

Artistic Representations of Urban Shamans in Contemporary Japan

Texts, Inter-actions and Efficacy

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Abstract This paper investigates how Japanese urban shamanic actors and their roles are constructed and represented by artists in different texts. Three case studies – writer Taguchi Randy, contemporary artist Mori Mariko, and musician Sugee – are presented to illustrate the processes of re-appropriation of terms and themes in the contemporary narrative on urban shamans. The use of the word *shāman* – with new meanings attached – and the role of connecting humans with other-than-human entities – and especially with nature – are analysed. Moreover, the connection to the so-called ‘new spirituality’ is emphasised.

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1 Introduction

The word ‘shaman’ is one of those terms on whose definition scholars cannot seem to find an agreement. One of the latest definitions is that of Thomas Karl Alberts, who suggests that we describe the shaman as “a person who, while in an altered state of consciousness, engages with spirits with the intention of influencing events and fortunes impacting others, whether individuals or collective groups” (Alberts 2015, 4). The value of this definition lies in the reference not only to the collective group, but also to the individual, at the centre of contemporary shamanic practices. However, as with many other definitions, it remains to be defined what an “altered state of consciousness” is. Moreover, especially when it comes to the practice of neo-shamanism, the shamanic actor – a term that could be more adequate for generally describing the variety of practitioners connected with shamanism in one way or another – does not engage only with ‘spirits’. Therefore, when generalising it would be better to talk about

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'other-than-human persons', as Alfred Irving Hallowell has suggested (Hallowell 1992).

In order to understand where the complexity of the term 'shaman' originates from, it is useful to look into its history, which I will briefly sum up here.¹ The term derives from the Tungus word *šamān*. This was introduced into Europe via its German transliteration *Schaman* at the end of the seventeenth century by travellers and explorers (mainly Germans and Dutchmen) who, sponsored by the Russian tsars, were sent to the Siberian region. There they met the *Schaman*, a spiritual practitioner they saw performing unusual rituals that they described once back home.

This can be viewed as the starting point of a long – and in certain cases still ongoing – process of appropriation of the word 'shaman', to which various meanings are attached depending on the period and the aim of those who are using it.²

The most relevant step in the history of the word 'shaman' was taken by the Romanian religious scholar Mircea Eliade, who published his monograph *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase* in 1951. This became even more successful and influential after the publication of the English version titled *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* in 1964. In this text, Eliade, who never met a shaman, presents a set of characteristics that the authentic and pure shamanism should have, most notably techniques to achieve ecstasy, as the title suggests. This work had an incredible impact on scholars of shamanism and gave rise to a debate about the appropriateness of using such a word to describe different actors and practices found in various cultural and geographical contexts. The main point of disagreement is represented by the sole reference to ecstasy in Eliade's definition: in many contexts, for example the Japanese one, spirit possession is the way used by the shaman to interact with other-than-human entities.

In studies and narratives about Japanese urban shamans, the influence of Eliade's theories appears through two intertwining threads – one from the academic world and the other from the popular world.

On the academic level, this influence first came to be felt with the work of the sociologist of religion Hori Ichirō who, after his encounter with Eliade

1 For a comprehensive overview of the history of the word 'shaman', see Znamesky 2007.

2 During the Romantic period, for example, fascination with what was 'Oriental' brought scholars to look for the origin of shamans in ancient India. They therefore developed the (sometimes still accepted) theory of a link between the Tungus word *šamān* and the Sanskrit *śramaṇa*, a word commonly used to describe Buddhist monks. Then, with the birth of anthropology at the end of the nineteenth century, the word 'shaman' started to be used to describe all those spiritual practitioners who seemed to share similar characteristics with the Siberian ones, regardless of their geographical and cultural context.

in Chicago, introduced the word *shāman* シャーマン, written in katakana,³ into Japanese academic vocabulary at the end of the 1960s. In 1971 Hori published a monograph that became fundamental for studies on the topic: *Nihon no shāmanizumu* 日本のシャーマニズム (Japanese shamanism). It is especially thanks to this work that the words *shāman* and 'shāmanism' written in katakana started being used by Japanese scholars also to refer to Japanese practitioners, such as *itako* イタコ and *yuta* ユタ.⁴ However, in his attempt to show the world that Japan too had 'real shamans', Hori Ichirō had to deal with the fact that Japanese practitioners were of the possession-type, while, as presented above, Eliade regarded as 'authentic shamans' only those of the ecstasy-type. Hori, therefore, stated that in the Japan of his day there were no longer any real shamans: a pure and true sort of shamanism had been widespread in prehistoric Japan but had degenerated in the following centuries, leaving only traces of its presence.

This view and Hori's theories - and, consequently, Eliade's theories too - have been shared by many other scholars, both in Japan and outside the country. The problem of defining who can or cannot be called a shaman in the Japanese context seemed to have found a possible solution in the 1990s, when Sasaki Kōkan defined the shaman as "a specialist technician who is able to associate directly and practically with the world of divine spirits" (Sasaki 1990, 116), without any references to possession or ecstasy.

