1. Religion as Narrative:
An Application of P. Ricoeur's Conception of Mimesis Using Computer Coding

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1. From Experience to Narrative

The starting point is to assume that a narrative is the most appropriate form of presenting biographical and religious experience. When we narrate a certain experience, we impose a certain interpretation onto that experience. Realities are, in fact produced by the selection and interpretation of meanings. According to Alfred Schutz:

Strictly speaking, there are no such things as facts, pure and simple. All facts are from the outset facts selected from a universal context by the activities of our mind. They are, therefore, always-interpretated fact [Schutz 1962 : 5].

To clarify this point, we can follow Paul Ricoeur, who carefully considered the characteristics of narrative. In Time and Narrative, he states that “time becomes human time” to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative [Ricoeur 1984 : 3]. To analyze its characteristics, he borrowed and developed the concept of mimesis from Aristotle's Poetics. He separated the mimetic process “seriously and playfully” into the three phases of mimesis1, mimesis2, and mimesis3. Using his conceptions of mimesis as a basis, three steps of mimesis can be distinguished and are useful in understanding religion.1

2. Mimesis 1

Every interpretation is always based on a preconception of human activity and of social or natural events. Mimesis1 describes pre-understanding of what human action is, of its semantics and its symbolism. Literature always arises from this pre-understanding.

As applied to religion, followers initially connect to religious groups and
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then gradually accept their teachings. Over time, the followers accumulate a wealth of religious knowledge and associated behavior. Thus, mimesis1 is evident in religious followers [Kawabata and Akiba 2001: 7-11].

It is difficult for researchers to empirically scrutinize mimesis1 without computer-aided coding methods. When analyzing Japanese text using computers, certain issues arise such as the correct interpretation Japanese dates. Nonetheless, several programs exist which can overcome the problem, in particular, the AUTOCODE program by Yutaka Satō, described by Kawabata [2001], and is capable of analyzing open-ended questions. The program works by assigning an appropriate code to a segment of text and allows us to empirically extract mimesis1.

3. Mimesis 2

Ricoeur said, “mimesis2 opens the kingdom of as if or the kingdom of fiction” [Ricoeur 1984: 64]. This mimetic transformation should be a process of constructing a text.

This process involves mediation between the individual events or incidents and a story as a whole:

In this respect, we may say equivalently that it draws a meaningful story from a diversity of events or incidents or that it transforms the events or incidents into a story. Such is the realm of mimesis2 between the antecedence and the descendence of the text [Ricoeur 1984: 65].

We can therefore define mimesis2 as the configuration of action. In short, employment is the operation that draws a configuration out of a simple succession.

Concerning religion, we can equate mimesis2 with the process of religious conversion. Using the KT2 system, we can plot the course of religious life as a map that describes a story. The KT2 system was produced by a joint project by Akira Kawabata of Osaka University and Toshio Taniguchi of Kyoto Kōka Women’s University, and is described by Kawabata [2001].

Using KT2, Kawabata and Akiba [2001] analyzed religious life histories of the reinōsha, spiritual mediums who achieve spiritual power within Shinnyō-en, one of the most active religious orders in contemporary Japan. Shinnyō-en uses its unique spiritual training called sesshin to help its followers discover their true self. This spiritual training is only possible with a reinōsha. More than 1,600 reinōsha exist among the Shinnyō-en followers. The mediums work as “spiritual mirrors” through which sesshin trainees objectively observe their inner selves and their shortcomings. A reinōsha gives
the followers *reigen* (certain words and phrases from the *Shinnyo* spiritual world) through which they can recognize for themselves the nature of their lives. The followers interpret these words and phrases during sesshin to modify their attitudes and behavior in order to be more Buddha-centered.

Spiritual mediums attain *reinōsha* status only through experiencing four progressive "spiritual levels": *daijō* (Mahayana: great vehicle), *kangi* (joy), *daikangi* (great joy), and *reinō* (spiritual faculty). According to my own research, it takes an average of sixteen years to acquire medium status. The followers have the opportunity to progress during a particular kind of sesshin, *sōshō eza* (spiritual elevation settings). In each *sōshō eza*, the spiritual power of the *Shinnyo* teaching judges which spiritual levels the followers should strive to attain.

