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Itako on screen: the use of visual ethnography for understanding how these Japanese shamans are adapting to social change

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on my fieldwork with Itako shamans in the north-eastern part of Japan. The progressive modernisation of Japan at the expense of rural areas has also affected Tohoku, resulting in the ageing of the social fabric of its communities. Within this context, this article focusses on traditional and established activities practised by the blind female Itako shamans, who are going through a process of adaptation. Therefore, the article is concerned with this process and, in particular, on the methodology applied before and during my fieldwork experience of spending time, observing, having conversations, and filming these women in their everyday life. In the attempt to understand and document these shamans, I consider the use of visual ethnographic methods for understanding the changing aspects and their implications on the life of these women. While doing this, I also considered their communities and the area in which they live. I analyse this process by blending different methodologies such as visual methodology and digital visual ethnography and the critical religion approach proposed by Fitzgerald (2000). In addition, the paper will describe how I applied this methodology to provide a fresh look at these women and their daily activity.

KEYWORDS

Itako, shamans, visual ethnography, Japan, critical religion, representation, Orientalism

* * *

Introduction

Shamanism is one of the most explored subjects in the fields of anthropology and religious studies. To witness this growing interest, it is enough to consider the number of publications on the topic of shamanism and neo-shamanic movements. Emerging shamanic traditions are also mushrooming in different places, including in the birthplace of the term itself, the core of the ex- Soviet Union (Humphrey 1999). More recently, as Winkelman (2013) has noticed, the phenomena is so widespread that the number of times the word "shaman" has been searched using Google surpasses 10 million times.

The debate on the nature, origin, and vocabulary used to define shamanism is very lively, as Wilson (2013) suggests, and the arena in which academics have confronted each other seems to be focused on a few topics concerning the nature – as ancestral religion or non-religion – of the phenomenon. However, compared with many scholars who approached the subject from a religious studies or anthropological perspective, my interest in the argument developed from Asian studies. This different starting point has influenced my understanding of shamanism, as well as the considerations regarding the use of diverse approaches, not strictly religious – in a European Christian acceptation of the word – for the study of shamanism. Therefore, I have chosen to experiment with two different methods: a critical approach to the study of religion, and the visual ethnographic method that will be illustrate later on in the article.

The Itako of Japan have been categorised as 'shamans' in existing scholarship (Blacker 1986, Raveri 1984), which has its own problems. Shamanism was identified as a pre-existing form of religion by Eliade (1964) and in doing so certain phenomena and similar practitioners were often described using a vocabulary which referred to a European Christian tradition. Wilson (2013) extensively describes the academic debate around the utilisation of this concept. His critique focuses on the fact that the word shaman is often used to cover a number of different and diverse social actors who deal with a variety of services and performative activities. At the same time, it is used to categorise and exclude other similar activities, e.g. creating an arbitrary distinction between shaman and medium. Wilson suggests that the term shaman had become an academic construct used within a determined environment to name and categorise something which is much more varied and complex to pin under a single label. As Horii (2018) points out, it would be more appropriate to use an emic vocabulary as certainly capable of conveying the significate. In the case observed, the word *itako* itself is used for a specific type of medium, and it already contains a very specific significate. However, if we had to use a more generic word, Murakami (2017) uses the word *fusha* (巫者ふしゃ) for mediums. I have used the term 'shaman' to describe Itako women for

similar reasons as Wilson (2013), who uses the term for Spiritualist mediums deliberately in contrast to Eliade's hierarchical distinction between shamans and mediums. Also, 'shaman' in my vocabulary becomes a synonym that is recognisable and with some clear references that are commonly understood.

In the research I am presenting here, I have focused on a particular group of shamans, the Itako of the Tohoku region, in Japan. The group, which counted more than 50 persons little over than two decades ago, is now much reduced. The academic publications had described them as blind, alone, and marginal. Generally, they were portrayed in a room decorated with an altar, a set of objects placed on it for calling the *kami* (spirit), and the spirits of those people who passed away, ready to deliver the service demanded by customers who had arranged the meeting (Raveri 1984; Blacker 1986). This form of representing the Itako, and the scarcity of recent academic writing on them, set the premise of this research. These characteristics, which were described as a *sine qua non* feature for becoming an Itako, have since been going through a process of adaptation, while other stated characteristics were more likely to have been misinterpreted. In my research, I challenge such representations of these shamans, especially in light of the following considerations: religion, tradition, culture, and occupation – as the medium often describes their practice – modified over time (Harvey 2000). This generic reflection comes as a consequence of the fact that there is a "problematic enunciation of cultural differences", as Bhabha (1994, 79) would say, and the social fabric of the North of Japan has changed, and these women together with their business have gone through some adaptation in order to survive. For these reasons, I consider the Itako from a representational point of view, examining the influence academia has had in framing the discourse and providing the base of our way of seeing these women. To achieve this, I have borrowed from different academic fields, but before discussing the chosen methodology and how I applied it to my research, I would like to spend a few words on the terms that have shaped the Itako narration.

