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Reassembling the Lucky Gods

Pilgrim Economies, Tourists, and Local Communities in Global Tokyo

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Abstract

This article intends to analyze the emergence of new subjectivities and economic discourses, and the semiotic construction of sacred places in global Tokyo as inventively constituted within the popular urban pilgrimage routes of the Seven Lucky Gods (*shichifukujin*). While a specific neoliberal discourse in Japan linked to tourism and the media has promoted the reinvention of traditional pilgrimage sites as New Age "power spots" informed by novel forms of temporality and subjectivity, urban communities living in those places, with their specific concerns and problems related to the local neighborhoods, often generate pilgrimage spaces that are radically different from those of the "neoliberal pilgrims." I will thus argue that the pilgrimage of the Seven Lucky Gods emerges as a double discourse through which religious institutions and urban collectives semiotically assemble themselves not only by rebranding older sites as neoliberal power spots through media and tourism practices, but also by creatively producing hybrid subjectivities, sacred places, and alternative ontologies that are set apart from neoliberal economies.

Keywords: anthropology, Japan, neoliberalism, ontologies, Paris School semiotics, pilgrimage, tourism, urban space

The relationship between economic networks, tourism, and religious pilgrimage has always been a close one. As noted, for example, by Victor and Edith Turner (1978), Venice in the late fifteenth century was already a successfully organized international center for religious traffic and a future model for later secular tourism because it had established a transnational network between European countries and the Holy Land that regulated the pilgrimage routes

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according to the economic concerns of both pilgrims and Venetian traders. And yet until recently, little attention has been paid in anthropology and social studies to the economic and marketing aspects of a religious pilgrimage (Reader 2014). Even more neglected is the impact of global economic trends on the way local pilgrimage sites are presented, experienced, and often reconfigured through media, infrastructure, and tourism, and on the way such national and transnational tourist networks relate not only to sacred places, but also to local communities. This article intends to investigate the negotiation and reinvention of subjectivities and modes of economic consumption in Tokyo, a modern global city, through the practice of religious pilgrimage called *Shichifukujin no meguri* ("pilgrimage of the Seven Gods of Fortune"). This pilgrimage, mainly performed during New Year's festivities, is organized by Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples connected through sacred circuits and located in different parts of Tokyo. As we will see, my ethnographic research on two specific pilgrimage routes and urban areas reveals polyphonies of battling subjectivities and ontologies, diverging economic interests, as well as different ways of organizing communities and local identities through the intervention of nonhuman actors, such as the Fortune Gods themselves, local mascots, spirits, and haunted places. In both routes, small communities were able to position themselves with respect to religious institutions, pilgrims, tourists, and local elites through the daily care of pilgrimage spots, the performance of rituals of spirit pacification, and forms of urban activism (*machi okoshi*) promoted during the pilgrimage through acting characters (*kyara*). By adopting a particular methodological approach coming from Paris School semiotics—notably introduced by Bruno Latour into the field of science and technology studies (STS) through the formulation of his actor–network theory, but rarely addressed in anthropology—I will try to show how the pilgrimage of the Seven Gods of Fortune emerges as a double discourse through which urban collectives articulate themselves not only by negotiating mutual power relationships and competing interests within local neighborhoods, but also by creatively producing new forms of identity, sacred places, and economic concerns. More specifically I will argue that, on the one hand, a discourse on neoliberalism in Japan has recently produced specific temporalities and forms of subjectivity that have informed and refashioned the pilgrimage sites as New Age "power spots" sought out by "spiritual consumers." Old sites associated with the Seven Gods are thus rebranded and promoted according to the laws of the "New Spirituality" market and media

advertisement. On the other hand, I shall also demonstrate how these neoliberal pilgrims, who situate themselves within such a universe of discourse, are associated with the emergence of an ontological space radically different from concerns and problems of the local neighborhood. Such concerns and problems relate instead to a second discourse, which is also incorporated into the experience of pilgrimage. In the more liminal areas of Tokyo in fact, the "power spot" boom seems to only affect the temple and shrine priests, but not the lay resident people. I will thus show how, while struggling with *yakuza* criminality, prostitution, haunted places, and class discrimination, urban collectives generate hybrid subjectivities and sacred places and produce alternative ontologies and forms of commitment that are set apart from neoliberal economies while, at the same time, assembling themselves in new, creative ways.

Seven Lucky Gods

During the first days of the year, everyone visiting a Shinto shrine or a Buddhist temple in Tokyo will soon realize how crowded these places are during this period, and how busy the shrine and temple attendants are in selling all sorts of talismans, amulets, sacred images, good-luck charms and tablets, votive stamps, and propitiatory rituals. This large religious business market produces in the first two weeks much of the income earned in one year in large religious sites, and creates huge flows of economic exchanges involving millions of people in the main places of worship of the Japanese capital, such as the Meiji Shrine or the Kawasaki Daishi Temple (Breen and Teeuwen 2010; Reader 1991). According to official statistics, some 70 percent of the population in Japan visits a shrine in this period to pray for happiness and luck in the coming year (Breen and Teeuwen 2010). Even at smaller sites, this particular period of the year is crucial for receiving donations, selling charms, and renewing bonds with the local community, including households, companies, and commercial organizations.

