



More than Just a Photo? Aura Photography in Digital Japan

The sudden disappearance from the market in 2016 of the type of polaroid film that happens to be used by cameras that are specially built to capture the halo of energy (or “aura”) believed to be surrounding human beings has made those cameras obsolete. As a result, Japanese aura camera owners who make a living from counseling clients based on a “reading” of aura photos express worry in regard to their loss of authority over the process of production of these photographs. At the same time, a historical analysis of aura photos as a sub-type of spirit photography shows that the popularization of specially built aura cameras had already led to the standardization of the “reading” of aura photos that is more prominent today in digital smartphone versions of the original aura cameras. Technological and religious authorities intermingle in this case-study and influence each other, showing an example of (partial) desacralization of religious media, at the expense of religious experts endowed with the ability to use them.

KEYWORDS: Japan—religion—aura—photography—technology—authority

In early March 2016, internet blogs and news outlets informed both professional and amateur photographers that the end of an era had come (Reagan 2016; Palladino 2016; Demolder 2016): Fuji Film had announced on February 29 that it would discontinue the production of its instant color film FP-100C (Fuji Film 2016), the only peel-apart film left on the market, thus effectively making all classic Polaroid cameras unusable. This perhaps came as no surprise to the other large film companies (such as Konica Minolta, Agfa, or Polaroid itself), which had already stopped producing film in order to remain relevant to the new generations of digital camera holders. However, for one Japanese business sector selling cameras allegedly capable of capturing people's auras, this announcement meant the end of its activities. For many of the professional "aura readers" who had invested in these cameras, it was the final call to either go digital or stop offering counseling sessions based on aura photography.

Aura photography remains an essential aspect of the spiritual business in Japan, even if it no longer attracts the crowds of the "golden era" of the late 1990s and early 2000s.¹ Most practitioners recall that era with nostalgia, talking about several thousand (testimonies vary from 1,000 to 10,000) people lining up in mind-body-spirit type fairs, such as SUPIKON (a Japanese acronym for "spiritual convention"), to take a photo of their aura (see figure 1). They now, however, must compete with a plethora of smartphone applications such as Uri Geller's Psychic Diagnosis (*Yuri Gerā no saikikku shindan*) or the Aura Measuring Camera (*ōra sokutei kamera*). These allow individual users to take a snapshot (a "selfie") with their mobile phone camera and instantly see the photo of their face on the screen surrounded by a multi-colored halo (see figure 2) and associated (onscreen) description of what the colors signify in terms of the user's personality and what they predict for his or her future life.

To those familiar with the market of self-spirituality and alternative therapies, the type of service described above should not come as a surprise. Studies of the New Age movement, especially in the Anglo-Saxon West, are replete with descriptions of a growing and expanding market of mass-produced commodities, from protective talismans to DIY divination calendars, that "promise consumers authentic experiences and spiritual liberation from the modern disenchanting world" (Aupers 2012, 355). Yet, the significance of this market, which has also flourished in contemporary Japan since at least the 1970s (see Shimazono 1999;



Figure 1: An aura photo taken with an aura camera using polaroid film. Photo of the author taken at Atelier Guardian Angel's aura photography booth in 2008 (see description later in this article).

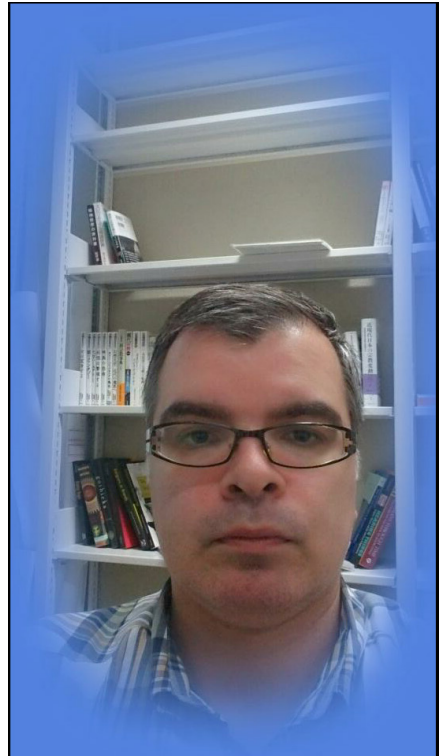


Figure 2: An aura photo taken with a dedicated smartphone application. Photo by the author, 2017.

Prohl 2007), lies not in the establishment of some unified religious worldview or of an organized religious practice. Rather, as Guy Redden has argued (inspired by sociologists Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, and Nikolas Rose), the popularization of such services reflects contemporary societal changes that “increasingly recast well-being in terms of how well persons are placed to make the most of self-responsibility amid the massive expansion of market relations across the social sphere and the diminishing of the welfare state” (Redden 2011, 655). Of course, in historical terms, this type of market, and especially its relation to technological developments and scientific discourse (as the existence of aura photos today illustrates), could be traced as far back as Franz Anton Mesmer’s animal magnetism séances of the eighteenth century and the appropriation of technological innovations by various occultists that became prominent in the following century. Jeremy Stolow, for example, describes how nineteenth-century spiritualists appropriated the invention of the electric telegraph as a metaphor for spirit mediumship and as a method for legitimizing the authority of the mostly female population of mediums:

In sum, telegraphy pointed towards a new type of human agent enveloped by the technological promise of bringing together the visible and the invisible, the public and the private, and the global and the local. This new agent was located in a cosmos defined by the performative goals of erasing distance, freezing time, and circumventing what seemed otherwise to be the inevitable decay of bod-

ies and things. On these terms, the act of being possessed by a spirit was phenomenologically comparable to the autotelic labour of electrical devices, such as occurs when a message is communicated through a telegraph circuit. In both cases, what was brought into existence was a system for the circulation of discourse freed from the “normal” conditions of individual human subjectivity, where one is supposed to enjoy mastery over one’s conscious intentions and one’s own body. (Stolow 2009, 90)

In this article I shall argue that, like the telegraph, the special polaroid camera’s popularity before the digitalization of aura photography had already impacted on the belief in auras and on how aura reading was produced and consumed. Digitalization, I show, came perhaps as a “natural” step forward in the long history of encounters between photographic technology and spirit mediums, occultists, and others who sought to use technology to communicate with the world of the spirits and, as a result, prove their existence. Indeed, what precisely connects the nearly four-century-old Mesmeric séances to today’s aura photography sessions are, first, a genuine striving to make sense of communication that does not rely on physical and visible contact (see Gregory 2015, 23), and second, the production of knowledge that this type of communication promises. Therefore, the authority that the operator of such technologies holds over this production of knowledge is of importance here.

