



BRILL

# “Toward a Shamanic Daily Life”

## *The Response of a Japanese Spiritual Therapist to COVID-19*

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### Abstract

This article contributes to the discussion on reactions and responses to the coronavirus pandemic in Japan, with specific reference to the field of “new spirituality” and, within this broad category, of shamanic spirituality. The case of the dance therapist, or “dance movement shaman,” Ms. Hiroda demonstrates how she managed to keep in contact with her practitioners and to design new ways to help them cope with the situation. The solution she offers, in line with the characteristics of shamanic spirituality, is to help each individual to acknowledge the importance of interconnectedness. In particular, Ms. Hiroda emphasizes body, community, and nature: to become aware of one's own body again and of the necessity of connection with others and nature, especially in times of interpersonal distancing and crisis. Her response to the first wave of COVID-19 is thus to offer a strategy to live peacefully with—and despite—the virus.

### Keywords

COVID-19 – new spirituality – shamanic spirituality – self-cultivation – nature – Japan

## 1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly impacted everyone's lives, resulting in different shades of crisis that need to be handled and, when possible, resolved. In this, religion plays an important role, as it has in the past during times in which humans perceived an imminent “end of the world,” as De Martino has put it (De Martino 2019). In these critical situations, magico-religious

systems act as protective tools and techniques, giving meaning to and offering cultural resolutions for the crisis. As Philip Fountain and Levi McLaughlin argue:

In the face of disaster, rituals of worship are among our primary technologies of response. Here, rather than seeing religious rituals as distractions from the real work of food aid, medical care, and reconstruction, religious rituals are relocated as central to helping humans live through disaster events and to rebuild on the other side.

FOUNTAIN and MCLAUGHLIN 2016: 14

Until now, studies on the role of religion in times of crisis—although still limited—have mainly dealt with the aftermath of catastrophic events by showing and analyzing how religious institutions reacted to them and sought to provide relief,<sup>1</sup> thus aiding the processes of reconstruction and recovery.<sup>2</sup> The coronavirus pandemic, however, has put religious actors (and scholars) in a different position, since the aftermath still seems to lie somewhere in the future and responses need to be provided during the crisis itself.

Philip Fountain and Levi McLaughlin (2016: 14) wrote that “the rupture of disaster opens possibilities of religious transformation, including changes in materiality, rituals, doctrine/theology, institutional hierarchies, logics, visions and interpersonal relations.” This appears all the more true considering the ongoing pandemic, which—as the case study examined in this article will show—has accelerated changes and transformations. It thus becomes important to study how religious actors and institutions are operating within the context of an ongoing disaster with no clear end in sight. This can enhance our understanding of the processes of religious transformation and of the close interactions between and intersections of religion, society, and the media. Not only that, but as Michel Feener and Patrick Daly (2016: 192–194) have suggested,

1 Providing relief is not the only role of religions; as Jean-Christophe Gaillard and Pauline Texier (2010a) have summarized, religions may also offer interpretations in the wake of a disaster, mainly seeing it as an act of God, but they can also hinder recovery.

2 See, for example, the special issue of *Religion* on the topic “Religions, Natural Hazards, and Disasters” (Gaillard and Texier 2010b), the special issue of the *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* “Religious Actors in Disaster Relief” (Bush, Fountain and Feener 2015), the special issue of *Asian Ethnology* “Salvage and Salvation: Religion and Disaster Relief in Asia” (Fountain and McLaughlin 2016), and the chapters on religious responses to disaster in Mullins and Nakano (2016b). Interestingly, all of them focus on Asia. For a brief review of anthropological literature on the role of religion after catastrophic events, especially natural disasters, see Merli (2012).

examination of religious actors and their operations can also promote a better comprehension of the complex transformations that are bound to occur on the broader social and cultural level in the post-disaster context (see also Oliver-Smith 1996: 312–314; Schlehe 2010).

There are several scholars who have started to explore the role played by religions and religious institutions during the pandemic through different case-studies.<sup>3</sup> Preliminary research shows that what believers seek is a way to make sense of what has happened and is still happening. The reaction to the new SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus by religious institutions throughout the world has thus generally been to offer comfort while experimenting with new ways to interact with believers.

This article deals specifically with religious responses to COVID-19 in Japan, a topic that has already been addressed in a preliminary fashion by Levi McLaughlin, who has written about the reactions of religious organizations during the first weeks of the pandemic, focusing on Buddhism, Shintō 神道, and New Religions (McLaughlin 2020; see also Cavaliere 2021). The specific case of the Nichiren Buddhism-based lay organization Sōka Gakkai 創価学会 has been further explored by Anne Mette Fisker-Nielsen (2020), and it can be assumed that, over the following months, further research on the broad topic of responses to coronavirus pandemic from the religious sphere will be forthcoming and several more aspects will be explored.

What these studies have yet to consider is a sphere that overlaps with the religious one, but is often underrepresented in the literature: that of what is often called “new spirituality.” As a matter of fact, only a few scholars of Japanese religions deal with spiritual practices, although they play an important role in the lives of a considerable number of people, especially in cities, where such practices have also offered solutions to the COVID-19 pandemic and related personal crises. Studies of religious responses to disaster in general usually take only religious institutions into account. However, as also argued by Robin Bush, Philip Fountain and Michael Feener (2015), spiritual and religious actors should be given more attention in the analysis of the role of religion in disaster relief.

In this article I will present an emblematic case study useful to understand how spiritual practitioners have reacted to the pandemic and what contributions spiritual practices have offered to the management of the coronavirus crisis. By looking at the specific narrative of a “dance movement shaman,” I will document her efforts during the first wave of the coronavirus in Japan.

