

Critical Visual Religion Approach in Japan

Subjects: Cultural Studies

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The employment of the critical religion approach in Japan has become a crucial method for analysing and understanding the issues related to the introduction of the category religion in the island nation. The critical religion approach informs and guides the filmmaker in a critical filming mode that is capable of including and communicating the critique moved to the language and images influenced by the category of religion. The visual and sensory data collected must mirror the critique produced to highlight the ideology behind this category and create a new visual approach free from constraints.

Keywords: critical religion approach ; visual ethnography ; Japan

1. Deconstructing the Category of Religion in Japan

The category of “religion” should be conceived as a construct, a term that has emerged and evolved in a specific context, changing its connotative meaning over time. This evolution has not only been the result of individual metamorphosis but, first and foremost, a consequence of interactions with other terminologies and traditions existing around it. During the long evolution of this term, from the Roman empire to contemporary times, it has been seen that some traits have become more relevant than others. In particular, a seemingly religious nature characterising all realities encountered emerged in the narrative built by colonising Western powers. Thus, one of these facets is the so-called cross-cultural nature of the term, although, as I argue, this characteristic is more politically and ideologically determined.

A number of scholars have long debated and argued about the observability of “religion” in societies across the world. According to [King \(1999\)](#), this characteristic should be carefully measured and contextualised. If people consider “religion” a “culturally specific social construction with a particular genealogy of its own” ([King 1999, p. 40](#)) when using it in contexts other than the European-Christian ones, it is crucial to consider its theological foundations. As the researchers further notices, Christianity has been the term of comparison for the study and classification of Asian and African traditions. As [McCutcheon \(2018\)](#) notes, imperialistic expansion in non-Christian areas had its fair share of responsibility in the increased use of the terminology. The employment of religion by bureaucrats and scholars coming in contact with something for the first time entailed the implementation of terms to describe phenomena. Religion was the term to label, describe and understand them. This does not mean that colonial civil servants and anthropologists were naively deploying the term *cognitio rerum*.

As previously mentioned in [Vecchi \(2020\)](#), when people discuss religion in the context of religious studies in Asia, whether in India or Japan, the concept of reference for religion as mentioned was the Christian tradition. Thus, the term Christian, with all its diverse traditions, became the object of comparison for the many phenomena observed by the colonial bureaucrats. The purpose of studying and naming these phenomena set the premises for what became a tool to assert the predominance of colonial powers when overcoming other governments. [Isomae \(2012\)](#) and [Liu \(2015\)](#) clearly described the discourse on religion in Japan. The researchers who analyse the introduction and development of the term religion, *shūkyō* in Japanese, perfectly highlight the role covered by the concept imported by Europeans into the island nation and debunk the idea of religion as a cross-cultural reality. [Isomae \(2012\)](#) attributes to 19th century Japan’s political situation the determining factor for introducing the term and the related legislation that developed afterwards. The binary notion of religion as irrational, as opposed to secular (rational), adopted by European nations to discern between civilised, semi-civilised—Japan was among these—and uncivilised nations were one of the reasons that motivated Japan to adopt the new terminology. The acknowledgement of the term and its antithesis was the way for Japan to step up and stand equally side by side with Western civilised powers. Therefore, for Japan, the deployment of the term was motivated by political and diplomatic forces to please Western powers. The colonial expansion was not only a synonym of land grabbing; it also meant cognitive colonisation, as I discuss later.

