

Article

Critical Visual Religion Approach: When Ethnographic Filmmaking Blends with the Critical Approach to Religion, a Japanese Case Study

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Abstract: This article draws on the research and practice developed during my doctorate and fieldwork in Japan. In this work, I consider the implication of using the critical religion approach and the visual ethnographic methodology for critically investigating what is commonly labelled as religion and its representation as observed in Japan with particular reference to my fieldwork in Tohoku. I begin by reviewing the concept of religion in Japan, in particular the character of the idea and the use of the critical religion approach. I continue with an analysis of ethnographic filmmaking, focusing on cases that inspired my visual ethnographic filmic approach. I discuss how the two methods informed each other, creating a visual ethnographic technique founded on the critical religion approach as well as sensory, participatory and creative ethnographic filmmaking methods I developed and applied to my documentary, *Tohoku Monogatari—A Story from the Northeast of Japan*. With this article, I contend the necessity of a critical approach to the representation of religions which could be achieved with what I named the critical visual religion approach.

Keywords: critical religion approach; visual ethnography; Japan; *Itako*; critical visual religion approach



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1. Introduction

This article takes inspiration from the outcome of my research, in particular on the considerations and fieldwork time spent in Japan studying how *Itako* mediums have been coping with societal changes that have inevitably affected their work. My encounter with what is commonly called religion(s) was troublesome as I had issues with the vague definitions of the term as well as the attitude towards the study of the discipline, especially in contexts other than Europe or America, such as Japan. In brief, this is the reason for adopting the critical religion approach as theorised by a number of scholars that have become my guides in analysing the concept in Japan and experimenting with it, transposing it to visual ethnographic studies. However, I want to unfold how I used the critical religion approach for my research and ethnographic documentary in Japan.

Over the past decades, the concept of religion has been criticised by a number of scholars that found the use of the term increasingly problematic as a category capable of describing and boxing in phenomena so different from each other. In particular, the use of this term has proven difficult for analysing phenomena in non-European contexts such as Japan. This term—religion—with its roots in the Christian tradition, for centuries, has been applied to delineate and contour a plurality of aspects. The nineteenth-century European moving into Asia with the intent of colonising it employed it to name phenomena very different from each other. In clear contrast to what Europeans perceived to be the marginal role of religion in their homeland, Asian countries were, on the contrary, seen as being dominated by archaic and superstitious traditions. Masuzawa (2005) clearly introduces the debate on the representation of Asian societies as dominated by superstitions. In particular, she points to an emerging branch of studies dedicated to the study of the East, Orientalism. This concept, which encompassed the narrow geographical designation of the area east of Europe, spanned from the north of Africa to the coast of Japan. The zealous

Orientalist scholars had collected, translated and catalogued material from across the continents, contributing to the fortune of this new discipline and the creation of a bulk of knowledge that encompassed the indigenous authorities' cognisance. Sadly, as the scholar remarks, "the non-European nations—which by the end of the nineteenth century had largely come under direct European colonial control (in the case of India and Egypt) or under its overwhelming influence and intervention (as was the case in China and Japan)—no longer seemed to possess the power and the prerogative to represent their own legacy apart from this scholarship" (Masuzawa 2005, p. 17). This progressed in two directions. On one side, we noticed the formation of objectively separated and distinct traditions that formed the corpus of the Oriental religions; on the other, the inability of these societies to express and develop their own views about indigenous cultures. This long preamble is instrumental in delineating the contour of what, in my opinion, is the foundation of the critical religion approach. The critique is not in this sense a criticism of the use of the category of religion only. Still, it extends to a legacy that developed during colonial time, whose attitude to the "other" has affected various fields, from cultural production to its representation. As Horii suggests, "critical religion examines the construction of the legitimacy around the use of the category 'religion' and the consequences of such use" (Horii 2020, p. 2). In my view, critical religion springs from the aforementioned discourse, the reason for considering it an essential method in the study of religions in Asia and Japan. Besides, I have applied it to other research fields, such as visual ethnography. The study of religion is not only related to the description of gods and rituals of a particular group; when we talk about "religion", we represent in words and images the other.

During my study, I used and employed the critical religion approach as a method for deconstructing the category of religion. At the same time, I considered the representations about the very same religions that have been described as object by the numerous scholars that have written about them. This study reflected particularly on Japan and the *Itako* medium, a now small group of practitioners living in the Tohoku region. As the analysis in this paper highlights, the category of religion had a heavy footprint in creating political, cognitive and representational structures. In my work, I focused on the representational element *Itako* as it well illustrated the consequences of introducing the category religion in a place where such terminology did not exist. The idea of religion, as instilled by western colonizing nations, had repercussions on people's visual representation of religion(s) and religious figures. This phenomenon is well visible in Japan where the category religion has been introduced as recently as the end of the 19th century.

