Anti-Cult Measures at Universities in Japan The Production of Knowledge on Religion as a Category

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The assassination of former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo in 2022 illustrated the complex relationship between the public and religion, specifically with "new" religions. This category is often associated with the term "cult", a label applied to religious groups considered hostile. The attack on Abe's life reinvoked memories of violence and religion in the public sphere, such as the 1995 Aum Affair. These events led to the university's role in protecting and guiding Japan's youth to become part of this debate. It considers universities as central actors to investigate their responses to the phenomenon of religion and new religions through anti-cult measures. These measures can be defined as warnings against cult recruitment in the university sphere. I draw on the framework of moral panic and the concept of moral entrepreneurs to demonstrate how universities select and represent information on religion as a category in their anti-cult measures. The study reveals that this is done through the primary mechanism of language. A fear-invoking lexicon is leveraged together with terminology that underscores a binary between "accepted" and "unaccepted" religions.

Keywords: new religions, moral panic, higher education, anti-cult movement, Japan

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In July of 2022, former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo was shot in broad daylight while he campaigned for the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in Nara City. The perpetrator's motive was connected to the new religious group, the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, unofficially known as the Unification Church. The attack and Abe's subsequent passing reinvoked anxiety stored in the collective memory of the Japanese public. In 1995, members of the new religious group Aum Shinrikyō released sarin gas in the metro system of Tokyo, with severe casualties as a result. This invoked fear specifically regarding the label of "new" religions (*shinshūkyō*), a category assigned to groups to highlight their contemporary nature (McLaughlin, 2023, pp. 209–210; Reader, 2000, pp. 23–25).

Both the attack on Abe and the Aum Affair have undeniably influenced the broader perception of religion in the Japanese public sphere. This sentiment was illustrated in the Japanese General Social Survey, in which 67.6% of the sample group stated that they trusted religious organisations "not very much" (Noriko et al., 2015). Kyodo News+ (2023) surveyed universities throughout Japan on their responses to the assassination. Of the 50 sampled universities, 28 stated that they had strengthened their anti-cult measures to warn students of potential cult recruitment. Anti-cult measures or cult prevention measures (*karuto taisaku*) include posts on university websites, warnings in student guides, flyers distributed on campus, and video materials shared through universities' intranets and websites (n.p.).

This study examines these anti-cult measures through the prism of the university, which operates as a "moral actor" that selects and represents information. It was found that universities engage in knowledge production on religion through these measures. In this contribution, "cult" is defined as a label assigned primarily to new religions to juxtapose them against religions considered acceptable. The research inquiry was approached through data analysis of publicly available warnings and interviews with university student support and health centre staff. By examining anti-cult measures through the lens of moral panic, it becomes evident that language plays a central role in two ways. First, a lexicon of fear is deployed that leads to increased anxiety. Second, the terminology used underscores a binary of socially "accepted" and "unaccepted" religions.

The Context of Karuto Mondai

Anti-cult measures are embedded in the context of Japan's "cult problem" (*karuto mondai*). This term addresses mainly incidents in the public sphere associated with groups considered cults, often new religions. The category of new religions emphasises the contemporary origin of groups that date back to the beginning of the Meiji Era (1868-1912). However, the foundation of this definition is porous. It includes

religious groups labelled as "new" that actually have lengthy historical roots (Baffelli, 2023, p. 226). This contribution leverages this category to understand how the perceived contemporary nature of certain religious groups influences knowledge production.

As previously mentioned, the category of new religions is often associated with violence and fear. This is exemplified by two cases that were landmarks in Japanese contemporary history. One of these is the previously mentioned 1995 metro gas attack by members of Aum Shinrikyō. While religion had not necessarily been viewed as something solely favourable before 1995, the attack introduced strong feelings of fear and anxiety into this debate. A key detail is that Aum Shinrikyō had been registered under the Religious Corporations Law (*Shūkyō Hōjin Hō)* enacted in 1951. They were categorised together with schools, hospitals and other institutions deemed beneficial to society (*kōeki*) in the eyes of the law. This legal status came with potential tax deductions, which were seen as the primary incentive to apply. Several adjustments were made to the law in response to the attack. For example, Article 5 was altered to enhance oversight of registered religious corporations. However, the sheer number of these entities, around 184,000, made this task difficult, if not impossible (LoBreglio, 1997, pp. 41–42; Mullins, 2021, p. 123). In sum, this association with violence and anxiety transformed the image of religion from considered public good to something to be wary of.