Early twentieth-century protestant experimentalism illustrates very well this relation between technology, technological imaginary, and religious authority in an environment that blended “conventional religion” with spiritualist concerns. It also shows that, despite appearances, such experiments have not been the monopoly of a few “curious” individuals looking to cash in on “naïve” seekers of self-spirituality. Pamela Klassen describes the case of archbishop Du Vernet, who in the 1920s charged the church with adapting to modern realities of psychology and communication technologies. He claimed that “the subconscious mind was a spiritual entity through which God could heal the body, but it was also a deep reserve that could be shaped by human actors, whether through oral or visual suggestion, auto-suggestion, or ‘collective telepathic suggestion,’ also known as radio mind” (2007, 665). Later, an international Catholic visionary culture developed around “polaroids from heaven,” photographic images of Marian apparition sites that were and are still regarded as divine communications offering insights of prophetic and personal relevance. Daniel Wojcik describes the practices of Catholics of the Bayside in New York, who “wrap rosary beads around their camera” or “had their cameras blessed by a priest” (Wojcik 2009, 124), believing that “the Holy Spirit enters the camera and ‘directs’ the content and symbolism of the photos” (ibid., 125). Significantly for the case of aura photos discussed in this article, Baysiders interpret various types of elements (numbers, letters, or colors) that they see on a photo as symbols: for example, they believe that the color blue shows the appearance of Virgin Mary; pink, Jesus Christ; green, Saint Michael; and purple means suffering or sorrow (ibid., 126).

As we will see, color symbolism is also very important for aura photos. Color combinations are supposed to tell of the feeling, emotional condition, and person-

ality of the person in the photo. However, for the Baysiders, the invention of the polaroid in 1972 allowed the general populace to produce and interpret miracle photography by themselves. By contrast, in the case of aura photos, the act of interpreting these photos was, until the appearance of personal digital cameras, mostly the monopoly of “professional” aura readers. By using a special apparatus built around a regular polaroid camera, these professionals were able to generate authority through the contemporary sort of séance that an aura photo shooting became. This case-study of aura photography in Japan is therefore an ideal site to explore the reason why the documental character of photography encourages the representation of realities outside empirical experience (Medeiros 2015, 3). It also enables us to place the triangulation of religion, technology, and individual autonomy into a global occultisms framework (de la Cruz 2017, 304), in which individual affective responses stem partly from relationships with a combination of religious and technological authorities that are at the same time locally informed and globally produced.

AURA PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE MAGICAL ASPECT OF TECHNOLOGY

An examination of the phenomenon of aura photography as “miracle photography” is best understood when placed within the long tradition of spirit photography, which appeared in photographic studies in the 1860s in the United States (see Kaplan 2008) and in the late 1870s in Japan (Koike 2005).² Technical mistakes and visual assumptions probably lay at the origin of believing things that do not exist in reality can be seen through a photographic lens, but as historians of photography have shown, the appearance of such photographs was also intimately related to photographic technology itself. Indeed, by showing things invisible to the naked eye, such as the stars through a telescope or bones through an X-ray photograph, photographic technology proved that it could show worlds that we did not previously know existed. As soon as something appeared on a photograph, the photograph became the proof of its existence (Hamano 2015, 76). By extension, a new understanding of the notion of *fact* became necessary, because in addition to human sight we now had to account for a “mechanical sight” (Medeiros 2015, 7). This enlargement of the realm of facts consequently affirmed the inclusion of phenomena not reached by human senses, phenomena that the medium of the photographic plate was merely considered as “automatically” transferring to a paper or a plaque (*ibid.*, 9). This seemingly passive copying of reality, in which man plays no part, was therefore seen as devoid of error and was eventually incorporated into “scientific” explanations of how things invisible to the naked eye could be subject to photochemical science. A variety of explanations, from the existence of “psychic screens” to the belief that photos can be invested with the energy of those figuring in them, have since been developed, leading to the possibility that photos are not just the medium but are also adorned with certain supernatural qualities that depend on the process (*i.e.*, mechanism) used.

With the concept of “aura,” it is thus not difficult to imagine that someone would one day claim that only “special” cameras can catch the aura. By definition,

the aura is allegedly invisible to the naked eye, at least in the case of those who do not claim to be able to see it. Consider for example my first experience of taking an aura photo in Japan. This was in December 2008, when I attended for the first time the spiritual market, or *supima* as it is usually known, a two-day “fair of healing and the spiritual.”³ The fair, being held in central Tokyo for the thirty-fifth time, was composed of fifty-four booths on the upper floor of an office building. Among the tarot readers, reiki therapists, and organic masseurs, my attention was immediately drawn to a large booth at the back of the room: Atelier Guardian Angel’s, booth number eleven. It was offering “aura photography and life reading (3,000 yen for a two-page explanation and 10,000 yen for a fifteen-page explanation).”⁴ Despite the early morning hour, I waited in line for thirty minutes before an elderly lady and her assistant sat me down on a chair placed against a black screen. They had me put my hands, palms down, on rectangular boxes with metal engravings in the shape of a hand located either side of the chair and look at a camera in front of me—a blue box three times the size of a regular polaroid camera. After Julia, the aura reader, took my photo, I waited several minutes for the assistant to print a two-page explanation of what my photo “meant” out of a laptop connected to the camera. Then, for approximately five minutes, Julia explained what the polaroid photo—a photo of the upper half of my body, with only my face clearly visible behind a red-colored halo (see figure 1)—revealed about my state of mind (I was stressed), my relationship with my family (I had to improve my relationship with my father), and my future (I was to finish my studies with no major issues).

This contemporary interpretation of the concept of aura worldwide owes much to the global theosophical network of ideas and practices established by Helena Blavatsky in the second half of the nineteenth century and later expanded and popularized through lectures and works by Annie Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater (Johnston 2015, 664). An early theosophical treatise on the human aura, published in 1896 by the president of the Aloha branch of the Theosophical Society, concludes with a reminder that the existence of the aura appears in writings from most religious traditions, such as Zoroastrianism and Hinduism, as well from more recent movements, such as mesmerism and spiritualism.⁵ The author ends with the argument that the correct knowledge or study of human auras can lead to various kinds of self-protection: social (such as predicting the behavior of others), moral (such as preventing us from vicious ideas), and physical (such as the preservation of a healthy body) (Marques 1896, 60–61).