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3 Examples are offered by Bentzen (2020); Consorti (2020); Parish (2020).

An analysis of the audience's response is not within the scope of this article, which is rather intended to provide a contribution to the study and discussion of the narratives of spiritual/religious actors, especially by focusing on the adjustments and changes made necessary by the crisis. Before introducing the case study, I will briefly outline the context of contemporary spiritual practices in Japan and, more specifically, of what can be defined as "shamanic spirituality."

### 1.1 *Spiritual Practices in Japan*

"New spirituality movements and culture," to use Shimazono's definition (Shimazono 2004: 275–305), developed in Japan, as well as in other highly industrialized countries, during the 1990s. However, we can trace their roots back to the 1970s and the emergence of an occult boom, initially fueled by the translation of the Prophecies of Nostradamus (Kisala 1997). This boom was associated with a desire for self-development that led some Japanese, especially following the broad reception of New Age movements in the 1980s and 1990s, to adopt techniques and practices perceived as being alternative to 'tradition,' even though a closer look reveals multiple connections with various Japanese religious traditions (Haga and Kisala 1995; Prohl 2007; Shimazono and Graf 2012).

As Shimazono explains, it is only during the last quarter of the twentieth century that "an understanding of spirituality as being independent from religion has been spreading," (Shimazono 2012a: 9) resulting in what has been called "new spirituality." This perceived independence from religion<sup>4</sup> emerged prominently after the Aum Shinrikyō オウム真理教 incident of March 1995, which undoubtedly represented a major turning point in Japanese history, and—with specific reference to the religious sphere—caused a rift in the ways of conceptualizing and talking about religion, which started to be seen as something potentially dangerous (Baffelli and Reader 2012; see also McLaughlin 2016). In his study of the use of the concept of spirituality in Japan, Horie Norichika argues that it is exactly after the Aum incident that the terms *supirichuaru* スピリチュアル and *supirichuariti* スピリチュアリテイ, *katakana* transliterations of the English words "spiritual" and "spirituality" respectively, replaced the term *reisei* 霊性, which has the same meaning but is written in Chinese characters that explicitly display the term "spirit," *rei* 霊 (Horie 2009). What happens in the transition from the English "spirituality" to the Japanese *supirichuariti* is, therefore, a loss of any direct reference to the spirit. The result, as Horie explains, is

4 Cavaliere (2019) has rightly shown that the two categories of spirituality and religion are not independent, but quite interrelated.

that “the Western notions of ‘spiritual’ and ‘spirituality’ are more religious than the Japanese equivalent” (Horie 2009).

The success of the term *supirichuariti* and of spiritual practices in Japan is tightly bound to the figures and activities of well-known spiritual therapists, most notably Ehara Hiroyuki 江原啓之 (b. 1964), who has been active as a spiritual counselor since the 1990s. By means of an extensive use of various media,<sup>5</sup> Ehara has made this term popular, to the point that he is now acknowledged as one of the promoters of the “spiritual boom” that occurred during the first years of the 21st century, which is well documented by many scholarly publications.<sup>6</sup>

The growing interest in spirituality has also resulted in several events organized to promote and commercialize various “spiritual” practices and techniques. This is the case with so-called spiritual conventions (*supikon* スピコン) and spiritual markets (*supima* スピマ), which were held in major Japanese cities until a few years ago (Sakurai 2009: 266–270) and have now been replaced by the Healing Fair (*iyashi fea* 癒しフェア, <https://www.a-advice.com/>) and the Healing Market (<https://healingmarket.jp/>). Indeed, it can be said that “Spirituality has arrived in the corporate marketplace and all that is required is a desire to consume” (Carrette and King 2005: 53). The conclusions Carrette and King have drawn with specific reference to the situation in the United States are surely valid when talking about Japan as well: “In a context where brands and images are becoming more important than the products themselves, ‘spirituality’ has become the new currency in the task of winning human minds and hearts” (Carrette and King 2005: 25). Such commercialization of spirituality—and of the sacred more generally—has benefited from the use of the media and of innovative technologies. However, the relationship between the religious/spiritual sphere and the economic one is not something new: across all times and spaces, the two are intertwined, and intimately connected to the social sphere as well.

To understand the reasons behind this success of spiritual practices in Japan, we must realize that the 1990s were the decade following the burst of the economic bubble, which marked the beginning of a profound recession and led many people to look for new ways to make sense of the difficult situation and to avoid uncertainty. New spirituality thus became a solid handhold for many

5 See, for example, Ehara's website: <https://www.ehara-hiroyuki.com/guest/index.php>. (Accessed 20 October 2020).

6 See, for example, Gaitanidis (2011, 2012a, 2012b); Horie (2009, 2014); Itō, Kashio, and Yumiyama (2004); Kashio (2010); Komatsu (2017); Prohl (2007); Shimazono (2007, 2012b); Shimazono and Graf (2012); Watanabe, Shimazono and Miyazaki (2008).

in this “liquid modernity,” where, as Zygmunt Baumann suggested, uncertainty is the only certainty (Baumann 2000).

In addition, spiritual practices gained more visibility, both in the eyes of the media and in those of the general public, after the March 2011 triple disaster in Tōhoku, when the perception of religion in general changed for the better and media coverage of the religious mobilization after the disaster emphasized mainly “individual rather than institutional efforts” (McLaughlin 2016: 127). As Paola Cavaliere explains, referring not only to the March 11 triple disaster but also to the 2016 Kumamoto earthquakes, “[they] were significant events that shifted the cultural orientation towards the spiritual world and related practices to heal the emotional dimensions of grief in the public sphere” (Cavaliere 2019: 4; see also Horie 2016). An example of this shift is offered by the case study presented below. As a matter of fact, the spiritual activities of the therapist described originated directly after the 2011 disaster, together with an increased awareness of the importance of a connection with nature and spiritual entities.