On the popular level, Eliade's theories influenced the construction of a shamanic role for the contemporary urban context. Starting with the Euro-American counterculture, the interest in shamanism increased among ordinary people, who were looking for alternative forms of spirituality, such as those that could be found in the works of very popular authors like Carlos Castaneda⁵ and Michael Harner,⁶ both strongly influenced by Eliade's definition of a shaman. The same interest has been shared by what Shimazono refers to as the "new spirituality movements and cultures" (2004, 296-9), and which have characterized the Japanese context especially since the

3 Katakana is a syllabary mainly used in Japanese for the transcription of loan words from foreign languages.

4 In 1974 Hori also translated Eliade's monograph into Japanese.

5 Carlos Castaneda is the author of eleven books in which he allegedly presents the teachings of Mexican shaman Don Juan. The series, starting with *The Teachings of Don Juan. A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, was published between 1968 and 1998.

6 Michael Harner did some fieldwork among shamans in the Amazon, where he tried *ayahuasca*. The visions and knowledge he said he obtained through this experience led him to create what he calls Core Shamanism (<https://www.shamanism.org/workshops/coreshamanism.html>, 2018-04-26). The techniques of this 'universal shamanism' have been transmitted through Harner's books (for example *The Way of the Shaman. A Guide to Power and Healing* 1980) and through courses organized by the Foundation for Shamanic Studies founded by Harner himself in 1979.

1990s. As a result, in contemporary Japan, alongside those actors connected to what is perceived to be the 'shamanic tradition' of the archipelago – especially the *itako* of the north-eastern regions and the *yuta* of the southern islands⁷ – a number of urban shamans and other neo-shamanic practitioners is active, especially in big cities. While the former have been deeply investigated during the last few decades,⁸ the latter appear to be only of marginal interest to scholars.⁹ Moreover, a wide range of spiritual healers are presenting themselves using the term *shāman*, which until now had mainly been used by academics. At the same time, the word *shāman* is frequently appearing in the media and in various products of popular culture, reflecting an interest in and fascination with the kind of actor it (vaguely) describes. As the following analysis will make clear, in this process the term is acquiring new meanings that add elements to the still on-going debate about its definition and use, both in the Japanese context and elsewhere. Inevitably, this increases the complexity of the field, a complexity which could be handled by analysing the 'shamans' category as a polythetic class where each member must possess certain characteristics, but none of these must necessarily be present in every member of the class itself (Needham 1975). The problem that still need to be solved is to list such characteristics and find a way to avoid excessively broadening this class by including members that differ considerably from one another.

The role of the various shamanic actors is thus imagined, built and enacted in/through different texts¹⁰ that intertwine and share common elements. In order to reach a fuller understanding of what it means to be a shaman – or to act as one – in contemporary urban Japan, the study of shamanic practices should be integrated with that of narratives and representations, as Lori Meeks suggests with reference to the study of *miko* 巫女 – the classical Japanese shamanic actor – in premodern Japan (2001).¹¹

7 For both contexts, a variety of denominations are used depending on the specific region and the rituals that the different actors can offer.

8 For a brief review of the state of the art see Gaitanidis and Murakami (2014) and Rivosi (2016).

9 Relevant exceptions are the works by Anne Bouchy on urban shamans in the Kansai area (see Bouchy 1992) and Ioannis Gaitanidis and Aki Murakami's study of neo-shamanistic practitioners (2014), which demonstrates how frameworks and theories created to explain 'traditional shamanism' can be applied to the study of contemporary shamanistic practitioners, such as spiritual therapists. Shiotsuki's works on Okinawan shamanism, spirituality and the Internet should also be considered. See for example Shiotsuki and Satō 2003.

10 The term 'text' is used here to describe any social and cultural configuration whose meaning can be empirically perceived, as Gianfranco Marrone suggests (2010) and in line with the main arguments of this publication.

11 Meeks suggests that only through a similar approach could it be possible to describe and understand the role of the *miko* in all of its complexity, by disproving at the same time

In order to contribute to the study and understanding of the representation and re-appropriation of shamans in contemporary Japan (and beyond), in this paper I will present and analyse three case-studies from the artistic sphere.¹² With regard to this analysis, two main points need to be considered. First of all, by looking at the emerging common themes in the case-studies presented, it is possible to see and understand which elements are perceived as being essential to the practice of an urban shaman in the contemporary world and which are neglected, and in what ways they are used in the process of re-imagining the shaman. This will be the focus of section 3. A second point, explored in the last section, concerns the place of these representations within a wider context. As will become clear, these cases share certain characteristics not only with modern urban shamanism, but also with the field of the so-called 'new spirituality'. I argue that it is possible to infer that there is a community of people with common interests and knowledge that the various representations contribute to create and nurture. It is also possible to examine the opposite movement: this community produces the representations analysed and is in turn influenced by them. The relationship is thus circular.

