

Original Article

Serial Murderers In Japan (1882-2017): A Narrative Analysis

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Abstract

A retrospective narrative analysis of 61 serial murderers (a few, belonging to health care profession, such as physicians, midwives and paramedic) in Japan was attempted.

Materials available in the online databases including Wikipedia entries on individual criminals were studied. Among the studied total of 61 serial murderers covering the time span from 1882 to 2017, 59 were convicted and 2 were non-convicted. All five categories of Deitz typology of serial murderers were represented among the convicted sample. These include, psychopathic sexual sadists (e.g: Ryuun Daimai, Yoshio Kodaira, Genzo Kurita, Kiyoshi Okubo, Takahiro Shiraishi), crime spree killers (e.g: Kanae Kijima, Chisako Kakehi), custodial killers (e.g: Shige Sakakura, Miyuki Ishikawa and Hayato Imai), psychotic, religious-cult killers (e.g: Sachiko Eto, Shoko Asahara and his 12 collaborators) and organized crime functionaries (e.g: Satoru Nomura). Tomomasa Nakagawa, personal doctor of the *Aum Shinrikyo* Buddhist religious-cult leader Shoko Asakara, may hold a record for a scientist on death row to publish a paper in a peer-reviewed journal.

Limitations of this study include, (1) omission of the methods of killing used by the murderers from analysis (2) total reliance on media reports for information, in preference to voluminous records of Japanese court cases. Despite these limitations, details presented in this analysis of 59 convicted and 2 non-convicted serial murderers in 45 court cases held in Japan may be useful for comparative studies in forensic science and law enforcement.

Key words: *Aum Shinrikyo* cult, forensic psychology, hanging, sarin gas, Shoko Asahara

Introduction

The lack of consensus for a proper definition of what constitutes ‘serial murder’ to identify serial murderer(s) still remains unsolved. Adjorlolo and Chan [1] reviewed this controversy by listing 13 such definitions, published between 2001 and 2014. Among these, the definition proposed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) of USA in 2005 – ‘*The unlawful killing of two or more victims by the same offenders in separate events*’ has gained prominence lately, for its simplicity [2, 3]. Nevertheless, clarity in the legal meaning of ‘unlawful’ is opaque and differs from country to country, as well as political system to political system. As Myers et al. [4] had reviewed, in the 20th century higher minimum casualties ranging from four or five or even greater had been considered. As such, comparative statistics on the number of serial murders of many countries do suffer due to inconsistency and inaccurate calibration. A two part review on serial killers by Miller [5, 6] had covered the history, proposed typologies, patterns, motives and forensic aspects of this specific category criminals, mainly from Europe and USA.

In a Master’s degree dissertation submitted to the California State University in 2003, Kaori Aki [7] had compared 82 Japanese serial murderers (in 64 cases) with 402 serial killers from USA from 1880 to 2002. Details of this study (including the names of 82 Japanese serial murderers) was analyzed by Hickey [8]. Based on *Yomiuri Shimbun* database of articles on serial murderers, from 1970 to 2013, covering 467 homicides by 187 serial murderers and comparing their profiles with an equal number of individuals who had committed a single homicide, Kiire et al. [9] could conclude that ‘there are few qualitative differences between serial and single homicide offenders.’

In this narrative analysis, an attempt is made to revisit the deeds of 61 serial murderers (a few of them be-

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longing to health care profession, such as physicians, midwives and paramedics) of Japan involved in 45 court cases, covering the 135 year period (1882-2017).

Methods

Literature on serial murderers in Japan, and its affiliated keywords like serial killers and serial homicide according to the FBI's 2005 definition, as indexed in the PubMed database, other appropriate online databases (such as Radford University/Florida Gulf Coast University serial killer database, Murderpedia.org) and Wikipedia were searched to collect empirical data.