4. Religious Narrative as a Map

The KT2 system disaggregates the transcripts into words to which codes are assigned. The codes are integrated into several meaningful categories by cross-tabulation of two variables: time and code. A contour map made from the cross-table clarifies the significance of the categories of events and their relations in a life history.

![Map of Belief](image)

*Figure 1  Map of Belief*

The horizontal axis of *Figure 1* shows the categories, and the vertical axis shows the nine sections of which the interview was comprised (The female interviewee was 29 years old at the time of the interview, and had become a
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spiritual medium two months earlier). The portions surrounded by contour lines in Figure 1 differentiated by gradation indicate the frequencies of the categories cross tabulated by the interviewee's nine stages of Shinnyo'en belief. The frequency of the word "family" in the stage of "Introduction to Shinnyo'en" falls in the category from 8 to 11. This result shows that some member(s) of the interviewee's family introduced her to Shinnyo'en.

The most frequent code (category) however, is "self." We will focus on this category because, as mentioned before, sesshin is the means with which the followers come to realize that which is necessary to improve themselves. By examining the correlation of "self" with other categories, we can interpret the interviewee's religious life history as a whole.

With the categories of "Introduction to Shinnyo'en," "Toward Kangi 1" and "Toward Kangi 2," the occurrence of "self" is less frequent. Conversely, in succession to each of the spiritual levels and "Toward Reino," the frequency of "self" is over 20.

In "Succession to Daijo," the category "understand" correlates with "self." This interviewee spoke of personal faults incomprehensible to others. She was not fully aware of these faults before this stage but sesshin gave her the necessary awareness. She realized that "somebody" comprehended her. This experience gave her satisfaction, since she was convinced that "somebody" had no doubt existed and understood her to such extent that even her parents couldn't know. At this point, she started to reinforce her belief in Shinnyo teaching.

With regard to "Succession to Kangi," the three categories of "Kyoshu-sama" (the founder of Shinnyo-en) and "Keishu-sama" (his daughter), "family" and "voluntary works" correlate with "self." The opportunities taken interviewee to voluntarily serve her religious community deepened her self-reflection. During her voluntary work for the Shinnyo-en head office, there were opportunities to serve Kyoshu-sama and Keishu-sama more personally. They impressed her with their ability to pursue the truth and to disseminate the teachings.

Concerning "Succession to Daikangi," the co-occurrence of "Kyoshu-sama and Keishu-sama" and "family" is common at the Kangi stage. In addition, "attachment" and "suji" (lineage) co-occur with "self." Following the interviewee's marriage, while living with her husband and mother-in-law, she became more aware of her self-attachment(The category "attachment" includes such codes as "self-centeredness," "intolerance," "ego" etc.). During that time, Kyoshu-sama appointed her as suji-oya (lineage parent) prior his death. As a suji-oya, she inherited responsibility over 200 families. According to Shinnyo-en beliefs, the power of salvation is expected to spread down from the suji-oya to the followers. It was therefore her duty as suji-oya to elevate her spiritual level. She thus cast her attachment aside to completely devote
herself to Keishu-sama.

With “Succession to Reino,” the categories “attachment” and “family” occur together with “self.” Moreover, “self” relates to “serve” with reinō. Since she reached “Succession to Daikangi,” she has been engaged in self-contemplation, referred to “attachment” and “family.” She has also made an active practice in daily life of eliminating attachment. However, she could not improve herself to the extent of fully accepting her mother-in-law’s opinions. On the morning of the sōshō eza, an unexpected incident informed her that her decision was unreliable. Without reinō, her deeds and words were greatly limited. She surrendered herself and decided to devote herself completely to Shinnyo teachings. That day, she activated her spiritual faculty to become a spiritual medium.

In this article, the contour map commands a panoramic view that examines a female case. A female narrative as a contour map expresses the salvation in Shinnyo teachings.

Notes
(1) In this paper I omit mimesis3 by the limitation of length.
(2) Kawabata, A. “Using Computers to Analyze Textual Date in the Study of Religion,” chapter 2 of this volume.

References