2 Case studies

The three case-studies chosen are narratives on shamans produced in Tokyo in the past two decades by artists working in different fields. They are therefore relevant ways to focus on the re-appropriation of motives in the representation of the shamanic actor in the metropolitan world. The relevance of the examples presented also lies in the fact that recurring elements emerge and connect the different cases in the same network, although the types of texts produced are very different from one another. For reasons of space other case-studies have been excluded from this analysis but, when taken into consideration, can reinforce the arguments made here.¹³

two common stereotypes: "(1) the idea that Japan has a timeless 'folk religion' comprised of ill-defined superstitions practiced in rural areas, and (2) that this folk religion can be neatly separated from the more intellectual and theoretically systematic traditions of Confucianism and Buddhism" (Meeks 2011, 210).

12 A similar approach has been adopted by scholars investigating artists re-appropriating shamanic elements in other geographical and cultural contexts. An example is offered by works on Joseph Beuys and Marcus Coates. Cf. Flaherty 1988 and Walters 2010.

13 Cf. for example Staemmler (2011) on the *manga* series - then transposed into *anime* - *Shaman King* created by Takei Hiroyuki and published in instalments between 1998 and 2004. Cf. also Shiotsuki (2002) for a study of the representation of shamans in Okinawan films and literature, and Okabe et al. (2001) for a study of representations of shamans in Japanese cultural history.

2.1 Taguchi Randy: Writing About the Shaman

As a writer, Taguchi Randy first depicted a modern urban shaman in three novels written between 2000 and 2001: *Konsento* コンセント (Outlet), *Antena* アンテナ (Antenna), and *Mozaiku* モザイク (Mosaic).

These are to be seen as a trilogy in which Taguchi presents the problems faced by the younger generation in Japan and outlines the characteristics of the actor able to solve them. In her commentary to the third book, critic and art historian Fuse Hideko defines the trilogy as *denpakei shōsetsu* 電波系小説, that is 'novels about *denpakei*', people who seem to be disconnected from ordinary reality and connected to another kind of reality instead.

The first novel of the trilogy is *Konsento*. It revolves around Asakura Yuki and her struggles to find an explanation for the death of her brother, who was a *hikikomori* ひきこもり 'someone socially withdrawn'. During this process, she comes to realize that she is a shaman and that her role is to purify and heal men by using her body and sexual energy.

In the text one of the characters explains that shamans act as an outlet for the community in which they live,

like holes in a wall, connected to an invisible world so that when you contact them, it is as if you were plugging into them, and in this way they can ensure contact between you and the world of gods. (Taguchi 2000, 168)¹⁴

At the end of the novel, Yuki goes to Miyakojima, in Okinawa Prefecture, to meet the *yuta* Kamichi Miyo, who acknowledges her to be the new shaman that modern society needs. She also explains that Yuki is a new *miko* sprung from the new urban nature and, since the times have changed, her role should also change accordingly. Therefore, Yuki has to find her own way to be a shaman. Once back in Tokyo, Yuki starts working as a shaman in Shibuya. Her ritual consists in allowing male office workers in their twenties and thirties to have sexual intercourse with her in order to be healed by the powerful energy she has been able to awaken. It must be noted that throughout the text the word used is '*shāman*' written in katakana. Taguchi makes her characters explain what *miko* and *yuta* are by using the same word.

In *Antena*, Taguchi presents the story of Yūichirō's family and its unsolved mystery: when Yūichirō was ten years, old his younger sister, who was sleeping next to him, disappeared in the middle of the night. For fifteen years no one knew what had happened that night; the girl was never found and the family started having various problems. As with Yuki

¹⁴ 「シャーマンは、壁についている穴のほうね。その穴は見えざる世界と繋がっているわけ。そしてね、シャーマンを訪れる人は自分のプラグをコンセントに差し込むわけだよ。そうすると、神様の世界と繋がることができる」。The translation of this and the following extracts is by the Author.

in *Konsento*, in this novel too it is only by accepting his sexual desire that the main character can finally enter a different level of reality, where he is able to obtain the necessary knowledge to restore harmony in his family. The shaman in this novel is Naomi, a dominatrix who will help the main character in his process of rebirth. Presenting herself, she says that she can “heal and rescue by using the power of the imagination” (Taguchi 2002, 102),¹⁵ in line with the definition of ‘shaman’ given by another character: “A shaman is a person who manipulates other people’s fantasies” (Taguchi 2002, 251).¹⁶

The third book of the trilogy, *Mozaiku*, explores the effects of technology on the younger generations.

The shamanic actor in the novel is the main character, Mimi, who helps people with psychological problems (mainly *hikikomori*) move from their own homes to psychiatric centres. However, as the reader is told at the very beginning of the novel, she has lost Masaya, the fourteen-year-old boy she was trying to help. The whole narrative is about her trying to find him again, while at the same time unexpectedly finding her true self. Mimi’s peculiarity resides in her sensitivity, which enables her to intuitively understand people affected by a disorder of perception. Thanks to her perfect psychophysical balance and her ability to truly listen to others, she can relieve the tension accumulated in the people she comes in contact with, thus helping them to feel better. This is what more than one character praises Mimi for, recognizing her presence as something indispensable to contemporary society (Taguchi 2003, 230). At the end of the novel, before finding Masaya, Mimi experiences a separation between her mind and her physical body and, in this condition, she discovers important truths about her past and the role she is called to play in society.