I begin here by addressing the problematic use of the term 'religion', especially because it is used in a context – Japan – outside of the Euro-Christian sphere of origin. It is a complex debate regarding the definition of this concept to the point that there is no concise explanation of the term. In fact, it is probably better to say that there is a plethora of authors providing explanations and categorisations (Smart 1989), but there is no clear definition that can explain all phenomena labelled as religion, religions, gods and spirits. As Fitzgerald (2000) notices in his seminal work *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, the common use made in academia of this term assumes an analytical function; thus, religion becomes a classificatory concept that deals with the events as if they were static objects rather than dynamic situations. Besides, the concept itself did not exist in many cultures and languages before the colonial expansions. As Fitzgerald looked closely

at Japan and India, he suggested we may as well substitute religion with other concepts such as system of values, or more generically as culture.

In particular, when analysing arguments linked to religion and kindred terms in other contexts, such as Japan, it is crucial to keep in mind the ideological role that religion has played during the European exploration and colonisation of Asia. For instance, it became an instrument to compare different cultures and to define the West in comparison with the East. Therefore, it is clear that the term carries a variety of functions not easily discernible, nor strictly related to the debate on god(s). Through classifications of religion, the West has moulded a number of attributes which have become so entrenched in the discourse on the East as to become descriptive categories of those geographical areas. For example, Said (1978) and other scholars have largely discussed the implication of Western scholarship in the creation of the East as the 'other', the Orient, and so forth. Similarly, in the study of religion (Goulet 2011; Stack, Goldenberg, and Fitzgerald, 2015), the gaze on these regions has been dominated by the European perspective. Authors such as Mignolo (2009) and Castro-Gomez (2007) addressed specifically the unidirectional production of information and knowledge, lamenting the lack of diverse points of views. Castro-Gomez calls it "the hubris of the zero point" (2009, 160) where with this term, he describes the relationship between the developed colonising nation, the colonised population, and the production of knowledge. In his observation, the coloniser becomes the observer and the producer of culture on the subjugated country, reason for using the expression zero-degree perspective as it highlights the undiscussed primate of the viewpoint of the coloniser.[1]

The discussion of the visual element can be introduced and illustrated using an example. In continuity with that expressed above, the concept shaped by Castro-Gomez resonates with the notion of oculocentrism outlined by Banks (2018). In fact, in his work the author debates the Euro-American prominent role in the production of visual culture and material. Banks (2018) and Jenks (1995) seem to suggest that the fact we live in a society which produces, consumes, and exports most of the visual material that surrounds us, represents a problem. In fact, we are "blinded to vision" (2018, 45), and as a consequence, unable to critically examine it. Like Castro-Gomez suggests, the Eurocentric cognitive superiority is problematic, as the use of religion for fostering an ideology.

When considering how this process developed in Japan, the analysis proposed by scholars such as Isomae (2012) and Liu (2013) are crucial, as they observed how a certain terminology was introduced in the country. The authors stress the historic relevance of the Treaty of Amity and

[1] In merit to the postcolonial theory discourse, there are other authors worth considering, such as Fanon (1968) or the production of the Subaltern Studies Collective Spivak (1988, 1996).

Commerce signed in 1858 between the U.S. and Japan, which saw the introduction in Japan of the concept of religion and *de facto* forced the nation to have to create a concept capable of conveying its significate. The treaty shows a very interesting point that reinforced the ideology and cultural hegemony. At the same time, it evidenced a certain presumption regarding the cross-cultural nature of the concept. As Josephson suggests "the original discovery of religions in different cultures was rooted in the assumption that each people had its own divine "revelation", or at least its own parallel to Christianity" (2012, 12).

