

Epistemological Religious Considerations: The Japanese Divination Example

Japan as a whole is often painted in broad strokes as a country with a highly disturbing culture, beyond rationality. One such example that can baffle: there is a talk-show host in Japan, Hosoki Kazuko, who, aside from being a run-of-the-mill host, inviting stars and idols to promote their projects on air at prime-time, is also revered for her divination practice – roku-sei senjutsu, or six-stars astrology – through which she analyzes her guests.¹ This unique setting allows for a most interesting research: what is the place of divination in contemporary Japan? Although still today most often snubbed by academic literature, I shall analyze mantic practices' importance as well as some of their forms in contemporary Japan, arguing that they can be considered as a faith. Posing such a daring thesis will allow me to link these “superstitious” practices with the contemporary state of religiosity in Japan, where most citizens claim no adherence to a religious institution. Moreover, this subject is a fertile ground for debate about the consideration of mantic practices in general, new religions, doctrine and its media, and women and religion.

Throughout history, the forms of religiosity in Japan have, as elsewhere, been controlled by their government, reacting to the fossilization of the institutions and to shifts in political powers. Japan has been alternating between a Shinto state, for example, before the second World War, and a Buddhist state, like during the Kamakura Bakufu. The ideologies used by the state have proved efficient to control their people and to set bureaucratic administrative systems. Moreover, as opposed to most Western traditions, Japanese belief systems are not seen as competing but rather as com-

plementary. The priests, or religious specialists, were jacks-of-all-trades, answering to the needs of their patrons. Among their popular specialties were esoteric rituals and mantic practices, aimed at giving their patrons a better understanding of unknown forces, in order for them to have the proper dispositions or to invite luck and prosperity. The Japanese government took these rituals seriously enough to have, at some point, an official office, the Bureau of Omyodo, to perform them.

Nowadays, however, it appears that Japan likes to think of itself as a secular, modern society; what is left, really, of the tales intertwining the supernatural to the earthly, of the multiple cosmologies that strived to comprehensively describe the whole of reality? Although many Japanese, when asked if they are religious, deny any form of faith, the limits between culture and religious activities are not so clear, and religious holidays or festivals are prime examples of the hazy limit between secular and sacred. Religion has seemingly lost its popular appeal for many reasons East and West, but still manages to make the headlines and demonstrate its sociological ramifications, oftentimes in terms of tragedy and clashes of ideology. One such crisis is the ‘Aum affair’, the sarin gas attack of a Tokyo subway train in 1995, which have scarred the public perception of religious movements in Japan, possibly leading to a very cautious mindset towards religious organizations at large. Nanzan University have released an edition of their journal dedi-

¹ Benjamin Dorman, “Representing Ancestor Worship as “Non-Religious”: Hosoki Kazuko’s Divination in the Post-Aum Era,” *Nova Religio* 0.3 (2007): 32.

cated to the consequences of this dreary event. In the editor's introduction, Baffelli and Reader state that "it was a turning point in Japanese attitudes to religion and, more specifically, to religious organizations, and raised questions about the very nature, presence, and standing of religions in Japan."² It gave the impression that new religions were potentially deviant threats to public order;³ fuel for fear and tagged as irrational and dangerous. "So widespread did this image of "danger" associated with religion become that in 2007–2008 Japanese phone companies [...] adopted a "harmful website filtering service" for mobile phones to protect children from dangerous influences."⁴ Paradoxically, however, in such a paranoid era, people like Hosoki the astrologer still command the attention of media corporations and audiences alike.

Although religions have been having bad press in traumatized Japan, how then can one explain the success of Hosoki Kazuko, who had been inducted in the 2001 edition of the Guinness Book of Records as the "Best-selling Author of Fortune-Telling Books," a feat crowning the sale of over thirty-four million books.⁵ Her authority maybe lies in that she claims, in synergy with her emcees or co-animators, her rhetoric is the revered, traditional and nationalist "Japanese ideal" ideology, instead of a suspicious and intimidating new religious ideology.⁶ She stresses, for example, that Confucianism is not a religion but a way of life.⁷ Due to these claims of natural philosophy, however, her detractors have labeled her as a shamaness, knowledgeable in but the laudable subject of folk religion.