The role of the shaman as narrated by Taguchi in the trilogy consists in reconnecting people who live in Tokyo with themselves, in such a way as to recreate a lost harmony. To achieve this goal, the shamanic actor takes the role of an intermediary through a flow of energy, light, thoughts and memories; no gods or spirits are involved.

The three novels are not the only texts in which Taguchi Randy’s narrative of a modern urban shaman takes place. Her interest in shamanism – and spirituality in general – is evident also from what she writes online: she is active on her personal blog, on Twitter, Facebook, and in an online community¹⁷ created by some of her fans. Other texts in which Taguchi states the importance of rediscovering shamanic practices and rituals in order to solve the problems of people living in big cities are the

15 「妄想の力で救済している」.

16 「シャーマンってのは他人の妄想を操る人間だな。(中略)」.

17 <http://chita-grandy.demeken.net/> (2018-04-21).

lectures and talks she delivers as an invited speaker at seminars, and the various interviews she regularly gives. Moreover, since 2017 she has also been publishing an online spiritual magazine entitled *Nū* ヌー, a transliteration of the French *nous* 'we'. Taguchi thus went from creating texts concerning the shamanic actors and the role they can play in contemporary society, to becoming herself a sort of living text in which the urban shamanic role is represented. In this perspective, it is interesting to note that writer AKIRA, in his commentary on *Antena*, talks about the novel as a hallucinogen created by the *shāman* Taguchi, who is able to take the reader to a parallel world, just like *ayahuasca* (Taguchi 2002, 359). Another contribution to the perception of Taguchi as a narrator of shamans and a sort of urban shaman herself comes from Kamata Tōji (Kamata, Taguchi 2001) who, as Shimazono Susumu underlines, is a 'spiritual intellectual' who has written several pseudo-scientific spiritual books and is often asked to give public talks on spiritual themes. For these reasons Shimazono writes that he is "commonly acknowledged as a promoter of the Spiritual World movement" (2004, 294). I will return to this connection between representations of shamanic actors and the so-called new spirituality in the last section of this paper.

2.2 Mori Mariko: Performing the Shaman

Contemporary artist Mori Mariko's construction of a shamanic actor is not as explicit as that of Taguchi Randy. Compared to the latter, in recent years Mori, who lives and works between Tokyo and New York, has focused more on performing a shamanic role as an artist for people living in big cities.

Her construction of an urban shamanic role can be divided into three phases, characterized by the production of different kinds of text.

The texts from her first phase - that goes from 1996 to the beginning of the new millennium - are videos and photographs. Among these, the most emblematic work for the purposes of this study is a video installation titled *Miko no inori. Link of the Moon* 巫女の祈り。リンク・オブ・ザ・ムーン, created and first screened in 1996. The video, also known by the English title *The Shaman-Girl's Prayer*, shows a cyborg-like *miko* who, by using a crystal ball, interacts with another reality. It has been screened in Osaka's Kansai International Airport, which was chosen because it is built on an artificial island, and thus lacks any trace of nature: it is a purely "technological place", as Mori herself defined it in an interview (Farani, Goretti, Schneider 2011, 55). Commenting on this artwork when it was presented at the Koyanagi Gallery in Tokyo in 1997, Mori said: "We have lost the sense of spirituality in this century. We have to create harmony and peace for the next century" (DiPietro 1997). She believes that this is what her shaman-girl is doing through her prayer.

In her second phase, Mori, inspired by her studies of astrophysics and archaeology – especially in relation to the Jōmon period (ca. 10,500 BC-ca. 300 BC) – created artworks of a completely different kind: acrylic sculptures devoid of any human presence. An example is *Primal Memory*, a circle of acrylic stones created in 2004 and inspired by the stone circle from the Jōmon period to be found in Ōyu, Akita Prefecture. Through these artworks, Mori aimed to make the spectator understand and perceive a link with the past and with a purer form of religion and spirituality that, in her view, was able to truly connect humans, spirits and nature. On the occasion of some exhibitions devoted to these works, Mori offered a ritual performance. Between 2004 and 2006, for example, the installation of *Primary Memory* was accompanied by a performance entitled *Rei-okuri* or *Ceremony of Transcendence*, which Mori explained to be a ritual evocation of the spirits of the dead from the Jōmon period.¹⁸ By means of similar performances, she intended to vitalize her works in order to recreate a connection between humans, nature and spirituality. In this second phase, it is her body that becomes a shamanic text, acting through performances in connection with the sculptures.