Furthermore, the presumption of the existence of a divine in all cultures has become the foundation for the numerous studies about religions. In this case, religion functions as an analytical category to merely describe phenomena. The analysis legitimately raises questions as "could we not reconceptualize the study of religions as the study of cultures or ideologies […]" (Fitzgerald 2000, 73). Waardenburg (in McCutcheon 1995) echoed what Fitzgerald considers the possibility that behind this debate there are other aims connected to ideological purposes. It is reasonable to affirm that, as Fitzgerald suggests (2000; 1997), religion is invested with an ideological component. Fitzgerald's interpretation has been further developed recently by Horii (2018), who analysed the implications of using the categories of religion and secular to talk about Japan as they were incorporated into the local vocabulary, thus becoming part of that context. As he shows, this is not only problematic, as both concepts were introduced in Japan in the mid-nineteenth century, but they are misleading, creating a religious/secular dichotomy which did not exist in Japan prior to that date. Alternatively, he advocates for the use of emic categories, as they are capable of conveying a significant meaning linked to the actual context.

The analysis produced by scholars such as Fitzgerald, Horii, and colleagues who recognise the problematic utilisation of Western categories (Josephson 2011), brings to the surface questions on the extent the adoption of those concepts may have affected our understanding of the phenomena we call religions. In particular, when this and other questions emerge in a non-Christian context, such as the Itako of the North Tohoku, indeed leaves researchers interrogating themselves on how much it has been left out of the debate to fulfil ideological positions. The analysis, provided by Fitzgerald and colleagues, may find its complementary method in furthering this investigation. MacDougall (1997) states that unwritten methods are often the best approach to explain certain phenomena. With this comment, he refers to the capacity of ethnographic films to illustrate something, suggesting that the use of the image is as relevant as a written anthropological description. MacDougall calls this specific visual tool "illustrative ethnographic films" as "[they] make use of images either as data to be elucidated by means of a spoken commentary or as visual support for verbal statements" (1997, 413). This contribution is invaluable as it offers a methodological approach to the study of Itako that frees the

research from the use of the written language as a solo method for looking at this phenomenon.

With regard to this, Grimshaw (in Henley 2004) proposes this point based on her experience of the use of film in anthropology: films should not be considered an appendix to the discipline, but a tool for understanding how we experience life. As she argues "[…] the world is not primarily approached through language, explanation or generalisation; but through a re-embodiment of the self as the foundation for renewed engagement with everyday life" (ibid., 111). The re-embodiment effect mentioned by Grimshaw is the result of contextualised interviews in which film participants are asked questions about their life experience, and in this case, the film provides to the participant that opportunity to reflect on their relationship with themselves and their social environment. Though agreeing with Grimshaw, Henley believes in the value of a textual description accompanying the visual material, as he considers the tangential points between written anthropology and film. As in my experience, the film participants, such as in Grimshaw's case, re-experienced their life, and often this process raised questions or evaluations of their current situation, stimulating thought on possible future scenarios. Therefore, in my case, not only the critical approach to religion is fundamental to understand how these mediums have adapted their role and profession, but the use of filmmaking becomes a form of re-visiting participants' life experience, placing less emphasis on the use of written language as the sole tool for conveying the research.

A Mixed Approach for the Itako Study

The methodology I utilise during my research is based on a mix of techniques which aim at showing in the best possible manner the change Itako have gone through and what kind of reaction, if any, they produce in response to that change. The set of methods I have used during my fieldwork is comprised of two pivotal approaches: the critical religion approach, as proposed by Fitzgerald (2000), and the visual ethnographic method, which plays a crucial role in the collection and analyses of the qualitative data and interpretation of the footage collected. This latter method is complementary to the critical religion approach in visually providing material to demonstrate the state of change and possible adaptations.

The interdisciplinarity aspect that characterises the research is pivotal for dealing with what is in my opinion an issue of representation. Thus, I began my work by considering the Western gaze on these women, beginning with an analysis of the theoretical representation of them, to move then into the images produced to represent them, concluding with the visual ethnographic work I created. Thus, my decision to commence with the critical religion approach is functional to the necessity of considering how scholars have theorised about these Itako mediums and their tradition.