This kind of detracting of divination practice happens for many reasons, not only in some parts of popular culture, but more significantly in the academia. One way to understand this rejection of folk traditions is through an analysis of the foundations and influences of the

academical institution, notably the modern Enlightenment project and its scientism. Max Weber posits notably a "religion/science binary dichotomy" and frames the "modern age as one that is desacralised, devoid of gods and spirits, and stripped of a magical or mystical dimension to life."⁸ In Japan, however, Shinto's framing of reality challenges directly this duality between natural and supernatural. Moreover, the principal interest of scholarly literature reinforces, as Hubbard puts it, the "elites" – the literati producing the knowledge of the world – prescribe "religion", instead of analyzing the true "religious experience of the majority, which is found rather in such things as ritual and institutional cultus."⁹ In that sense, there is a disdain of practiced religion, deemed less noble than philosophical considerations of the authors history cared to remember. Hubbard adds that the textual distance is also comfortable because it romanticize religious practices, but "when women appear on a stage in multi-hued satin gowns and float hosts of brilliant foil over the followers of a charismatic leader of a new Buddhist movement, it is gauche and nouveau riche, reminding us of the move-

² Erica Baffelli and Ian Reader, "Editors' Introduction: Impact and Ramifications: The Aftermath of the Aum Affair in the Japanese Religious Context," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 39.1 (012): 7.

³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵ Dorman, "Representing Ancestor Worship," 33.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁸ Wynne Jordan, "Stellar Logic: Astrology in Contemporary Culture," "Enchanted Modernity: Refutations of Weber's Disenchantment Thesis with Particular Focus on the Re-emergence of Astrology in Contemporary Culture, N.p.: n.p., n.d.: 1, East Coast Astrology.

⁹ J. Hubbard, "Embarrassing Superstition, Doctrine, and the Study of New Religious Movements," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66.1 (1998): 60.

ment's low-class origins,"¹⁰ underlining with his vocabulary the ascribed superiority of high class scholars.

Another difference encountered while studying mantic practices, as opposed to new religions, is the doctrine. Mantic practices doctrine is written and shared in abundance through popular media, such as specialized magazine and Hosoki's show *Zubari iu wa yo!* (I'm gonna give it to you straight!)¹¹ for example, but is never legitimized through official institutional apparatus. On the other hand, this freedom from a socially recognized organization surely is one more reason mantic practitioners and believers do not feel threatened by the shadow of religion's concept, even though they do have a form of faith. Furthermore, the channels of communication through which the doctrines are exposed are also ridiculed because their main audience consists of women. When looking at footage of *Zubari iu wa yo!*, one witnesses a crowd of women, and realizes also that the emcees are not only chosen for their humour, but also their looks! Watching a woman hostess can certainly be empowering, as her claims are given a lot of authority. Women's religiosity is often disregarded as "the little tradition", fundamentally domestic, emotional, irrational, mundane and unworthy of study, associations that have undoubtedly encouraged scholar to ignore mantic practices.

But who are these disregarded women, these avid readers of doctrine? When surveying visitors of the *Libra Divination Hall* (95% females)¹², Suzuki analyzed their relation with divination. Of these "young single women in their late teens and twenties,"¹³ 91% affirm that divination "can be used to achieve happiness and success,"¹⁴ guide them with advices and by underlining their "talents and faults [of which they weren't] aware of [themselves]."¹⁵ In the post-modern age, the options women are

facing are plentiful, and having a relation with a transcendent entity, or something that puts their lives in perspective, can be much needed – although religious narratives are oftentimes not deemed worthy of respect. Perhaps the confusion young women feel before the choices at the eve of their adult lives is the reason why divination is most popular among them, but the media, designed to aim their age bracket and culture, could also carry part of the blame. Moreover, the intimate relation with the transcendent sustained through divination practices feels customized to young women's needs and their individualities, which can explain why they prefer them to cookie-cutter faiths which propose the same doctrines to all. This personal kind of relation with the mysterious is also emphasized by the preferred modes of divination of these young women who are willing to pay: tarot reading, where the believer shuffles cards while thinking about a concern or a question, and palmistry, where a physical part of the body, unique to an individual by definition and surprisingly fluctuating, is read.¹⁶ One understanding of the situation is that they are in need of a counselling-like interaction. This connection with the unknown, greater than oneself, is pertinent to both what is classified as New Religion and as divination practices, where personal involvement supersedes sociological organization and formal mediation of the transcendent.

The precondition that these divination aficionados are irrational or superstitious is also to

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹¹ Dorman, "Representing Ancestor Worship," 32.

¹² Kentaro Suzuki, "Divination in Contemporary Japan: A General Overview and an Analysis of Survey Results," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 22.3-4 (1995): 256.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 257.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 264.

be questioned. When asked about the reason for their preference in divination technique, 57% of the respondents claimed that it “often proves true.”¹⁷ The academic doesn’t have the authority to deny their mystical experiences, yet by ignoring them altogether and by casting them as folkloric, they do. This understanding of religion as a rational domain can be traced back to the philosophers of the Enlightenment, who considered Spiritualism and Esotericism as obstacles in their quest of empirical knowledge, and thus heretical.¹⁸ It is also demonstrated, alongside other biases, by the very problematic paper by Wuthnow in 1976: “Astrology and Marginality.” Supported by the highly contested deprivation theory, he defines astrology as “a coping mechanism of the socially marginal.”¹⁹ He goes on by defining the marginal people as “nonwhite, female, not having or expecting post-graduate education, not currently married, and being bothered a lot by health problems,”²⁰ a definition that would include a vast majority of society, demonstrating the obliviousness of such elitist scholars to their own biases. Another example of this obliviousness is when he states that because there are forty interviewees to collect the data, the biases are more or less neutralized,²¹ unaware of the ideological underpinnings of his colleagues nor himself.