In the research I conducted, the critical religion approach informed my visual ethnographic fieldwork to analyse and dissect the repercussion caused by the category religion in Japan and fully reveal the legacy of the category religion.

2. Deconstructing the Category of Religion in Japan

The category of "religion" should be conceived as a construct, a term that has emerged and evolved in a specific context, changing its connotative meaning over time. This evolution has not only been the result of individual metamorphosis but, first and foremost, a consequence of interactions with other terminologies and traditions existing around it. During the long evolution of this term, from the Roman empire to contemporary times, we have seen that some traits have become more relevant than others. In particular, a seemingly religious nature characterising all realities encountered emerged in the narrative built by colonising Western powers. Thus, one of these facets is the so-called cross-cultural nature of the term, although, as I argue, this characteristic is more politically and ideologically determined.

A number of scholars have long debated and argued about the observability of "religion" in societies across the world. According to King (1999), this characteristic should be carefully measured and contextualised. If we consider "religion" a "culturally specific social construction with a particular genealogy of its own" (King 1999, p. 40) when using it in contexts other than the European-Christian ones, it is crucial to consider its theological

foundations. As the author further notices, Christianity has been the term of comparison for the study and classification of Asian and African traditions. As [McCutcheon \(2018\)](#) notes, imperialistic expansion in non-Christian areas had its fair share of responsibility in the increased use of the terminology. The employment of religion by bureaucrats and scholars coming in contact with something for the first time entailed the implementation of terms to describe phenomena. Religion was the term to label, describe and understand them. This does not mean that colonial civil servants and anthropologists were naively deploying the term *cognitio rerum*.

As previously mentioned in [Vecchi \(2020\)](#), when we discuss religion in the context of religious studies in Asia, whether in India or Japan, the concept of reference for religion as mentioned was the Christian tradition. Thus, the term Christian, with all its diverse traditions, became the object of comparison for the many phenomena observed by the colonial bureaucrats. The purpose of studying and naming these phenomena set the premises for what became a tool to assert the predominance of colonial powers when overcoming other governments. [Isomae \(2012\)](#) and [Liu \(2015\)](#) clearly described the discourse on religion in Japan. The authors who analyse the introduction and development of the term religion, *shūkyō* in Japanese, perfectly highlight the role covered by the concept imported by Europeans into the island nation and debunk the idea of religion as a cross-cultural reality. [Isomae \(2012\)](#), in his article, attributes to 19th century Japan's political situation the determining factor for introducing the term and the related legislation that developed afterwards. The binary notion of religion as irrational, as opposed to secular (rational), adopted by European nations to discern between civilised, semi-civilised—Japan was among these—and uncivilised nations were one of the reasons that motivated Japan to adopt the new terminology. The acknowledgement of the term and its antithesis was the way for Japan to step up and stand equally side by side with Western civilised powers. Therefore, for Japan, the deployment of the term was motivated by political and diplomatic forces to please Western powers. The colonial expansion was not only a synonym of land grabbing; it also meant cognitive colonisation, as I discuss later.

Another analysis supporting Isomae's view is the work produced by [Liu \(2015\)](#), who takes on the scholar and considers the roots and significance of *shūkyō* while further illustrating the political reasons for inventing religion in Japan. [Isomae \(2012\)](#) considers that the Japanese term translating religion incorporated the idea of Christianity as a doctrine related to father and son, as well as to the idea of ancestors. Liu further developed this analysis considering the repercussion of the invention of religion in Japan. In particular, he focuses on the Meiji reformers "controlling and performing" ([Liu 2015](#), p. 143) of religion for their political agenda. Meiji bureaucrats, conscious of the step Japan could take by following the western binary system but wanting to retain some of the country's nature, re-interpreted the concept of religion as a "transcendent vision of a governing ancestral superstructure" ([Liu 2015](#), p. 155). The concept of veneration of the ancestors was connected with the imperial forefathers, making *de facto* Shinto the indigenous cult and foundation of Japan. The Meiji reformers related the cult of the ancestor to the Emperor and Shinto. As Shinto surged to the stage of state creed, the term religion became the synonym of Christian tradition. Liu described this process with the word "religiopolitical", where the "Meiji construction of the imperial institution as a living ancestral cult was inexplicably religiopolitical" ([Liu 2015](#), p. 155). The scholar's analysis clearly illustrates that the appearance of religion is a consequence of the political decisions of the Meiji administration, not some kind of "natural" state.