The originator of the concept of auras and energy healing is said to be the American Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1822–66), founder of the New Thought movement (Kline 2013, 355). Quimby, inspired by mesmerism, argued that beliefs and expectations can influence the vital force of the person who holds them and be responsible for his or her illness or health (Hanegraaff 1998, 485). This idea later led to the positive-thinking rhetoric found today in most self-development and life-advice literature, as well as in the words of advice of Japanese aura photographers and readers. After Quimby, the theosophist C. W. Leadbeater developed and popularized the belief in the existence of seven subtle and different-colored bodies,

together with a network of energetic pathways, centers, and chakras that control the flow of energy. In his most well-known treatise on the subject, Leadbeater notes that

before we can intelligently study the details of these various bodies, we must familiarize ourselves with the general meaning of the various shades of color in them. . . . It will be realized that an almost infinite variety is possible in their combination. I am endeavoring to give, as nearly as possible, the exact shade which expresses the unmixed emotion whose name is attached to it; but human emotions are hardly ever unmixed, and so we have constantly to classify or to analyze indeterminate hue in the formation of which many factors have played their part. (Leadbeater 1902, line 133)

In Japan, it was Naruse Jinzō (1858–1919) who introduced the concept of “aura” in 1916, three years after visiting the Theosophical Society (see Kasai 2012, 443, based on Yoshinaga 2007). The concept seemed to travel quickly among spiritualists and members of Japan’s new religious groups. For example, Yoshinaga Shin’ichi (personal communication; see also Yoshinaga 2008) notes that aura goggles appear already in the early 1920s in the journal published by Taireidō, the largest *seishin ryōhō* (mind cure methods) group of Taishō Japan (see Yoshinaga 2014).⁶ Yet, it is only due to the Russian Semyon Kirlian (1898–1980) and his Kirlian photography, developed in 1939, that we can really talk about aura photography today.

Kirlian’s most famous image is that of the “phantom leaf,” a photograph of a leaf, part of which was cut off, but with the glowing portion of the amputated section still visible. This phenomenon was due to the discovery that both animate and inanimate things generate a sort of glowing halo when captured on film and exposed to a high-voltage, high-frequency, low-amperage current (Harvey 2007, 76). These glows sometimes appeared blue or green and were soon compared to the aureole seen around holy figures on medieval paintings. As John Harvey argues, “colour serves as the medium of spirit: the spectrum is the spectre” (Harvey 2007, 78). In other words, the symbolism of artistic renderings of spirituality (recall Marques’ above argument that the aura was present in most world religions) were used to strengthen the legitimacy of an electric phenomenon as a perceptible projection of psychic energies.

From the advent of the New Age in the 1970s to this day, Kirlian photography has acquired unprecedented popularity with recurrent resurgences, the most recent having benefited from the endorsement of Hollywood actress Gwyneth Paltrow (see Murray 2015). Yet, perhaps one person has monopolized the market in this area and has been the main provider of aura cameras currently in use around the world, including Japan: Guy Coggins. Coggins is said to have developed his system in the 1970s. According to Ms Watanabe, a Japanese retailer, it has since gone through at least three models, the current one being Aura Camera 6000, which was the machine used during my first encounter with an aura reader in 2008.⁷ Coggins claims to have invented a new method to capture auras, different from that of Kirlian. His website explains this technology as follows:

The Auracam 6000 consists of one or two hand sensors which are connected through cables with the camera. Polaroid instant film is put into the camera and is adjusted and aligned to the customer. Once the customers put their left and right hand onto hand sensors, the AuraCam 6000 begins to gather standardized biofeedback parameter data through the hand sensors. The measured points of resonance are connected with certain organs and the electromagnetic field of the person; this information about the energetic and auric qualities of a human being are then delivered to the camera. Through a patented operation, these parameters are projected as a radiant, colorful aura field around the body onto the Polaroid film, along with the image of the person.

(“AuraCam 6000 / Coggins Camera” 2019)⁸

From the above description, it is clear that Coggins does not claim that his machine is taking the photo of the actual aura but that the machine projects the aura onto the photograph based on information gathered through the hand readers. The concept of biofeedback that Coggins uses became popular in the mid-1970s among “New Edge” magazines and promotional material of innovative technologies. The term “New Edge” refers to the relationship between New Age spirituality and “high tech” and is generally associated with the belief that information technologies have “the capacity to connect people to a sacred reality that is otherwise deeply hidden inside the self and in the wider universe” (Zandbergen 2012, 359). Consequently, personal computers were increasingly explored as spiritual feedback systems claiming to allow users to regain awareness of who they truly are and to provide a solution to the modern alienation from their bodies (ibid., 370). This is a significant step forward in the direction of what aura vision technology had tried to do (for example, the abovementioned aura goggles) or already claimed to be doing. It often came as a surprise for first-time clients of the aura readers I interviewed. Indeed, Coggins’s aura cameras do not take the picture of one’s aura; they do more than that: they are machines that claim to process other types of information (hence the need of a laptop computer connected to a Coggins camera), which they then “translate” into an aura. This shift from simply “exposing” the invisible to “reproducing” the invisible has significant repercussions for how users of aura cameras conceive of the authority of aura technology and is a perfect example of the “magical” dimension of technology in general.

As Christian Kassung observes, the appearance since the nineteenth century of the enclosure to protect human and machine from one another reduced the complexity of functions to clear and distinct ends, and all communications with machines became interface based. This allowed new ways of interacting with machines, evoking strategies of communication that are not based on how the machine really works but on how the user imagines the machine to function (Kassung 2015, 14). In the case of aura photography, its constitutive elements are as follows:

1. The photo itself, which is the main focus of attention.
2. The camera, which is either specially built, such as Coggins’s or Kirlian’s technologies, or a normal camera perhaps attached to a smartphone or a laptop.