Following the attack, the public put the roles and responsibilities of several social institutions into question including universities. They were inquired regarding their capacity to safeguard Japan's youth. This was due to the fact that some members of Aum Shinrikyō involved in the attack were alumni of prestigious institutions, such as Waseda and Tokyo University. In addition, from 1991 to 1993, Asahara Shōkō, Aum Shinrikyō's former leader, had been permitted to give speeches at several campuses. This led to reconsiderations of universities' roles in engaging with religion in the campus environment and if or where boundaries should be established (Baffelli & Reader, 2012, pp. 5–6; Reader, 2000, pp. 97, 100, 199).

The second landmark regards the previously discussed assassination of Abe Shinzo in 2022. The attack became associated with the new religious group, the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification. This was due to the perpetrator's status as second-generation religious (*shūkyō-nise*), which invoked a debate on issues regarding this topic. This is also a highly publicised book category that entails testimonials of those who grew up in new religious households (McLaughlin, 2023, p. 209). In relation to these themes regarding youth and religion, universities were once again inquired about their responsibilities, which resulted in the reinforcement of their anti-cult measures on campus.

Literature on anti-cult measures has been published, but not without issues. They were initially addressed in a conference paper that argued they limit students' privacy and freedom of thought (Uotani, 2012). Nevertheless, the paper contains inaccuracies and shows a speculative, unrealistic picture of the situation on university campuses in Japan. Moreover, it does not consider the expectations by the Japanese public of universities to inform and protect their students from this "threat". This is likely related to the author's association with the Universal Peace Federation, which is affiliated with the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification. Sakurai (2012) published a book to convince universities of the anti-cult measures' relevancy. However, the author's mass publications on the cult problem, both in journals and popular media, and previous involvement in de-cult counselling bring along implications. They show the potential presence of an agenda to portray religious groups in a certain way. The shortcomings of both these works emphasise the need for rigorous research on this topic. A nuanced analysis that considers the broader context of anti-cult measures is required to understand how they produce knowledge on religion in the public sphere.

The Making of a Moral Actor

The Aum Shinrikyō attack and the Abe assassination illustrate unease with religion in the public sphere. In turn, this affects how knowledge on religion is produced and disseminated. To investigate this, the anti-cult measures and the university as a central actor are viewed through the theoretical lens of moral panic. Morals, societal reactions, and processes of deviance-making, which are present in these measures, are central to this framework. Moral panic refers to anxiety about the erosion of collective morals within a society. During a period of moral panic, the "folk devil", the entity that portrays considered deviant behaviour, is established in opposition to these shared morals (Cohen, 2011, pp. 1–2). In this study, folk devils are considered religious groups which have been labelled as cults in the anti-cult measures.

Becker (1963) defines the entity that attempts to eradicate the folk devil as a "moral entrepreneur", an actor highly motivated to relieve society from this threat. Moral entrepreneurs are classified into two groups: those who either create or enforce rules on how to cope with the situation (pp. 144–155). Universities fit into both these categories, as they produce and enforce anti-cult measures. However, this concept alone is insufficient to address the complete picture. First, Becker's (1963) standard of a moral entrepreneur leaves limited room to consider the broader societal context. He defines moral entrepreneurs' sole purpose as "interested in forcing his own morals on others" (Becker, 1963, p. 148). However, as previously discussed, universities are expected to inform and protect their students. Therefore, room should be made to understand the motivations and reasons of universities to develop and distribute these measures.

The second shortcoming is the lack of the "entrepreneurial" dimension. While universities create rules to a degree, a large share of the information in the measures is cross-referenced and taken from other sources. This can be established when one compares the similar language usage between the 68 universities in this research. Yet, the idea of a moral entrepreneur still provides the theoretical foundation needed to understand knowledge production on religion as a category. First, it takes into account the central role of the university in this process as it actively engages with the production and dissemination of the measures. It is through its actors that what is deemed deviant can be understood and how this influences knowledge production. All the above considerations led to the modification of this term to "moral actor" in this contribution.

Analysis of the Anti-cult Measures

A qualitative research approach was deployed to study the anti-cult measures through the prism of the university. As moral actors, they select and reproduce information. Consequently, they contribute to the production of knowledge on religion as a category. The process of data collection consisted of two phases. First, publicly available materials were extracted from university websites. This corpus of data consists of 60 warning posts, six flyers available online and handed out on campus, nine warnings in student guides and five videos from Youtube. The complete dataset includes information from 68 universities throughout Japan. These can be classified as national, public, and private institutions, some of which are of confessional nature. It is worth noting that differences in anti-cult measures based on these categories can be observed. For example, the sources selected to compose the measures or how religion is represented as a category.