Another analysis supporting Isomae’s view is the work produced by [Liu \(2015\)](#), who takes on the scholar and considers the roots and significance of *shūkyō* while further illustrating the political reasons for inventing religion in Japan. [Isomae \(2012\)](#) considers that the Japanese term translating religion incorporated the idea of Christianity as a doctrine related to

father and son, as well as to the idea of ancestors. Liu further developed this analysis considering the repercussion of the invention of religion in Japan. In particular, he focuses on the Meiji reformers “controlling and performing” (Liu 2015, p. 143) of religion for their political agenda. Meiji bureaucrats, conscious of the step Japan could take by following the western binary system but wanting to retain some of the country’s nature, re-interpreted the concept of religion as a “transcendent vision of a governing ancestral superstructure” (Liu 2015, p. 155). The concept of veneration of the ancestors was connected with the imperial forefathers, making *de facto* Shinto the indigenous cult and foundation of Japan. The Meiji reformers related the cult of the ancestor to the Emperor and Shinto. As Shinto surged to the stage of state creed, the term religion became the synonym of Christian tradition. Liu described this process with the word “religiopolitical”, where the “Meiji construction of the imperial institution as a living ancestral cult was inexplicably religiopolitical” (Liu 2015, p. 155). The scholar’s analysis clearly illustrates that the appearance of religion is a consequence of the political decisions of the Meiji administration, not some kind of “natural” state.

2. Critical Religion Approach as Visual Ethnographic Method in Japan

The critical religion approach, applied to visual ethnography, turned out to be a tool to analyse the religious discourse and visually represent the multiple layers of the term “religion” and “religious” on figures such as the *Itako*. These layers, developed over the decades, are a consequence of the colonial expansion and the idea of religion based on European-Christian canons. In my view, they have affected social constructs, politics and eventually the representation of people, such as the Japanese mediums. Since the critical religious approach considers in a holistic way the term religion, hence dealing with all these issues, I decided to adopt it as part of the visual methods I conceived and used for my fieldwork. I argue that the notion of religion had a misleading role in representing a phenomenon such as the one I studied in Japan. Therefore, recalling the approach discussed and theorised by the different researchers (Fitzgerald 2000; Masuzawa 2005; Horii 2018), I applied the approach to my visual ethnographic research. Thus, while the critical religion approach unhinges the discourse on religion, I argued that it was possible to use it in a practice-based method for producing a critical representation of so-called “religious” figures. In the context of Japan, images and moving images about religious phenomena are products of the same logic that has constructed the discourse on religion by producing images that follow that same narrative. They have provided a visual element to the category of religion. However, before going forward, I briefly introduce my study participants: the *Itako* mediums were traditionally blind women who supplied a number of services, one of which was the summoning of the spirits of the dead (*kuchiyose*). According to some studies (Hori 1975; Sasamori 2000), these women were seen to have special powers due to their physical condition. Young blind women were trained during the puberty years by a mature *Itako* teacher. After the years spent with a senior *Itako*, the young medium was ready to move to the first steps in her business. It could be said that the time spent next to an experienced medium was instrumental for the novice to learn the activity that gave her skills for living. Knowing the intricacy of the word religion in the Japanese context, I was interested in looking at how it affected the understanding and representation of figures such as the *Itako* mediums. These religious figures and their “special” power were the perfect subjects for exoticism and nostalgia for a diverse and global audience.

It is common to see television programmes that depict Asia as the embodiment of the empire’s nostalgia (Rosaldo 1989), a mystical place full of wisdom, sitting between tradition and modernity, past and present. This genre of programmes, in which the nostalgia for a past is mixed with exoticism and curiosity, often represents the Others as more religious, wiser and thoroughly faithful. This image imbued with exotic feelings “relies on and reinforces an outsider perspective” (Berghahn 2019, p. 36). So, as Forsdick suggests, the exotic develops a gaze, a perspective that comes precisely from elsewhere, “from the other side” (Forsdick 2001, p. 21), outside of the geographical and cultural area narrated. The relation and closeness between exoticism and nostalgia are real. The two work together to create a “sanitised and embellished past and an idealised alterity”, as Berghahn continues (Berghahn 2019, p. 36), reinforcing the cognitive imperialism of language and labels created by the West. This analysis was constructive when I began my research of pre-existing visual material on religion in Japan, and specifically on the *Itako* mediums. So, in a gesture to Banks (2018), I adopted both approaches recommended by the researchers during my qualitative research with visual material. I first analysed pre-existing material before producing new visual material. Although my practice-based work focused primarily on using film as a research method with the scope of creating new visual material, I began by looking at the available audiovisual on the *Itako* mediums. The images and audio–video products relative to my research differed in production and audience, ranging from academic to professional and eventually to bloggers. In particular, digital ethnographic work has been crucial for finding material and contacting those who produced, shared, or remixed audiovisual material during this phase. With the uploaded material, this online community has involuntarily provided a “face” to the mediums and the geographical location. Kraemer considers this phenomenon critically, as “many have explored what networked, digital communications entail for places and identity in a global, deterritorialised world. Thinking about places [and people, my adding] on transnationally circulating media, however, requires asking how identities come to be linked to a place, well, in