In the context of spirituality, it is possible to recognize the same subjective turn that Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005)—building upon Charles Taylor’s theories—have observed in the United Kingdom and in the United States of America. In these countries there has been a shift from what they call “life-as,” that is a life lived according to precise roles and duties, to what they define as “subjective-life,” namely a life lived in deep connection with the unique experiences of the self. Such a turn has been enabled by spiritual techniques and practices that can “cater for the values and expectations, potentialities and vulnerabilities of those who attach importance to subjective-life as a primary source of significance” (Heelas and Woodhead 2005: 82). The individual is thus at the center of the new spirituality culture. However, as Heelas and Woodhead have highlighted, this process of subjectivation does not mean individualization: “above all else subjective-life spirituality is ‘holistic’, involving self-in-relation rather than a self-in-isolation” (Heelas and Woodhead 2005: 11).

The two authors rightly chose to refer to this increase in interest in spirituality through the term “spiritual revolution” rather than “spiritual boom.” While the latter evokes the image of a sudden explosion followed by silence, the former conveys the idea of a process that has changed reality in some ways, producing permanent consequences, as can be observed in Japan as well.

### 1.2 *Japanese Shamanic Spirituality*

According to Horie, the spiritual boom that occurred in Japan in the 1990s tailed off at the end of the first decade of the new millennium. Since then, as Ioannis Gaitanidis writes, “*supirichuaru* seems to have lost its genre-defining

narrow meaning and has been fragmenting into various sections of Japanese sub-culture” (Gaitanidis 2012b: 379). This fragmentation is the result, I suggest, of what might be better termed a *revolution*. I argue that it is in one of these “sections” of spirituality that a specific discourse on contemporary urban shamanism has developed. In order to label this discourse, it is fruitful to adopt the concept of “modern shamanic spirituality,” which Joan Townsend defines as follows:

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.

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The goal of the movement—or, more precisely, of the different voices and expressions of this non-homogeneous movement—is to create a better world, by using knowledge and techniques acquired via contact with the spiritual realm and by awakening the spiritual awareness of each individual.

As stated above, the emphasis here is on the individuals, who lie at the center of the practice through which they can achieve self-transformation. However, it would be reductive to think of the sphere of spirituality as an individualistic world: even though they are the focus, individuals are always situated within an (imagined) community that shares a common form of knowledge and a common interest, along with specific experiences. In this case, as the definition presented above suggests, the knowledge shared is that of a discourse on contemporary shamanism: as a keyword for their practices and objectives, leaders and seekers have adopted the word *shaman* シヤーマン, written in *katakana*, which entails a specific set of imageries and characteristics that differ slightly from those connected to the emic words used to refer to ‘traditional’ Japanese shamanic practitioners (Rivadossi 2018: 524–525).

The role of the shamanic spiritual therapist can be summarized through the word *tsunagari* 繋がり, meaning “connection.” In the field of shamanic spirituality, the therapist is believed to be able to (and is indeed required to) establish a connection with vaguely defined other-than-human entities: rather than to specific spirits or gods, the practitioner refers to energy, light, and, more

often, to nature. By means of such connections, the leader can then enable the seeker to achieve healing, knowledge, and empowerment by using and passing down techniques during workshops, seminars, or individual healing sessions.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the discourse on shamanism which these spiritual therapists develop and spread takes the form of a set of tools to be used in everyday life, to gain awareness of one's possibilities and roles in the present world. The aim, then, is not to turn the seekers into shamans, but to give them specific knowledge and strategies to cope with difficulties, to heal wounds and to live fully.

In all of this, one of the main themes stressed by shamanic spiritual therapists is interconnectedness, to be understood as the interdependent connection between individual humans, and, in a more general sense, as the interdependent connection between humans and nature, usually seen as a source of healing energy.<sup>8</sup> The desire for a renewed harmonious relationship with nature is generally understood as a reaction to urbanization and modernity, and it is connected with the search for one's origins in the past, especially in the Jōmon period (ca. 10,500 BCE–ca. 300 BCE), where the core of authentic Japaneseness is thought to lie. In this viewpoint of history, the echo of *nihonjinron* 日本人論 (theories on the uniqueness of the Japanese) is evident.<sup>9</sup>

As the case study will clearly show, by helping the individuals to feel connected within and outside themselves, shamanic spiritual practices manage to provide guidance in times of crisis and uncertainty, of which the present time undoubtedly constitutes an example. The discourse on shamanism and spirituality thus contributes first and foremost to the construction of identities, and, secondly, of relationships.

Shamanic spirituality shares another important characteristic with the broader category of new spirituality movements and culture: the use of technology and the media. Among the many studies in the last few years that have considered the relationship between the media and religion in general,<sup>10</sup> a few have focused on new spirituality. These include Anne Kalvig's research on alternative therapists and spiritualists in Norway (e.g. Kalvig 2017), Liora Sarfati (2014, 2016) and Kim Seong-nae's (2005) studies on the use of new technolo-

7 On the topic of shamanic spiritual therapists, see Gaitanidis and Murakami (2014).

8 Interestingly, animals are usually not part of the spiritual framework, as they are in many other modern shamanic traditions.

9 The term refers to those discourses on the identity of the Japanese people which emphasize its alleged uniqueness and homogeneity and which present, as one of its main characteristics, an inherent ability to build harmonious relationships with nature. See Befu (2001); Matsudo (2001); Oguma (2002).

