Aum Shinrikyo and the Rastafarian Movement

4/4/11

[SOC 151 Sociology of Religion & Ideology](https://bb.uvm.edu/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp?tab_tab_group_id=_2_1&url=%2Fwebapps%2Fblackboard%2Fexecute%2Flauncher%3Ftype%3DCourse%26id%3D_51429_1%26url%3D) / Prof. L. Kaelber

**Introduction**

New Religious Movements have seen growth since the inception of the 20th century. These movements tend to originate from prominent religions such as Buddhism, Christianity or Hinduism. They are known to have distinctive characteristics and appear to be autonomous from conventional religious institutions, doctrines and typically proffer an alternative view of religion for existing cultures. According to Dawson, New Religious Movements emerged in the U.S. because of a response to moral ambiguity, changes in values and the turmoil of the 1960’s (2006:40). In this modern society New Religious Movements are an obvious phenomenon that has garner worldwide attention. Two NRM that have gained such prominence are the Rastafarian Movement and the millenarian religious group Aum Shinrikyo. The Rastafarian Movement and Aum Shinrikyo share similarities and differences on many levels such as influences, beliefs and practices. They are two NRM that developed in different regions of the world but have created profound movements that still exists in today’s society and reinforces the notion of the importance of a compelling religion and its innate ability to influence.

**Rastafari**

Rastafari is a religious movement that grew and cultivated out of Jamaica in the 1930s. “Rastafari faith is simply something he has always known within himself, whether or no he or she has been consciously aware of it” (Kitzinger 1969:246). A central part of Rastafarian beliefs emanated from Marcus Garvey, a born Jamaican who preached and promoted black power in Jamaica, United States and Africa. Although not a Rastafarian, Garvey set the ideological framework for the foundation of Rastafarians. Garvey teachings explained that the black race represented one nationality and their native land was Africa. Garvey noted that while other races were eradicated as a result of European enslavement, blacks were able to withstand and thus were special people and viewed this accomplishment as sources of self-confidence and pride ([Dolin](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/advancedSearch.do?inputFieldName%280%29=AU&prodId=AONE&userGroupName=vol_b92b&method=doSearch&inputFieldValue%280%29=%22Kasey+Qynn+Dolin%22&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm) 2001:55). In his speeches, Marcus Garvey preached and endorsed the notion of a back to Africa Movement and predicted that an African king would be crowned that would lead blacks to salvation. Indeed, soon after Garvey's prophecy in the early 1930’s, Ras Tafari Makonnen was crowned Emperor of Ethiopia and was given the name, Haile Selassie I which was viewed by numerous Jamaicans as the fulfillment of a prophecy. Garvey accentuated that all people worship their individual god and that African-descended individuals should praise a god in their own image, which was a black god who was the sole ruler of all black people and the God of Ethiopia. This notion extended to the formation of Rastafarian where there were no existing organizational structures within the movement. “Power, authority and control are dispersed; there is no central command, no single leader and no single position” (Price, Nonini and Tree 2008:138).

**Rastafari Beliefs and Symbols**

In Jamaica, Haile Selassie I was deemed a divine being, the Black Christ, an incarnation of God; He was also referred to as Jah, a paradox of Jehovah (Dolin 2001:55). To expound on his divinity, his previous name Rastafari, Ras means prince and Tafari denotes creator. Rastafarians beliefs posits that redemption for Rastafarians is an earthly notion rather than heavenly, speech is extremely important to Rastafarians because it enables the power and presence of God to be felt and that blacks will be led back to Africa by Haile Selassie and recognizing Emperor Haile Selassie as God, and the ruler of black people (Dolin 2001:55).

Symbols that are associated with Rastarians include the “rasta flag” which is yellow, green and gold and it depicts a picture of a lion. The colors are symbolic because gold typifies the gold that was stolen from Africa by Europeans and the green represents the lands stolen from Africa, which Rastafarians deem to be the motherland. Members of the Rastafarian movement are known was “Rastas” and they can be identified by their beards and long dreadlocks (Kitzinger 1969:242). Rastafarians are known for their use of Marijuana. Marijuana is also known as ganja or the holy herb and it is believed god provided it. Marijuana is used for various Rastafarian rituals, one of which is reasoning. Reasoning is gathering of Rastas who smoke and have discussions. The ritual commences when a person lights the pipe and recite a short prayer and ends when all the Rastas have smoke. (Kitzinger 1969:255). Rastas recognize few holidays such as Marcus Garvey’ birthday & Selassie’s birthday. People who join the group because they are convinced that Rastafari is their god, are generally recruited through establish friendship with members of the movement. Studies of conversion and case studies of specific groups have found that recruitment to NRMs have happen primarily through pre-existing social networks and interpersonal bonds (Dawson 2006:77).