3. The process of “capturing” the aura, which in the case of special cameras relies on a specific technology sometimes embedded in the camera, but which today mostly takes the format of a software program or smartphone application that processes the photos independently of the camera itself.
4. The information/explanations of what the aura shown on the photo means: these may be transmitted by the “aura reader,” a professional with experience of using the camera and sometimes believed to possess some sort of supernatural abilities allowing him or her to understand the “meaning” of the colors; or they may be transmitted by the technology producing the photo itself, such as the pages of explanations coming out of the laptop connected to a Coggins camera and hosting his software or those appearing on the screen of a smartphone application.

The original source of authority for aura reading remains the same: it stems from the act of “reading” a photograph of someone in his or her presence (like Julia did for me) and claiming to base this advice on the very picture showing that person’s face, dressed in the clothes that he or she is wearing at that moment. The authority of this “reader” is enhanced by the apparatus when this is supposed to be specially built for this very specific purpose. In the digital age, however, “reading” is mostly done by the user him- or herself when examining the software’s comments on the photo. Coggins’s camera, by providing extra, paper-based explanations, in a sense does both. This is perhaps why it monopolized the market in the last decades of the twentieth century, but this did not stop it from becoming obsolete today. The reason is straightforward: from the moment Coggins introduced the biofeedback concept and connected the camera to a laptop and sensors, he not only claimed to be transplanting the person onto the polaroid paper but also translating that person as pure data. Like posthumanist projects such as Whole Brain Emulation, which strive to find a method to transfer humans into computers based on the belief in an analogy between consciousness and computational phenomena (Sconce 2015, 12), Coggins’s camera (the same as any new technology [Kassung 2015, 12]) already anticipated from the very beginning of its existence a more reliable successor. This came under the guise of digital photography.

RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND THE AURA CAMERA

“Having a spiritual counseling session with someone and just talking out of your head is not the same as talking to someone over their own snapshot,” argued Ms Watanabe, who started selling Coggins’s polaroid aura cameras in Japan in 1997, and who is understandably afraid of the digitalization of her profession. To prove her point during an interview in October 2016, Ms Watanabe proceeded to take my photo and print for me the entire set of explanations that Julia had been selling at the fair eight years earlier for the price of 10,000 yen.⁹ As Ms Watanabe was skimming through the pages, she repeated several times with pride that she was the one to have translated those explanations and instructions into Japanese from the English original material handed to her with the license to sell aura cameras and software by Coggins himself.

First, Ms Watanabe went over the color of my aura: she noted the red color (again) and dismissively nodding her head, repeated to herself: “Everything is red. Your aura is low; you are tired. You are a very active person and cannot relax. You need to be constantly doing something. But that everything is red is not necessarily bad. It means that your energy is stable and that you have a strong will. But, sometimes you need to stop and reflect on your actions.” Next, she explained the basic rules for reading an aura photo: the color above the right shoulder represents the past, the color above the head represents the present and the color above the left shoulder gives information on the future of the person. “When you were a kid you probably liked Lego. Fixing things up was your thing. Your future, which is also red, shows that your wishes will be fulfilled. Next year will be a good year for you.” After these general comments, Ms Watanabe proceeded to read quickly with me the pages of detailed explanations.

The first five pages mostly repeated what she had just said, but with more details and based on several more areas of observation that corresponded to what are popularly known as chakras (illustrated on a human-shaped figure): my crown chakra above my head, which showed my total energy (a red color meant that I was living at full speed); my third-eye chakra, which showed my inner vision (a red color meant that I had a very busy schedule and that all eyes were on me); my throat chakra, which showed the color of my energy (a golden color meant passion and humor; I was “meant to be a comedian”); my heart chakra, which showed my current feeling (a red color signified that I invest everything in my life); my third chakra, whose color represented my essence (a deep red color meant that I was stressed or ill); my second chakra, or energy center (an orange/red color showed my “creativity” and dynamism); and finally, my first chakra, which represented my physical energy (again, a red color showed effort and success).

The rest of the explanatory pages added further nuances to the previous descriptions by considering the same information from different angles. Page six showed the frequency of my aura, which represented the extent of my social influence (mine was mediocre) and the volume of the energy I produce on a scale of ten to one hundred (again I had mediocre results). Pages eight to ten showed the volume of energy at each chakra, whereas pages eleven to fourteen provided even more details: a pie chart showed the proportions of body (67.88%), mind (16.17%), and spirit (15.95%), the ideal being a perfect balance between the three percentages. Another page showed the color of my soulmate (I had red for “love”), my own lucky color (which remained unsurprisingly red), my planet (which was Mars), and my yin-yang balance (which seemed to lean toward yang).

Here, I argue that Coggins’s camera is important for several innovations in the field of aura photography. First, it enhanced the authority of the “aura reader,” because the machine itself was meant to be specially built for that purpose and manipulated only by its owner. Indeed, the aura reading session could be said to have started at the moment I entered Ms Watanabe’s room and saw this complicated mechanism: the camera on the tripod, the hand readers, the cables, and the laptop. At the same time, Coggins’s technology strengthened the “verity” of the existence of auras. The majority of aura readers (including famous spiritual coun-

sellor Ehara Hiroyuki, to whom I will return) usually relied on a “subjective” argument that attributed the ability to “see” auras only to them—and not to a camera. By contrast, Coggins attributed a certain level of “scientific” authority to the camera itself. This gave the camera an autonomous authority over the legitimization of the belief in auras. The camera is special and its workings remain a secret: this is, in fact, what each of the professional readers I interviewed makes sure to repeat to his or her clients at the beginning of each session. Finally, Coggins’s camera sought to standardize aura readings by producing a number of explanations on paper, to be used by the reader and the client. Although personalized, they stem from a database of readings he had allegedly gathered from several clairvoyants before building the machine. In fact, Coggins never seems to have claimed to be able to see auras himself.¹⁰

Before moving forward, it is perhaps worth noting that most people would consider these sessions a “scam” and the process of production of aura photographs (whether on film or digital) simply a matter of randomized combinations. This is not a new debate. From its beginnings the practice of spirit photography “thrived even in the context of acknowledged cases of fraud, a knowledge of how double exposures were produced, and a difference between the appearance of someone’s spirit and how he or she looked alive” (Willburn 2012, 376). Like the Baysiders’ miracle photos, spirit photography has always been an aesthetic and subjective practice, or in Bruno Latour’s words, an iconoclasm; “what happens when there is uncertainty about the exact role of the hand at work in the production of a mediator” (Latour 2002, 20). What I am interested in in this article are the motivations behind people’s will to believe in this apparatus rather than whether aura photography is true or not. Besides, the correspondence system between the three variables (color, intensity, and location = chakra), each bearing a specific array of meanings, can be frequently found in the world of pop psychology and self-development literature and does not constitute a monopoly by aura photography discourse. This does not mean, of course, that there have not been other, more localized attempts to interpret auras.