10 For a recent review of studies of the media and religion, see Campbell and Evolvi (2020). See also Peterson (2020).



gies and the media by Korean shamans, and Birgit Staemmler's ongoing study of how Japanese spiritual healers present themselves online (e.g. Staemmler 2019). These studies deal, among other things, with the relevant issues of self-representation, authority, trust formation, and 'tradition,' as well as with the effects of the use of technologies and new media on spiritual practitioners and practices, mainly in terms of increased visibility. When talking about the Internet, they show that, as also theorized by Heidi Campbell (2012), there is a close interconnection between what happens online and offline: the two spaces are contiguous, as the current pandemic has made clear to everyone. However, a deeper analysis of this interconnection is still required in order to better understand how and why new spirituality actors use specific media and how these media have transformed and adapted their practices.

As the following pages will show, during the first months of the pandemic, spiritual therapists managed to keep in contact with their practitioners through the many opportunities provided by the Internet, as did many other religious actors. However, it must be recalled that, as Hazel O'Brien argues, "Digital religion has opened itself up to the masses as a result of Covid-19, but this is an acceleration of a pre-existing development, rather than something new" (2020: 244).<sup>11</sup> Further evidence in support of this is provided by the case study presented, where the main actor started using Internet and social media to promote her practices well before the current pandemic.

## 2 Case Study: "Toward a Shamanic Daily Life"

Ms. Hiroda,<sup>12</sup> a Japanese woman in her late fifties, presents herself as a dance therapist and a "dance movement shaman." I met her in Tokyo in October 2019 and, since then, we have kept in touch via Facebook. She has always been active online: her Twitter account, created in January 2011, has 1,323 followers; her personal Facebook page, where she has 683 friends and posts on a daily basis, is followed by 172 people.<sup>13</sup> In November 2018 she also created a Facebook page specifically devoted to her spiritual activities, which she promotes through specific posts and the creation of events (this page is now followed by 329 people). On both pages, people interact with her posts by writing comments and asking for more information, or they simply react to her pictures and words with likes

11 On the concept of "digital religion," see Campbell (2013).

12 All names that are preceded by Ms. are pseudonyms.

13 Last accessed 20 October 2020.

and hearts. Since 2008 she has also been running a blog, mainly to report on the workshops she organizes and the exhibitions she takes part in.

Therefore, Ms. Hiroda's online presence was already strong before the coronavirus pandemic and was bound to increase and deepen during the months of the declared state of emergency. To better contextualize and understand Ms. Hiroda's responses to the contemporary critical situation, it is useful to briefly outline her practices and trace the roots of the role she has chosen to play.<sup>14</sup>

### 2.1 *Before the Coronavirus Pandemic*

From the time she was a little girl, Ms. Hiroda studied various dance styles before discovering *ankoku butō* 暗黒舞踏, which she studied and performed under the guidance of Ashikawa Yoko 芦川羊子 (b. 1947).<sup>15</sup> Her training as a dancer led her to begin a career as a dance therapist in 1997, combining all the dance techniques and styles she had studied with her knowledge of psychology and relaxation techniques. Since then, she has worked as a dance therapist in hospitals, clinics, associations and different organizations, while at the same time organizing workshops and giving lectures on various topics. By her estimation, more than 20,000 people have participated in her professional activities.

The March 2011 triple disaster, which represented a major watershed in the perception of the role of religious and spiritual actors and practices, as stated above, was also a turning point in Ms. Hiroda's professional and personal life. From this moment on, she started to offer prayer dances in natural settings and at Shintō shrines. The prayers offered by means of such dances were—and still are—intended for human beings and animals, both living and dead, and for the natural world at large. These dances are not planned and organized: rather, in certain natural spots, Ms. Hiroda unconsciously feels the urge to dance and, through such free movement, she becomes one with nature, praying and thanking the spirit present within it.

14 Ms. Hiroda's reaction is not the only case of a response to COVID-19 by spiritual therapists. The better-known and already mentioned Ehara Hiroyuki has also offered his contribution. A recent example is a message he published online in three parts on how to face life after the emergency. It can be found at the following links: <https://ananweb.jp/anan/294447/>, <https://ananweb.jp/anan/294450/>, <https://ananweb.jp/anan/294453/>. (Accessed 20 October 2020).

15 Many scholars recognize shamanic elements in *butō*, also romanized as *Butoh* (e.g. Fraleigh 2010). However, as Centonze argues, "it is important to underline that *Butoh*, an art founded on and which thrives on paradox, is not necessarily linked to shamanistic rituals ... one can note that Hijikata's *Butoh* was born as a form of aesthetic and social desecration, dissociated from any religious practice" (Centonze 2021: 71).

The 2011 disaster also marked another beginning: Ms. Hiroda started organizing specific workshops in different cities across the country with the main aim of reawakening people’s awareness of being part of nature and of being able to establish a connection with it, as well as with spirits. She believes that once this connection is re-established, an exchange of energy is enabled and humans can learn a lot of different things from nature. Through her workshops, attended year after year by many different people, she says that she is actually managing to expand this awareness of the importance of nature and of the need to rebuild a connection to it. Becoming aware again of the interconnectedness of all beings on Earth also requires working on one’s body, learning to stop the flow of thoughts and to follow one’s instincts. According to Ms. Hiroda, this is especially necessary in the present, because people think too much and pay less attention to their physical body.

Over the years, she has continued to develop her activity through new projects. An interesting example is what she defines as *junrei dansu* 巡礼ダンス or “pilgrimage dance”: she has been offering these improvised dances in specific natural places and Shintō shrines to thank nature and the *kami* 神 (gods) since 2015. This is a personal project: no public is involved except for her husband, who films and takes pictures of the performances. This material is produced for Ms. Hiroda’s own use and is only rarely shared online. So far, she has performed around 150 of these ritual dances, through which she claims to receive energy from nature and the *kami* of each shrine. It is interesting to note that for Ms. Hiroda, nature is more than just the backdrop to her dance: dance makes her part of nature, to which she expresses her gratitude (personal communication, 7 October 2019).