Within this picture, a prominent role is played by pilgrimages dedicated to the Seven Gods of Good Fortune (*shichifukujin*), who incarnate the expectations and hopes of the people visiting the sacred sites: health, business prosperity, longevity, success, protection from disasters, and happiness. Often depicted together on the treasure boat (*takarabune*), bringing

wealth and luck especially at New Year, the Seven Gods of Fortune—whose names are Ebisu, Daikokuten, Bishamonten, Benzaiten, Hotei, Jurōjin and Fukurokuju—are a group of deities with a distinctive heterogeneous character, both local and foreign. These deities, who emerged as a collective between the sixteenth and the seventeenth century probably in the region of Kantō surrounding Edo, the modern Tokyo, come in fact from different cultural backgrounds, from India, China, and Japan. Also, they are associated with different religious traditions, namely Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism and Shinto, and are interchangeably worshipped in Shinto and Buddhist institutions (Satō and Kaneko 1989).[1]

The Seven Gods of Fortune are in fact assembled together in extremely popular pilgrimages that are widespread across the country, which combine Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples in local trails commonly known as *meguri* (lit. "circuits," one of the many words used in Japan to define the phenomenon of pilgrimage). Although, as we have seen, this syncretic, combinatory group of gods is quite ancient, pilgrimage circuits associated with them have often changed across time, sometimes interrupting old routes, sometimes instead reviving them, sometimes creating new ones. Having been quite popular in the Edo period (1600–1868), and undergoing a few ups and downs in the late nineteenth century and in the twentieth century, the routes were considerably revitalized in the last forty years, when about 130 new circuits were established between the 1975 and 1985, and several old trails were resurrected or reinvented (Reader and Tanabe 1998).

The pilgrimage of the Seven Gods is in fact still considered a way to promote the activities of Shinto and Buddhist centers, for it creates a network between them according a changing geography of religious interests, economic practices, and quests for local identities, often in association with communities in the adjacent neighborhoods. The association of these deities with financial prosperity and wealth has also stimulated connections between religious institutions and commercial activities, companies, and local retailers. From rail companies promoting new trails in concerted action with shrines and temples, to package tours including shopping activities and visits to pilgrimage spots, and from "Lucky Gods" lotteries, to shops advertising special products—like the *sake* wine bottles of the Seven Lucky Gods of Ebara, in southwest Tokyo—these religious pilgrimages seem to be closely intertwined with local social life, economic practices, and, as we will see in detail, the politics of identity.[2]

Global Cities and Neoliberal Economies

It is interesting to notice that a large number of these religious circuits are concentrated in Tokyo. In the now famous definition of Saskia Sassen (1991), Tokyo, along with New York and London, was described as a "global city," one of the first urban centers to reach a new level of interdependence between the world economy and urban life. The high concentration of command points in the organization of the world economy, the emergence of Tokyo as a key location for a worldwide network of financial services, its prominence as a site of production and innovation, and its rise as an international market incorporating industrial homeworkers in remote rural areas have all deeply affected the spatial organization and social structure of the Japanese capital, and this was especially true in the 1990s.[3]

One such example of a global market is the fish market of Tokyo, the biggest in the world, which was described by Ted Bestor (2004) in his ethnography of Tsukiji as a situated node of transnational flows investing people, commodities, information, technology, and capital. The recent ethnography of Miyazaki Hirokazu (2013) on the rise and fall of financial traders' dreams in Tokyo's stock market has analyzed both the impact of neoliberal economies in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and the limits of the idea of a global city based on them. He examined how arbitrage operations of a group of Japanese traders were first boosted and then defeated by neoliberal reforms like the deregulation and privatization of the market, after the so-called "bubble economy," as well as by reconceptions of subjectivity in terms of strong individuality (*tsuyoi kojinsei*), risk (*risuku*), and responsibility (*sekinin*) (2013: 15). After a decade of experimentation that led to the disillusion with the idea of arbitrage itself, such traders were all caught off-guard by a diffused sense of "end of finance," which still pervades the market (2013: 129–132).

We should thus consider neoliberalism, at least in its Japanese version, as a discourse characterized by a specific temporal "aspect." Following semioticians and linguists, we can consider *aspect* the way in which action is inscribed in semiotic processes through *semantic marks* such as inchoativity, durativity, punctuality, perfectiveness, and imperfectiveness—in other words, marks that express the temporality of an action from the point of view of particular actors (Greimas and Courtés 1982). Accordingly, the temporality of the neoliberal discourse shared by such financial traders may be seen

as characterized by a distinct aspect of *terminativity*, an incumbent sense of "end of an era" (Miyazaki 2013: 141). This terminative aspect, embedded in the temporality of neoliberalism, seems to be however combined with another aspectual mark, that of *durativity* (Greimas and Courtés 1982), a continuous progression over time. The demise of finance, lamented by Japanese stock market traders, is described by them as a process which nevertheless keeps going, as a form of perpetual motion that constantly defers its own end (Miyazaki 2013).[4] Similarly to the way Roland Barthes (1967) once described the style of Coco Chanel—producing simulacra of women who have already intensely lived, but who nevertheless endure and continue to elegantly present themselves in the world—arbitrage in the neoliberal economy is *always already* at an endpoint, and yet everything there persists in being seen as arbitrage. In other words, despite this sense of crisis and dissatisfaction with neoliberal models, Tokyo's economic scene seems to be permeated by a neoliberal discourse sustaining transnational flows of financial processes and transactions, and producing new forms of subjectivity.