For example, a now much-less-remembered (none of my informants, for example, knew of him) Japanese individual named Imura Kōji produced several books about his own research on auras, conducted from 1974 to the mid-1980s (Imura 1984a, 84). Imura mostly used (and even eventually trained seven [Imura 1984b, 19]) people who were believed to have the ability to see auras and who produced more than 1,000 aura drawings (ibid, 107). Imura, however, did not associate aura with personality or character traits but with vitality and life force. Concepts of vitality and life force (*seimei*) have been ubiquitous in the modern religious culture of Japan. In particular, they characterize the doctrines of new religious movements (NRMs), which became popular again in the immediate postwar era. Since the nineteenth century, Japanese NRMs built their concept of salvation on the belief in the existence of a fundamental source of energy, the unbalance of which is seen as the cause of human calamities and disjuncture with godly beings and nature (see Tsushima et al. 1979).¹¹ Imura’s book, *Aura Technology*, shares elements of this worldview. The book starts with several Kirlian photos comparing the rather

dim aura of a carrot bought at a regular supermarket with the more glittering aura of a carrot grown at a local Kyoto farm. His is a very strong message: scientific advancement risks turning us into robots. “We need to 1) develop technology that will allow us to feel and control vitality (*seiki*), so that we can protect ourselves, our families, our societies and the world, and 2) discover a new technology that detects vitality and aura, so that we can neutralize the poison of science” (ibid., 8). Imura eventually developed his own theory of subtle bodies (of which he argued there were three) and layers of aura (of which he believed there were four).¹² But, despite using Kirlian photography for his own experiments, he claimed that the Kirlian method only captures an electrical discharge and not necessarily the vital energy of the aura.¹³ In the end, Imura’s advice is to train ourselves to see aura through a series of relaxation techniques and physical postures (see ibid., 125–50) that would allow us to reach the objectives set forth at the beginning of his treatise on aura technology.

Imura, therefore, resembled a more conventional religious leader, unwilling to relinquish (even partly) the authority of knowledge to machines. Coggins stood at nearly the other extreme: he relied entirely on his camera’s ability of reproduction to imply that he was in possession of the knowledge of how an aura is constructed and how it functions. Coggins’s camera in effect *makes* auras, but Coggins only seemed to have cherished the secular authority that this engineering knowledge granted him (in addition to financial benefits). Coggins relinquished religious authority to the buyers of his machine. He enhanced their authority by enhancing the secrecy behind the capacities of regular polaroid cameras but simultaneously made users entirely dependent on a machine they could not claim to understand. This separation of authorities, therefore, brought aura photography closer to the next step: “everyone” can now produce aura photos.

THE DIGITALIZATION OF AURA PHOTOGRAPHY: TECHNOLOGY’S IMPACT ON AURA BELIEF

In twenty-first-century Japan, the word “aura” left the circles of fans of “occulture” (Partridge 2013) and reached a wider audience through a television program, *The Source of Aura* (*Ōra no Izumi*). Self-proclaimed spiritual counselor Ehara Hiroyuki “read” the aura and conversed with the guardian spirits of his celebrity guests on the show without the use of any device, such as an aura camera. Originally broadcast late night every Monday, in April 2007 the show was moved to Saturday evening at 8pm, the “golden time” of audience rates. In a book titled *Japan’s Aura* (*Nihon no ōra*) published in September 2007, at the peak of his program’s popularity, Ehara acknowledges the role that his television appearances played in popularizing the term “aura.” He explains it as follows: aura is the name given to the spiritual energy emanating from two sources, the astral body (*yūtai*) and the spiritual body (*reitai*), which, one after the other, surround our physical body (*nikutai*). The aura of the astral body reflects the health condition of the body, for example showing red where an inflammation occurs. The aura of the spiritual body is located on top of the head and shows the mental and spiritual

states of the person. “What I see in *The Source of Aura*, is the aura of the spiritual body” (Ehara 2007, 27). Ehara continues with a general description: auras can have different colors and shades, as well as different sizes, but good auras and bad auras do not exist. The objective is of course to have an aura of a clear color and shape, but auras that are too clear are not helpful to live in this world either. “My aura is devoid of stains because I have seen and know the darkness of this world” (ibid., 29).

Despite Ehara’s simplification of earlier theories, he remains in the “old school” (similar to Imura) of those who claim that only someone with special abilities (like himself) can see auras. These auras, as Leadbeater argued more than one hundred years ago, can tell us a lot about the person. For Leadbeater and his contemporaries, however, auras were unique in color variation to each person. There were an infinite number of them, and colors constantly shifted according to an equally infinite number of factors of influence. Yet, from a technological perspective, Coggins’s camera is not able to produce that variety of colors, since it is precisely trying to *reproduce* them and not transfer them onto the paper directly. Theories about aura had therefore to be adapted.

The same year as Ehara’s book, Ms Watanabe published a revised edition of her own book on aura photography, which originally appeared in 1998. To define aura in her book, Ms Watanabe quotes the translation of one of the worldwide New Age bestsellers: Barbara Brennan’s *Hands of Light*, originally published in 1987.¹⁴ Brennan defined the aura as “the Human Energy field [which] is the manifestation of universal energy that is intimately involved with human life” (Brennan 1988, 41). In both Ms Watanabe’s and Brennan’s books, seven layers of aura are described, each associated with a chakra (“a vortex of energy,” or sort of *keiraku*, a meridian) and with specific “sensations, emotions, thoughts, memories and other non-physical experiences that we report to our doctors and therapists” (ibid., 43). Both describe how chakras have specific colors depending on the energy that they let through and how these constantly change (hence the colors of the aura) as humans’ sensations, thoughts, and emotions fluctuate.¹⁵ This is why, as Ms Watanabe insisted, two aura photos of the same individual taken at a short interval show completely different colors. This is also the reason, I was told, why people who know about aura photography want to take their photo: they want to find out the color of their aura during that specific period of their lives.