In recent years, Ms. Hiroda has developed an interest in shamanism and animism, which has led her to study Native American rituals, on the one hand, and those of the Japanese Jōmon period on the other. In her own practice, this latter element is connected to *kodai shintō* 古代神道, “ancient Shintō,” a religious tradition believed to have characterized the Jōmon period, although—and it is necessary to bear this in mind—there are no written sources about it. In her practice, all these elements and themes find a place, along with her interest in the use of tarot cards and her attention to nature and its phases.

In 2017, together with art therapist Ms. Hayashi, she designed a new workshop entitled “Toward a Shamanic Daily Life,” which has been held in Kobe every year since, after being advertised online. The main goal is, once again, to teach people how to connect one’s body to the Earth by helping participants rediscover their inner self and make use of the wisdom that comes from being connected with nature in one’s everyday life. The workshop does not aim to turn the participants into shamans, but rather to make them acknowledge the

shamanic elements within themselves and to use them while playing their role in society. In Ms. Hiroda's understanding of the term, shamanism equals animism<sup>16</sup> and mainly refers to the ability to get in touch with nature, by means of different techniques, especially dance improvisation.

One last element in the kaleidoscope of Ms. Hiroda's activities is represented by her solo dance performances: on several occasions, she has performed solo, grounding her performances in improvisation and sometimes collaborating with other artists, such as musicians and painters.

### 2.2 *During the First Wave of the Pandemic*

On 1 April, a few days before Prime Minister Abe Shinzō 安倍晋三 (b. 1954) declared a state of emergency for Tokyo and certain prefectures, Ms. Hiroda invited her followers to unite in prayer for 30 minutes at 10 pm, addressing their thoughts to the medical staff and healthcare workers of every country of the world, through a Facebook post using the hashtag #prayfortheworld. People were invited to participate any way they could, via prayers offered to any entity, deity, or spirit. In a comment on the post, which has received 77 likes, she later said that she prayed using the *Kannon Sutra* (*Kannongyō* 観音経). This event was repeated several times over the following months, in conjunction with the various phases of the lunar cycle. Each time, Ms. Hiroda created a post dedicated to this, occasionally adding further details and suggestions. On 23 April, for example, she asked people to pray for nature and the Earth, for all essential workers, and for all living beings, explaining how this prayer could be performed: one could listen to music, meditate, watch a beautiful image of nature, just sit and relax, or think about something one perceives as truly important.

This is not the only contribution Ms. Hiroda has made to the management of the crisis. Indeed, in the same month, she shared her thoughts on the situation, inviting her friends and followers to reflect on the future. For example, on 5 April, in a post liked by 112 people, she said it was time to envisage a new future by learning from the wisdom of the past, heading towards sustainability and (re-)creating a symbiotic relationship with nature. Through other posts, she talked about the importance of rebuilding communication between people and of transforming the present situation into an occasion to truly gaze within oneself, by analyzing one's emotions and anxiety. Reading the comments on

16 This equivalence is common in contemporary discourses on shamanism within new spirituality contexts, both in Japan and in other countries. See, for example, Vitebsky (2003); von Stuckrad (2002); Wallis (2003); Znamenski (2007).

these posts, it is evident that some of her friends and followers have truly benefited from her words, asking for more advice or sharing their own thoughts. Thus, Ms. Hiroda's suggestions always lead to dialogue.

The interpretation of a disaster as an opportunity for change is not unique to the coronavirus pandemic: Feener and Daly (2016), for example, found the same response among many members of the Muslim community after the 2004 Aceh tsunami. The same interpretation can be found in Japan as well, where the discourse on change contributed to defining the post 3.11 discourse, as explored by Richard Samuels (2013: 97–100) and by Mark Mullins and Koichi Nakano (2016a). Mullins and Nakano (2016a: 3) underline that the rhetoric of crisis was “combined with the idea that the massive destruction also represented an opportunity (*kikai*) to renew, revitalize, and rebuild Japan.” Ms. Hiroda, who has probably adopted this discourse, goes further, seeing the pandemic as an opportunity to make adjustments and imagine a new future not only for Japan, but for the whole world. Moreover, she sees it as encompassing the potential to look into oneself and initiate a self-transformation, thus grounding the opportunity for change more deeply.

Her role as a healer and guide manifested itself in another project launched during this time of interpersonal distancing: from 12 May, every Tuesday night at 9:30 pm, Ms. Hiroda held a session entitled “Healing Stretching and Relaxation” over Zoom. This was part of a self-care program organized by an association of artists, therapists and healers, of which she is a member. During the Zoom meetings, lasting between 30 and 40 minutes and costing 3000 yen each, she guided participants in taking care of their own body by means of simple breathing and stretching exercises aimed at resetting both body and mind, since—as she herself explains—the stress caused by the coronavirus has resulted in tensions and anxiety. These healing sessions ended on 4 August, when Ms. Hiroda offered a longer session (90 minutes).

Following the health and hygiene instructions to prevent a further spread of the virus, in June Ms. Hiroda resumed her in-presence dance therapy workshops. The first one was held in Osaka on 13 and 14 June. The final report, published on Ms. Hiroda's blog, outlines the most important points that emerged during the workshop. This was based on the importance of communicating with people, of being able to talk about what has happened over these months of social distancing, about one's feelings and thoughts, and about the importance of the body, which has been neglected during the months of self-isolation, following the authorities' suggestion to practice self-restraint (*jishuku* 自肅). With reference to this second theme, Ms. Hiroda's main job has thus been to bring people's attention back to the body by making it move and resonate with the Earth.