Results

Among the 61 serial murderers counted in this study, 49 were men and 12 were women. Previously assembled data on male-female gender percent among offenders indicate that 12-17% were women [10]. Thus, 19.7% of women in the studied sample of 61 serial murderers aligns marginally with the previous data. Table 1 presents a listing of 59 convicted serial murderers in Japan – chronologically arranged tentatively arranged since 1882. While 58 of the convicted serial murderers were adults, one (Shinichiro Azuma aka Seito Sakakibara) was a juvenile offender. All five categories of Deitz typology [5, 11] of serial murderers were represented among this sample of 59. These five categories were,

1. Psychopathic sexual sadists (e.g: Ryuun Daimai, Yoshio Kodaira, Genzo Kurita, Kiyoshi Okubo, Takahiro Shiraishi)
2. Crime spree killers (e.g: Kanae Kijima, Chisako Kakehi),
3. Custodial killers (e.g: Shige Sakakura, Miyuki Ishikawa and Hayato Imai), and
4. Psychotic religious-cult killers (e.g: Sachiko Eto, Shoko Asahara and his 12 collaborators).
5. Organized crime functionaries (e.g: Satoru Nomura).

Though criminal gang activity had prevailed in Japan [12, 13], minimal number of convicted serial murderers representing this category in the surveyed sample is rather unusual; it may also explain the difficulty in persecuting this category of murderers in a court of law and convicting them for their crimes. Technically, Sato-

ru Nomura (the head of Kudo-kai, criminal gang) is an outlier to the FBI's definition 'unlawful killing of two or more victims' for a serial murderer. He was convicted for the crimes for *only one murder* in 1998, a shooting in the thigh of a retired police officer investigating his criminal gang in 2012, facial-stabbing of a woman nurse at a cosmetic surgery clinic and stomach-stabbing of a dentist [14] One crime reporter had noted the cause of facial attack on the nurse as follows: 'Known for his violent temper, Nomura became enraged in 2012 when a penis enlargement procedure did not produce the desired results. He ordered an underling to stab the supervising nurse. She survived but was severely injured' [15].

Hanging is the only method used for all executions in Japan [16], and in the view of Holmes [17], executions in Japan still remain shrouded in secrecy and silence. Two serial murderers in Japan, a man and a woman, were not convicted in court, for reasons of their premature death. The man, Akiyoshi Umekawa, was shot dead by the Osaka armed police two days after he committed his second crime in 1979. The woman, Miyoko Sumida was the prime suspect in the Amagasaki serial murders of at least 8 individuals which happened for 15 years, between 1987 and 2012. The motive for the crime was pension fund and insurance fraud. Investigations revealed that victims were tortured to death. Sumida committed suicide by choking herself in her prison cell [18].

Discussion

The 135 year period, from 1882 to 2017, spreads along four distinct time frames in recent Japanese history designated on the basis of ruling Emperor; namely, Meiji period (1868-1912), Taisho period (1912-1925), Showa period (1925-1988) and Heisei period (1989-2017). Each period had distinct social markers, which include development in banking access to money transfer, telecommunication system, computer and internet revolution, as well as transportation links connecting various prefectures of Japan. Serial murderers who had lived in these four distinct time frames made use of these social markers, for their criminal activities.

When comparison between the data available in the 2003 study by Aki [7, 8] and this study. Two notable differences between the two studies are, Aki's study (1) contain 9 unidentified serial murderers, and (2) exclude the murderers Shoko Asahara (1955 - 2018) and his 12 associates, involved in the notorious sarin gas poisoning

cases, in the count. In my dissenting view, first, mixing identified and unidentified serial murderers in the same list defies logic. Secondly, due to its notoriety and shocking value, sarin gas poisoning cases in 1994 and 1995 had received specific attention from researchers in multiple fields, including religious-cults, cultural deviance, terrorism, toxicological science and chemical warfare [19-31]; as such, Asahara and his associates deserve recognition as serial murderers. Based on nosology and *Aum Shinrikyo* cult publications, Akimoto [32, 33] had found evidence for the leader Asahara suffering from pseudologia phantastica.

