

## Psychological aspects of the Aum Shinrikyo affair

Alexander E. Raevskiy

*Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia*

Corresponding author. E-mail: a.raevskiy@gmail.com

Terrorism has become a highly important problem for humanity, and psychology tries to make its contribution to the study of this complex phenomenon. In the current work we analyze not a typical terrorist case, but an unusual one: the sarin attack which took place in Japan in 1995. The current study combines the cultural-historic approach of L.S. Vygotsky, and research on Japanese mentality and collectivistic psychology. The results show the importance of several key factors that led a religious sect to become a terrorist organization. In spite of the uniqueness of the Japanese psychology, in the Aum Shinrikyo case we can see some common aspects of terrorist motivation and behavior.

**Keywords:** Japan, religious terrorism, religion, terrorism in Japan, Aum Shinrikyo, social behaviour, conformity

### Introduction

Japan is known as one of the safest countries in the world, but terrorism has become so global, that nowadays any country can suffer from terrorist attacks. The most famous (and to be accurate, one of the very few) acts of terrorism to have occurred in Japan was the sarin attack of 1995, perpetrated by Aum Shinrikyo. Terrorism in every region has its own typical features, as does Japanese terrorism. By analyzing the psychological aspect of the Aum Shinrikyo affair, we can learn more about the goals and motivation of terrorists in general.

Aum Shinrikyo is a Japanese religious organization, better known for its terrorist activity, mainly the for sarin attack in the Tokyo subway on March 1995. This act of terrorism came as a surprise to the whole world (for the first time in human history weapons of mass destruction were used by non-combatants, and it happened in Japan, which is known as one of the safest countries), but it was a much greater shock for Japan itself. Japanese society always had confidence in a perfectly organized social system, with no possibility of violence. The sarin attack showed that this was an illusion: Japanese people for a long time could not feel safe in their own country. It is what can be called an effective terrorist attack: 12 people killed, but with a great psychological impact on the whole country.

The most surprising fact for the Japanese people, after news of Aum had spread all over the country, was that most of the terrorists were graduates of famous universities: Tokyo, Waseda, Kyoto, etc. They were not uneducated misfits (from whom violence is more often expected), but qualified specialists, with good educations and with ambitions. This fact meant, in general terms, that in spite of career and other material opportunities provided by Japanese society, young people could choose anti-social forms of behavior. Moreover, they were not only anti-social, but they acted violently against their own country. Psychologists, sociologists, historians and journalists from Japan (and several specialists in other countries) tried to explore the Aum Shinrikyo phenomenon and came to the conclusion that Aum was a result of many factors, leading from religion to tragedy.

Terrorist motivation was always a great field for discussion between scientists; psychologists try to find the proper method to analyze the problem (Zinchenko, 2007, 2011). Terrorism in Japan is, of course, a special case (Raevskiy, 2012), but in this study we tend to use the achievements of the Soviet psychological school.

According to the Cultural-historic approach, introduced to psychology by L.S. Vygotskiy, every event should be analyzed not as a certain independent case, but in connection with the specific cultural features of the region and the time it took place. If we take a look at the situation in Japan in 1980s, when Aum Shinrikyo appeared, we can see that the social-cultural background can be definitely seen as one of the main factors of the Aum phenomenon.

First of all, we should not underestimate the role of Japan's defeat in World War II and the occupation of Japan by American soldiers. It was preceded by Emperor Hirohito's speech on the radio: for the first time in Japanese history, the emperor admitted that he was not a God (*kamisama*), but an ordinary man. Some historians argue that this had a greater psychological impact on people than the defeat itself (Mesheryakov, 2009). In any case, Japan had to build a new country under the supervision of the USA, and for post-war generations, work for the sake of their country was of the greatest value.

The next generation, born in the 1960s, was much less idealistic in its aims: money for them was not an ultimate goal, but merely a way to provide a living; young people were seeking spiritual enlightenment more than economical welfare. Some Japanese sociologists invented a new term for the post-war generation: they call them *shinjinrui*, meaning "New Generation" (Tanaka).

We must also remember that religion in Japan plays a role that is different from our culture. The indigenous faith of the ancient Japanese is called Shinto (神道, which can be translated as "the way of the gods") and it greatly influences modern-day culture and traditions in Japan. In the sixth century Buddhism was adopted, and the Japanese religion became more complicated, becoming more a set of practices and rituals than a belief. For centuries, the Japanese did not have a need for the spiritual functions of religion, but in the severe and hard post-war times there was a situation which was described by the American historian and religious scholar D. Metraux as a "religious vacuum", when people needed religion to recompose themselves, but could not find anything in their religion that could help them.

The religious situation in Japan in 1980s can be called an "occult boom", when people were looking for a religion, and many New religions (*shinshukyo*) appeared as a response to the needs of the Japanese (Metraux, 1999). Aum Shinrikyo was ini-

tially such a religion, and in its beginning there was nothing to show that it would later become a terrorist organization.