**Aum Shryinkyo**

Aum Shryinkyo is a NRM that emerged in the mid 1980’s in Japan founded by Shoko Asahara and accounted for at least ten percent of the nation’s population (Susumu 1995:382). “According to his own account, Asahara moved to Tokyo in 1977 after graduation from Kumamoto Prefectural School for the blind” (Susumu 1995:384). In Tokyo, Asahara practice as an acupuncturist and it was there he developed an interest in in religion. Asahara desired to attend the prominent Tokyo University and he practiced for the entrance exams while he worked. After marriage and a child, Asahara failed the entrance exam and this led him into a new direction along with his new family. According to Asahara, he turned to religion because of his inability to sufficiently cure his patients (Reader 2000:45). A major turning point in Asahara’s search for faith occurred when he joined Agonshu where liberation from bad karma is deemed of utmost importance, which goes along with the notion of worldly happiness and Aum’s belief of effacing karma is a continuation of this teaching slight altered (Susumu 1995:385). According to Susumu research, Aum formative stage (from 1984, when Assahra left Agonshu, until about 1987) Asahara inherited various elements of Agonshu’s faith system. Agonshu central importance is accorded to freedom from karma while early Aum position is occupied by the awakening of kundalini through yoga. (1995:388) “Kundalini is explained as the original life energy that is release from the muladhara chakra, the lowest of the seven chakras located from the bottom of the spinal chord. This release of mysterious kundalini energy transforms both body and soul”(Susumu 1995:388).

**Aum Beliefs and Practices**

Aum belief consists of reaching a lever or a state where everything is achieved and nothing else is worth achieving, which is the ultimate realization of life. Asahara believed he could remove his followers bad karma and sins and ultimately providing them the tools to gain spiritual power (Susumu 1995:386). He delineated the notion of a doomsday prophecy and predicted a World War III that he called Armageddon and only those who were apart Aum would survive (Susumu 1995:402).

“Asahara assumed titles such as guru, master and savior” (Reader 2000:55). He is highly involved in the initiation process. Initiation is both an important element in disciples’ progress up the ladder of spiritual attainment and an affirmation of the power of the guru. Initiations consisted of various rituals but the most prominent initiation was shaktipat, which Asahara performed on multiple occasions. It was a practice that drained him and he often became ill as a result (Reader 2000:72). Ascetic practices were also believed to be the gateway to obtaining psychic powers. These practices were known to attract followers and easily persuaded people to join the movement; levitation was considered the most prominent of such practices (Reader 2000:72). For Aum members, the development of various stages and levels of practice was a way of providing a framework that enabled them to measure their progress (Reader 2000:72). There are different levels in rank or status, clothing and symbols and level of practiced achieved. For instance, Asahara rank was Saishu gedatsusha, he wore purple clothing and achieved every stage and has obtain the ultimate liberation.

“The major attraction of Aum Shryinkyo was its heavy emphasis on special ascetic practices of developed and prescribed by the guru. These practices began with yoga, meditation, and physical endurance exercises, but graduated to wearing special headgear that transmitted the guru’s brainwaves and ingesting substances ranging from the guru’s bath water to LSD” (Steinhoff 2001:145). Believers were shown videos of the master’s talks continuously for several days. They were told to repeat the following formula sixteen to twenty hours everyday for extended periods of time. “I pledge faithfulness to Aum, the Guru and the god Shiva (Susumu 1995:388).

**Aum Symbols**

The teachings of Aum deeply reflect Buddhism and Hinduism.“Aum’s most striking borrowing from Hinduism was that of that Hindu deity Shiva, who became Aum’s main image of worship.” According to one Aum believer Nishiwaki, Shiva was a manifestation of the highest level of absolute consciousness and of pure eternal truth, while spiritual practices related to the worship of (including yoga) was means of transcending the polluted self to attain the highest levels of consciousness and gain release form an endless and painful cycle of rebirth (Reader 2000:67).