Dissatisfaction with neoliberal models has however been recently expressed by scholars, especially anthropologists, who in a recent motion asked why these categories should be taken into account at all by analysts, as interpretive schemes. In a perceptive proposal and discussion (Venkatesan et al. 2015), James Laidlaw and Jonathan Mair have strongly argued that by applying the concept of neoliberalism to such a disparate range of phenomena like environmental issues in Kenya and Chile, legal and social problems related to heritage in India and Colombia, antihomosexual legislation in Uganda, and educational policy in Morocco (to mention a few), we end up obscuring our objects of analysis. While we are trying to explain all these phenomena with the same concept, we actually do not explain anything, because we miss the specificity of each ethnographic context. Lacking a clear theoretical definition, the category of neoliberalism would instead be a semiotic "schema" (as defined by Hjelmslev in 1961) put into "usage" by analysts as a discourse that predefines a categorical opposition between the *negative value* of contemporary neoliberalism and the *positive value* of traditional communality (Venkatesan et al. 2015: 917-8). Instead of getting to know better social organizations by means of ethnographic insights, we finish up applying top-down prefixed values, which just reproduce classic dichotomies like modernity vs. tradition, or instrumental economies vs. moral spirituality.

This is not, however, an entirely new argument. Karen Ho, in her in-depth ethnography of Wall Street investment bankers, has already criticized anthropological approaches to finance that "reproduce power-laden assumptions about the 'winners' and 'losers' in the global economy" (2009: 32), where markets in modern industrial society appear as abstract, non-cultural forces opposed to the deeply embedded and concrete social relations characterizing traditional cultures. Furthermore, as ethnographic work can easily demonstrate, no neoliberal schema is able to maintain an alleged division between the modern economy and traditional spirituality. We will see, for example, how pilgrimages to spiritual spots in Tokyo are sustained by economic discourses, and, *vice versa*, how local communities manifest forms of sociality and devotion that are also informed by economic concerns. However, what happens when the discourse of neoliberalism is not posited by the anthropologist, but by the ethnographic subjects themselves? Should we ignore the effects that such a discourse may have on them, through the production of new subjectivities, spatialities, and temporalities? Can the "schema," as argued by Louis Hjelmslev (1942) himself, be changed by a constant interplay between customary "usage" and inventive "act," as if the *local and concrete enunciations* were always able to *modify the general neoliberal system of oppositions*?

Maybe we should adopt James Ferguson's idea (2006) of global capital, and globalization more generally, as *globe-hopping* and not *globe-covering* phenomena. According to Ferguson, when we speak about global economies, we are not talking of a movement of capital encompassing the globe. Capital in Africa, for example, has largely been concentrated in mineral-extraction enclaves dominated by Western companies that are spatially segregated, and socially "thin," relying on smaller groups of high-skilled workers. Economic investments do not "flow" from New York and London to oil fields in Angola and gold mines in Ghana. They instead connect discrete points of the globe, "hopping" and jumping from one dot to the other, and skipping what lies in between. To an idea of globalization as flow of capital, Ferguson (2006) therefore prefers that of *globe-hopping*, which leaves out what is not directly touched by the very selective and localized global network of financial benefits. We will see what implications this redefinition of globalization may have in the case of Tokyo. One question that now needs to be answered is: can we also consider neoliberalism as a phenomenon concerning only specific localized areas, even within the

same city? In other words, instead of considering neoliberalism as a general explicative category, can we *analyze it as a discourse* enacted only in specific circumstances, a schema that may also *leave out other local dynamics*? It is to such *local dynamics* that I would now like to turn through the study of the pilgrimage of the Seven Lucky Gods.

Pilgrimage On and Off the Track

More than twenty pilgrimages to the Seven Gods are currently present in the urban space of Tokyo (Shichifukujin sanpokai 2011). A strong resurgence of this pilgrimage in the last five years might be related to processes of commodification and popularization through the media, which have promoted forms of religious tourism on TV, in magazines, in books, and on the internet, and which have also attracted pilgrims from across the country. If, on the one hand, because of such mediatization of pilgrimage, it is not possible to clearly separate these visits to religious sites from ordinary phenomena of marketing and tourism (Padoan 2012; Reader 2014), then, on the other hand, circulation within the capital city and nearby prefectures—and also from abroad, which is evidenced by an increasing presence of visitors from China, Korea, and Southeast Asia—has recently enhanced the translocal dimension of the Lucky Gods' trails in Tokyo.