Since the Itako are generally located in the realm of 'religion', I decided to analyse the use of the term, first in a more general context, and subsequently in the case of the Itako of North Japan. In fact, I reckon that the use of the term has determined how they have been perceived by, not only the West, but Japanese audiences too. Fitzgerald's critical approach, as a theoretical basis for exploring available written material, has been crucial when considering 'religion' and terms often accompanying this concept such as secular, superstition, or tradition. This method looks at the ideological use of the term by following its historical evolution and application, including the introduction of these concepts in geographical areas where they did not exist before the intervention of European powers, such as in Japan. To some extent, this method and the observations emerged during the fieldwork, were instrumental in answering some of the questions on the Western gaze or in providing further information which highlighted different ways of portraying the Itako and their tradition. I will come back to this point later in the article.

A Few Crucial Questions for my Methodological Approach

The genuine attention to understand the evolution of the social activity and role of the Itako made me question how they have adapted to a fast-evolving society. The methodology utilised emerged after taking into consideration the available material on Itako which had scarcely been updated. I discovered that the publications available became very sporadic from the beginning of the 2000s, a factor that may have been due to the progressive decline of Itako still working. In addition, Eliade (1964) and others following him have categorised shamanism and shamans as examples of primordial religions, feeding a debate that, similarly to the one on religion, is equally problematic, but I will return to this later.

In many ways, the conceptualisation of shamans has influenced the way we view and understand these cultural phenomena and at times it may have prevented us from considering them in other terms. Similarly, the context in which Itako have been placed is in the realm of religious studies with an emphasis on the spiritual experience and has been ultimately relegated to that world. My research was, to some extent, implemented on these very points, which in my opinion are related to representation or as Berger (1972) would put it "ways of seeing". Therefore, some of the questions I asked myself: was it possible to consider these mediums in other terms? Has this condition prevented us to look at them as socio-cultural agents? And if so, how are they adapting to a changing society? Being aware of positions such as Hastrup's stance (1992) on the potentially uninteresting results achieved when tracing changes of traditions and agreeing that vis-à-vis it may be a sterile work, the research took a different approached and began with the descriptors scholars used to describe religion (Smart 1989). I did it to highlight a few problems that emerge when placing figures like the Itako under the religion label; furthermore, the attributes used for narrating

this phenomenon are problematic and limit our capacity to understand their role.

In light of these considerations, the methodology adopted has its foundation in two major practices of analysis and production of data (in Banks' use of the term, 2018), and began by exploring the critical religion approach as proposed by Fitzgerald (2000) for a critical analysis of the concept of religion. In addition, I considered the visual material produced by academics, such as the photos that often accompanied the written material. I must point this out as there are different styles of visual analysis "[those] that deal with the analysis of pre-existing imaginaries, and those that create the images and then subsequently analyse (or at least present) them" (Banks 2018). Having said this, I also engaged with the production of images followed by their analysis, in what could be defined a visual ethnographic method (Pink 2013).

A Critical Approach to Religion

As mentioned, one of the first crucial points this work focused on was the language used. Specifically, I concentrated on the use of the term religion in relation to the Itako. However, the problematic character of the terminology used is only the tip of the iceberg. Fitzgerald (1997) suggests that the term changes its connotation in different academic contexts. Therefore, some use it in a theological-metaphysical discourse, while other in a non-theological form. In particular the latter case is the one that many scholars – with the exception of those inclined to agree with Eliade on the theory that shamanism is an ancestral religion - have applied when studying Itako. According to Fitzgerald, within religion departments there are nuances also in the use of the non-theological connotation of the term 'religion'. For example, "[some scholars] use it to mean something like 'transactions with supreme being', which can have a soteriological nuance but can also refer to a supernatural technology for solving this-worldly problems" (ibid., 92). This is not only pertinent but describes very well the approach applied to the study of Itako as well as many other similar figures (see the Yuta of the Ryukyu Islands). In fact, Fitzgerald continues by clearly asserting that the result is that the "analytical gravity has in fact shifted from the transcendental to human institutions, from gods to values" (ibid., 92). It is clear that culture is the key concept we spent time debating rather than religion. The function attributed to religion becomes superfluous, as it becomes a label which does not add much to the understanding of what we observe, as such, and naming it religion may be an "ideology or culture understood as institutionalized values" (ibid., 93). Fitzgerald's observation gives space for further debates on the necessity of the use of a concept resembling more an empty container, a categorizing tool for boxing in the right place objects generically named *religions*. It is clear that the use of religion for Itako becomes misleading.