[Josephson's \(2012\)](#) work echoes the words of the two scholars. In his book, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, he extensively explains the political nature of introducing the concept of religion in the island nation. In particular, he points at the creation of the religion–superstition–secular structure to the Meiji reformers who institutionally regulated religion, becoming a *de facto* invention for political purposes. Josephson's analysis echoes the above-mentioned scholars. In his analysis, Josephson describes the political use of religion to the point he defines it as a political category that "emerged through a process of negotiation,

conditioned by competing aims and aspirations” (Josephson 2012, p. 71). If religion in Japan is an invented category, as highlighted by these scholars, why use it as a cross-cultural concept? Fitzgerald (1997) debates the cross-cultural notion of religion, outlining some attitudes that have emerged over time in the academic discourse regarding the study of religion. The author considers that the term has been implemented in a variety of contexts that do not necessarily refer to metaphysic systems; in fact, what Fitzgerald (1997) observes is that “religion” has assumed an array of different connotations: from talking about god and spirits to culture and behaviours. The idea of a universal experience named “religion”, which is present across the globe according to some academics, is nothing more than ideology. In fact, “religion” became a tool for imperialistic and colonial expansion in numerous places across Asia or Africa. The category of “religion” played a role in strengthening the hierarchical structure as aimed at setting straight the power relationship between the dominant and the dominated. In this sense, the creation of concepts that served and conveyed the meaning of “religion” such as *shūkyō* in Japan resulted from a power relationship between the West and East that aimed at systematising communities and behaviours. The invention of a concept that translated the word “religion” to be employed across societies was not sufficient proof of the existence of a universal sentiment or phenomena that could be indicated with the sole use of the term. Fitzgerald’s analysis suggests this is the outcome of “cognitive imperialism [. . .] institutional dominance of western theology thought the auspices of phenomenology” (Fitzgerald 1997, p. 99). In his view, cognitive imperialism is not only the outcome of the western ideological imposition, but it also encompasses the elites of non-Western countries that by accepting it fosters the colonisers’ ideology.

Religion is unequivocally attached to power and its application; in this sense, the category of “religion” becomes a vehicle of Western powers used to assert position across the continents and “authorise and naturalise certain norms and values” (Horii 2020, p. 2). The power embedded in the category is not limited to political domination but extends to cultural and cognitive domination. As Mignolo (2009) describes in his paper, power is asserted in different forms. The scholar suggests that it is the product of a process that sees the dominated community’s knowledge production in the hands of the dominant group. Much of our understanding and information suffers from a lack of variety of points of view, and we end up with what Castro-Gomez calls “the hubris of the zero point” (Mignolo 2009, p. 160).

The critical analysis of religion is more relevant than ever, not only because it debunks the idea that religion is a phenomenon present across societies and continents, but most importantly, it shows the link between power and knowledge formation. As McCutcheon says, “we translate unfamiliar terms (and also social worlds) by this word of ours, religion, all in our effort to gain command of alien material so as to make sense of other people” (McCutcheon 2018, p. 34), so, at what cost are we forcing the term on others?

3. Critical Religion Approach as a Discourse on Religion

The actions and language employed by scholars who study religion and treat it as a tangible phenomenon are not neutral, as we have seen. In this context, language becomes a vehicle for shaping the discourse about knowledge, truth, and ideas. In Foucaultian (Foucault 1972) terms, the discourse is a system of representation, and as such, the form of describing something creates knowledge. Suppose we conceive of discourse as a series of pronouncements and declarations, which enable us to tell something and produce knowledge about that subject through the language. In that case, we understand that the cognitive operation we have just created is representation. In my view, introducing the concept of religion in Asia has also shaped the power dynamics inside the discourse and representation of the local cultures and the figures operating in the system named “religion”. As Taira adds in his analysis, “discourses establish one version of the world, in the face of competing versions [. . .] Whilst what is possible to say seems self-evident and natural, this naturalness is a result of what has been excluded, that which is almost

unspeakable” (Taira 2013, p. 28). The scholar’s words resonate even more meaningful when compared with cases such as Japan, where the discourse about religion constructed on European understanding resulted in an include/exclude approach. Fitzgerald (2000) provided a number of examples in *The Ideology of Religious Studies* when considering certain daily gestures that are not included in the apparatus designed by religions because they are not strictly attached to any metaphysical realm. The distinction between the gestures and activities that could be considered “religious” and those not regarded as such seems to be a common denominator of religion scholars. The critical point is not only constituted by the way we name something but with the discourse, and how we verbally and visually represent a context, a phenomenon, etc.

