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Aum Shinrikyo guru Shoko Asahara and six other cult members hanged for mass murders

BY REIJI YOSHIDA AND SAKURA MURAKAMI

Japan Times (07.07.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2tY6lSe> - Shoko Asahara, founder of the doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyo and mastermind behind the deadly 1995 nerve gas attack in the Tokyo subway system — and a number of other horrific crimes in the 1980s and '90s — was executed on Friday, Justice Minister Yoko Kamikawa confirmed.

She also confirmed that six other condemned Aum members — Tomomasa Nakagawa, 55, Kiyohide Hayakawa, 68, Yoshihiro Inoue, 48, Masami Tsuchiya, 53, Seiichi Endo, 58, and Tomomitsu Niimi, 54 — were also executed.

In total, Asahara, 63, whose real name was Chizuo Matsumoto, was found guilty for his role in 13 crimes that led to the deaths of 27 people, a figure that later was increased to 29. In the Tokyo subway attack, 13 people were killed and more than 6,000 injured.

The hanging of Asahara has in some ways closed the curtain on the shocking crimes and dramatic events staged by Aum. But it also leaves several critical questions unanswered, because even during his trial, Asahara never explained the actual motivations for the crimes.

In particular, the 1995 sarin attack in Tokyo is remembered as a watershed event that deeply damaged a long-held sense of security felt by many in postwar Japan.

Kamikawa deflected questions about the details of the executions, such as the reason for choosing the seven from among others also on death row or the timing. She said she couldn't comment on "the decisions regarding individual cases" because her statements may "disturb the peace of mind" of those on death row.

She cited "the pain and suffering of the victims and their families" and her belief that "the members' death penalties were finalized after plenty of deliberation in court" as reasons for ordering the executions.

Although Kamikawa declined to specify whether any of those who were executed were appealing their sentences, some media reports have said that at least Inoue had sought a retrial. Those seeking a retrial are usually not executed.

After the executions were reported, residents near the prisons where the inmates had been detained expressed relief and renewed anger. "They deserve executions. Actually, I

think they should have been hanged much earlier” an 84-year-old man said in front of the Tokyo Detention House in Katsushika Ward, where Asahara had been detained.

A woman in Osaka, who was walking past the Osaka Detention House in the city’s Miyakojima Ward — where two of the executed inmates had been detained — expressed a voice of concern.

“Now with the executions, I’m worried (Asahara’s) remaining followers could start doing something terrible,” she said.

Authorities said they were on alert for any actions by followers of the cult’s splinter groups.

The death penalty for the guru was first handed down by the Tokyo District Court in February 2004 and finalized by the Supreme Court in September 2006.

The crimes he was convicted of also include the murders of lawyer Tsutsumi Sakamoto, his wife, and their 1-year-old son in November 1989, as well as another sarin gas attack in Matsumoto, Nagano Prefecture, in June 1994. That attack killed eight and left about 600 injured.

Asahara’s execution was delayed while the lengthy court proceedings involving other key Aum followers accused of being complicit in the crimes played out. The court saga concluded on Jan. 25 of this year.

In addition to Asahara, 191 Aum members were indicted over a number of criminal acts — including murders, attempted murders, abductions and the production of deadly nerve gases and illegal automatic rifles. Twelve had their death penalty sentences finalized.

Over the past 10 years, the guru reportedly turned down all requests from outside the prison for a meeting, even from family members. During the trials and interviews with his lawyers, Asahara often remained silent or uttered words that no one could clearly understand. The difficulty in communicating with him prompted his counsel to claim that he was not mentally competent to stand trial.

In 2006, the Supreme Court, however, rejected a special appeal and finalized the death sentence. The court ruled that Asahara was legally sane and thus could be held responsible for his actions.

Asahara, born in 1955 in what is now the city of Yatsushiro, Kumamoto Prefecture, formed the predecessor of Aum Shinrikyo in 1984.

By around October 1988, the number of lay followers surged to between 3,000 and 4,000 and that of live-in followers was estimated at between 100 and 200.

In that period, the cult had head offices in Tokyo and Kamikuishiki, a village in Yamanashi Prefecture. It also had branch offices in Osaka, Fukuoka, Nagoya, Sapporo, New York and Russia.

In the vast compound in Kamikuishiki at the foot of Mount Fuji, Aum Shinrikyo, under the instruction of Asahara, built and operated a chemical plant to mass-produce sarin and another to assemble illegal automatic rifles.

The doomsday cult successfully recruited a number of highly educated young people, including doctors and scientists, some of whom took part in the crimes — a fact that particularly shocked the Japanese public.

Many Aum members were featured on live TV shows, openly defending the group. The media exposure helped solidify the group's lasting impact on the public's collective consciousness.