For the second time in her twenty years as a workshop organizer, the theme that acted as a common thread for her many sessions was “love”: noticing that hiding feelings and emotions during the first months of the coronavirus pandemic resulted in various physical and mental symptoms, Ms. Hiroda decided to try to help participants bring back the energy of love, directed both toward oneself and toward others. According to her, by acknowledging every feeling and deeply accepting even those that are negative and painful, one can transform everything into something beautiful. She notes that this process is rather difficult and often painful and that it can take years to reach the desired goal, but this is what she wishes people to experience in their lives. During the workshops and beyond, such energy can spread not only to interpersonal relationships but also to nature and the Earth, which have benefited from the shutting down of various human activities—as Ms. Hiroda suggests, agreeing with those who think that, in a way, the coronavirus may be a sign of the Earth’s wrath. In her view, energy needs to flow: if it stagnates, it will turn into something unhealthy. For this reason, taking care of oneself on a daily basis is essential and enables the growth and circulation of feelings of love, compassion, generosity, and gratitude, which are especially important in the present situation.<sup>17</sup>

There is one last big project that saw Ms. Hiroda’s involvement and contribution during the first wave of coronavirus: the third edition of the workshop “Toward a Shamanic Daily Life.” The original plan was to hold the workshop in March 2020, but after the coronavirus outbreak, Ms. Hiroda and Ms. Hayashi<sup>18</sup> decided to postpone it until July. On 13 May they created a Facebook group for all those interested in the workshop, soon reaching a total of 92 members (including the present writer). Interestingly, through this group, the two therapists managed to reach far more people than the usual participants in their activities, extending their audience beyond the Kantō and Kansai regions as far as Hokkaidō.

To promote the workshop, for eight Thursday nights, starting on 14 May, they went live on Facebook using StreamYard. The online meetings started at 9:30 pm and lasted for 30 minutes. During the live streaming and even after it, members of the group were allowed to leave comments—the majority of which expressed gratitude for the knowledge shared—and ask questions, mainly about terms and concepts they did not understand, to which the two therapists gave answers. Until this moment, the online promotion of the workshop did not involve any communication between the two women and the audience,

17 The terms Ms. Hiroda uses for these feelings have no specific religious connotation.

18 During these months, she also began offering art therapy sessions and workshops online.

who could only read a presentation of the workshop’s goals and activities. The possibility of actually seeing the two therapists talk and to directly interact with them online enabled even those living far from Kobe to feel that they knew them to a certain extent; this helped build an emotional connection and can easily explain the increased interest and participation in their activities.

The general theme of the eight videos was “Crossing the Bridge between Therapy and Shamanism.” In the post presenting the series, the two therapists explained that shamanism is not something occult and that in ancient societies, shamans played a role as doctors, pharmacists, and therapists. They went on to say that in the current situation, with the new coronavirus, self-care is essential for everyone and that a “shamanic daily life” is full of wisdom that helps one to stay healthy, improves one’s self-healing ability, and contributes to self-care.

During the eight meetings, Ms. Hiroda and Ms. Hayashi explained how they became interested in shamanism and talked about the paths that led them to become therapists. Ms. Hiroda went more deeply into what it means to live a shamanic life, explaining that a shaman is someone who has acquired the ability to connect consciousness and unconsciousness, nature and humans, forests and cities, and to heal people’s souls. These abilities are extremely important in the contemporary world; as already stated above, the workshop aims to teach how to fully live in connection with one’s body and with nature.

The workshop session eventually took place in Kobe on 4 and 5 July, two days during which the fourteen participants, all of them women, learned how to use their body, voice and images to become more conscious of themselves. The Facebook post announcing the in-person workshop stated:

There are many people who are experiencing negative emotions, such as anxiety, fear, and anger. It is important that from now on, they can have hope and feel they are able to go on positively. The aim of the workshop is to make people notice the wisdom and the abilities they have in themselves and to ensure they use them in their everyday life.

During the first day, the theme was trusting nature and the “Great Things” (*ōi naru mono* 大いなるもの) and relying on them by learning how to use one’s body and physical sensations. The second day, the participants took this a step further: the theme was “Connecting to the ‘Great Things’” by means of meditation, art and dance improvisation. This was presented as a truly important step, since, according to the two therapists, by feeling a connection with others, nature and the spiritual world, people can reduce anxiety and feel safe and secure. Since there was a full moon on 5 July, some of the activities proposed

had the moon as their topic. For instance, the meditation exercise was based on the Shingon 真言 *gachirikan* 月輪觀 or “moon visualization,” an esoteric Buddhist technique that—to put it in very simple, if not simplistic, terms—consists of meditating before an image of the full moon. Ms. Hiroda explained to me that after doing this meditation, the participants made a collage of the moon and danced by moving the image along with their bodies. Talking about the reasons behind the choice of Buddhist techniques during a workshop devoid of any specific religious connotations, Ms. Hiroda told me that even before the introduction of Buddhism into Japan women were already extremely familiar with the moon, in various ways, and that femininity has long been associated with the moon. Therefore, she does not think that “there was much awareness of Buddhism in the participants. The Japanese say that they are non-religious, but most of the graves are in temples, and even if they are not conscious of Buddhism, they often unconsciously accept Buddhist customs” (personal communication, 10 November 2020).