the first place” (Kraemer 2017, p. 180). In fact, on the one hand, this free production and sharing of visual material has given a chance to a large audience to learn something about the *Itako*. On the other hand, I noticed that the audiovisual material shared by this involuntary community often evidenced tropes that fostered an exotic and romantic view of these women. The photographic portraits first and videos later, often representing this woman in the act of “shamanising”, have contributed to creating the image of a mysterious figure and, at the same time, the guardian of an immutable ancient knowledge. This visual narrative has boxed these women in a sort of limited dimension where they exist only in relation to their work. The exotic emerges in the fetishisation and sentimentalisation for the past as a more truthful condition (Berghahn 2019). This condition is also embodied in the mediums, but the past they represent is grotesque and full of superstition. Over the decade, the tradition has changed, and sighted women have progressively taken the position of blind women, who have had access to special services for blind people since post-war times.

In light of these considerations, the *Itako* medium has been categorised following the same normative process Western scholars apply when describing and labelling phenomena as “religions”. Academics created a simplistic image of these women, often defined as shamans, confined in their space, ready to communicate with the dead. Wilson (2013) states that words such as shaman have been disproportionately used, to the point he says that “shamanism is an academic category, developed in order to draw together a wide range of traditions recognised as being shamanic in character” (Wilson 2013, p. 17). Retrievable images from archives, such as the Bunkaisan,¹ show the *Itako* posing in the performative act. As spirit summoning or divination are regarded as traditional activities, the photo creates an iconic image of the medium sitting with her rosary, ready to perform. In particular, I observed this distinctive approach in academics, professionals of the image and non-professionals who have documented the Tohoku tradition, such as bloggers and diary travel writers. As I previously said, the discourse is fundamental in giving a body to the imagination and representation of these mediums, colouring the same with exoticism. Words such as “shaman”, which popular imagination links to an array of figures across the globe, contribute to strengthening the exotic imagery. Images of the present, such as those taken in the past and now stored in archives, wish to capture and freeze the contemporary *Itako*. This aesthetic choice is the outcome of an exoticizing process that refuses to acknowledge the changes that have happened to this tradition. In a broad sense, it is an example of Han’s (2017) analysis regarding artwork and the way people value it. As for artworks, the original piece is the valuable one as made by the artist, for traditions researchers tend to appreciate them when presented as “original” as they are more authentic. So, researchers could say that if it can be demonstrated something has remained unmuted across time—an image can be used in this way—researchers consider it more valuable and truthful.

For this reason, some scholars suggest the use of emic words as more appropriate to semantically describe cultural phenomena (Hori 2018; Murakami 2017), unless clearly stated that it is a language synonym part of a contextualised vocabulary (Vecchi 2019). However, the Western gaze and categorisation that produced distorted images of the Others have not been the only ones guilty of fabricating misleading representations. In the last decades, it has been passed from a visual narrative focused on these women as a medium summoning the dead to one portraying them as grotesque and fraudulent figures, which seems to be the sentiment that has prevailed in the amateur video production. This passage could be a consequence of a discourse developed within the Japanese media since the 1960s. According to Ōmichi (2016, 2017), the *Itako* portrayed by the mass media is a caricature of herself, transformed into a new consumption product for the masses living in the urban areas, removed from the north and the countryside. The *Itako* becomes an exotic character to tickle urbanites and a grotesque and remote legacy of a troubled past, from which Japan has come out. These mediums are, in fact, a remnant of a bygone time soaked in the superstition and irrationality Japan had left behind with the Meiji Restoration. Hence, there is a necessity to employ the critical religion approach to the visual ethnographic method and the representation discourse of so-called religious figures.