Fitzgerald (2000) questions the reasons for disregarding some actions—such as going to the stadium—as religiously valuable as going to a temple. Still, the answer comes from McCutcheon (2018), who acknowledges that many colleagues embrace a critical approach to the study of religion only to abandon it and describe these religions as if they were real and tangible objects. Porcu (2012), who researched the ambit of Kyoto’s Gion *matsuri* (festival), suggests that some activities have a “religious” nature, while others are not “religious” despite being related to the celebration. The elephant in the room is once more the definition of religion. Although Porcu recognises the problematic nature of the term religion, the scholar calls into question the “elastic frontiers”; the concept seems to be taken from Reader and Tanabe (1998, in Porcu 2012, p. 87). She opts for a definition of religion as an inclusive discipline, a deployment of the word common in academia, as Fitzgerald (1997) highlighted. So, religion emerges as a not well-defined concept, flexible, that is somehow capable of including or excluding features of the Japanese tradition. Hence, for Porcu, “religion includes not only doctrines and belief but is also a matter of participation, custom, action, practice and belonging” (Porcu 2012, p. 87). The author regards some activities as religious, while other activities are regarded as less religious or if in doubt, she suggests that those actions that do not fall neatly into the category should not be considered “non-religious act(s)” (Porcu 2012, p. 87). Porcu (2012) creates a distinction between religious and secular, where this binary conception does not appear. The scholar reports that people who participated in the study do not see the festival and its activities as religious or secular. Nevertheless, the usual binary religious/secular opposition is once more applied. From my perspective, the reaction of the participants is not that surprising. During my ethnographic fieldwork in Tohoku documenting the *Itako* mediums’ activities, people never considered what they were doing of any particular “religious” nature. In fact, no one ever used the word religion to define what they were doing. The most used terms were activity (*katsudo*) and tradition (*dentō*).

This experience made me reflect on Josephson’s (2011) and Horii’s (2018) analysis on the discourse about religions in Japan, and in particular on the fact we could use emic words to describe the phenomena we have up to now generically labelled religions. Horii’s (2018) study shows that this very problematic category, religion, is not “useful for analysing the Japanese society” (Horii 2018, p. 25), not only because that concept did not exist. It was not part of the cognitive capital of that group, but there are emic terms that, once contextualised, become a better resource for researchers to employ instead of religion.

Fitzgerald (2000) considers approaches such as those adopted by Porcu, typical of some academic research built on the dichotomy of religious/secular. This extensive narrative on religion talks about this concept as if it were a container capable of containing an array of phenomena quite different from each other. Therefore, the discourse on religion is confused, and at times, it refers to the metaphysic sphere, while on other occasions, it welcomes and includes the opposite. The fallacy is inherent to the idea that there is a social and political dimension of religion, as if religion, though related to society or politics, was at the same time independent “outside society, like a spirit or an essence [...] that exists on its planet but contingently at some points comes into contact with society, takes on a ‘social dimension’” (Fitzgerald 2000, p. 159). In light of this consideration, the author expresses his concern on the meaning and functions many attach to the term, asking whether religion

is a concept capable of describing and drawing some aspects of society out as religious versus those non-religious or part of the religious dimension as we often hear. As the scholar regards, concepts such as religion are employed in other contexts such as Japan without reflecting on it. The lack of critical analysis in the employment of a problematic concept such as religion “creates misleading images” (Fitzgerald 2000, p. 160). The Western ideological systematisation has fundamentally prevented us from understanding Japan and other non-western contexts where the Europeans and Americans introduced concepts such as religion, economy and politics.

The role of the critical religion approach is to unhinge the category of religion by considering the implications attached to the term itself. In the case of Japan, this approach proves paramount to understanding the politics and the discourse behind the introduction of this term. This word, introduced more than a century ago, could not explain the Japanese context. Religion, an analytical category many scholars have turned into a tool to explain phenomena across societies, is a mere label. To conclude, we should look at the phenomena until now labelled religions, not as immutable objects that can be recounted, but as values that have been enforced and supported by society as well as by institutions (Fitzgerald 2000).

4. Critical Religion Approach as Visual Ethnographic Method in Japan

As I mentioned in the introduction, for my work, the critical religion approach became more than a method to analyse the discourse on religion in Japan; it became an integral part of my visual ethnographic method. I argue that the critical analysis of religion developed by numerous scholars is crucial for understanding the impact and repercussions of this concept on non-Western societies. In my study in Japan, I noticed the ramifications of religion in the political, cultural and representational discourse. Figures such as the *Itako* medium have been described and represented through the lens of this very Western concept. In my view, the creation of “misleading images” (Fitzgerald 2000) has become the norm.