Asahara claimed that Armageddon was inevitable and justified the murders of certain people by insisting they would send their souls to a heavenly world, according to court transcripts.

During a hearing in June 2001, Nakagawa, a former doctor who played a key role in the cult's production of sarin gas, begged his guru to explain what he was actually thinking when he instructed followers to commit illegal, violent acts.

In response, Asahara, with his eyes closed, just mumbled words no one could understand, according to media reports.

"I didn't enter the priesthood (of Aum Shinrikyo) to produce sarin or choke someone's neck," Nakagawa tearfully said during the hearing.

"Please explain your ideas to the people who believed in you," Nakagawa recalled saying in vain.

Nakagawa himself was on death row for the roles he played in the production of sarin gas and the 1989 murders of the Sakamoto family.

U.N. warns Japan against hanging Aum cult figures currently seeking retrial

Japan Times (28.03.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2pPAeBz> - The U.N. Human Rights Office has called into question Japan's possible execution of Aum Shinrikyo cult figures on death row who are seeking a retrial.

"We do note that some of the defendants in this case are reportedly requesting a retrial," Ravina Shamdasani, spokeswoman for the office, said in a written interview with Kyodo News.

"Execution of individuals with appeals or other proceedings still pending is against the U.N. Safeguards Guaranteeing Protection of the Rights of Those Facing the Death Penalty," she said.

Death sentences have been finalized for 13 members of the cult, including Aum founder Shoko Asahara, 63, who masterminded the 1995 sarin nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway system that killed 13 people and left over 6,000 people ill.

Earlier this month, the Justice Ministry transferred seven of the 13 on death row from the Tokyo detention center to other facilities across the country, likely bringing them a step closer to execution.

Japan has long tended to avoid executing death-row inmates while their retrial pleas were pending, but last year then-Justice Minister Katsutoshi Kaneda said such a plea does not impede an execution.

All 13 inmates sentenced to death for crimes committed while members of the doomsday cult, including Asahara, whose real name is Chizuo Matsumoto, had been housed in the Tokyo detention facility. Asahara remains in the facility, government sources said earlier.

The U.N. safeguards, adopted in 1984, partly stipulate that capital punishment “shall not be carried out pending any appeal or other recourse procedure or other proceeding relating to pardon or commutation of the sentence.”

“The U.N. Human Rights Office advocates for full abolition of the death penalty, and we have in our discussions with the Japanese government urged them to consider abolition,” the spokeswoman said.

Tokyo residents protest against doomsday cult’s successor group

Renamed Aum Shinrikyo group target of angry demonstration to mark anniversary of subway sarin gas attack

South China Morning Post (24.03.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2GuWk6O> - More than 200 people living near a Tokyo base of the main successor to the Aum Shinrikyo cult took to the streets on Saturday demanding the group disbands, with the execution of its guru and a number of former disciples seemingly imminent.

The residents marched around the Adachi Ward compound owned by Aleph, led by Adachi Mayor Yayoi Kondo who held a banner saying, “Absolutely against Aum.”

The demonstration was planned to coincide with the recent 23rd anniversary of the 1995 sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway system that killed 13 people and injured over 6,200, the worst of several attacks and crimes carried out by Aum followers.

Aum renamed itself Aleph in 2000 and two additional splinter groups formed. The Public Security Intelligence Agency continued to monitor the groups, believing they are still under the influence of Aum founder Shoko Asahara who is on death row along with 12 of his former disciples.

Residents of Kawaguchi, a Saitama Prefecture city adjoining Adachi Ward, and some from Tokyo’s Setagaya Ward where a facility of one of the splinter groups is located, joined Saturday’s demonstration.

According to the agency, the three groups have 1,650 followers in Japan, with 1,470 of them Aleph members.

The 13 death row inmates could be hanged anytime as the Aum-related trials over a series of crimes that left 29 people dead concluded in January.

“I’m worried what could happen after the executions,” said Hisashi Mizukami, who represents a group of Adachi residents protesting Aleph. “We will remain vigilant.”

1995 Aum sarin attack on Tokyo subway still haunts, leaving questions unanswered

By Alex Martin

Japan Times (19.03.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2ugoTjy> - Hitoshi Jin describes his younger brother spending the booming 1980s "cult surfing," exploring what new religions had to offer to fill the gaping spiritual void left by a childhood scarred by an abusive father.

Like others seeking refuge from the rampant materialism of the era, he appeared to find a form of salvation in the Buddhist-Hindu influenced teachings espoused in what was then a yoga-training circle run by a long-haired, bearded former acupuncturist called Shoko Asahara.

Jin, a Buddhist priest, recalls his brother showing him a periodical published by the group claiming its guru could levitate. He brushed it aside as nonsense.