It is different in the case of amateur video production, especially on a platform such as YouTube. In the era of social media and video sharing services, it is possible to find videos of the *Itako* where the grotesque element prevails. In particular, it seems that these amateur video makers focus their attention on the bizarre and supernatural feature of the *Itako*’s job: the summoning of dead people’s spirits. As for the academic study of religions, the fallacy of these kinds of visual products is that they propose a binary vision of religion that is described by Fitzgerald (1997, 2000) in his analysis. The images engage either with the spiritual/godly element or the superstitious, treating religion as a category that can be described as a still nature subject on the table. This attitude is the result of a long debate regarding the use of film and stills as an instrument to capture reality, but as one of the most authoritative figures in visual anthropology reminds people, “film will never be the ‘objective’ recorder of reality for which the pioneers in this field had hoped” (Ruby 2000, p. 65). So, the meaning of those photos and videos showing the *Itako* mediums in their rooms busy summoning the dead could be summarised with a “this is it”, whether it was the exotic or the grotesque that the images focused on, the result is a “real unreality” (Barthes 1980). In light of these considerations, visual ethnography became a methodology accompanying the critical religion approach in a method in which the latter was used to inform and guide the visual analysis in the creation of the ethnographic film I made on the *Itako* of Tohoku.

When I considered the critical religion approach for the study of religion in Japan, and more specifically for the *Itako* mediums, I decided to combine it with visual ethnographic methodologies. For my work I referred to Ruby's critical approach to visual ethnography (Ruby 2000); Banks (2001); Pink (2009, 2013) and their collaborative publication *Made to be Seen* (Banks and Ruby 2011). As previously mentioned, I could see that the terminology employed in the religious studies field had an impact on the representation of these mediums at different levels. The discourse on images for research purposes is vast, rich and still open (Ruby 2000). The debate on whether to consider images and moving images capable of carrying evidence is ongoing, and a number of scholars have struggled to define the ethnographic film. As Winston suggests, "the idea of recorded footage brings people into direct and unavoidable contact with the scientific, and probabilistic idea of evidence" (Winston 1995, p. 175). Indeed, the scientific element is part of the debate. However, as Ruby had already observed a few decades earlier, "some anthropologists seem to forget that while all films may be potentially useful to anthropologists, that does not necessarily mean that these films should be labelled as ethnography" (Ruby 1975, p. 106). Other approaches focused on the *ethnographicness* of the image produced (Heider 2006), where the focus is on the capability of the film to enhance the research via the image; hence, it provides something that a written ethnography cannot provide.

The aim was to use visual ethnography to provide a holistic representation (Heider 2006) of *Itako* that could distance itself from those images and films adhering to the binary religious discourse. Therefore, in the study I conducted, the camera became a methodology to understand *Itako*'s cultural dimension and her profession in the context of Tohoku. For many researchers who used a camera during their fieldwork, that device became the means to record—someone would suggest a digital notebook—their subject(s) and their movement in the space they occupied. Although those studies collect information on body language and behaviour in space, they have not produced any clear scientific results (Ruby 1975). I would still suggest that the material collected is valuable ethnographic work. I could understand and capture the *Itako* beyond her "shamanizing" activity. I capture the daily life of the *Itako*, a professional of communication—and a digital online presence—with a social life. As Timothy Ash noticed "a good filmmaker knows that detached scientific observation is not enough. The film must also capture the essence of the people, their passions, their fears, their motivations" (Ash 1992, p. 198).

