



## 趣旨説明 Introduction

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A couple of years ago, Atreyee and I were working at the same university, Manchester, and we started a conversation over coffee. Atreyee was teaching a new course on Women Warriors in Contemporary Religious Conflict, and she asked me to give a guest lecture. From that conversation we started talking about a research network to look at religion, woman, and violence from a comparative perspective.

In particular, we are interested in looking at women who participate in radical religious and political movements. Comparatively little academic attention has been paid to these women, despite the increasing number of recent publications and research projects addressing the issue of religion and violence. Women's involvement in terrorism (for example as suicide bombers) is still discussed as "exceptional" and "spectacular", as actions that are "out of the ordinary". We think that these approaches essentialize women's wartime character: as nurturing, vulnerable and non-violent, and their reductionism often precludes the possibility of analyzing women's roles as instigators of brutalities.

Scholars from a range of disciplines have begun to challenge these assumptions, and we believe that through sharing methodologies and areas of study we will be able to develop nuanced notions of female militarism and gender and conflict. Our conversation over that coffee two years ago led to a small workshop organized in the University of Manchester in December last year and a grant proposal, on which we have been working together and is now under review for the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK.

In particular, in our research and projects, we are interested in looking at three aspects. The one aspect is role and motivation. What are women's motivations for joining violent communities, and what are their ascribed and chosen roles? Why are women from both economically marginalized and affluent areas joining this movement? Do women use this role to gain visibility, agency and access to resources? This is one of our

### Research project (Baffelli-Sen)

- **Roles and motivations:** What are women's motivations for joining violent communities, and what are their ascribed and chosen roles?? Do women use these roles to gain visibility, agency, access to resources?
- **Representations:** How are images of women perpetrating violence shaped in policy documents, media discourse and other channels of dissemination, and how does it impact public opinion? How women share knowledge and experiences?
- **Memory:** How are acts of violence involving women's participation re-elaborated and re-narrated in post-conflict contexts?

questions. Then, the next aspect is representation. How are the images of women who perpetrated violence shaped in policy documents, media discourse and other channels of dissemination, and how does it impact the public opinion? At the same time, how do these women share information with each other in different contexts? The final aspect is the memory. How are acts of violence involving women participation re-elaborated and re-narrated in a post conflict context?

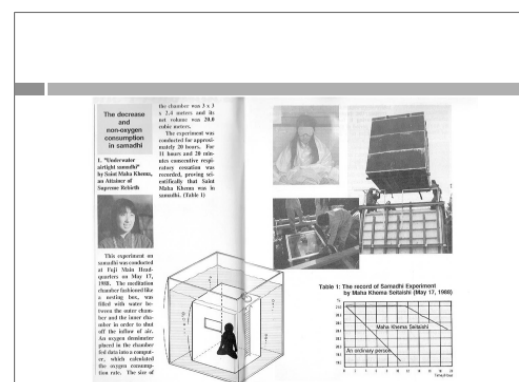
Regarding my research, I have been working on new religious movements for many years. Therefore, I am particularly interested in looking at the role played by women in new religious movements that turned into violence and how these women narrate their experiences. In particular, I have been looking at the role played by female members in conceptualizing violence in Aum Shinrikyō in particular during the early stage of development of the movement, and not only violence toward external but also in the form of extreme ascetics practices.

Of particular interest is the role of some high ranked members as role models for other female and male members as well. Also after the 1995 sarin gas attack members were faced with the violence committed by the group. I'm particularly interested in investigating how violence is re-elaborated through ex-members' personal narratives and in particular through narratives related to their bodies.

Many academic study and non-academic works have been published on Aum Shinrikyō, both in Japanese and other languages. However, the role of women in the group has been overlooked. In the media, women who are members of Aum are often portrayed through three main tropes, as “terrorist beauty”, Asahara’s lovers, or irresponsible mothers.

However, three out of five top ranked disciples were women and, especially in the early stage of formation of the movement, their role cannot be reduced to the above-mentioned tropes. An interesting case is Ishii Hisako who is considered Asahara’s first disciple. She is portrayed in members’ account as an example of devotion to the leader and a model of ascetic training. In particular, she was seen by members as someone capable of performing extreme ascetic practices, such as the underground Samadhi meditation. She also gave lectures and wrote on the group’s publications about her spiritual experiences, contributing to create a common narrative about “spiritual experiences” in the group.

Some members considered her charismatic and she was



able to perform the initiation ritual; she was also reported to have the ability to make prophecies. This seems to indicate that her role was more than just being a support to the male leadership. Furthermore, some recent publications by ex-members and some interviews I am currently conducting seem to suggest that the conceptualization and justification of violence in the group was a more complex process than often portrayed and more research is needed to understand whether female members played a specific role in this process.

The idea of the workshop tonight is to continue our discussion about these issues by also involving speakers working on violence and gender-related issues thereby broadening up the field as well.