Interestingly, however, the simplified explanations attached to each color in a two-page leaflet given out to clients by Mr Suzuki, another aura photographer, hint at the idea that some colors may appear less often than others. The pamphlet shows in two sentences for each color a hierarchy between the “strong will” of the red, the “freedom” of the orange, or the “innocence” of the yellow—the colors that appear most frequently—and the “kindness” of the blue, the “mysteriousness” of the purple, or the “high healing powers” of the white, which, the pamphlet notes, seldom show in a person’s aura (this is the same order of colors as they appear in Brennan’s book, page 48).¹⁶ “Everyone wants to have some mix of blue or purple at least,” explained Ms Watanabe. “It is because they are the colors of the mental body (*seishintai*), whereas the first three are the colors of the physical body

(*nikutai*.)” In the so-called new spirituality culture (see Shimazono, 1999), the search for a higher state of consciousness and self-spirituality leads undoubtedly to clients seeking proof of their daily efforts to spiritually better themselves, hence the tendency of clients to hope for blue or purple colors.

Nevertheless, although the photographers know that photos can show different colors for the same person at different times, they also know that most clients will not be willing to come for a photo session every day or at regular intervals. Hence aura photo readings tend to seek a description of the client’s entire life (past and future) and personality, as was obvious during my own sessions. This is, in a sense, facilitated by the actual low color variation produced by Coggins’s camera, which makes it easier for aura readers to associate each client with the clear-cut colors appearing on the photo. In fact, some users of Coggins’s camera seem to be expecting the results before they see them: “you know, in the end, even though there are seven colors, most people have auras of just three colors: red, orange and yellow, and the variations in between. This is because the type of the person is fixed, so the colors cannot change much.” This was the comment made by Mr Ozawa, who bought a camera from Ms Watanabe fifteen years ago, and uses it with every one of his clients, as an accompaniment to the counseling session that precedes his therapies. The first half of Mr Ozawa’s comment seems to hint at a technical limitation of Coggins’s camera, which does not produce a grand variety of colors. Yet, he explains the phenomenon by attaching a certain hierarchy to the coloring, reproducing the traditional view that a rare number of people are more “spiritual” than others, so some colors seldom appear on photos. In other words, Coggins’s technology has fallen victim to its inability to reproduce the belief about the infinite number of colors. Yet, this has not led to the disappearance of that belief, but, under the authority of professional aura “readers,” to an exacerbation of the idea of color hierarchy and to the ensuing typology of personalities according to the seven colors.

This aspect is important because it has risen back to the surface with the digital turn. By helping establish a system of correspondences between colors and personalities (also chakras, planets, and other elements figuring in my own ten-page report described above), Coggins’s machine provoked the loss of its own sacred character. The machine’s secret mechanism that allowed the reproduction of auras provoked at the same time the “democratization” of aura reading itself, hence the eventual appearance of software and smartphone applications that no longer reproduce the auras but rather the established mechanism of aura reading. This is what Coggins’s camera was in effect doing already but under a special apparatus that still gave the impression that it was only his camera that could “see” auras and only the camera holders / aura “readers” who could read the aura photos. Ms Watanabe, a staunch critic of digital aura photography since the appearance of the first software ten years ago, aware that her business is doomed to close down, tried to defend Coggins’s technology for its quality: “it is not the same; you never get clear shades with the digital photos.” But what she really meant was probably what Mr Suzuki, who also sounded pessimistic about the inevitable digital turn, was more willing to admit: “you know, I have opened this box [referring to the Coggins

camera's box] and seen several small colored bulbs inside. These are what make the polaroid pictures of such high quality. Even if one day, we can get the same quality with digital pictures, we will still have to deal with the fact that people may not be looking into this mysterious box, but in the camera of their laptop; and this will never provide the same feeling."

Admittedly, when one sees figures 1 and 2 side by side, the polaroid photo seems to offer a closer image of how people think auras look like and more opportunities for interpretation of the color nuances and shapes within the halo surrounding the person. The digital picture is a more standard idea and looks more like an automatic process, which would show an aura whether there is a person in the picture or not. From this perspective, Ms Watanabe's comment sounds truthful: polaroid photos give professional aura readers more "depth" and space for individualizing their narrative for each of their clients. The "realistic" blurry coloring of the polaroid enhances their authority, perhaps even more than the apparatus, the "box," that Mr. Suzuki finds so irreplaceable in his profession. Religious experiences associated with technology cannot be separated from the texture of the text and the nature of the machines concerned (Dixon 2007, 729). This is the case with the polaroid, just as it is with, for example, electronic voice phenomena (EVP) in which enthusiasts decipher messages in the mechanical noises made by audio equipment, such as radio or audio tapes. No medium is transparent or friction-free, but it is precisely the specificities of its functioning or malfunctioning that allow interpretation of the significance of the message. Hence, similar to what happens with narratives of ghost encounters, both clients, and to some extent aura readers, find themselves in a circular logic, by which they "jolt themselves out of uncertainty by putting faith in their own extraordinary experiences and using them as a basis for producing beliefs" (Hill 2010, 114). It is this circle of cognitive and affective forms of belief that sustained the authority of aura photos as instruments of spiritual experience. But, for how long?

AURA PHOTOGRAPHY AS SIMPLY, PHOTOGRAPHY

What has happened to aura photography has already in fact occurred in the more "popular" field of spirit photography. According to Koike (2005, 164–70), the term "spirit photos" (in Japanese *shinrei shashin*) only reached popular use in Japan around 1974, the same year Imura started his experiments on auras. Although spirit photos had existed before the 1970s, they were previously known by the term ghost photos (*yūrei shashin*) and bore a less eerie image. Koike claims that this was because, with a few exceptions, most pre-1970s spirit photos depicted people who were known to those who took them, so ghost photographs were more often cherished by their owners than feared (*ibid.*, 167–68). Many of these photos were taken by professional photographers or people who, willingly or not, may have been able to manipulate the photograph so that the ghost might be easily recognizable. Indeed, sometimes a great deal of effort was put into making these ghost photographs. This is perhaps why most of the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century photographs can still be found today.