Another problematic aspect of the use of the term religion in the Japanese context is represented by the introduction and subsequent creation of the concept[2] that did not exist before the end of the nineteenth century in that language. A number of authors (Horii 2018; Isomae 2014; Josephson 2012) evidence the peculiar situation created with the introduction of the word religion in Japan, beginning with considerations of the historic moment and the social context in which religion appeared on official documents. Horii (2018), in fact, states that the religious and secular dichotomy did not exist in Japan before the Meiji restoration. Isomae (2014) suggests that the introduction of a certain terminology in Japan has geopolitical foundations. The contact with European colonial powers, and consequently with the U.S., was the 'breaking point'. Isomae explains that the distinction between religion and secular became an instrument in the hands of colonising powers to discern communities by their level of civilisation. While a civilised nation embodied qualities such as rationality and logic, an uncivilised nation was characterised by irrational and superstitious behaviours. Asian and African populations showed traits of irrationality, therefore, if they aimed at entering the group of modern and rational nations something had to change. The hierarchical structure that took shape was composed of civilised nations that sat at the top, the semi-civilised – Japan was among these – in the middle, and the uncivilised ones were located on the bottom of the scale. In order to achieve the top of the pyramid, the semi-civilised and the uncivilised nations had to embrace the civilised group mindset; thus, by abandoning their 'superstition' they would have been able to move towards the rational and the secular. Japan in this regard was halfway there, provided that it allowed more secular initiatives in its territory.

Therefore, the treaties and agreements of the late nineteenth century between Japan and other nations had an impact on societies. As mentioned, what emerged was the need to create a word that mimicked the meaning of religion – *shukyo* – to comply with those international treaties which asked for granting protection of religious expression to foreigners living in Japan. There are a number of critical aspects: the idea that certain concepts are 'naturally' part of all societies, and the connotation value that comes attached to a term. In fact, it is crucial to remember that the term religion in contraposition with secular acquired a negative connotation. As I stated, it was associated with superstition and irrationality. This point made me think about the potential negative impact that this discourse may have had on these women, who have been labelled irrational as their activities rely on

[2] Liu suggest that term *shūkyō* (宗教) was introduced to translate the word religion which was brought into the discourse by the US Government through the 1858 Treaty of Amity and Commerce. The term was created by combining two Sino-Japanese characters which meaning were different form the etymology of the word religion, and which could be translated as *"teaching from/about the ancestor"*. As the author recalls " the generative effect of the emerging terminology translating "religion" [evolved] both in inventing Japanese "religion" and in controlling and performing it" (2015:143).

tradition and superstition. This idea emerged and was corroborated also during my fieldwork, which I mention later.

A visual ethnography of the Itako

Banks suggests that we should make a distinction in visual analysis between "those forms or style (…) that deal with the analysis of pre-existing images, and those that create the images and then subsequently analyse (or at least) present them" (2018, 42). The former type is connected to media studies linked to sociology and anthropology, while the latter is usually associated with fieldwork research. I borrowed this very simple but clear distinction that the author makes to introduce my approach to the visual methodology I applied while working on this research. Complementary to the critical religion approach as theorised by Fitzgerald, I applied a second set of methods founded on visual anthropology methodology. To be more specific, I used a combination of visual ethnographic method, digital visual ethnography, and the observational method.

The main reason for using this methodology is in response to the relationship established between academics, the use of the term religion, and the analytical function with whom the term has been used to categorise diverse realities and for talking about phenomena such as the Itako. This tendency has had consequences not only in the manner of talking about certain realities, but also on the form we visually represent them. For this reason, I began by briefly exploring some pre-existing pictures of these mediums by employing the critical religion approach. For example, the image taken by Blacker (1986) and published in her famous book *The Catalpa Bow,* shows an Itako performing a *kuchiyose* (summoning the spirit of a death) at a private house. The photography in itself does not constitutes a problem. However, the medium may convey a limited amount of information as it only shows a portion of the relevance of the activity of these women. Crang and Cook (2007) consider that during the act of producing photographs, the end product is loaded with "people's ideas of what should (not) be recorded, how it should (not) be shown" (2007,109), highlighting a certain degree of social normative influencing the choice made by the person behind the camera. As the authors further consideration suggests "photographs (…) appear remarkably standardised within cultures" (ibid., 109). Since the photographs taken by academics that I observed, had either representing Itako mono-dimensional – 'shamanising' in their rooms - or as liminal creatures, I often had the feeling that they had a simple illustrative function or "filler", as Ruby would suggest: "illustrative materials-to describe, to amplify, to fill in details, and to provide a "feeling" for an object or situation" (1975, 104). I will come back to the production of images in researches that use visual ethnographic methods in the following section.[3]

[3] As part of the debate on use of photography and audience perception, consider Backer (1986) and Mitchell (1984).