The critical religion approach, applied to visual ethnography, turned out to be a tool to analyse the religious discourse and visually represent the multiple layers of the term “religion” and “religious” on figures such as the *Itako*. These layers, developed over the decades, are a consequence of the colonial expansion and the idea of religion based on European-Christian canons. In my view, they have affected social constructs, politics and eventually the representation of people, such as the Japanese mediums. Since the critical religious approach considers in a holistic way the term religion, hence dealing with all these issues, I decided to adopt it as part of the visual methods I conceived and used for my fieldwork. I argue that the notion of religion had a misleading role in representing a phenomenon such as the one I studied in Japan. Therefore, recalling the approach discussed and theorised by the different authors (Fitzgerald 2000; Masuzawa 2005; Horii 2018), I applied the approach to my visual ethnographic research. Thus, while the critical religion approach unhinges the discourse on religion, I argued that it was possible to use it in a practice-based method for producing a critical representation of so-called “religious” figures. In the context of Japan, images and moving images about religious phenomena are products of the same logic that has constructed the discourse on religion by producing images that follow that same narrative. They have provided a visual element to the category of religion. However, before going forward, I briefly introduce my study participants: the *Itako* mediums were traditionally blind women who supplied a number of services, one of which was the summoning of the spirits of the dead (*kuchiyose*). According to some studies (Hori 1975; Sasamori 2000), these women were seen to have special powers due to their physical condition. Young blind women were trained during the puberty years by a mature *Itako* teacher. After the years spent with a senior *Itako*, the young medium was ready to move to the first steps in her business. We could say that the time spent next to an experienced medium was instrumental for the novice to learn the activity that gave her skills for living. Knowing the intricacy of the word religion in the Japanese context, I was interested in looking at how it affected the understanding and representation of figures

such as the *Itako* mediums. These religious figures and their “special” power were the perfect subjects for exoticism and nostalgia for a diverse and global audience.

It is common to see television programmes that depict Asia as the embodiment of the empire’s nostalgia (Rosaldo 1989), a mystical place full of wisdom, sitting between tradition and modernity, past and present. This genre of programmes, in which the nostalgia for a past is mixed with exoticism and curiosity, often represents the Others as more religious, wiser and thoroughly faithful. This image imbued with exotic feelings “relies on and reinforces an outsider perspective” (Berghahn 2019, p. 36). So, as Forsdick suggests, the exotic develops a gaze, a perspective that comes precisely from elsewhere, “from the other side” (Forsdick 2001, p. 21), outside of the geographical and cultural area narrated. The relation and closeness between exoticism and nostalgia are real. The two work together to create a “sanitised and embellished past and an idealised alterity”, as Berghahn continues (Berghahn 2019, p. 36), reinforcing the cognitive imperialism of language and labels created by the West. This analysis was constructive when I began my research of pre-existing visual material on religion in Japan, and specifically on the *Itako* mediums. So, in a gesture to Banks (2018), I adopted both approaches recommended by the author during my qualitative research with visual material. I first analysed pre-existing material before producing new visual material. Although my practice-based work focused primarily on using film as a research method with the scope of creating new visual material, I began by looking at the available audiovisual on the *Itako* mediums. The images and audio–video products relative to my research differed in production and audience, ranging from academic to professional and eventually to bloggers. In particular, digital ethnographic work has been crucial for finding material and contacting those who produced, shared, or remixed audiovisual material during this phase. With the uploaded material, this online community has involuntarily provided a “face” to the mediums and the geographical location. Kraemer considers this phenomenon critically, as “many have explored what networked, digital communications entail for places and identity in a global, deterritorialised world. Thinking about places [and people, my adding] on transnationally circulating media, however, requires asking how identities come to be linked to a place, well, in the first place” (Kraemer 2017, p. 180). In fact, on the one hand, this free production and sharing of visual material has given a chance to a large audience to learn something about the *Itako*. On the other hand, I noticed that the audiovisual material shared by this involuntary community often evidenced tropes that fostered an exotic and romantic view of these women. The photographic portraits first and videos later, often representing this woman in the act of “shamanising”, have contributed to creating the image of a mysterious figure and, at the same time, the guardian of an immutable ancient knowledge. This visual narrative has boxed these women in a sort of limited dimension where they exist only in relation to their work. The exotic emerges in the fetishisation and sentimentalisation for the past as a more truthful condition (Berghahn 2019). This condition is also embodied in the mediums, but the past they represent is grotesque and full of superstition. Over the decade, the tradition has changed, and sighted women have progressively taken the position of blind women, who have had access to special services for blind people since post-war times.

In light of these considerations, the *Itako* medium has been categorised following the same normative process Western scholars apply when describing and labelling phenomena as “religions”. Academics created a simplistic image of these women, often defined as shamans, confined in their space, ready to communicate with the dead. Wilson (2013) states that words such as shaman have been disproportionately used, to the point he says that “shamanism is an academic category, developed in order to draw together a wide range of traditions recognised as being shamanic in character” (Wilson 2013, p. 17). Retrievable images from archives, such as the Bunkaisan,¹ show the *Itako* posing in the performative act. As spirit summoning or divination are regarded as traditional activities, the photo creates an iconic image of the medium sitting with her rosary, ready to perform. In particular, I observed this distinctive approach in academics, professionals of the image

and non-professionals who have documented the Tohoku tradition, such as bloggers and diary travel writers. As I previously said, the discourse is fundamental in giving a body to the imagination and representation of these mediums, colouring the same with exoticism. Words such as “shaman”, which popular imagination links to an array of figures across the globe, contribute to strengthening the exotic imagery. Images of the present, such as those taken in the past and now stored in archives, wish to capture and freeze the contemporary *Itako*. This aesthetic choice is the outcome of an exoticizing process that refuses to acknowledge the changes that have happened to this tradition. In a broad sense, it is an example of Han’s (2017) analysis regarding artwork and the way we value it. As for artworks, the original piece is the valuable one as made by the artist, for traditions we tend to appreciate them when presented as “original” as they are more authentic. So, we could say that if we can demonstrate something has remained unmuted across time—an image can be used in this way—we consider it more valuable and truthful.