In the 1960s and 1970s, with the popularization of instant photography and the use of cameras by a larger number of households, everyone was potentially able to take photos—including ghost photos.¹⁷ Hence there occurred what Koike calls the “post-modernization of spirit photography,” namely the mass “production” of spirit photos provoked by the fact that no special skills or technology were needed to take them (ibid., 152). In practice, this resulted in the appearance of photographs taken by amateurs who did not claim that they clearly took a photo of a spirit. Rather, Koike’s “post-modern spirit photography” is characterized by photo owners who claim that a shadow *looks like* a ghost or *has the shape* of a monster but with no clear-cut identification of who or what it may be. In this sense, the democratization of spirit photography took the authority out of the hands of the professional photographers who had painstakingly ensured that spirits on their films were identifiable as spirits and put it in the hands of every camera owner. Simultaneously, the advance of technology that allows theoretically anyone to buy a camera today means that a “limited degree of control over exposure and processing and the perceived lack of any facility or reason for failure that might give rise to superimpositions, narrows considerably the opportunity for manipulation and fakery” (Harvey 2007, 145). Hence, the product, the photo itself, attracts more interest than the process—and users are less impressed by the authority behind the “science” of spirit or aura photography.

Considered in this light, both Coggins and Imura took a logical decision when they developed their theories about aura photography in the 1970s. Coggins decided to complicate the process of “capturing” aura by adding hand readers, software, and a mechanism that enhanced the “scientific” authority of aura photography. Imura, on the other hand, denied that technology had actually captured the “true” aura so far and fell back on the claim that only “special” or “trained” individuals could see it. Interestingly, I heard a similar argument to this still being used with regards to Ehara Hiroyuki’s televised aura readings. Mr Suzuki, who has been photographing auras with the Coggins cameras for the last twenty years, mentioned that most of his clients always ask one of two questions: “what is the best color to have?” to which he always replies that all colors are good (see discussion above); and “is the aura on the photo the same as that Ehara sees?” to which he dismissively responds: “well, I don’t know which layer of aura he can see, but I suppose it is not everything.” Here, Mr Suzuki agrees with Imura that the aura is more complicated than it is usually believed to be, but he also trusts the Coggins camera’s ability to capture that complexity, more than Ehara’s. In his effort to claim greater authority over aura reading than a popular television figure, Mr Suzuki awards Coggins’s camera complete authority over the production of knowledge about auras, exacerbating again his dependence on the machine.

Returning to spirit photography, the democratization of high-quality photography continued, and in the 1990s new types of spirit photos became popular on the market. They all have in common the fact that there is no ghost or creature figuring in these photos. Rather, one of the humans or objects seems to have lost a part of their body or has an extra limb or is shown entirely duplicated (Maekawa 2004, 49–52). Kihara attributes this further change of trend to the “spiritualization”

(*reiseika*) of spirit photographs and calls them “spirituality photos” (*reisei shashin*) (Kihara 2007, 66), by which he means that instead of showing a spirit, the pictures show the spiritual state of the person on the photo. In the same vein, Kihara argues that the resurgence of aura photos through Ehara’s television program testifies to this further “spiritualization” of photography, by which pictures depict personalities and psychological conditions rather than dead spirits and monsters (ibid., 64). This is perhaps why no one remembers Imura today: auras are believed first and foremost to show the mental and physical conditions of the person, not a/their vital energy.

What is perhaps missing from Kihara’s argument is the change in the medium through which most spirit photographs are taken today: the digital format. In concluding his study of the early-twentieth-century spirit photography of Julien Ochorowicz, Jeremy Stolow notes that “making photographs legible depends on a host of decisions and interventions at the level of production but also at the level of interpretation as carried out by trained observers who must know how to weed out meaningless noise in order to retain the good data: the images that confirm the consistency of any given indexical claim” (Stolow 2016, 948). Digital technology has undoubtedly simplified the intervention at the process of production to the maximum. Equipped with automatic zoom, flash, and even retouching, it is, in practice, nearly impossible to make a “bad” photo with a good digital camera today. Yet this automatization, immediacy, and theoretically infinite number of ways of manipulating a photo has, I argue, led to at least one consequence with regards to spirit and by extension aura photography: it has desacralized the mechanism, namely the camera, by separating religious authority from technological authority. In other words, people have become less curious about how the photo was taken (there are now plenty of programs on television that claim to show how to make spirit photos or videos of alleged ghost apparitions) than how the resulting photo can be produced. Coggins was aware of this problem and tried to counter it by putting the polaroid camera in a blue box and indirectly enhancing the authority of his technology by constantly increasing the number of pages of explanations (some of which have gone, as I illustrated earlier, beyond what Theosophists saw in the aura of individuals). Unfortunately, according to Ms Watanabe, most people ignore these last pages of explanations and prefer to just receive the couple of pages that are printed by default and for a lower price. Coggins, in fact, is also now offering software (not a camera) that allows the capture of an aura video or a 3D aura model of the person through a regular web camera, with more detailed and more visually informative explanations than the traditional text that accompanied the polaroid photos. In this sense, digitalization has caught up with Coggins as well, while the sensorial richness of the aura-reading session has been declining.

When Ms Watanabe and Mr Suzuki lament the end of the production of polaroid film, they in fact express a desire to still partly rely on the authority of this sacralized technology, through the “spectacle” offered by the process of production. Mr Suzuki clearly noted that even if Coggins makes a digital aura camera one day, it had to be set in the same way as the box of small colored bulbs that contains his camera today: “he probably thinks he does not need to do it, but I think he does. It is not the same as the smartphone’s camera.” And this was the same with

spirit photography since its beginnings. As Wojcik describes, “the moment of creating a spirit photograph often was an intense ritual event, involving direct and personal experiences . . . sometimes Bibles were passed around, and people prayed and sang hymns, and trance states and ritualized performances were common” (Wojcik 2009, 118). On the contrary, the digitalization of aura photography has reduced the ritualistic aspect of sessions, pushing aura photos into a more instrumentalized role. Ms Tanaka, another aura reader, for example stopped using the Coggins camera several years ago, preferring to take print screen shots of an aura video of the client on her laptop using another maker’s software:

I never do just aura reading sessions anymore anyway. I always combine aura photography with other sessions. Last year, for example, I collaborated with another two therapists, one masseur and one counselor, and we provided special sessions in which I would play music using a crystal while the client would receive counseling, then a massage. At the end of this 3-hour session, I would compare the before-after aura photos with the client, and everyone could see the difference. I would then record the music I had played on a CD and ask the client to meditate on it at home while looking at the aura photo taken after the session.