As Pink also reminds people, the ethnographic approach enables researchers to experience and represent cultures in their material and sensory aspects. Since the data and knowledge produced is the fruit of the single ethnographer's work, visual ethnography should be understood as a methodology that "does not claim to produce an objective or truthful account of reality but should aim to offer versions of ethnographers' experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context [...]" (Pink 2013, p. 35). Thus, in this sense, the ethnographic value of a pre-existing image, or an image produced during the research, expresses its value when contextualised and related to other knowledge that has ethnographic relevance. In light of these considerations, the camera became a way to realise the approach of Fitzgerald to the study of religion (Fitzgerald 2000), and at the same time increase the value of the ethnographic research, in this case, critically approaching the production of representation of a phenomenon generally part of religious studies. The camera becomes a method and an approach, as filming should be considered not the final aim of the fieldwork but an integral part of the planning of the research. The critical religion approach became instrumental in revealing the multiple layers of religion and how this terminology has influenced representation at different levels. The combination of the approach with visual and sensory ethnography provides the viewer with the experience and capacity to see and immerse the senses in the lived experience of the *Itako* mediums as well as of the people related to them, the belief and culture that links them to mountains of the Tohoku region. The film can reflect the grade of complexity that has been often superficially labelled as religious belief.

Therefore, my approach was to collaborate with them, ask questions, observe and hear from these mediums their view on their profession and life. The subjects of those images that I collected online or viewed in archives were in this way given agency. For this reason, often, the interviews would start with some questions and slowly would convert into convivial conversations. The mediums, as well as other participants, were unguided in their speeches. The point was to allow their thoughts to be shared with me and the camera in order to have a holistic view of the *Itako* mediums. Though this approach gave me the chance to create a relationship with the participants, I must acknowledge that my and the camera's presence were elements of "distraction", not part of their daily routines, and as at the same time capable of provoking reactions in what Rouch described as *ciné-transe* (Rouch 2003). Far from putting myself in the shot or using voice-over as Rouch used to do, I avoid misleading and directing viewers' opinions by providing the filmmaker's interpretation of reality. However, I agree with Rouch's observation as I and the camera are catalysts. The *ciné-transe* proposed by the researchers well describes the relationship between the parties—visual ethnographer, participants and camera. The presence of a camera and a person operating it goes beyond provoking a response or an action only in the participant. For Rouch, the transformation is also in the filmmaker who follows what unfolds in front of his/her eyes with the support of a "mechanical eye accompanied by an electronic ear" (Rouch 2003, p. 39). It is an experience, an encounter between the

filmmaker and the participant that affects the filmmaker and the filming experience (Ferrarini 2017, p. 132). The researchers's words describe it as a "strange state of transformation that takes place in the filmmaker that I have called, analogously to possession phenomena, 'ciné-transe'" (Rouch 2003, p. 39). Rouch's experience matured after some experiences in which he saw the direct effect of the camera on the people he was filming and on himself. I argue that the critical religion approach has enhanced the reflexivity process involved in visual ethnographic fieldwork and limited the risks of transforming the ethnographic film into a personal journey, losing the focus on the subject's experience. Ferrarini's consideration of Rouch and the first-person method suggests that it "was less about subjectivity than about interaction and intersubjectivity" (Ferrarini 2017, p. 132). I, too, was interested in focusing on the participants' points of view. The critical religion approach, with its polyphony of scholars (Fitzgerald 2000; Masuzawa 2005; Josephson 2012) and critique of the colonial and political influxes of the Western powers, encourages a certain degree of reflexivity on the researcher that employs it in the visual realm, whether it is about the analysis of visual cultural products or the production of visual material.

The *Itako* and the people within that environment offer their perspective and ultimately become critical figures for interpreting culture. Thus, the work I produced aims not to "present the indigenous view, nor to invade voyeuristically the consciousness of other individuals, but to see social behaviour, and indeed culture, as a continuous process of interpretation and re-invention" (MacDougall 1998, p. 95). In addition, I was interested in providing environmental and social elements compared with what I had noticed previously in visual references on the *Itako* mediums.

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