For this reason, some scholars suggest the use of emic words as more appropriate to semantically describe cultural phenomena (Horii 2018; Murakami 2017), unless clearly stated that it is a language synonym part of a contextualised vocabulary (Vecchi 2019). However, the Western gaze and categorisation that produced distorted images of the Others have not been the only ones guilty of fabricating misleading representations. In the last decades, we have passed from a visual narrative focused on these women as a medium summoning the dead to one portraying them as grotesque and fraudulent figures, which seems to be the sentiment that has prevailed in the amatorial video production. This passage could be a consequence of a discourse developed within the Japanese media since the 1960s. According to Ōmichi (2016, 2017), the *Itako* portrayed by the mass media is a caricature of herself, transformed into a new consumption product for the masses living in the urban areas, removed from the north and the countryside. The *Itako* becomes an exotic character to tickle urbanites and a grotesque and remote legacy of a troubled past, from which Japan has come out. These mediums are, in fact, a remnant of a bygone time soaked in the superstition and irrationality Japan had left behind with the Meiji Restoration. Hence, there is a necessity to employ the critical religion approach to the visual ethnographic method and the representation discourse of so-called religious figures.

It is different in the case of amateur video production, especially on a platform such as YouTube. In the era of social media and video sharing services, it is possible to find videos of the *Itako* where the grotesque element prevails. In particular, it seems that these amateur video makers focus their attention on the bizarre and supernatural feature of the *Itako*’s job: the summoning of dead people’s spirits.² As for the academic study of religions, the fallacy of these kinds of visual products is that they propose a binary vision of religion that is described by Fitzgerald (1997, 2000) in his analysis. The images engage either with the spiritual/godly element or the superstitious, treating religion as a category that can be described as a still nature subject on the table. This attitude is the result of a long debate regarding the use of film and stills as an instrument to capture reality, but as one of the most authoritative figures in visual anthropology reminds us, “film will never be the ‘objective’ recorder of reality for which the pioneers in this field had hoped” (Ruby 2000, p. 65). So, the meaning of those photos and videos showing the *Itako* mediums in their rooms busy summoning the dead could be summarised with a “this is it”, whether it was the exotic or the grotesque that the images focused on, the result is a “real unreality” (Barthes 1980). In light of these considerations, visual ethnography became a methodology accompanying the critical religion approach in a method in which the latter was used to inform and guide the visual analysis in the creation of the ethnographic film I made on the *Itako* of Tohoku.

When I considered the critical religion approach for the study of religion in Japan, and more specifically for the *Itako* mediums, I decided to combine it with visual ethnographic methodologies. For my work I referred to Ruby’s critical approach to visual ethnography (Ruby 2000); Banks (2001); Pink (2009, 2013) and their collaborative publication *Made to be Seen* (Banks and Ruby 2011). As previously mentioned, I could see that the terminology employed in the religious studies field had an impact on the representation of these

mediums at different levels. The discourse on images for research purposes is vast, rich and still open (Ruby 2000). The debate on whether to consider images and moving images capable of carrying evidence is ongoing, and a number of scholars have struggled to define the ethnographic film. As Winston suggests, “the idea of recorded footage brings us into direct and unavoidable contact with the scientific, and probabilistic idea of evidence” (Winston 1995, p. 175). Indeed, the scientific element is part of the debate. However, as Ruby had already observed a few decades earlier, “some anthropologists seem to forget that while all films may be potentially useful to anthropologists, that does not necessarily mean that these films should be labelled as ethnography” (Ruby 1975, p. 106). Other approaches focused on the *ethnographicness* of the image produced (Heider 2006), where the focus is on the capability of the film to enhance the research via the image; hence, it provides something that a written ethnography cannot provide.

The aim was to use visual ethnography to provide a holistic representation (Heider 2006) of *Itako* that could distance itself from those images and films adhering to the binary religious discourse. Therefore, in the study I conducted, the camera became a methodology to understand *Itako*'s cultural dimension and her profession in the context of Tohoku. For many researchers who used a camera during their fieldwork, that device became the means to record—someone would suggest a digital notebook—their subject(s) and their movement in the space they occupied. Although those studies collect information on body language and behaviour in space, they have not produced any clear scientific results (Ruby 1975). I would still suggest that the material collected is valuable ethnographic work. I could understand and capture the *Itako* beyond her “shamanizing” activity. I capture the daily life of the *Itako*, a professional of communication—and a digital online presence—with a social life. As Timothy Ash noticed “a good filmmaker knows that detached scientific observation is not enough. The film must also capture the essence of the people, their passions, their fears, their motivations” (Ash 1992, p. 198).