The second phase consisted of 10 weeks of fieldwork in Japan from early January to mid-March in 2024. This included on-site and asynchronous email interviews with staff members of student support or health centres involved in the production and dissemination of anti-cult measures. All interviews in this article have been anonymised by using non-identifiable initials. Visual materials were collected together with field notes of observations.

These observations primarily focused on campus visits and included notes such as the placement of signs and their design. However, observations of the "cult issue" in broader society were also made.

The complete body of data was analysed through thematic coding, which revealed how universities produce information on religion in these measures. The main finding was that language is used in two ways. First, it invokes anxiety regarding past cases of new religions and violence. Second, the use of specific terminology establishes a binary of considered acceptable religion.

The Lexicon of Fear: Youth, Violence and Anxiety

I witnessed the reality of the anti-cult measures during a field visit to K. University in Kansai. Here, I was invited to talk about the measures deployed on campus with a staff member from the student support centre. As I entered the campus grounds, I noticed that signs with large lettering and bright colours marked off the area. They emphasised that solicitors were not welcome and that students should be aware of them. On the central road of the campus, six of the same signs were lined up to warn students of possible cult recruitment. They stated that students should not provide personal information to strangers and should contact the student office in case of recruitment. The on-campus telescreen displayed several warning videos in which cult recruitment was acted out.

To understand the folk devil or the deviant behaviour, we should initially explore what it deviates from (Cohen, 2011, p. 5). In this example, the university attempts to protect students from groups labelled cults. Yet, the question is, what exactly do they aim to protect? While the on-campus anti-cult measures focus on the threat itself, the measures online tell a different story as they build on narratives of a precarious, youthful student body.

Through students' youth, vulnerability is emphasised in the measures. They live by themselves for the first time (*hajimete hitogurashi*), as young people (*wakamono*) who have left their parental home (*oyamoto o hanere*). In total, 21 universities use the term 'newly admitted students' (*Shinnyū gakusei*) to emphasise this status. Osaka University of Education (2022) suggests that one's "precious youth" (*kichōna seishun*) can be lost if one engages with cults (n.p.). Two interviewees noted that students do not have enough experience (*keiken ga sukunai*). This sentiment is also reflected in four online warnings and five asynchronous interviews in which university staff discussed their former status as high school students. "Compared to high school, they (university students) have more freedom." a student support staff member of N. University elaborates, "They are more likely to be approached by these groups, which guardians and teachers previously prevented." (interview, February 8, 2024).

These similarities in deployed language in the warnings can be explained in two manners. First, cross-references between anti-cult measures are present. In total, 10 universities included links to videos uploaded by Osaka University that enact cult recruitment on campus. Second, the measures include information from external organisations. Three universities provided links to the website of the Japan Society for Cult Prevention and Recovery (*Nihon Datsu Karuto Kyōkai*) and to a flyer by the Consumers Affairs Agency. Several warnings contain similar information from these sources but do not provide references. Reliance on only a few sources can lead to exaggeration and misinterpretation of the situation. It could furthermore result in increased anxiety and stress amongst both students and staff.

Cohen (2011) acknowledges that language has a taken-for-granted status within moral panic and should be interrogated (p. 5). It is not just that they are young or that youth is precious, but the alteration of life phases. As high school students they received supervision from adults. As university students they have more responsibility and autonomy, which they must learn to navigate in a university

setting. As previously noted, the university is expected by the public to mitigate this situation. Thus, this is not solely an entrepreneurial affair but also a response to this societal inquiry to inform and protect students.

Potential harmful consequences to this precarious student body are outlined to emphasise this threat. In total, 65 universities make use of fear-invoking language to some degree. Yamaguchi University (2007) writes that cults may contact you at night and, in extreme cases, have you abducted, confined, assaulted, or even murdered (n.p.). Kyoto University (2018) expresses that threats and extortion by cult groups have also taken place (n.p.). Vocabulary used to describe this threat are adjectives such as dangerous (*kikenna*) or terms like evacuate (*hinan*) and run away or flee (*nigeru*). A layer of threat without explicit mention of violence is the ungraspability of groups labelled cults. They hide their true form (*shōtai o kakusu*) and pretend to be other types of activities (*yosōu*). Universities emphasise that you will lose your "free will" and capacity to make "proper" decisions as a possible consequence. The terms brainwashing (*sennō*) and mind-control (*maindo kontorōru*) are deployed by 24 universities.