A symbolic place associated with Aum is India. It signifies a potent image and a well-known destination(Reader 2000:66). Hindu motifs were prevalent in the public images that Asahara exhibited to the world. In his appearance, for example, he took on the air of an Indian guru or ascetic, with long flowing hair and a beard and Indian style robes (Reader 2000:66).

**Similarities and Differences**

Many similarities and differences can be seen in these two NRM’s.

One salient difference is that Rastafarian members were easily identifiable because of their elaborate colors, long hair and representation of their flags. Unlike Aum Shryinkyo, Rastafarians have unique ways of communicating to one another. Rastafarians unique way of interacting is known as Dread Talk. They generally use the letter " I ", which alludes to the Roman numeral " I " in the name of Haile Selassie I. Therefore, Rastafarians use phrases such as " I-man ", meaning " I " or " myself ", or " I-dren ", signifying " children " or "brethren " (Dolin 2001:55).

Both NRMs are representation of exemplary prophecies. For Aum Shryinkyo, Shoko Asahara represent an important figure who possess characteristics that no other could obtain and he was vital to the movement as Haile Selassie I was to the Rastafari movement. Haile Selassie I eventually died in 1975, which led to the break up of a certain notions of Rastafari, because the Emperor of Ethiopia was thought to be immortal. Both leaders were also given the highest of praise or status where they were worshiped by followers. Asahara was known to as the master guru and Haile Selassie I was given the title the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Aum and Rastafarians utilize similar methods of reaching out and attracting new members. Such methods included the use of digital media. Aum Shryinkyo leader, Shoko Asahara made numerous television appearances on talk shows, rendering himself for interviews with an extensive amount of academics. Initially, Rastafarians faced with poverty and the lack of government support were not able to find the financial resources to advance membership through media outlets but were able to alter that with the rise of reggae icon, Bob Marley. Bob Marley gave Rastafari international exposure internationally with his musical success. In his interviews he explained the meaning of his dreads and its connection to Rastafari and was able to express Rastafarian ideas through his music. Aum Asahara used photographs and cartoons to provide valuable clues to his personality and ideas information about his movement. In such cases, he is always in a dominant position, placing his hand on the head of the meditating disciples to give them blessings or transfers of spiritual power (Reader 2000:55). In Aum cartoons and animated videos, Asahara is depicted as larger than life, much bigger than his disciples, his beard, hair, and body assuming enormous proportions and dwarfing those around him (Reader 2000:56).

**Controversies**

Aum Shryinkyo and the Rastafarian movement definitely gain popularity because their beliefs but also because the controversies they created. Bob Marley gain prominence through reggae music, a music that spoke about suffering and its lack of support for the government and the upper class. Bob Marley became a Rastafarian and preached the teachings in his songs but Marley stirred up controversies when he escaped an attempted assassination attempt. Many speculated it was because of Marley’s new found membership in the Rastafarian movement that he often sung about, defending the poor and the helpless and giving them voice which upset the upper class Jamaicans. In the end, Rastafarians received incredibly public scrutiny and the world became more aware of the movement. With the scrutiny many Jamaicans opposed the movement. According to one Rastafarian, “my joining this Rasta movement was, to everyone, almost like walking in the opposite direction of progress, to say the least” (Brodber 2001:23). Aum Shrinkyo had the attention of the world in 1995 when members of the group release poisonous sarin gas in a Japan train station killing and injuring innocent civilians. The group received immense public scrutiny and faced ensuing criminal charges where Shoko Asahara was convicted and sentence to death.

**Conclusion**

NRMs have become something that coincides with modernity. The emergence of such movements has altered views of religion and has created a lasting impact in today’s societies and cultures. Aum Shinrikyo and the Rastafarian Movement have been two NRM that have proved to be similar but different while maintaining their purposes. “The tragedy of Aum Shinrikyo is not just that it is symbolic fight against evil and for world salvation was transformed into a real brutal fight which resulted in indiscriminate murder but that in claiming to operate on exalted spiritual ground beyond the boundaries of normal morality” (Reader 2000:249). The Rastafarian movement brought together a country where the voiceless became heard but are still being oppressed. These movements were creates based some fundamental ideas of conventional religious movements and have created an avenue for themselves especially in these modern times where technology has advances and can be used as a very useful tool to increase membership. The past has produce numerous NRM and the future will produce more NRM and only time will capture their fate as we have seen in these two NRM as the importance of beliefs are heighten and the extent people will go to uphold them are unknown.

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