Among the 59 convicted serial murderers in this study, majority committed their crimes solitarily. Only four 'team activities' were identified in the studied sample. The largest team activity was that of the notorious *Aum Shinrikyo* Buddhist religious-cult group lead by Shoko Asahara. In addition to the leader, 12 of his associates (all men) were executed in July 2018, for three separate crimes, spread from 1989 to 1995. While Tanimoto et al. [34] published a brief commentary in the *Lancet* in 2018, after the execution of 13 *Aum Shinrikyo* cult members, under the title 'Involvement of doctors in *Aum Shinrikyo*', the doctors who were charged with crime and convicted were left out. It should be noted that one among these 12 associates of Asahara who were executed in 2018, was his personal doctor Tomomasa Nakagawa (1962 - 2018). [35, 36]

In fact, two months before his execution, a short communication with Nakagawa as the first author was published in *Forensic Toxicology* journal, with the title, 'Murders with VX: *Aum Shinrikyo* in Japan and the assassination of Kim Jong in Malaysia' [37]. This paper's publishing history is somewhat interesting. It was received at the journal on Feb 3, 2018, accepted on May 7, 2018 and published online on May 21, 2018. And Nakagawa was executed on July 6, 2018, two months after the acceptance of his paper. One specific line in the paper had this sentence: "The first author of this paper was actually involved in such manufacturing [unpublished observation]". The address given for Nakagawa was 'Hiroshima Detention Center'. This may be considered as a record for a scientist on death row to publish a paper in peer-reviewed journal. Another *Aum Shinrikyo* cult affiliated doctor (a heart surgeon) Ikuo Hayashi (b. 1947) who had functioned as the medical director of *Aum Shinrikyo* cult, received a relatively

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mild sentence of life in prison in May 1998, following his cooperation with the prosecutors [38, 39].

Since the conviction of British general practitioner Harold Shipman (1946-2004) in 2000 [40-46], serial murders by healthcare professionals (doctors, nurses, midwives and paramedics) have become a cause of serious concern globally [47]. During the late Meiji period, a three member women team, led by a midwife Shige Sakakura (1868-1915) were involved in a practice then tagged as 'baby farming' [during the Victorian period in Britain] of purchasing unwanted, illegitimate infants at a low cost and then killing. Sakakura and her two women accomplices were executed in 1915, for the crime of snuffing out the lives of nearly 200 infants. Subsequently, during the war-depleted period of mid 1940s during the Showa period, another midwife Miyuki Ishikawa (1897-1987) was also charged for killing an estimated 84 infants. Turbulence of property loss records during the war time in combination with the US Occupation administration by the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) under Gen. MacArthur that lasted until 1952 was advantageous for the release of Ishikawa from her crimes, after spending 4 years behind the bars.

Hiroshi Maeue (b. 1968, identified by the media as the 'suicide website murderer' and executed in 2009) and Takehiro Shiraishi (b. 1990, identified by the media as the 'Twitter killer') belonged to a new breed of serial murderers, who adopted a novel *modus operandi* technique of preying on the fear/loneliness of depressed young women with suicidal feelings. Projecting themselves as 'concerned helpers' and as 'experts' in assisting suicide, Maeue and Shiraishi made use of digital world devices of internet activity, personal computer, email, smart phone and Twitter, which came to be promoted after 1995 [48, 49], to initiate contact with their gullible victims. Shiraishi's execution was finalized in Jan 2021 [50].

In conclusion, limitations of this study include, (1) non-specification of the methods of killing used by the murderers in this analysis. Japan being a country with strict gun control policy, all serial murderers had used either weapons other than guns or poisoning for their killings. The exception was the case of Akiyoshi Umekawa, identified in Table 2. (2) total reliance on media reports for information, in preference to voluminous records of Japanese court cases. (3) To comply with maximum word limit requirements, detailed descriptions of inter-

esting case examples included in this study have to be curtailed. Despite these limitations, details presented in this retrospective narrative analysis of 59 convicted and 2 non-convicted serial murderers in 45 court cases held in Japan may be of some use for comparative studies in forensic science and law enforcement.

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