Nevertheless, in this article I will try to show how this translocal dimension—and, to a minor extent, this transnational dimension—of religious tourism related to media coverage, mobility, and economic "flows" has emerged in sharp contrast with local issues affecting the people who live in the vicinity of the shrines and temples. Here, a completely different pilgrimage takes place, as the Seven Gods become part of local identities, creating new ways of assembling communities among people who feel to have been consistently cut off from what Ferguson defines, as we have seen above, as global economic "hopping." In this sense, I will demonstrate that new forms of hybrid subjectivity and nonhuman agency also emerge from local discourses of pilgrimage, according to site-specific dynamics that escape from global neoliberal economies. Such local forms of subjectivity and agency are not recognized by pilgrims and tourists, and they entertain an ambiguous relationship with the religious institutions, to the extent that they produce altogether different *ontologies* and modes of commitment to them.

Theoretical and Methodological Notes

Before proceeding with the ethnographic description, I would like to spend a few words on the term "ontology," which I adopt here in a specific sense, and on the methodology that I follow in my analysis. With regard to the term "ontology," my use slightly diverges from the way the category has been adopted by proponents of the ontological turn in anthropology, notably Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2014) and Philippe Descola (2013). In this sense, my application of the term is closer to the usage first developed in STS by Latour (1993), Annemarie Mol (2002), and others. Whereas Viveiros De Castro and Descola apply the word "ontology" to the totality of Amerindian people, making the term coextensive not only with "cultures," as some have already argued (Venkatesan et al. 2010), but with entire continental blocks, STS has always tended to show, on the contrary, how different ontologies may emerge from a single ethnographic case, thus producing multiple realities not always aligned with each other (Woolgar and Lezaun 2013). Mol's (2002) analysis of the body in medical practice is revelatory in this sense: while a disease known as atherosclerosis is considered a single form of illness in *theory*, it turns out to be several ones in *practice*, from a condition of pain while walking presented as possible symptom in the vascular surgery outpatient clinic, to a value representing the speed of blood flowing into the vessels in the Doppler room, from an X-ray showing the position and size of blood vessels, to a thick white paste scraped from the interior of the leg in a surgical operation. Only after some serious *coordination work* are these four networks aligned as a single disease, but often this does not happen and more exams need to be done. Perhaps the X-ray does not fit with the Doppler, or the patient walks perfectly even with reduced blood speed in the leg, and the atherosclerosis is multiplied in a myriad of other exams, until it shifts to another disease.

As we shall see, in the Seven Gods pilgrimage often such coordination work is not even sought, and *different ontologies coexist and sometimes clash* with each other. From a *methodological* viewpoint, however, I will choose to define ontology only as the *result of discursive processes*. In this definition, I will follow Paris School semiotic analysis of discourse (Hammad 2002; Fontanille 2006; Perron and Collins 1989), strongly nonrepresentational and anticognitivistic, from which Latour (2005: 54) borrowed his methodological tools when he formulated his actor–network theory.

Discourse here is not defined only as verbal, but as a *crossmodal dimension employing different expressive forms* (visual, verbal, gestural, material, etc.), which includes the body as a triggering process and the production of specific subjectivities as a temporary result. From a semiotic methodological point of view, ontologies are therefore discursive effects originated by *crossmodal regimes of bodily enunciation*, which are assumed as "common sense" (as a *semiotics of the natural world*) by social actors (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 374–375). This perspective, besides reintroducing virtual, actualizing, and epistemic modalizations within a nonrepresentational frame—desires, duties, power, knowledge, belief as relationally experienced by actors in reference to their narrative courses of action—opens up the possibility of a *methodological* level *between* the *theoretical* and the *analytical* ones, that is, a set of models that are constantly tested and reformulated by the dialogue between anthropological theory and ethnographic data.

Before and Beyond the Sumida River

The ethnography that I conducted in Tokyo[5] is part of an ongoing project on urban pilgrimages, which aims to explore the relationship between religious and spatial politics in the city and their role in shaping everyday urban life. After having conducted participant observation and interviews with pilgrims, representatives of religious institutions, travel agencies, local communities and associations, and tourism divisions of municipalities in Tokyo, and having joined several guided tours to the Seven Gods organized by local agencies in six different locations, I restricted my analysis to two pilgrimage routes.

These routes are the Seven Lucky Gods of Asakusa's Famous Places (*Asakusa nadokoro shichifukujin*) and the Seven Lucky Gods of Sumida River (*Sumidagawa shichifukujin*), both of which are in downtown Tokyo. The two routes are located on the opposite sides of the Sumida River, the first in one of the most visited and crowded areas of Tokyo, surrounding the Sensōji temple, and the second one on a now almost deserted area called Mukōjima (lit. "The island beyond"), which incredibly reanimates itself during the first week of the year with over thirty thousand visitors, according to local associations. Their importance to me lay in their contrasting

situations. On the one hand, Asakusa, as a well-known sightseeing place, was an emblematic case for understanding the relationship between locals and tourists in the space of pilgrimage; on the other hand, Sumida, while not a famous tourism spot, has been recently promoted by a local community of shopkeepers, residents, and representatives of religious and historical institutions, who are interested in revitalizing the area and its historico-cultural significance through a rebranding of the pilgrimage and the local activities. Sumida thus constitutes a remarkable example of how economic and religious interests can be conflated in place-making activities toward the construction of local identities.