Another reason for Aum's popularity (especially among young Japanese) was that the founder of the cult, Shoko Asahara, understood what people needed at that moment, and used it in the promotion of his religion. Levitation and supernatural abilities were introduced in the form of manga and anime, beloved by all Japanese, so that people could quickly catch the main idea: living in society is boring, but joining Aum helps in making new friends, developing one's skills, and reaching enlightenment. The main targets for such propaganda were young graduates of the universities, and Asahara made every effort to invite them to Aum laboratories.

We should keep in mind that Shoko Asahara, according to the evidence, was a talented storyteller and a very charismatic person, which made Aum not a boring, one-among-many religion, but an attractive cult with bright visual advertisements and a smiling, understanding guru. Thus, we can come to a conclusion about the importance of Asahara's role in Aum activities, and the role of leader is definitely a second major factor which led Aum to tragedy.

Shoko Asahara (his real name is Chizuo Matsumoto) was born on Kyushu, in a poor family of tatami mat makers. Afflicted at birth with infantile glaucoma, he went blind at a young age in his left eye and was only partially sighted in his right. After he moved to Tokyo in 1978, he tried to enter Tokyo University, but failed the exams and started a new business in Chinese herbal medicine. Having an interest in religion, in 1984 he opened a small yoga club, which became more and more popular, perhaps to Asahara's own surprise.

Every guru should have his own legend, and Asahara created one after his trip to India in 1987. He told his disciples about a meeting with the god Shiva, that the Dalai Lama gave to him a special mission, and from now on he was guru (in Japanese - *sonshi*) Shoko Asahara. The Dalai Lama came to visit Japan in 1995, several months after the sarin attack. When asked about his meeting with Asahara, the Dalai Lama said that he remembered a strange Japanese man coming to visit him, but that he did not give any special mission to him.

After that group changed its name to Aum Shinrikyo and started an active PR-campaign, attracting many people who even left their houses to live in the Aum commune (this practice in traditional Japanese Buddhism is called *shukke*, but although it was popular in the 13th century, it appeared very strange in the end of the 20th). Many Japanese students became interested in reaching spiritual enlightenment with Aum.

It is even more surprising that another boom of interest in Aum Shinrikyo was after Aum manga "*Metsubo-no hi*" (1988), about the Armageddon. According to this comic book, everyone except Aum members would die during the destruction of this world by the Shiva deity. Speaking about the Armageddon was a good idea for Asahara: before the approaching millenium in 2000, many Japanese felt worried, and joining Aum was a solution to overcome those fears. This fact means that, no matter how strange this cult can appear from the present day, the social and psychological climate in the time of Aum's existence made it very popular among young Japanese.

It is possible to suppose that it was the popularity of Aum which led to the dramatic changes inside the organization and the tragedy in 1995. According to I.

Reader, intensive physical exercises and ascetic practices helped Asahara to suppress his “dark side” (such as his intentions to rule and manipulate people). But the larger and more powerful his cult became, the more Asahara distanced himself from religious practices and asked his closest disciples (*seitaishi*) to perform physical exercises. He became a real guru, saying wise things, seldom moving, and eating his favorite food (in contrast, Aum followers were to adopt severe ascetic practices). That made Asahara (initially a charismatic yoga teacher) more violent with his disciples: the first acts of violence inside the group occur in 1988 (Reader, 1999).

The same year, the first death occurred in Aum: 21-year-old disciple Majima Terayuki died from a heart-attack during a 24-hour meditation session in a dark room. That death was a great psychological blow to Asahara: it meant that his religion brought people not to salvation, but to death. It became necessary to change the Aum doctrine in such a way as to justify murder, and Asahara took from Vajrayana, a branch of Tibetan Buddhism, the idea of *poa*. *Poa* means sacred killing in the name of the guru: people can be killed, if they accumulate bad karma, and in this case *poa* helps them to be reborn with better karma in the next life.

From 1989, every person who did wrong from Asahara’s point of view could be killed for their bad karma. Aum had planned several (both successful and unsuccessful) murders, and when in 1992 the Japanese people didn’t vote for Aum Shinrito (Aum’s political party) in the parliamentary elections, Asahara announced that society (except Aum members) was filled with bad karma and needed *poa*. That meant that in the space of a few years Aum had changed its main aim – from salvation to destruction. And, as we can see, these changes happened with (and even in accordance with) Asahara’s mental state and religious ideas.

One more important psychological aspect of this problem is: why did Aum’s disciples, after having understood the criminal and violent tendency of the movement, not leave it? Moreover, they became terrorists and producers of weapons of mass destruction. It was a big surprise for the Japanese at that time, but the answer probably lies deep inside Japanese culture and psychology.

If we take a look at Japanese culture and social behavior, we can see two very important features. The first is that Japan is a collectivistic culture, in which group values are more important than individual ones. In such cultures, obedience and loyalty to the group are considered to be important qualities (Triandis, 1994). The second is that the Japanese, according to several studies in this field, have a high level of conformity: this means that a member of this group is more likely to agree with the group’s decision (Matsuda, 1985).

