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RESEARCH REPORTS

Narratives of Shamans in Contemporary Japan

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Recent studies of shamanism in contemporary Japan have mainly focused on “traditional” shamans – especially *itako* and *yuta* – who are located in peripheral areas of the country (see, for example, Chilson and Knecht 2003, Hirayama 2005, Ivy 1995, Kawamura 1994, Knecht 2004 and Shiotsuki 2012). Hence, the situation in its very center (i.e. the urban center, especially Tōkyō) has been left almost unexplored. Here, together with new shamanistic practitioners and spiritual therapists, a number of new narratives and imageries of shamans are now emerging through several media and different languages, thus calling for further research. My Ph.D. research aims at shedding light on the new forms that Japanese shamanism is assuming in such narratives. In doing this, I would like to find the answers to questions such as: “Why are there so many new narratives of shamans?”, “How is the shamanic figure being reshaped and represented?”, and, “How do these narratives contribute to changing the perception of and the knowledge about shamans?”

The research approach I am adopting is a multidisciplinary one, due to the very nature of my project, which requires connecting anthropology, religious studies and media studies. During my one-year fieldwork I conducted semi-structured interviews with key informants, while I used a more relaxed and seemingly casual conversational style with many other informants. In some cases dialogues and interviews, as well as participant observation, are still continuing over email, and through Internet forums and social networks. My starting point is the analysis of the use of the words “shaman” and “shamanism”, in regard to their history and meaning. This has brought me to draw the following (still preliminary and partial) conclusions.

Firstly, I would like to abandon the word “shamanism”, since it could implicitly recall a phenomenon that is firmly established and has rules and an organized structure. On the contrary, in Japan there seems to be no such thing as *shamanism*. There are, instead, different shamans who are offering their help to whoever asks for it. Moreover, I would suggest that the word *shāman* (in katakana), widely used in the academic world, is not simply a mere translation of the English term brought to Japan by Hori Ichirō after his

meeting with Mircea Eliade in the USA. On the contrary, I think that it is becoming an emic term used to refer to new practitioners and that, for this reason, it will need a revised framework to be properly understood.

As for the main part of my research, I am working on multiple case studies coming from both different media and the “actual” world in the last decade. I am considering, in fact, narratives of shamans from literature, contemporary art, manga, anime, TV series and TV documentaries as well as testimonies from the “material” world, with the specific case of an urban shaman I met and interviewed in Tōkyō. I plan to focus mainly on him because of the relevance of his activities and the amount of data collected, but I am considering also other cases, even though I still need to decide whether to include them or not in my final dissertation.

My research project is based on the acknowledgment of the fact that all these narratives concern figures and experiences perceived as being real by the actors involved in them. They should, therefore, be viewed in such a light and included in the broader field of the studies of shamans.

I would truly appreciate comments and suggestions, so please feel free to contact me via email.

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