As Pink also reminds us, the ethnographic approach enables us to experience and represent cultures in their material and sensory aspects. Since the data and knowledge produced is the fruit of the single ethnographer's work, visual ethnography should be understood as a methodology that “does not claim to produce an objective or truthful account of reality but should aim to offer versions of ethnographers' experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context [...]” (Pink 2013, p. 35). Thus, in this sense, the ethnographic value of a pre-existing image, or an image produced during the research, expresses its value when contextualised and related to other knowledge that has ethnographic relevance. In light of these considerations, the camera became a way to realise the approach of Fitzgerald to the study of religion (Fitzgerald 2000), and at the same time increase the value of the ethnographic research, in this case, critically approaching the production of representation of a phenomenon generally part of religious studies. The camera becomes a method and an approach, as filming should be considered not the final aim of the fieldwork but an integral part of the planning of the research. The critical religion approach became instrumental in revealing the multiple layers of religion and how this terminology has influenced representation at different levels. The combination of the approach with visual and sensory ethnography provides the viewer with the experience and capacity to see and immerse the senses in the lived experience of the *Itako* mediums as well as of the people related to them, the belief and culture that links them to mountains of the Tohoku region. The film can reflect the grade of complexity that has been often superficially labelled as religious belief.³

Therefore, my approach was to collaborate with them, ask questions, observe and hear from these mediums their view on their profession and life. The subjects of those images that I collected online or viewed in archives were in this way given agency. For this reason, often, our interviews would start with some questions and slowly would convert into convivial conversations. The mediums, as well as other participants, were unguided in their speeches. The point was to allow their thoughts to be shared with me and the camera in order to have a holistic view of the *Itako* mediums. Though this approach gave me the

chance to create a relationship with the participants, I must acknowledge that my and the camera's presence were elements of "distraction", not part of their daily routines, and as at the same time capable of provoking reactions in what Rouch described as *ciné-transe* (Rouch 2003). Far from putting myself in the shot or using voice-over as Rouch used to do, I avoid misleading and directing viewers' opinions by providing the filmmaker's interpretation of reality. However, I agree with Rouch's observation as I and the camera are catalysts. The *ciné-transe* proposed by the author well describes the relationship between the parties—visual ethnographer, participants and camera. The presence of a camera and a person operating it goes beyond provoking a response or an action only in the participant. For Rouch, the transformation is also in the filmmaker who follows what unfolds in front of his/her eyes with the support of a "mechanical eye accompanied by an electronic ear" (Rouch 2003, p. 39). It is an experience, an encounter between the filmmaker and the participant that affects the filmmaker and the filming experience (Ferrarini 2017, p. 132). The author's words describe it as a "strange state of transformation that takes place in the filmmaker that I have called, analogously to possession phenomena, '*ciné-transe*'" (Rouch 2003, p. 39). Rouch's experience matured after some experiences in which he saw the direct effect of the camera on the people he was filming and on himself. I argue that the critical religion approach has enhanced the reflexivity process involved in visual ethnographic fieldwork and limited the risks of transforming the ethnographic film into a personal journey, losing the focus on the subject's experience. Ferrarini's consideration of Rouch and the first-person method suggests that it "was less about subjectivity than about interaction and intersubjectivity" (Ferrarini 2017, p. 132). I, too, was interested in focusing on the participants' points of view. The critical religion approach, with its polyphony of scholars (Fitzgerald 2000; Masuzawa 2005; Josephson 2012) and critique of the colonial and political influxes of the Western powers, encourages a certain degree of reflexivity on the researcher that employs it in the visual realm, whether it is about the analysis of visual cultural products or the production of visual material.

The *Itako* and the people within that environment offer their perspective and ultimately become critical figures for interpreting culture. Thus, the work I produced aims not to "present the indigenous view, nor to invade voyeuristically the consciousness of other individuals, but to see social behaviour, and indeed culture, as a continuous process of interpretation and re-invention" (MacDougall 1998, p. 95). In addition, I was interested in providing environmental and social elements compared with what I had noticed previously in visual references on the *Itako* mediums (See Note 1).