"I should have listened to him more carefully," he said.

Jin's brother was found dead at the age of 27 in an apparent suicide from inert gas asphyxiation. Among the pile of occult books and magazines found in his room were those written by Asahara, who the following year orchestrated the worst terrorist attack in modern Japanese history.

It's unclear to what extent Jin's brother was involved in Aum Shinrikyo, the doomsday cult responsible for staging the March 20, 1995, sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway system that left 13 dead and injured around 6,300 people.

During the final years of his troubled life, Jin's brother had experimented with various prescription drugs and other substances to induce an altered state of consciousness — to "see Buddha." Members of the cult would later testify that Aum resorted to numerous tactics to instill its doctrine in its ranks, including the use of LSD and other hallucinogens.

But for Jin, 57, one thing is certain.

"Despite being a man of religion, I couldn't save my brother," he said.

Jin is among those whose lives have been confounded by the cult that burst onto the national stage 23 years ago, with an act of terror that crippled postwar Japan's long-held sense of security and left policymakers, media, academics and counterterrorism agencies scrambling to make sense of the new dangers posed by religious extremism.

The series of crimes committed by the group, which culminated in the toxic nerve gas attack during the morning rush hour, also launched an unprecedentedly long and complicated judicial process that finally wrapped up this January, paving the way for the execution of Asahara — whose real name is Chizuo Matsumoto — and 12 other disciples on death row. Speculation is rife that they could be hanged before the Heisei Era draws to an end with the abdication of Emperor Akihito in April 2019.

For those who were involved with the cult, however, an enigma remains.

Asahara visits Orié Miyama in her dreams. Not often, only occasionally, and usually during stretches when she hasn't been thinking about the cult she joined in 1986.

Miyama, a pseudonym she uses to protect her privacy when speaking to the media, was a graphic designer when she discovered the cult through one of Asahara's books. She

was among the droves of young Japanese — many from wealthy, well-educated backgrounds — sickened and alienated by the consumerist ethos of the time that was fueled by the bubble economy. She found peace in the teachings and a sense of spiritual connection with Aum followers, and especially, toward its charismatic guru.

Miyama became a “shukke,” a full-time devotee living in the cult’s compounds. She was among the 25 Aum members — including Asahara — who ran in a failed 1990 Diet election bid considered one of the turning points for the sect, when paranoia and rhetoric of Armageddon intensified within its top circle.

Miyama claims she was unaware of the criminal activities in which Aum was engaged, including the 1989 murders of lawyer Tsutsumi Sakamoto and his family and the 1994 sarin attack in Matsumoto, Nagano Prefecture, that left eight dead and around 600 injured. “I thought I would be with the group until I die,” she said.

That changed in 1995, when the subway gassing triggered massive police raids and arrests of Aum members — who by then had grown to over 11,000 with branches in Russia and other countries — igniting a media firestorm and nationwide condemnation.

Miyama felt compelled to step away from the confusion engulfing the organization, and in June that year left with fellow member and soon-to-be husband Tekenori Hayasaka. The two would spend the next year traveling in Thailand, India and Nepal, listening to radio broadcasts from time to time to stay tuned with the ongoing police investigation that was unraveling the extent of Aum’s heinous deeds. “We were unsure whether Aum was really responsible for all this, but were convinced when members began testifying,” Miyama, 57, said.

After returning to Japan in 1996, they settled in Kanagawa Prefecture — where they still live — hiding their involvement in the cult and working part-time jobs. They monitored Aum-related news and on several occasions observed the trials of Asahara, who would be found guilty for his roles in 13 crimes that took a total of 27 lives. As many as 191 other Aum members were also charged with multiple criminal counts including murders, attempted murders, abductions, and production of nerve gas and automatic rifles.

Court proceedings unveiled how the cult’s inner circle engaged in escalating levels of violence and illegal activity — beginning with the disposal of the body of a member alleged to have been killed accidentally, then progressing to attacks against individuals perceived as antagonistic toward the cult, and finally, mass murder as a means to bring about the apocalypse.

“But we can’t help feeling that the image of Aum painted in court was different from what we had experienced,” said Hayasaka, who joined Aum in 1989.

The self-employed 54-year-old, who also goes by an alias, said the widely held notion of the cult being a dangerous army of mind-controlled zealots assembling around a half-blind, babbling madman seem far removed from the mostly calm, stoic lifestyle rank-and-file members like himself experienced during much of the cult’s existence.

Hayasaka said he wouldn’t have taken part in the cult’s murderous campaigns if he had been asked to. Miyama agrees, and wishes the deadly mess never happened. Both have distanced themselves from the splinter groups that emerged after Aum broke apart.