The older among the two trails is probably the second one, which was founded in the Bunka era (1804–1818) by a group of literates and artists led by Sahara Kikū (1762–1831), a wealthy businessman and owner of the Mukōjima Hundred-Flower Garden, who became a patron of the rich cultural and artistic life in the area in the early nineteenth century. The trail includes three Buddhist temples, two Shinto shrines, and the garden itself, which enshrines one of the deities. The other pilgrimage, in Asakusa, which includes three Buddhist temples and six Shinto shrines (where two of the deities are reduplicated), was in some other form already present in 1936, but it was revived and reinvented in 1977, thanks to the effort of local religious institutions that wanted to expand the circulation of pilgrims around the busy tourist area of the Sensōji temple.

In order to explore these two cases, I will start from the analysis of the package tours arranged by local tour operators and travel agencies, which organize guided visits to the sacred spots of the Seven Gods of Fortune as well as sightseeing activities in the two areas. I will then move on to the ethnographies of the local communities living around the Asakusa and the Sumida River pilgrimages.

Package Tours, Power Spots, and the Night Visions

It was 11:30 am on 4 January, and twenty-six participants, including myself, were lining up on the side of coach number 261 of the Hato Bus tour operator while we were waiting to board and start the pilgrimage to the Lucky Gods of Asakusa. The tour also included some free time for shopping and sightseeing in the area of the crowded Buddhist Sensōji temple,

a classic-style Japanese dinner (*washoku*) in a big hotel, a *rakugo* comic monologue (a traditional form of entertainment), and a visit to the upper deck of the Tokyo Sky Tree, which, having been completed in 2012, is currently the tallest tower in the world (634 m).

Such a blend of traditional and modern values, combined with religious benefits acquired during the visit to the Gods of Fortune, seems to attract much interest across generations, as the guides told me on more than one occasion. While the tours were originally intended for an old age target, the guides acknowledged the increase of popularity of the pilgrimages in the last few years among families, young couples and even groups of female teenagers.

A middle-aged couple explained to me that it was the first time they were performing the pilgrimage on a package tour. They had previously been in several other locations of the Seven Gods in Tokyo, but going on a guided tour was for them now more reassuring—something that was confirmed to me also by other pilgrims. They were making the pilgrimage in order to purify their heart/mind (*kokoro*) at New Year and to bring about fortune for the coming year. Also, it was a chance for them to visit lesser-known spots around Asakusa.

Some younger participants gave other reasons. When we were visiting the Imado Shrine—a Shinto pilgrimage site that, besides the Lucky God Fukurokuju, displays huge beckoning cats (*maneki neko*) as lucky charms—they explained to me that this was a famous *power spot* known for fostering love relationships (*enmusubi*, lit. "karmic bonds"). The term "power spot" (*pawā spotto*) first appeared in 1986 to designate places that were endowed with particular powers and that were able to channel spiritual energy. However, the use of the term in the media grew exponentially at the end 2009, when palm-reading comedian Shimada Shūhei declared on a TV program that, while taking a picture of the Kiyomasa's Well in the Meiji Shrine and setting it as wallpaper on his cell phone, "my luck increased and I scored a job" (Tsukada and Ōmi 2011: 30).[6] From that moment on, media coverage of power spots across Japan exploded on TV programs, magazines, newspapers, and books with the effect of rebranding traditional Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples in a New Age fashion—a trend that Miyazaki, drawing on the work of sociologist of religion Shimazono Susumu (2007), sees as linked to the *individualistic* character of new forms of *spirituality* that are "closely related to the diffusion of neoliberal values" (Miyazaki 2013: 114–117).

The main promoters of this "power spot boom" were those in the media in collaboration with tourist agencies and municipalities, inasmuch as it was confirmed to me by the supervisor of the tourism and cultural industry section of the Taitō ward, who proudly gave me the pamphlets that they had produced to advertise the power spots in the Asakusa area. Some religious institutions were not actually very happy with this form of New Age refashioning—as a representative of the Asakusa Shrine told me—but other priests, like the daughter of the main priest of the Imado Shrine, actually fostered this kind of popularity and were also very keen to promote connections between religious institutions and local business activities. The same female priest provided me with a copy of a magazine advertising restaurants, coffee shops, and boutiques in Tokyo, which featured her visiting these places and enjoying the local products as a travel writer; it also acknowledged her status as a Shinto priest.

It is interesting to note that such a fascination for New Age spirituality coupled with tourism is not related to something portrayed as really "new" at all, but to the rediscovery of ancient spiritual energies connected to the old cultural and religious heritage of Japan. Also, critics of the "power spot boom," such as the Asakusa Shrine representative quoted above, tend to stress the ephemerality of this phenomenon, which is often compared to an already outdated fad (*ryūkō*) popularized by the media five to six years earlier. In this sense, it is thought to be doomed to fade out soon—although people still seem to be attracted by these power spots. Some scholars of new religions also tend to consider the general phenomenon of the "religious information boom" as a passing one that is related to forms of consumption that constantly pick up on phenomena that are easily discovered and then forgotten. After all, "the story ends when the information becomes boring" (Inoue 1992: 208–210). In this sense, similarly to what we have detected in the neoliberal discourse produced by Tokyo stock market traders (Miyazaki 2013), religious tourism connected to power spots might be characterized nowadays not by *inchoative* aspectual marks, which are related to a temporal process starting anew, but by *terminative* and *durative* ones, which are related to a phenomenon that keeps on going notwithstanding its already announced demise.