At the beginning of the workshop, Ms. Hiroda helped put the whole experience into perspective by recalling its starting point: owing to the measures taken to contain the virus, life had inevitably changed and a lot of people had experienced—indeed, were still experiencing—an “atrophy of body and mind.” The workshop thus represented an opportunity to notice the changes in one’s own body and offered a place and time to communicate again, and not merely with words. According to Ms. Hiroda, it also aimed to help people see reality from a broader perspective, by thinking deeply about the future and what can be concretely done for the Earth.

After the workshop, one of the participants wrote a report describing not only what had happened during the two days and what Ms. Hiroda and Ms. Hayashi had said, but also participants’ thoughts. Being asked why they had decided to participate, some of them answered that the choice was a consequence of the coronavirus emergency, which had made it more and more difficult to communicate with people. Others said that they wanted to regain control over their own body, or that they wished to become independent by learning to rely on their own strengths. A few also said they had chosen to participate because they wanted to become shamans (*shāman* シヤーマン) or witches (*majo* 魔女), demonstrating little awareness of the aims of the activities and confusion about the meaning of the word “shaman.” At the end of the workshop, they expressed their gratitude and joy for being able to feel their body again, to perceive their own life force, to see and accept their wounds, and to feel a connection with the Earth.



### 3 Re-connecting to Cope

To encompass all of Ms. Hiroda's activities and to describe the role that she has decided to play in contemporary society, no word is more appropriate than *tsunagari*: “connection.” The descriptions of her various activities make it clear that this is the keyword for her practices, of which it represents not only the end but also the means. The connection that Ms. Hiroda wants to re-create, by using ‘shamanic’ elements, involves three main aspects: body, community, and nature. The three can be conceptualized as three concentric spheres, where the effects generated in the central one reverberate through and affect the other two as well.

#### 3.1 *Body*

The first sphere is that of the individual, the subject of Ms. Hiroda's practices as well as of every spiritual practice. By means of the workshops and sessions she organizes, individuals are guided via diverse techniques with the intention of enabling them to re-gain awareness of their body and thus to manage their feelings and emotions.

The new spirituality field—including the sub-field of shamanic spirituality—is thus characterized by a holistic attention to the self and by the offering of various techniques aimed, in most cases, at harmonizing the relationship between body and mind so as to re-establish the importance of the body and of physical sensations. As Eeva Sointu and Linda Woodhead have illustrated in their studies of spirituality carried out in the United Kingdom, “Holistic spiritualities recognize and affirm the body, its health, appearance, and sensations, as proper subjects of attention, care, and cultivation” (Sointu and Woodhead 2008: 269). This is also evident in the case study presented, as well as in other examples from the Japanese spiritual *milieu* (Gaitanidis 2012b; Prohl 2007; Shimazono and Graf 2012).

Attention to the body plays an especially important role in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. As Ms. Hiroda explains, months of self-isolation have resulted in a general lack of care for one's own body, leading to an increase in stress and tensions as well as the loss of awareness of one's own emotions, which, according to her, are always grounded in the body. Healing these tensions can thus enable the body to become a reliable point of reference to return to, in order to avoid or defeat anxiety and worries. In this way, the individual is empowered.

It must be noted that Ms. Hiroda's practices are mainly directed toward the female body. Indeed, as numerous studies demonstrate,<sup>19</sup> most participants in

19 See, for example, Cavaliere (2019); Fedele and Knibbe (2021); Gaitanidis (2012a); Heelas

the field of new spirituality, both in Japan and in other highly industrialized countries, are women in their 40s and 50s. The same also holds true for the majority of spiritual therapists. An explanation is offered by Sointu and Woodhead, who argue that

within the holistic milieu this traditional feminine skill of care for other is given economic and personal validation, as female clients purchase the services of female carers to help them get in touch with, heal, and validate their own emotional lives.

SOINTU and WOODHEAD 2008: 268

In her study of spirituality in Japan, Komatsu Kayoko reaches the same conclusions: being involved with spirituality provides not only a business opportunity for women, but also “ways of affirming themselves and positively accepting that they are women” (Komatsu 2017: 130), enabling them to gain a sense of self-liberation from socially constructed roles and expectations.

Spiritual practices thus offer women new roles as well as the possibility of empowerment. These roles and possibilities can take different forms, as demonstrated by the religious and spiritual experiences of Japanese women presented and analyzed by Paola Cavaliere, who underlines the creativity and “the innovative tendency that these women share” (Cavaliere 2019: 15) in developing their own ways of engaging with religious and spiritual practices.

### 3.2 *Community*

The self-cultivation of physical well-being does not lead only to the general well-being of the individual, understood as composed of both body and mind, which are always strictly intertwined. As our case study has shown, Ms. Hiroda aims to promote the positive effects of her therapies on the interpersonal level, which has been deeply affected by the coronavirus pandemic and the subsequent social distancing imposed to prevent the virus from spreading further. Through extensive use of social media, she has taken care of her online community, engaging in dialogue, sharing her thoughts, and providing answers and solutions to problems. Her role has thus been to prevent individuals from feeling completely alone and her community from weakening and ultimately dissolving.

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and Woodhead (2005); Kalvig (2017: 58–64); Komatsu (2017); Sointu and Woodhead (2008).

It is important to note that the community to which Ms. Hiroda's online and offline activities are addressed is not so much built on actual interpersonal relations between members, but rather bound by shared knowledge and interests and by the central role of the therapist, who holds the whole structure together and represents its focal point. This is especially evident on Facebook, where her followers never interact with one another via comments, but only with Ms. Hiroda, who is clearly invested with the necessary symbolic capital and whose authority is recognized and accepted. Each of the participants in her activities is thus connected to *her*, and not necessarily to the others. What she has established is thus an imagined community whose members do not necessarily know one another, but nevertheless feel bound to the community through their connection to Ms. Hiroda, first and foremost, and through their shared thoughts, interests and practices.<sup>20</sup>

The effects of the therapist's teachings and practices on the interpersonal sphere, therefore, are not necessarily and specifically reflected in the relationships between her followers; rather, they concern the interpersonal relations which each follower and participant entertains outside the therapist's group. In this sense, it is understandable that the therapist's actions can indeed have a wider impact beyond the individual participants who have been empowered and who can thus extend the positive effects of the workshop/practice to those to whom they are connected.