For this reason, I provided and included these elements into the research by interviewing people who frequented the mediums and places where they gathered to give a holistic (Heider 2006) view of these women otherwise detached from the community and places surrounding them. Omori, who documented some aspects of the *Itako* mediums life in his film *A shamanic medium of Tsugaru* (Omori 1994), concentrated his work on rituals. In an article the scholar wrote a few years before the production of the mentioned film, he advocated the use of film as a way to analyse and present cultures. Although Omori wrote nothing specifically related to his work with the mediums, in his article, he advocated the use of the visual ethnographic method combined with rigorous research to "in order to gain comprehensive knowledge about the entire existence of a given culture, a film that consists of the documentation of not just of one particular aspect but numerous cultural phenomena is most desirable" (Omori 1988, p. 194). These words resonated with the approach I had embraced for my practice-based study of the critical religion approach during my fieldwork in Japan. As mentioned, the influence of the introduction of religion in Japan and elsewhere impacted the representation of some figures labelled as religious, which is reason for my argumentation to adopt an interdisciplinary approach. For this reason, the method I used, which I call the *critical visual religion approach* (Vecchi 2019), is a visual attempt to re-discuss the image we have of religion and religious figures such as the *Itako* mediums, taking into consideration different aspects. These aspects, which span from personal life and work to education and the cyclicity of time, provide a four-dimensional picture of *Itako* and their

world. In a way, the *critical visual religion approach* aims at providing the “multidirectional” (MacDougall 1998, p. 145) nature that characterises human existence with the simultaneous unfolding of events. Moreover, the *critical visual religion approach* wishes to communicate sensory elements. Pink (2009) suggests visual methods convey sensory elements that complete and enhance the result of research.

Some of these sensory elements, which I analysed with the use of the critical religion approach and visualised with the *critical visual religion approach*, were conveyed in the film through the use of montage. The juxtaposition of different scenes and actions that travel parallel on the timeline in the film complete each other in the narration. This point is instrumental in surfacing that part of a culture which I attempted to explain also with words and the critical religion approach. These abstract concepts emerge as such, not only through moving images but also through montage. As MacDougall reminds us, written anthropological studies focus on general structures. As the scholar says, “writing more often emphasises basic structures, such as those of kinship or exchange, film common gestures and experiences” hence, “images and written texts not only tell us things differently, they tell us different things” (MacDougall 1998, p. 257). Thus, I argue that the critical religion approach is indispensable for analysing those power structures erected by the employment of the term religion, while the use of visual ethnography informed by the approach can and does illustrate what words cannot achieve. Therefore, the *invisible* can be communicated through the editing without transforming the ethnographic film into fiction, especially if we understand the invisible as “an “excess” or “infinite totality” of vision, montage in the film may enable us to imagine views fundamentally different from those given to us in ordinary perception” (Shur and Willelev 2012, p. 286). In light of this consideration, the critical religion approach becomes a way to unhinge and understand the power structure created by the term religion and, when combined with the visual ethnographic method, informs it in creating images that highlight what is inaccessible with words.

5. Conclusions

The employment of the critical religion approach in Japan has become a crucial method for analysing and understanding the issues related to the introduction of the category religion in the island nation. In fact, religion was a non-existing concept before the end of the 19th century. Its introduction, as suggested by Fitzgerald (2000); Isomae (2012); Masuzawa (2005) and others, had an ambassadorial function and adopted political connotations. Josephson (2012) even defined it as a political category because of its use by Meiji reformers.

The term was brought in during the colonial expansion in Asia and had strong European and Christian foundation. It became a vehicle of Western ideology, power and world view. Scholars such as Fitzgerald (2000) consider this category highly problematic because it is employed not only to talk about god(s) or transcendental phenomena, but to describe an array of different situations. Thus, the author even suggests substituting it with another equally constructed term, such as culture.

The colonial expansion time has had an impact we cannot ignore, and for this reason, we need a critical sensitivity capable to recognize the footprint of Western political and cognitive expansion. The repercussions of introducing the concept of religion in societies where it did not exist, such as Japan, are evident in the words and representation of phenomena such as the *Itako*. The power structure created by the category of religion can be understood and dismantled with the use of the critical religion approach. I argue for a critical religion approach with a reflexive effect on the researchers who approach the study of what we commonly call religion, not only in the written form, but with the use of cameras.

The critical religion approach informs and guides the filmmaker in a critical filming mode that is capable of including and communicating the critique moved to the language and images influenced by the category of religion. The visual and sensory data collected

must mirror the critique produced to highlight the ideology behind this category and create a new visual approach free from constraints.

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- ¹ Some images I consulted were part of the [Bunkaisanonrain \(n.d.\)](#) (Cultural Heritage Online Page). I refer here to an image portraying an *Itako* in her room, holding her rosary in the act of performing <http://bunka.nii.ac.jp/heritages/detail/199896/2> (accessed on 1 December 2021).
- ² This video is an example of an amatorial production where the medium is tested by the video makers who invent a fictional character to be contacted under request. The couple aims to highlight the superstitious element of the tradition www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmPsKsDOzGQ (last accessed on 1 December 2021).
- ³ Tohoku Monogatari—A Story from the Northeast of Japan. Available online: <https://vimeo.com/435013437> (PSW: 8618) (accessed on 1 December 2021).

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