Another way the biased conception that astrology is but superstition percolates in the academic sphere is via the vocabulary encountered in some research papers. Suzuki, for example, labels the whereabouts of the diviners as a “place of business,” the believers as “clients,” their communication as “advertisement,” their paraphernalia as “tools of the trade”;²² he analyzes the mantic practices setting with a materialist and consumerist worldview, a commercial analysis never encountered in papers written on traditional forms of religiosity such as Buddhism or Shinto. Moreover, there might be

remnants of the Tylor understanding of reality and religions where monotheism is the pinnacle of religious functionalist evolution, and thus where spiritualism and mantic practices are understood as primitive.²³ Writing about other cultures can be quite a challenging subject for a scholar, especially when he is not aware of the failings of his own knowledge, and not ready to question his certitudes.

Because of the high importance given to mantic practices in Japan, there are some social consequences requiring further studies. Indeed, there are some anecdotal consequences, such as the possibility of undergoing a palm surgery to modify one’s faith, an operation that allows clients to “change their destiny,” claimed the specialist.²⁴ There are also cases of believers addicted to divination services, craving uplifting predictions, and spending all of their money to hear happy narratives about their lives.²⁵ This can be the price of divination. It does not have the pretense to be free, unlike many religious forms. In that sense, it might bring to mind what we take as the pejorative definition of a cult, but that doesn’t belittle the importance of the astrological framework of reference for its faithful. It should be noted that both mantic practices and religious protection rituals or prayers never were free, neither were religious services in general, living off donations of believers and political powers.

Of course, divination is not only popular in Japan, and the subject seems to have become even less popular in the recent years. If we are to read the Japanese Journal of Religious Studies from 1995 and from 2012, it is only in the first that we find an interest in divination practice, although the article by Suzuki has, according to the editors, a “closing argument [many will find] provocative, since he maintains that research on divination beliefs can contribute towards a reconsideration not only

of the more overarching narratives supplied by religion, but also of religious faith itself."²⁶ It seems that questioning the rigid categories of the Academy is not pleasing to most. Moreover, the 2012 edition does not even dabble in divination practices, disregarding them altogether, failing to propose a continuation of the epistemological interrogation proposed by Suzuki. The authors, however, underline the importance of the Aum tragedy for the scholarly field of religion, and the apparent failure of scholars whose field researches failed to recognize the potential danger Aum represented. Moreover, and maybe consequently, less scholars initiate field researches about New Religions, deemed unsafe and of least interest than respectable traditions.

One thing I almost never encountered however during my reading of religious traditions and mantic practices in contemporary Japan, only mentioned by the blogger Ken Y-N,²⁷ is the belief that blood-type defines personality. Heck, on Japanese and Korean Wikipedia, when looking up celebrities, their blood-type is listed! Surely, although this conception of personality archetypes seem to have "scientific" grounding, based on a physiological characteristic, the scientific field disregards this knowledge as superstition. By underlining traits and potentiality, blood-type casting resembles astrology and should be considered by the field of religious studies as such, maybe even comparing them.

Moreover, if six-stars astrology is one of the most popular forms of divination practice in Japan and we, as western scholars writing and reading English academic literature, know close to nothing about its theological cosmology, we are facing a gap that should be considered, and can probably point to other such ignorance and epistemological shortcomings. Why do we romanticize the philosoph-

ical discourses and religious manifestations of eras pasts instead of holding contemporary beliefs of our worldly peers as respectable and curious?

¹⁷ Ibid., 265.

¹⁸ Jason Ānanda Josephson, "God's Shadow: Occluded Possibilities in the Genealogy of 'Religion'," *History of Religions* 52.4 (2013): 312-313.

¹⁹ Robert Wuthnow, "Astrology and Marginality," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 15.2 (1976): 157.

²⁰ Ibid., 164.

²¹ Ibid., 160.

²² Suzuki, "Divination in Contemporary Japan," 250.

²³ Ibid., 317.

²⁴ David Moye, "Plastic Surgery Palmistry Slapped Down By Experts," *The Huffington Post*, TheHuffingtonPost.com, 15 July 2013.

²⁵ Murata Satoru, "Fortunetelling Addiction Spreads among the Insecure," *AJW by The Asahi Shimbun*, *The Asahi Shimbun*, 11 Apr. 2012.

²⁶ Manabu Haga and Robert J. Kisala, "Editor's Introduction: The New Age in Japan," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 22.3-4 (1995): 242.

²⁷ Ken Y-N, "Astrology Big in Japan," *What Japan Thinks*. N.p., 8 May 2006.

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