In the last and more contemporary phase of her production, the role of ‘performing the shaman’ becomes more prominent. Central to this phase is a new consciousness of the role Mori is called to play in urban society: an awareness she first gained during a trip she made in 2004. The artist travelled to Kudakajima, an island in Okinawa Prefecture, also known by the name of *Kami no shima* 神の島 ‘the gods’ island’. Here she met a *noro* ノロ, a priestess, whose ritual she was able to attend. Mori described this ritual as follows:

It seemed deeply rooted in nature, unchanged from our remote ancestors of prehistoric times. I felt the importance of this heritage and wished to pass this along to future generations by instilling site-specific installations to honour nature. (Di Marzo 2013)

To reach this goal, she founded a non-profit organization called Faou Foundation, with the mission of connecting humans and nature through six artworks to be permanently installed in six natural spots all over the world.¹⁹ The first one is titled *Primal Rhythm* and it is installed in a bay on Miya-

¹⁸ It is not clear where she found information about this prehistoric ritual, since there are no sources on the Jōmon period. Some pictures of the performance held in 2005 at the Hamburger Bahnhof can be seen at: <http://www.zfl-berlin.org/zfl-in-bild-und-ton-detail/items/compulsive-beauty.html> (2018-04-26).

¹⁹ The website of the Foundation states: “The artworks each become an emblem of gratitude to diverse eco-systems and natural resources. Faou wishes to inspire an ethos of ‘one with nature’”, <http://www.faoufoundation.org/> (2018-04-26).

kojima, an island closely connected with Japanese shamanic actors. There Mori carried out what she described as 'ceremonial performances' in front of the sea, also praying with a local *noro* for the successful installation of her artwork.²⁰ On the occasion of the Olympic and Paralympic Games of Rio, in August 2016, a second installation created with Faou Foundation, *Ring: One With Nature*, was installed on top of the Véu da Noiva waterfall in Rio de Janeiro State and inaugurated with a ceremonial performance.²¹

Thinking about her experiences on the islands of Okinawa Prefecture, Mori said: "I feel like I'm a bridge to bring those elements [the natural elements] back to the city" (McDermott 2016). In light of these words, it is possible therefore to read the artistic and ceremonial performances of these last years as an attempt by the artist to become a link between people living in big cities, on the one side, and nature and spirituality, on the other.

2.3 Shaman Sugee: Living as a Shaman

Shaman Sugee is a *toshi no shāman* 都市のシャーマン 'urban shaman', as he defines himself, and mainly works in Tokyo.²² Similarly to the above-mentioned cases, the narration of the shamanic role takes place via different media, all intended to offer *yorokobi* 喜び 'joy', *iyashi* 癒し 'healing' and *wa* 和 'harmony'. These are keywords for all his activities and can be summed up by using the word that Sugee recognizes to be central to his practice: *tsunagari* 繋がり 'connection'. Like Mori Mariko, he seeks to recreate a connection between people living in the big cities and nature, a desire and goal he has come to regard as a consequence of certain personal experiences. Particularly revealing have been his travels in Okinawa Prefecture, South-East Asia, Central America and West Africa. In each of these places, he met with those he defines as local 'shamans', namely people able to connect and communicate with nature and gods. By taking part in their rituals, talking with them, becoming aware of their knowledge and role, Sugee realized that the presence of similar actors was exactly what was missing in Tokyo. Once back home, he became aware of the fact

20 Pictures of these ceremonial performances can be found on the website of the Faou Foundation: <http://www.faoufoundation.org/ceremony/2017/5/2/nioo664dixi62ghxbc-ceobd8n9fsbv>, <http://www.faoufoundation.org/new-gallery/2017/5/2/ceremonial-performance-1>, <http://www.faoufoundation.org/new-gallery-45/2sjhyj6hmbjgta75vtfrgi7o0mesb> (2018-04-26).

21 Pictures can be found on the website of the Faou Foundation: <http://www.faoufoundation.org/programs-1/> (2018-04-26).

22 I met him in 2013 and interviewed him three times while I was in Japan. We have kept in contact via e-mail and Facebook.

that Japanese people, especially the young, needed shamanic actors able to help them connect with nature. Only in this way could they re-establish the connection they lost as a consequence of living in Tokyo and spending most of their time at work or commuting to and from their workplace.

The first text through which Sugee has built his shamanic role is music: he is, first of all, a musician who performs solo or with his group, *The Arth*. He learned how to play djembe in Africa and says that by standing between men and spirits and using music he is able to convey messages from one world to the other. According to Sugee, this is the only way to restore harmony and balance inside his listeners.

Every year he attends a *matsuri* 祭り 'religious festival' in Kudakajima, the same island of Okinawa Prefecture where Mori Mariko went. Sugee describes the place as a *seichi* 聖地 'holy place', where shamanism still survives and where he goes to sing, play and pray with local shamans.

A second text that plays a fundamental role in his practice is nature, especially in the form of plants. He has built a large greenhouse outside Tokyo, where he grows succulents and cacti that he sells or uses to perform his role. Along with public performances, Sugee also offers private healing sessions in which he talks, sings, plays the djembe, and uses plants to give relief and joy to his patients.