We should also bear in mind so-called ‘conformist aggression’, which “comprises various acts of aggression that are performed not because the aggressor is driven by the desire to destroy, but because he is told to do so and considers it his duty to obey orders. In all hierarchically structured societies obedience is perhaps the most deeply ingrained trait” (Fromm; 1992). Such aggression can be seen, for example, in Milgram’s obedience experiments, or in the Stanford prison experiment by Ph. Zimbardo. These experiments have shown that people do not need to be aggressive to commit violent acts; passively obeying orders can sometimes lead people to committing very cruel actions.

It is also important to keep in mind that we are speaking about group consciousness, and that any ideas shared by the group have a greater impact on the psychol-

ogy of the individual. An important feature of forming of a group consciousness is a division between “us” and “them”, and it can be used to provoke different feelings among the members of the group.

In the case of Aum Shinrikyo we can underline three main factors that influenced the cult’s popularity and its transformation into a terrorist group:

**The social and cultural background in Japan in the 1980s.** Religions were very popular among the Japanese at the time, and Asahara used his charisma to build a successful business. It is unlikely that without the unstable psychological climate that was felt in Japan in the eighties, a small religious cult, even one led by a charismatic person, could achieve such success and popularity as Aum did.

**The role of the leader.** The final results of Asahara’s psychiatric survey after his arrest have not been publicly revealed yet; however, there are some reasons to suppose psychological illnesses. Psychiatrist R.J. Lifton, for example, supposes megalomania (Asahara in his books compared himself with Napoleon and Christ).

**Conformity of the disciples.** It was Asahara’s disciples who committed the sarin attack, even though they understood that it was wrong by in the eyes of society. A group of devoted followers made violent ideas come true; and in this aspect their role in the tragedy is as important as Asahara’s.

The most important thing that the Aum story can teach us is that it takes many factors to coincide to make such acts of religious terrorism possible. But if it happens, with the possibilities and dangers of the modern world, the consequences are unpredictable.

## Conclusions

Among many other, not so well-known but very important aspects of the Japanese mentality, that the Aum affair has revealed, we can point out one important factor which is connected not only with Japanese traditions, but with the psychology of the individual in general. The most important thing for understanding the reasons of the sarin attack is that terrorists are not aggressive people who want to inflict harm and violence, but more often, are motivated to commit violent acts under certain circumstances. Aum followers were interested in religion and in reaching salvation, but due to certain factors, such as their strong commitment to the guru and the conformity among group members, they had to take part in terrorist activity. This means that in analyzing terrorism we should always keep in mind the social and psychological background of the act.

## References

- Asahara, S. (1995). *Hissutsu zuru kuni, wazawai chikashi*. Tokyo: Oumu Shuppan.
- Fromm, E. (1992). *Anatomy of human destructiveness*. New York: Henry Holt & Co.
- Matsuda, N. (1985). Strong, quasi-, and weak conformity among Japanese in the modified Ash procedure. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 16, 83–97. doi: 10.1177/0022002185016001007
- Mesheryakov, A. N. (2009). *Bit’ yapontsem* [To be a Japanese]. Moscow: Natalis.

- Metraux, D. A. (1999). *Aum Shinrikyo and Japanese Youth*. New York: University Press of America.
- Raevskiy, A. E. (2009) Psihologicheskoe manipulirovanie v novih religioznih dvizheniyah [Psychological Manipulation in New Religious Movements]. *Vestnik Moskovskogo Universiteta. Seriya 14. Psikhologia [Moscow University Psychology Bulletin]*, 2, 81–89.
- Raevskiy A. E. (2012). Terrorism v Yaponii: istoricheskaya i psihologicheskaya perspektiva [Terrorism in Japan: Historical and Psychological Perspective]. *Vestnik Moskovskogo Universiteta. Seriya 13. Vostokovedeniye [Moscow University Asian Studies Bulletin]*, 3, 53–68.
- Tanaka, Yu. (1995). *Contemporary Portraits of Japanese Women*. Westport CT: Praeger.
- Triandis, H. (1994). *Culture and Social Behavior*. New York: McGraw-Hill Inc.
- Vygotskiy, L. S. (2005). *Psihologiya razvitiya cheloveka*. [Psychology of Human Evolution]. Moscow: Eksmo.
- Zinchenko, Yu. P., Tkoshov, A. S., & Surnov, K. G. (2007). Motivatsiya terrorista. [Terrorist Motivation]. In *Vestnik Moskovskogo Universiteta. Seriya 14. Psikhologia [Moscow University Psychology Bulletin]*, 2, 20–34.
- Zinchenko, Yu. P. (2011). *Metodologicheskie problemi psikhologii bezopasnosti*. [Methodological Problems of the Psychology of Security]. Moscow University Press.

*Original manuscript received September 14, 2013*

*Revised manuscript accepted March 07, 2014*

*First published online March 30, 2014*