The package tour to the Lucky Gods of Sumida River is very similar to the one described above to Asakusa, with the only substantial difference being that the pilgrimage also involves a cruise on the Sumida River on a

"Treasure Boat" (like the one on which the Seven Gods are often depicted) and a visit to the famous Tokyo Tower (333 m), which was completed in 1958 and modeled after the Eiffel Tower in Paris. Attraction for the power spots—as well as the search for values related to the New Age spirituality—was repeatedly stressed to me by pilgrims also on this route. And such an attraction was often mentioned to me in combination with tourist activities: for example, a couple of two middle-aged female participants, coming from a nearby prefecture, told me on the Treasure Boat that visiting Tokyo was as significant for them as receiving serenity (*odayaka*) and healing (*iyashi*) at the power spots included in the pilgrimage.

Moreover, the semiotic analysis of the package tours reveals an interesting distribution of *actantial roles* between the Lucky Gods and the tour operators.[7] While the Lucky Gods play the role of manipulatory "Sender-actant"—or *destinateur* in semiotic terminology (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 293–295), namely the position of *authority* that regulates the main values sought by the visitors (luck, health, love, etc.)—the tour operators occupy the position of modal "Helper-actant," which provides the visitors with the *modalities* of "being able" to safely travel across the city and of "knowing how" to enjoy their visit to Tokyo. However, at the end of the trip we see a twisting of these narrative positions.

The final visit to the two towers (i.e., the Tokyo Sky Tree and the Tokyo Tower) is in fact advertised by the tour operator as the possibility of watching at, and watching from, "two of the most important symbols of Tokyo and of the entire Japan." Similarly to what Roland Barthes (1997) argues for in the case of the Eiffel Tower, the visitors in this case are invited to *restructure* and *unify* through their gaze the city itself below the two towers, something that was previously only experienced through their multiple, fragmented, and situated points of view during the pilgrimage. The city of Tokyo—which, as seen from afar, now embodies the Seven Lucky Gods, their values, and their power spots in its own urban fabric—is objectified and captured by the pilgrim's *gaze*.[8] By visiting the towers, the pilgrims are in fact realizing visual control over Tokyo's urban and cultural values. Furthermore, the vision from the towers, proposed at the end of the journey on a megalopolis immersed in the dark, animated by flows of pulsing illuminations and neon lights, is highly *reflexive* (in the linguistic, and not psychological, sense). While watching the city, pilgrims are actually *watching themselves* projected onto

it, as they see their figure reflected on the dark window panes, overlapping with the flowing urban background. Pilgrims thus occupy the two actantial positions of *subject* and *object*, observer and observed at the same time, like in front of a mirror. The two roles of the subject who watches, and the object which is seen, are reflexively played by the same actors, the pilgrims.[9] While seeing their own image at night, reflected on the dark windows inside the tower deck, they adjust and position themselves to take in the scenery of the city and to reflect on its system of values. In other words, the experience of the night vision of the capital city leads to the reflexive construction and self-constitution of the viewers' subjectivities and identities, which are informed by Tokyo's cultural values of tradition and modern neoliberalism. In the discourse of the package tour experienced by the visitors, *they* (and not the Lucky Gods) become the *final authority* or judicatory "Sender-actant"—that is, the new judges and interpreters of the global city's values.[10]

Haunted Places

A completely different picture is instead offered by interviews with members of local communities who live and work next to the pilgrimage sites and by participant observation conducted during the activities organized by them. When approaching, for example, one of the northernmost spots of the Asakusa pilgrimage, the Shinto shrine of Yoshiwara, far away from the large Sensōji Buddhist temple (the main tourist attraction), one has the feeling of having fallen into a completely different city. This is one of the impressions given by a travel writer:

> Along the main street, I notice a café with an atmosphere totally different from other quarters [of the city]. To the middle-aged woman with heavy makeup appearing on the window, I ask: "Can I normally drink a coffee here?" receiving a strange reply: "Well, this is actually an *information* café (*jōhō kissa*)." (Izumi 2007: 165; translation is my own)

What the writer later discovers is that such places are meeting points for prostitutes, from which "*soaps*" (brothels administered by local *yakuza*) are *informed* of potential customers.

The owner of another more ordinary café indeed, who introduced me to the chairman (*chōkai*) of the neighborhood association, confirmed to me that this place is considered as rather unsafe by the rest of Tokyo's population. The scene is in fact dominated by local *yakuza* operations including prostitution. Recently, there were two cases of suicide: both of the deceased were homeless people who hanged themselves from the street lamps next to the sanctuary, and on the same day of my arrival someone had stolen alms from the garden of the inner sanctuary dedicated to the Goddess of Fortune Benzaiten by breaking open the offering box.