While all this visual material is very relevant and helpful for my present study, I felt that my mind's eye was trying to picture these mediums outside their rooms, or their customers' rooms, all set up for the *kuchiyose*, and imagining these women in other contexts, not necessarily related to that religious aspect in which they seemed to be confined. Therefore, if the analysis I do with the critical religion approach is fundamental for understanding how Itako have been positioned, the use of visual ethnography and digital visual ethnography as proposed by Pink (2013) complements and complete the methodology, and provide a useful approach to show how these women could be something other than a lady 'shamanising' in a room. Through the visual ethnographic approach, I could rephrase this aspect and highlight other crucial angles such as how they have adapted to preserve the tradition, or the technologies they are putting in place to maintain their livelihood and profession.
Pink explains the visual ethnographic method as

> (…) a practice that attends to the visual elements of the world that we inhabit in terms of their inseparability from other elements of sensory experience, and to visual and digital media in relation to how we might use them to produce way of knowing (…). (2013, 47)

The array of definitions that academics have provided to try to explain and circumscribe this research methods, are diverse. When I began my research, I organised my work around an initial moment during which I collected data, information, and contacts that I used for the second stage, the fieldwork. Interestingly, as Pink (2013) also notices, the first part of the investigation tends now days to be done on digital devices, or through the use of digital devices such as cameras and video cameras. The digital information collected is of a different nature, and do not relate necessarily to academic productions as I considered articles, videos, blogs, or digital material which witnessed the presence of these women online and in the physical world. During this phase, I found and contacted all those people I wished to interview in my fieldwork; I emailed archives that had photographs and videos previously produced, and I also received disinterested or negative replies to my requests for more interviews. I was interested in talking to people close to the Itako as well. The point is that, as Steinmetz (1992) suggests, all these voices provide an alternative perspective to the official narratives. I ultimately have to say that despite the excitement I felt at the dawn of my fieldwork, I managed to get in touch with the Itako only through third parties. In fact, most of these women were quite mature and not technologically savvy. However, over the course of the years I have spent with them, things began to change, but I will return to this point later.

The interviews, most of which were filmed, were organised in locations familiar to the interviewees. As Heider (2006) noted, the best observational point for an ethnographer who wish to understand people, is to spend time

with the participants in their environment. In my case, most of the time I spent with the Itako was in their homes, indoor. However, I spent a fair amount of time, observing them in the public environment of the temples where they go during the July *matsuri,* concentrating specially on the performative aspect of their relationship with customers. The domestic and peaceful interior of their homes was the place where they were more comfortable, not only for a personal choice, but as they told me their communities expect them to be at home as it is their working space. This approach worked well with a few interviewees, especially Itako, while for other participants I had to adapt and create a different modality which I called 'casual interviews and focus group in convivial circumstances'. The circumstances of this typology of interviews were the result of word of mouth as one of my interviewees introduced me to other local people who I wished to include in my research. In this case, the group would have begun chatting, often in response to a question I had asked. The structure of the interviews with the group were very fluid and natural. Despite the presence of the camera, the Itako who participated seemed very relaxed. I reckon that previous meetings with them, in which I introduced my research project, as well as previous recorded experiences with local broadcast outlets or similar, had helped.

Capturing Adaptation with Visual Ethnography

As MacDougall (1997, 292) suggests, a number of phenomena could be better "accessible only by non-verbal means" makes the use of visual ethnography a relevant and complementary method to the traditional descriptive one. MacDougall's statement together with Sarah Pink's approach to visual ethnography embody the foundation of this work. Pink (2013) notices that critical visual ethnography is extremely relevant when trying to consider the visual re-representation of a subject in a social context. The author takes as an example a known event, such as the Superbowl, and compares the images produced by sponsors and organisers, versus those images taken by a researcher. Though she refers mainly to the use of photography, I applied the same approach while filming during my fieldwork. In fact, as I suggested above, the visual material available on the Itako, excepting a rare example, was portraying them secluded from the communities they served. While my filmic work done with the Itako does not necessarily invalidate former films, it aims to provide a less exotic and more contemporary image of them as businesswomen. For example, the relationship these women have with customers, family, or technology in the case of one of them, it becomes part of the outreach activities for finding customers (and adapting to new forms of promoting freelancing activities). The result obtained is a re-representation of the Itako in relation to customers, society, and technology, in antithesis with most of the existing images of a lonely woman sitting in a room "shamanising".