His narrative of the role of urban shamans also takes shape via other media: every year Sugee teaches a class about the meaning of travel at Jiyūdaigaku, or Freedom University, a non-profit organization in Tokyo. Of the five lessons that constitute his course, at least one is centred on what he believes shamanism and the role of urban shamans to be. He also gives lessons and organizes seminars in cafés, pubs, clubs, and various other venues. There he talks mainly about *kyōsei no shāmanizumu* 共生のシャーマニズム 'the shamanism of symbiosis', to stress the role of shamans in creating a *tsunagari* with others and with nature.

The last group of media by which he builds his image as a shaman and performs his role is represented by the various aspects of online reality. Sugee has a website²³ where all his activities are described; he is also active on Facebook, where he has 1,286 friends and where every day he uploads new pictures and shares his hopes and thoughts. He does the same on his Twitter account, with 914 followers for 6,038 tweets.²⁴ Moreover, on Youtube, one can find some videos of his performances as an urban shaman and the video of one lesson he gave at Freedom University. One last thing needs to be emphasized: Sugee often collaborates with Kamata Tōji to create events and organize conferences, especially in Tokyo.

23 <https://www.shamansugee.com/> (2018-04-26).

24 Updated on 2018-04-26.

3 A Circle of Re-appropriation

In the above-mentioned case studies – as well as in other narratives of the shamanic actor in contemporary urban Japan²⁵ – what is to be noted is the process of re-appropriation of terms and themes coming from what is perceived and constructed as a ‘tradition’. At the same time, other different elements are added, following paths similar to those of the new spirituality movements.

In artistic representations, all the re-appropriated elements contribute to the shaping of an urban shamanic role that can be defined by the word *tsunagari*: by using different texts and languages, what urban shamans do is recreate a connection between humans, on the one side, and other-than-human entities, on the other.

The three main common themes characterizing representations of the urban shaman are the focus of the following section. Only by noticing their presence and grasping their meaning is it possible to come closer to an understanding of what aspects are perceived as essential to the practice of an urban shaman in contemporary Japan. This could consequently enable the formulation of hypothesis about the reasons for such a representation and re-appropriation.

3.1 *Shāman*

The first element to be noted is the term used to define the urban shamanic actors: *shāman*, written in katakana. This appears frequently in the narratives and it is possible to assign it a twofold function: to connect with what is perceived as a pre-existing ‘tradition’ while, at the same time, differing from it.

As presented above, the word *shāman* written in katakana has been created by scholars to translate Eliade’s work within the Japanese academic world and it is still used to describe in a general way Japanese practitioners such as *miko*, *itako* and *yuta*. Thus its presence in the narratives just analysed creates a connection between the modern urban shaman and the other shamans active in the archipelago.

At the same time, the use of this word is mainly associated with the academic world: it is rarely understood by common people. It therefore has the power to define and create another actor, differentiating him/her from the ‘traditional’ image of the *shāman*, without ever fully breaking away from it.

A clarification is required: ordinary people who do not understand the meanings of the word *shāman* are generally unfamiliar with the so-called new spirituality, in which there is instead awareness of the set of images and characteristics implied by this word – when used with reference to

25 Cf. note 13.

modern urban actors. An analysis of the new spirituality would exceed the scope of this paper. However, it is useful to refer to Horie Norichika's definition in order to grasp what it is and relate it to the modern urban shaman represented in our case-studies:

Spirituality refers to both belief in what cannot usually be perceived but can be felt internally, and practices to feel it with the whole mind and body, accompanied more or less by attitudes of individualism, anti-authoritarianism, and selective assimilation of religious cultural resources. (Horie 2014, 111)

In the case studies analysed, reference was made – both explicitly and implicitly – to many elements of the kaleidoscopic new spirituality movements, as will also become clear in the following sections.

Therefore, on the one hand, by defining the actors as shamans, the creators of these representations are activating the symbolic capital of the term in order to legitimise what the practitioner is doing inside the field of new spirituality. This appears to be strictly connected to the need for recognition, which is believed to come primarily from the narratives produced by scholars and especially by spiritual intellectuals and authors such as Kamata, perceived as a source of authority. On the other hand, the use of a word written in katakana to describe one's practice to potential clients represents a form of exoticization of the practice itself. At the same time, as already noted, this practice differs from the activities of more 'traditional' shamans, commonly known by emic words such as *itako* and *yuta*.

3.2 Peripheries of Time and space

By analysing our case studies, it is possible to trace a circular movement that goes from the centre towards the periphery – in its temporal and spatial dimensions – and then back again.

A permanent feature of this movement is the willingness to rebuild a connection with nature, a common characteristic of new spirituality movements and the defining feature of "modern western shamanism" according to Kocku von Stuckrad (2002).

This need to go back to nature is explained in the narratives as a reaction to life in big cities such as Tokyo, which is thought to cause various problems, especially psychological ones. According to the modern urban shamans analysed, by establishing contact with nature it is possible to re-discover and re-establish a connection with one's own inner self. This will eventually lead to harmony in society as a whole.

