Comments on Erica Baffelli's Working Paper
"Media and religion in Japan: the Aum affair as a turning point."
by Blai Guarné (Universitat Pompeu Fabra)

I would like to start with a personal recollection. We all know well that fieldwork is a lonesome experience in which one might find oneself double-checking notes, re-interpreting voices and revisiting places in the quest for the sense of the Other.

Thus, during my fieldwork in Japan, I remember looking at the same advertisement every day on my daily train trip to the University of Tokyo campus. This is the SGI (Soka Gakkai International) magazine ad that I am referring to. Every month, the ad would change in order to advertise the new monthly issue. In its cover, the picture of Soka Gakkai's President, Mr. Daisaku Ikeda, recurrently appeared welcoming foreign dignitaries and participating in global forums.

In the inner pages, Mr. Ikeda's omnipresence was assured: pictures of him at university campuses, at speaking stands in International Conferences, surrounded by smiling students in various places the world over, receiving ovations after a lecture, issuing diplomas and degrees, at work on poems for his next poetry book at his study. The pictures of the Presidential study showed shelves containing all the possible translations of his writings in various languages. The elegantly gold framed mirror hanging on the study's wall, the immaculately kept floor carpet, the finely upholstered armchairs for the guests conform the scenery of a grand international leader.

The visual representation of Soka Gakkai reflects its founding principles of peace, friendship and hope for the 21 st century. All together, they construct a visual narrative in which the image of the President plays the role of a leader of outstanding wisdom and respected authority who travels the globe with his message of peace.

In my view, it is not unwise to believe that using the media in this way has been for many Japanese organisations, both political and religious, a model to follow. Erica's paper precisely focuses on the awareness of this intentional use of the media in **shinshūkyō** ('new religions') of present day Japan.

To speak openly about the **shinshūkyō** issue in Japanese society is no easy task. It is a sensible topic, if not an outright taboo which is eluded in any everyday conversation. It is interesting to analyse the fact that in the Japanese media, the issue of Religion is not a topic **per se**, it always stems from some other reported event, be it economic, social, historical… In Japanese society, religious experience is considered intimate and personal, it is not subject to somebody else's opinion. This turns the issue into something one cannot fully grasp. Erica successfully deals with these various aspects and difficulties throughout her research.

Erica's work starts by portraying a precise genealogy of the historical relationship between **shinshūkyō** and the media, highlighting the changes brought about in the different media strategies. These new religions mostly appeared in the 1970s, a decade of strong economic and social expansion, in a context of an opulent society enjoying a wealth and a wellbeing never known before. Japanese society was in search of new ways to live the individual's spiritual necessities. At the same time, in some circles, the quest was directed to alternative forms of thought such as **new-aca** ('new academicism').

Erica identified a turning point in the media and **shinshūkyō** relationship: the Aum episode (the terrorist attack on the Tokyo subway system in 1995). Thereafter, a substantial retreat of these religious movements from the media is quite apparent in many ways: fewer public appearances by the better known leaders, a diminished presence of public advertisements, a limited distribution of publications... All this is a consequence of the increase of criticism in the media directed against the **shinshūkyō** that hindered the communication of its message to the general society. This is Erica's prime contribution to the study of the media and **shinshūkyō** relationship: the necessity to examine this issue 'in terms of the period before, and the period after, the events of 1995'.

One interesting point to note is the background of these organizations' media retreat. Following Erica's outline, in the case of Kōfuku no kagaku, the virtualization of the image of its charismatic leader seems to begin with the **Kōdansha jiken** and the need to maintain it free of damaging criticism, developing new forms of spreading the message, such as the presence of the organization on the internet. In the case of Agonshū, the first live satellite broadcasts of its religious rituals started at the end of the 1980s, during the boom of the expanding high tech means of communication, and it led to the interconnection of the organization's centres in a national network that would fully expand in years to follow.

For both of these **shinshūkyō** movements, Erica visualizes a period of wait and see media strategy immediately after the Aum incident, a true turning point in this sense. This event had core consequences in the construction of religious rites that affected the direct experience of their participants, i.e. the development of new ritual forms adjusted to fit the new media strategies incurred by Kōfuku no kagaku and Agonshū.

In Erica's view, the media played a central role in shaping the identity of these groups from that moment after. Hence, in these spiritual movements, 'media are not just informing about religion, but can make religion'.

It is always difficult trying to encapsulate the social reality in a single formula to explain it. For this reason, I consider interesting to keep on reflecting on the idea that the media strategies of the **shinshūkyō** have played 'a central role in creating, reshaping and innovating the identity of new religious movements'. The idea that discourse and practices related to the media construct the social reality is a well-known topic about which our media research colleagues might be able to give valuable suggestions. In this debate, I have always felt closer to Professor Goody's views, specifically in his usage of the term 'implications', more than 'consequences', to describe the relationship between writing and thought, in the case of **shinshūkyō** it would be between technology and discourse.

Erica's work confronts us with very valuable ethnographic evidences about the interactions between media and religious movements in the genesis of discourses and practices related to the creation of personal experiences and social realities. The accurate analysis of the broadcast of the **shinshūkyō** rituals and the religious experiences associated with them (spectacular in the outdoor rituals and intimate in those carried out indoors) create what I would call a 'virtual communitas' that it is of the utmost interest for me. Hopefully, we shall hear more about it.

In fact, the representational strategies of these two moments analyzed by Erica seem to be placed in a spectrum that ranges from what it is **revealed** and what is **concealed**. In this sense, the Aum episode constitutes a turning point

which exposed the ambivalent dynamic of **shinshūkyō** with the media and its subsequent adjustment in the new social context. For this reason, revisiting Erica's final idea –"media are not just **informing** about religion, but they can **make** religion"- we could say that media are not only **informing**, but also **conforming** religion through new discourses and practices ridden with underlying social and political implications.

Once more, I am very grateful for having been invited to comment on Erica's piece. I want to thank Eika for her splendid work and I encourage her to follow with this research. My thanks also go to the members of the EASA Media Anthropology Network and of the Religion Network. I hope my comments have contributed to open new elements for the debate.

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