The life of this local community gravitates indeed around this same inner sanctuary, which is located in a small garden detached from the main Yoshiwara Shrine and completely administered by the neighborhood association of residents. Shin-Yoshiwara was historically the pleasure quarter of Edo, the early modern Tokyo, where the rich culture of art and entertainment of the "floating world," which was captured in the widely celebrated wooden-block prints (*ukiyoe*), *kabuki* theater performances, and literary works, famously originated (Seigle 1993). The quarter was officially closed in 1958, and its legacy of high-ranking *oiran* courtesans and refined cultural production, of which its inhabitants are so proud, was not evidently preserved in these places. The inner sanctuary of Benzaiten is also the place where 490 prostitutes, who perished during the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake while seeking refuge in the large pond of the Goddess, are memorialized. Most of the pond was interred in the 1959, but a giant statue of the compassionate Bodhisattva Kannon is still there, as it has been since 1926, standing next to the Goddess's sanctuary.

According to the local residents, this place is rarely touched upon by tourists and visitors. All the pilgrims stop in fact at the main shrine in order to get the pilgrim stamp from the Yoshiwara Shrine's main priest or his wife, while guided tours never venture to the inner sanctuary and rapidly cross this area, trying to keep their visitors away from these uncanny places. According to the chairman, the priest is the only one who actually benefited from the recent pilgrim stamp boom, which followed the power spot trend. In the last few years, the priest could actually reside full time at the shrine, which has allowed him to considerably increase his daily income. Residents have criticized the priest for being interested only in money and for disregarding the separate inner sanctuary of the Goddess and what is going on there.

This place is in fact haunted by the spirits of the prostitutes who died there, whose hundreds of corpses portrayed in pictures from old newspapers are displayed in the garden, and elder people usually avoid entering it. The situation changed when, years ago in 1999, a famous writer of *yakuza* crime novels called Ieda Shōko (b. 1958) converted to Shingon esoteric Buddhism and subsequently became a fully ordained monk. Around that time, she started paying visits to the haunted place, performing rituals of pacification for the souls of the prostitutes. Since then, she has become the point of reference for the entire local community and a close friend of the chairman. More interestingly, she claims to be able to see the ghosts and to communicate directly with the Goddess Benzaiten. Since her ordination, she has been performing the ritual of pacification once a month and has been actively contributing to the renaissance of this place by bringing into this Shinto sanctuary the statues of the thirteen Buddhas and by inviting students from a local art school to decorate the small chapel with Buddhist images. About ten people from the neighborhood association attend the garden on a daily basis and take care of it, feeding the carps (donated by a patron friend of Ieda), cleaning the place, and collecting the alms. As some members told me, they want to make this place "beautiful."

Animated Mascots

It is interesting to note that a parallel situation of open criticism and competing interests between religious institutions and local communities can be found on the other side of the river. The Sumida River Seven Lucky Gods Association, historically refounded in 1898, is formed by a local elite, which includes the descendants of the rich patron who opened the trail, the temples and the shrines of the pilgrimage, and the most wealthy and traditional businessmen, restaurant owners, and shopkeepers of this area. They try to preserve the rich traditional culture of *geisha*, expensive traditional restaurants and inns that proliferated on this side of the Sumida River in the early twentieth century. There are, however, people who feel that they are discriminated against by this dominant elite.

In a small sushi restaurant of Mukōjima, the owner explained to me how a few years ago, in 2006, he had started in this area a form of urban activism called *machi okoshi* ("community raising"), in order to promote city life in

this part of Tokyo. Here, the city seems to fall apart from the dynamics of the global city, the large megalopolis, since the New Year is the only period when large flows of tourists venture beyond the Sumida River. While his business got worse and worse in the last decades, he also suffers, together with other residents, from being excluded from the upper elite of the Lucky Gods Association.[11] He started promoting his urban activism among these other residents, creating a local network, publishing a newsletter, and, like with other forms of community-making in Japan, adopting an acting character (*kyara*), namely a cute "geisha cat" called "Sister Kotochan."

The mascot, who has a life on her own, with her Facebook and Twitter pages, official residence, and media coverage, often participates in local events through a human-size animated character. The mascot also performs, once a year, the Sumida River Lucky Gods pilgrimage, where she is transported along with her friend the *kyara* Oshinari, who represents the neighboring areas of Oshiage and Narihira, through traditional rickshaws followed by fans and aficionados (Figure 1). Her assistants always refer to



Figure 1: The two mascots Kotochan and Oshinari performing the Sumida River Lucky Gods pilgrimage. Courtesy Tatsuma Padoan.

her as a full-fledged subject, while they accompany her throughout her busy schedule. Interestingly, the owner and creator of Kotochan is the boss of a printing house who still officially owns the mascot, and also belongs to the elitist Seven Gods Association. Kotochan, while performing the pilgrimage, acts therefore as *mediator between the elite and the community* in an ongoing negotiation between power positions and the politics of identity rising from local dynamics—a negotiation located miles away from the economic concerns and cultural values appropriated by the tourist flows.