In Taguchi's novels, and most explicitly in *Mozaiku*, the shaman acts as a link with Mother Nature. Thanks to this ability, the shaman can access

a source of natural energy that she can then use to restore balance and harmony. Moreover, she can absorb the energy that flows in excess into her patient's body and release it into the earth. The shaman depicted by Taguchi can also enable a connection between her client/patient on the one side, and energy, light, memories, and thoughts on the other.

Mori Mariko has made her goal of acting as a bridge that brings nature back into the big cities explicit. Through her artworks and performances, she aims to promote the development of an environmental consciousness in the urban context, since she believes that this could be the only way to solve problems springing from excessive urbanization. With regard to the artworks she has created and is currently developing with the Faou Foundation, on the Foundation website one reads:

These permanent works promote a deeper understanding of humankind's connection with the natural environment. They serve to help preserve the environments and engage the communities that host each installation. The locations have been chosen based on their pristine natural setting and engaging local culture and history. Through the gifting of six site-specific installations, Faou continues the primal tradition of honoring nature. (<http://www.faoufoundation.org/about-1/>, 2018-04-26)

However, it is to be noted that these artworks are permanently installed in natural places all over the world, thus altering them forever and making one wonder how this can help increase people's awareness of the relevance of nature.

In the third case study, the absolute importance of nature is also evident. Shaman Sugee grows plants, essential for his healing sessions, and stresses the need to recreate a harmonious relationship between people living in the cities and nature. The nature he refers to, though, appears to be 'artificial', 'constructed': it comes from his greenhouse and it is 'made' by humans for humans.

For all urban shamanic actors going back to nature is thus essential in order to harmonize human beings not only with the environment, but also with themselves. However, this is achieved in a utilitarian way: nature is viewed mainly as the source from which one can obtain useful ingredients to respond to individual needs and problems.

Urban shamans find knowledge and elements to recreate the connection with nature in the above-mentioned movement towards the periphery: a specific place where, in their view, it is possible to find what is perceived as essential for the centre in order to react to contemporary reality.²⁶

26 In the re-discovery of peripheries and of an 'original' way of living with nature and spirits, we find an echo of *nihonjinron* 日本人論, 'discourse/theories on the Japanese'.

The historical period which these shamanic actors look to is the Jōmon period, the only time in which, according to certain scholars, such as 'philosopher' and spiritual intellectual Umehara Takeshi, 'original' and 'authentic' Japaneseness is to be found. More specifically, since in his view the geographical peripheries of the archipelago seem to have been only marginally touched and modified by contact with continental culture, it is still possible to find 'authentic' Japanese culture there.

Travel to the peripheries is thus a means of searching for a 'tradition' that, once brought back, could help solve the problems of the centre.

The case studies just presented clearly reveal a movement towards the southern periphery of Japan. Two islands in particular are mentioned – Miyakojima and Kudakajima – both related to the presence and activities of shamans in the minds of many Japanese.

In Taguchi's novel *Konsento*, a *yuta* in Miyakojima acknowledges the main character as being the new shaman needed in the metropolitan context. Mori Mariko understood the importance of the relationship with nature after her encounter with a *noro* in Kudakajima and had another one perform a ritual for the artwork she installed in Miyakojima. Shaman Sugee travels to Kudakajima every year to meet the local shamanic actors – as he refers to them.

In these peripheral areas, urban shamans find more than just inspiration for their practice. The other fundamental quest they carry out is that for legitimization: they need to be recognized as 'shamans' and legitimated in their role. The authority required for this is believed to reside in 'traditional' shamans, who are assigned an important role in the construction of shamanism for the centre. It is possible to infer that according to the perspective of modern urban shamanism, peripheries are looked at as places of 'tradition' and power.

3.3 Tsunagari

A third element is involved in the circle of re-appropriation characterizing the role of the urban shaman, and it is represented by the term *tsunagari*.

As seen at the beginning of this paper, the ability to connect and communicate with different worlds is what most commonly defines the role of the shaman.²⁷ Just as 'traditional' shamans mediate between human and other-than-human persons creating – or, in most cases, embodying – a connection between the two, so do modern urban ones, though with some

27 Cf. for example Harvey (2010, 31) "Shamans are persons (human or otherwise perhaps) who learn to communicate across species boundaries within a richly animated world full of persons who deserve respect but who might be eaten and might aggress, and who might control and be controlled".

differences that place them within the sphere of the new spirituality. The association with the so-called 'new spirituality' is evident in Heelas and Woodhead's study on spirituality in Great Britain:

On entering the milieu, one is immediately struck by the pervasive use of 'holistic' language: 'harmony', 'balance', 'flow', 'integration', 'being at once', and 'being centred'. The great refrain, we might say, is 'only connect'. (Heelas, Woodhead 2005, 26)

As suggested by the above-mentioned case studies, very similar observations might be made with reference to the Japanese context. First of all, the entities shamans can communicate with appear to be more 'fluid' than the spirits and gods with which 'traditional' shamans interact: in order to re-establish a *tsunagari* within the patient, urban shamans in the narratives analysed communicate mainly with energy and light. Also, by contrast to 'traditional' shamans, their attention is directed only to the human patient, whose well-being is restored. Moreover, through their performances and rituals, these urban shamanic actors offer healing only to the psychological/spiritual dimensions of their patients, without addressing any physical problem. The emphasis on the individual and his spiritual healing and transformation represent a further link with the new spirituality movements.