In total, 29 universities stated that recruitment has taken place. However, this is difficult to confirm, as some universities consider being approached already as potential recruitment. Most institutions briefly mention that this has happened without specifically confirming whether it took place on campus or not. Yet, hypothetical cases are often described in detail. For example, the video materials by Osaka University (2017) and Kyushu University (2022) display scenarios of possible cult-recruitment. When directly asked about cases, five out of the eleven questioned universities responded positively. Two interviewees provided online news articles on recruitment cases in which their students had been involved. Three others mentioned that students complained about unapproved club activities on campus at the beginning of the academic year in April. W. University stated that they specifically started to alert their students in response to these complaints (interview, March 3, 2024). In sum, it is a challenge to define what is considered recruitment, as this is not immediately evident when students are approached. Furthermore, it can be understood that anti-cult measures are not solely a reaction to events related to religion in the public sphere, but also in response to concerns by students.

The language used in anti-cult measures highlights potential violence and constructs an ungraspable threat potentially present on campus. However, the data shows that it is difficult to measure these cases. Universities take a preventive approach as they present hypothetical scenarios and respond directly to students' concerns. The next section shows how religion as a category is included in this lexicon of fear and how this contributes to a binary of accepted and unaccepted religion.

The Construction of a Religious Binary

Underpinned by expected accountability, universities aim to inform and protect their students. Yet, precisely what is it they aim to protect students *from*? Cohen (2011) defines this as a folk devil, the entity that deviates from the accepted values. He describes it as "a reminder of what we should not be" (p. 2). In the case of the anti-cult measures, this term applies to both groups labelled as cults as well as to those who become associated with them.

Universities attempt to distinguish between cults and religion in their measures. Several institutions use the labels cult (*karuto*) or cult groups (*karuto shūdan*) without any reference to religion directly. Universities also state in the warnings that freedom of thought and religion are not interfered with on campus. A total of 12 universities refer to articles in the Constitution that pertain to these rights to illustrate their awareness of this matter. Nevertheless, the data shows that 51 of the 68 universities refer to religion directly. This was done through labels such as religious cult groups (*shūkyō*

karuto shūdan), cult religions (*karuto shūkyō*), religious organisations (*shūkyō dantai*) or anti-society religious groups (*hanshakai shūkyō shūdan*). Five universities used one of these labels in the asynchronous interviews. It shows that universities actively select which terms they use to represent a specific type of religion.

In turn, this leads to a differentiation between accepted and unaccepted religions. This is present in the following quote from a post by a Christian study club listed on Osaka Metropolitan University's website under approved student clubs (2016):

> "We do Bible readings together. We do not only discuss and share its content but also talk about everyday problems and concerns … (warning note!) We are a university-approved club not associated with any cults or new religions" (n.p.).

This was likely written by one of the club members rather than by university staff. However, it indicates views on religion in the campus environment as it probably had to be reviewed or approved by the university. The Christian student club illustrates their need to set themselves apart from unaccepted religion, specifically the category of new religions. Three other universities used new religions as a category in their measures.

New religions have been viewed as a nuisance and a potential public safety hazard (Baffelli, 2023, pp. 224–225). In this case, Christianity is seen as a familiar and "safe" religion. This was also emphasised in an interview at K. University with a student support staff member. According to them, Japanese university students do not have the awareness (*ishiki*) of what "actual" religion entails. The interviewee contrasted this against their image of European students. They suggested that these students had grown up with religion and, therefore, understood this better. During my field visit, I observed a Buddhist temple located a short walk from the campus' main entrance. I was thus curious about my interviewee's opinion on considered religious practices and elements related to Buddhism and Shinto, which I assumed most students were to some degree familiar with. The interviewee replied that these were a part of Japanese culture rather than religion (interview, March 14, 2024).

Conclusion

This contribution focused on universities as moral actors in their capacity to produce knowledge on religion. The data shows that this is done through the mechanism of language in the anti-cult measures. First, by deploying a lexicon of fear, they describe a precarious student body and include descriptions of violence and other consequences if one engages with groups labelled cults. Second, religion as a category is present in the dataset as it is directly mentioned by the majority of universities. They invoke a binary that juxtaposes unaccepted religion against accepted religion. The framework of moral panic and the notion of moral entrepreneurs were applied to understand this phenomenon through its actors. Yet, several theoretical adjustments were made to enable a nuanced analysis that considers the complex contemporary background of this issue. This includes the 1995 Aum attack and the 2022 assassination of Abe Shinzo. However, universities also state that they directly respond to concerns raised by students. Although some universities attempt to navigate the precarious and unclear area of religious freedom, knowledge production on religion does occur through their anti-cult measures. Yet, several questions remain open to academic inquiry on this matter. For example, how does the categorisation of universities influence the representation of religion in anti-cult measures? Furthermore, how do the ramifications of these measures both in university and religious spheres manifest? These gaps highlight the need for future research to understand how universities engage in knowledge production on religion.

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