Conclusion

We have so far explored two pilgrimages featuring the Lucky Gods, one in Asakusa, the other beyond the Sumida River. Each pilgrimage was analyzed from the perspective of religious tourism and of the local communities. Both pilgrims and residents engage with the worship of the Lucky Gods. However, we might question whether *the same pilgrimage* is actually experienced and produced by these different collectives. While the visitors seek the practical benefits bestowed by the Gods, and the sightseeing experience of Tokyo—finally embodying the cultural values of the global city—local communities conduct their everyday life according to different concerns. Is the *Goddess* who speaks to the medium monk really the same deity who bestows her blessings on tourists? Are the *spirits* who infest her ground also included in the reality of the package tours? How can the *animated characters*, in their role of *political delegates*, also represent the concerns of the religious tourists who temporarily flock to Mukōjima at New Year?

Such politics of identity and economic concerns are instead locally situated and produce strange forms of hybridization between human and nonhuman actors, inventing new spaces of interaction and ontological realities. To use Annemarie Mol's (2002) terms, while we have in theory a single pilgrimage for each course, it turns out in practice that we have multiple pilgrimages. The pilgrimage sites become for such communities an "object of value" (Greimas 1989), namely, something in which they invest their hopes, their wishes, and their expectations, something that needs to be *actively constructed* and sought out. The sacred space in the neighborhood, therefore, must become for them a "beautiful" place, a place of new equality, a place through which *the collective* shapes and reassembles itself, and

invents itself in the double etymological sense of the Latin word *invenire* (Ricoeur 2004): something that is, at the same time, "crafted" and "rediscovered."

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Notes

1. Hindu deities like Benzaiten (Sarasvatī), Daikokuten (Mahākāla), and Bishamonten (Vaiśravaṇa) arrived in Japan through Buddhism.
2. For a discussion of the concept of luck in Japan and more in general in anthropology, see Inge Daniels (2003) as well as Giovanni Da Col and Caroline Humphrey (2012).
3. For some sociological investigations of the "global city" concept, looking in particular at the city of London, see John Eade (1997, 2002).
4. It is in this sense that Andrea Muehlebach, while investigating the relationship between people and the state in Italy, can describe neoliberalism as a force that "contains its own negation" (2012: 25–26).
5. Fieldwork was conducted from September 2009 to January 2010, from December 2014 to January 2015, and from December 2015 to January 2016. The latter two trips were funded by the British Academy Newton Fellowship.
6. For a recent overview of this phenomenon, see Caleb Carter (2018).
7. In Paris School semiotics, *actants* are defined as syntactic positions occupied by every human or nonhuman *actor* that is able to receive or perform an action and that can be described according to different *modalities*—volition as "wanting to," obligation as "having to," ability as "being able to," knowledge as "knowing how to," and belief as an oscillation between "accepting-doubting-refusing and admitting." See Algirdas Greimas and Joseph Courtés (1982: 5–8, 193–195).
8. Simon Coleman and Mike Craig (2002: 17) have provokingly warned against "cruising grammarians" reading the "semiotics of landscapes," as well as against the excessive focus on vision in tourist studies, which has been popularized through the influential book by John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (1990). While the Paris School approach followed here, being deeply *phenomenological* and critical of the concept of representation (Coquet 2007), strongly refuses to maintain the usual (modern Protestant) divides so often found in social sciences between action/meaning, body/text, exteriority/interiority, senses/sense, instrumentality/signification, reality/discourse, practice/language, and, finally, material/semiotic, the concept of semiotic gaze that I adopt

here considerably differs from that of Urry. It is different insofar as it relates to the pilgrims' reflexivity and subjectivity (and not only to the reflexivity of the tourism industry, as in John Urry and Jonas Larsen [2011: 39]), and insofar as it considers the gaze from the towers as a specific apparatus of sanction and evaluation (Foucault 1977; Padoan 2014), which is part of larger assemblages of semiotic behaviors.

9. Greimas and Courtés explain: "Thus, in the sentence 'Peter walks his dog,' we have two actants—subject and object—invested in two distinct actors: the relation between the actants is then called transitive. On the other hand, in the utterance 'Peter's walk' the two actants—subject and object—are syncretized within the same actor (Peter takes himself for a walk): the relation is here termed reflexive. Similarly, the relation of knowing is called transitive or reflexive depending on whether or not the subjects between whom communication is established are distinct actors (for example, we can thus differentiate between knowledge about others and knowledge about oneself)" (1982: 351).
10. In narrative semiotics, discourses can be analyzed according to a sequence of four narrative domains—(1) manipulation or contract; (2) competence; (3) performance; and (4) sanction—each characterized by specific actantial positions. Every domain of this "narrative schema" of analysis presupposes the preceding one(s), but does not necessarily imply the successive ones, and more domains can simultaneously occur within the same situation—as when a *persuasive action* connected to the "manipulation" domain elicits an *interpretive action* from another actant related to the "sanction" domain. In our specific case, the gaze from the tower pertains to a semiotics of "sanction," which reorganizes and resemantizes the other three previous domains of semiotic experience developed during the pilgrimage. For the narrative schema and some of its possible applications, see Jean-Marie Floch (2001).
11. The "contested" character of pilgrimage has been influentially explored in John Eade and Michael Sallnow (1991), although there have been later critiques and reassessments (Coleman 2002). The social dynamics of class, power, and elite status in neighborhood Tokyo have instead been investigated at length in Bestor (1989).

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