### 3.3 *Nature*

The last sphere in which the effect of Ms. Hiroda's work on the body manifests itself, thus making interconnectedness fully possible, is that of nature. This reflects what Robert Kisala (1995), referring to new religious movements, has defined as “social healing” (*shakaiteki iyashi* 社会的癒し). As Yumiyama Tatsuya also explains, such social healing coincides with the result of the work carried out by religious groups “to preserve harmony in society and the environment, compensating for the contradictions and shortcomings of the existing social system and the devastation of the natural world, and thereby attempt to restore society and nature to their rightful, original form” (Yumiyama 1995: 272). The desire to raise awareness of the need for interconnectedness not only among humans, but also between humans and nature, is a trait common to various spiritual and shamanic practices, both in Japan and in other highly industrialized countries.<sup>21</sup>

20 The role of the Internet in helping shamanic actors create imagined communities has also been underlined by Liora Sarfati (2016: 194).

21 See, for example, Vitebsky (2003); von Stuckrad (2002); Wallis (2003).

In Ms. Hiroda's view, this connection with nature appears to be especially important in urban contexts, where people's lifestyle does not allow them to get in touch with the environment and where, as a consequence, nature is often neglected. The need to return to nature is therefore related to—and a reaction to—the characteristics of metropolitan life. I must emphasise that Ms. Hiroda's awareness of the importance of nature has been deepened by two crises: first the 2011 triple disaster, and now the coronavirus pandemic. Her thoughts and role have thus been molded at least in part by these crises, which have led her to identify and design the tools necessary to face and react to such crisis states. Because of this, it is precisely in response to the current critical situation that she can play a significant role.

Re-connecting with nature appears to be an essential step to become fully able to cope with the anxiety derived from the coronavirus pandemic, as well as with other crises. Once individuals have managed to regain awareness of their own body, they need to perceive their existence as part of nature in order to feel safe and face any possible negative event and situation. Moreover, considering that Ms. Hiroda sees nature as animistic, in her case, connecting with it also involves a connection with the spirits it encloses, and—as illustrated above—such a connection requires the offering of prayers and the expression of gratitude.

This expressed need to restore natural harmony results from an interplay of different elements, including echoes of *nihonjinron* theories.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, returning to nature is also perceived as a way of going back to one's origins and of re-discovering one's identity. In many cases, as the case study of Ms. Hiroda's practices has shown, the past to which the therapist connects is the Jōmon period, where it is believed that one can find the answers and strategies necessary to cope with the present crisis by rediscovering how to recreate the social cohesion and harmonious relationship with nature considered characteristic of ancient times. What Ms. Hiroda and other spiritual therapists do, then, is not only help people to overcome problems of various kinds. By teaching self-cultivation techniques and linking the participants to their past as well as to nature, they also engage in processes of identity (re-)construction.

It remains to be seen whether the discourse on the importance of nature will become a driver of change, leading to active engagement in the preservation of the natural environment, something that is generally lacking in spirituality movements at the moment. Environmental activism fueled by a desire to

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22 On the specific theme of the alleged Japanese love of nature, see, for example, Kalland (1995); Dessì (2016: 90–94); Saito (1992).

save the planet is one of the two main developments that Piers Vitebsky (2003) sees in the New Age appropriation of shamanic elements, the other being the attempt to improve the self through what he defines as the “individualistic psychologization of religion.” His analysis draws on what is happening in the Western world and it is interesting to note that, while a focus on self-cultivation is surely prominent in the Japanese context as well, the discourse about environmentalism and ecology is rarely developed in depth.<sup>23</sup>

#### 4 Conclusion

As seen in the introduction, spiritual practices emerge and develop in times of individual crisis and economic uncertainty. In this respect, the coronavirus pandemic is no exception: it required and stimulated reactions and responses aimed at individuals in order to guide them in developing or recapturing relationships with themselves, with others and with nature. As Ms. Hiroda's case has clearly shown, shamanic spiritual practices do not offer explanations of and solutions to the crisis, but strategies for living and coping with—and despite—the crisis. A response to the crisis—be it individual, interpersonal, or environmental—can therefore also benefit from the sphere of spirituality, with its various techniques and practices. These should be further explored in order to clarify their contribution and thus enhance our understanding of the strategies humans adopt to cope with difficulties.

In the following months and years, closer observation of spiritual therapists' activities will also show whether, and how, these have changed during the different phases of the crisis and have been changed by the crisis itself. I predict that the experimentation with new technologies brought about by these months of social distancing will continue to be a valuable resource even when physical distancing is no longer required. New technologies have already enabled spiritual therapists to reach more people than usual and to engage with them directly, thus furthering their aims. It remains to be seen what results and effects this will produce over the long term.

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23 A similar idealized discourse on environmentalism characterizes also several Japanese religions, as argued by Dessì (2016: 67–97), who has shown how the involvement in these themes takes more often the shape of rhetoric rather than of actual engagement. Also Rots (2017) in the analysis of what he defines the “Shinto environmentalist paradigm,” has underlined a similar lack of real engagement in environmental problems by Shinto priests, even though several actors are now taking part in projects to preserve shrine forests (*chinju no mori* 鎮守の森).

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