As our case studies show, in constructing and performing the shamanic role different kinds of media are used: from the body of the shaman in Taguchi's novels to the author's own words, both online - on her blog, in her virtual community, and through her online spiritual magazine - and offline, via lectures and seminars; from Mori's artworks and performances to her Faou Foundation; from Sugee's music and plants to his website, Facebook profile and Twitter account.

This analysis of representations of the urban shaman in contemporary Japan in comparison with that of 'traditional' shamans could suggest a differentiation of roles and expectations in the imagery surrounding these practitioners. First of all, the 'religious' and the performative aspects of 'traditional' shamanic practice appear to be separated here: the modern urban shaman focuses mainly on the latter, using various artworks and performances to play the role expected of him/her, without mentioning any religious aspect in his/her practice. Secondly, while in contemporary narratives 'traditional' shamans are recognized as being able to perform rituals allowing them to communicate with spirits - mainly in order to obtain answers - the modern urban shaman specializes in the re-harmonization of the individual and in his/her re-connection with nature.

4 Inter-actions and Efficacy

As mentioned before, many elements characterizing the representation of a modern urban shaman are understood mainly by those connected with the new spirituality movements and culture. Therefore, although in the narratives the focus of the shamanic practice is on the individual, it is possible to argue that the different shamanic texts do not only interact in shaping the image of the modern urban shaman, but also contribute to the creation of specific communities. These are constituted by individuals who do not know each other (and will probably never get to know one another) but feel that they are part of a broader formation that shares certain experiences, forms of knowledge and needs, nurtured by the texts themselves.

To better analyse and understand such a community, it might be useful to turn to Birgit Meyer and her aim of studying

the role of religion and new and old media in the emergence and sustenance of new kinds of communities or formations, which generate particular notions of self and others, modes of religious experience, and of being and acting in the world. (Meyer 2009, xii)

Searching for a theoretical approach that could take into account the role of bodies, senses, things and media in the making of religion, Meyer developed the concept of 'aesthetic formations'. She chose the term 'aesthetic' to underline the importance of the body and the senses, and decided to use the term 'formation' because it can refer both to a social entity and to its processes of coming into being, thereby resulting in a more comprehensive theoretical tool.

In this sense, 'aesthetic formation' captures very well the formative impact of a shared aesthetics through which subjects are shaped by tuning their senses, inducing experiences, moulding their bodies, and making sense, and which materializes in things. (Meyer 2009, 7)

Therefore, it is clear that the interaction of the different texts through which the shamanic actor and his/her role are built - and also the texts that are built by the shamanic actor and through his/her role - shapes and sustains aesthetic formations. These aesthetic formations are also supported by the various spiritual intellectuals and they share many elements with other aesthetic formations, namely those that came into being with the new spirituality movements and culture.

Within the larger formation of new spirituality movements, the urban Japanese shamanic discourse and the formation to which it is directed and that it contributes to establishing could be viewed as part of what Joan Townsend defines as 'modern shamanic spirituality'.

Modern shamanic spirituality as a whole is a democratic movement; authority is vested in each individual because sacred knowledge is held to be experiential, not doctrinal. Individuals can create personal belief systems based on information gained from spirits during journeys and from workshops, literature, and other sources. In a movement such as modern shamanic spirituality, it would be almost impossible to limit access to sacred knowledge because of the variety of media and network information systems available, the individualistic nature of the movement, and the fluid relationships between leaders and seekers. (Townsend 2004, 52)

By shedding light on how shamans and their roles are (re-)imagined and represented in contemporary urban Japan through different media and languages, it is therefore possible to trace the characteristics of the shamanic spirituality they contribute to building, thus broadening our understanding of what spirituality is.

In conclusion, this paper has showed how shamanic practices are being represented in contemporary urban Japan by focusing on three main case-studies from the arts. This analysis has brought out some common elements and shown how various texts interact in the representation of the shamanic actor and role, in the construction of the imagery surrounding them and in their efficacy. What clearly emerges in this process is a re-appropriation of themes and elements that contribute to making the shamanic discourse effective. Different interacting texts and the performances of urban shamans build a community and are in turn built by it, as part of the broader formation labelled 'modern shamanic spirituality' and 'new spirituality'.

Lastly, it is important to remember that these representations, alongside other representations including those of spiritual intellectuals such as Kamata and Umehara, create and crystallise a certain image and perception of what Japanese shamanism is that is then assimilated both by Japanese and by non-Japanese people.

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