Of course, I did consider that developing research which had a foot in religious studies and one in film studies may present a number of risks. Pauwels advises (in Pink 2006) to be cautious when dealing with interdisciplinarity as it is a minefield where the risk of dilettantism by making approximations is always present. Despite feeling called into question by his statement, I cannot ignore that this research was conceived since the beginning as a critical analysis on the use of a determined terminology and as collateral the affected fields as our way of seeing and representing things around us. The aura of sacrality and exotic mystery surfacing in those photographs is deliberately avoided in the video material produced during my fieldwork, as these women themselves were not interested in communicating their tradition in that way.

The kind of work I am producing with the use of film considers what Banks calls "the internal narrative" and "the external narrative" of the image. Where the internal is the story conveyed by the image and the external is "the social context that produced the image, and the social relations within which the image is embedded at any moment of viewing" (Banks, 2001, 11). In fact, photos and films aim to provide a more balanced representation of the participants. The use of imagery, however, does not eliminate the use of words. In fact, the aim of the research is to produce what Mitchell (2011) calls a composite video: the written part is complementary to the video, and the filmic part should come out part of that analogic information. As Mitchell says the critical part is "producing something that allows for the various layers of work to come together as a composite" (ibid., 161). Her recommendation is useful when considering rituals such as the *kuchiyose* in a digital environment. The use of the web is not only a method of research but becomes a tool for disclosing how their business is changing. It is evident that when the Itako began to perform it in a digital format, the ritual is no longer as we know it: the internet is the medium and the physical presence of the customer is not required, modifying that personal relation previously established between the parties. In this case, the film can provide a layer of the story, integrated with a written section to provide a better picture of this interesting adaptation of an Itako practice to complete the composite depiction.

I am aware of the long-standing debate on the use of visual ethnography applied to academic research, especially when it entails producing an ethnographic film that accompanies the written research (Ruby 1975). Often authors have suggested that the two parts should be more than complementary, while others have refused to provide a definition (Heider 2006, Banks 2001, Pink 2014). To dissipate further issues, I have adopted Heider's instance (2006) who, in his seminal work on ethnographic films, suggests that "a productive semantic approach should not focus on the process of identifying a single term, but should 'look for the various attributes, or dimensions, that affect ethnographicness in film'" (Odorico 2010, 65). In this case, ethnographicness may be translated as attributes or features of the film that qualifies the film as an ethnographic film. The film,

in my case, can capture and embody those elements which make it an ethnographic piece, and at the same time a document of the change. Every time the Itako performs in public or private places they re-propose and reconstruct a narrative they have learnt during their training, and at the same time they perform a version which has been adapted to the current times. Therefore, the use of still images and film in particular, is capable of capturing a number of ethnographic elements that complete a research as Mitchell suggested.

Conclusion

In this article I have illustrated my methodology and how I applied it for a new approach to the study of Itako. This study, which aims to consider how they are adapting to social change, makes use of two distinct approaches: a critical religion approach, and the visual ethnographic methodology.

The critical religion approach as proposed by Fitzgerald (2000) provides a critical tool for analysing not only a method for understanding the extent of the problematic use of the term religion, but it also highlights the ideology behind its application. Such terminology used in different contexts has had consequences, to the point of influencing cultural changes, as in Japan. The ideological function reflected in the European use of the term was well demonstrated by other authors, too, such as Castro-Gomez who focused on power dynamics based on colonialism and dominating cultures. The analysis produced after considering the use of religion for describing the Itako has shown a problem related to the representation of these women, which has been considered thorough the implementation of the visual ethnographic methodology. The methodology will provide a re-representation of this Japanese figure, which will complement the result produced with the critical approach, and the ethnographic observation made during the fieldwork. The ethnographicness of the film is therefore, based on a number of features that include both methods applied during the research. The result should highlight and challenge the representation of this and similar figures who have been described using categories such as religion, shaman, and other non-emic terms. In conclusion, the contributions provided by the critical analysis and ethnographic work evidences a number of interesting variations to the theme that previous scholars described to be the norm for the Itako of Tohoku.

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