As in Mr Ozawa’s case, for Ms Tanaka aura photos are the instrument of diagnosis of a condition or status, not the medium of “experiencing” aura. This perhaps returns us to the late-nineteenth-century use of ghost photographs as proofs in public trials (see Hashimoto 2010, 27) but also hints at a rather different shift in the religious experience offered by aura photography: aura photos, like spirit/ghost photos since the 1990s, have become, in a sense, “normal” photos.¹⁸

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As Catherine Albanese writes, in the post-Freudian discourse community in which New Ager and aura popularizer Barbara Brennan and her contemporaries function, all life misfortunes have to do with failed relationships and self-esteem (Albanese 2007, 461). Indeed, Ms Tanaka’s definition of an aura photo was “the thing that visualizes our inner situation.” Yet, what should be obvious now is that what allows such meanings is related to the photographic technology itself, which permits that *gap* of interpretation between what a photo shows and what we see on it. It is this gap that the aura reader makes use of in order to “borrow” from the authority of the technological device and to support his or her own claims. It is the ability of scientific and rational media, such as the camera, to isolate and reproduce the world that gives rise to new spheres of specialized belief and alienated experience (Geoghegan 2015, 5).

Coggins materialized this gap by enveloping his camera into a blue box “full of mystery.” He sought to enforce onto the camera a special ability to produce auras, and claimed that his technology could show what only clairvoyants see and interpret. Yet, in order to do that, Coggins had to systematize the interpretations and meanings attributed to auras. As a result, he made it easier for the next generation of digital cameras to reproduce his final product, while ignoring the mechanism. He relegated the religious authority onto the users of the camera but kept the

authority of technological knowledge, forgetting that from the moment a new technology is used “it generates a new future in [the] form of a promise for a better usability” (Kassung 2015, 12).

Birgit Meyer has argued that religion “is about the link between humans and the divine. In order for that link to be experienced as genuine, sensational forms must be persuasive” (Meyer 2010, 757). With no doubt, aura photos are there to mediate between the person photographed and the layers of energy that are supposed to tell that person not only about his or her condition but also to give advice about his or her future. Embedding the phenomenon of aura photography into the wider category of spirit photography, this article has shown that, as Meyer also argues, “the acknowledgement of the capacity of new technologies to mediate, and even convey immediacy . . . is rooted in broader notions and practices that attribute certain capacities to these technologies” (Meyer 2011, 31). Undoubtedly, the camera, perhaps due to its own liminality (see above; Hamano 2015, 126), has since the time of its appearance been considered capable of capturing the spiritual, regardless of the interpretation of what eventually appeared on film. But with the arrival of digital photography arose both a possibility of bypassing the use of this “special” medium, namely the “energy”-endowed, film-based photographic technology, and also a question about the appropriateness of the new digital medium’s genuineness as a sensational form. Simply put, polaroid cameras had film. Digital cameras have lost this intermediate carrier and now everything is “data.” This phenomenon, in which the entirety of the visible and invisible world could become information—visible, accessible, and interchangeable information—would lead to what Jean Baudrillard has called Integral Reality, a reality whereby there is no longer anything on which there is nothing to say; a world of hyperobjectivity (cited in Sconce 2015, 18).

The aura readers’ comments about the disappearance of polaroid aura photography highlight their awareness of the need to avoid that situation by keeping the apparatus, even if new technology is adopted. They do not seem to doubt that the digital aura photos really show the aura of people. They do not deny the capacity of photographic technology, in any form, to capture aura. They do not even seem to worry about the heightened immediacy offered by smartphone cameras and applications. Polaroid photos after all only took one minute to develop. What they seem to fear is the disappearance of their own role as “technicians” and extensions of a medium whose authority relied not on the visual information, which Ms Tanaka and many therapists today mostly use, but on a process of production that started with the very existence of the aura camera itself. All aura photographers started their sessions with an explanation of how the camera works, mentioning the concept of biofeedback and later of what the colors may mean. The client’s experience started with sitting on the stool in front of this blue box that she or he believed to be a device specifically built for capturing auras. If the device turns out to be the same as the one the client uses to take family or holiday photos, the focus, as in the new types of spirit photos of the 1990s, will shift onto visual information, namely the difference that aura photos have with regular ones, and by the same token, with previously taken aura photos. In this sense, as a de-sacralized medium, digital aura photography produces “normal” photos onto

which a colored halo is added. These regular photos are merely the basis on which the aura (i.e., colors) is projected. Like reading a horoscope and not particularly believing that the newspaper itself is a special newspaper capable of showing the horoscope, consumers of digital aura photos look at the aura (i.e., colors), not the photo nor, of course, the camera.

The ultimate example of the de-sacralization of aura photography was provided by Ms Watanabe herself. At the end of our long interview, she stood up and went to a small drawer at the back of the room. From there she extracted a large envelope, which she proceeded to empty on the table in front of me. “These are special aura photos,” she started explaining. “I do not usually show them to clients.” By “special,” I soon understood that Ms Watanabe meant that these photos had to do with the special circumstances under which the aura photos had been taken. One photo, for example, showed a Buddhist priest, surrounded by a bluish halo, which Ms Watanabe was “expecting” to see considering the spiritual condition of her client. Another photo showed a child, also with a bluish halo that Ms Watanabe interpreted as expressing innocence. Finally, a series of three photos showed a woman with a reddish aura, but with a white mark, a sort of line, breaking through the right part of the photo. “This woman came here for an exorcism and I believe that Coggins’s camera snapped the evil spirit,” exclaimed Ms Watanabe. “Look at the second one. This one I took because I thought there was a problem with the camera with the first one. This time the line appears on the left, as if the spirit had been passing through. Then, on the third one, it is nowhere to be found. So strange, isn’t it?” concluded Ms Watanabe. Coggins’s camera never fails. Ms Watanabe repeated this several times, almost as if I had gone there to buy one.¹⁹ Abnormality had to do with the spirit world not our world. This encounter suggested to me that Ms Watanabe—in that moment at least—considered even the aura photos that Coggins’s camera produced to be “normal,” like digital photos. Similar to an X-ray, they were diagnostic tools showing things (auras) that we cannot see, but which exist. They had become so “normal” that they could now be disturbed by curious apparitions. Aura photos could now become spirit photos—what an irony?

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NOTES

1. The term “spiritual business” (*supirichuaru bijinesu*) is a Japanese construct popularized by sociologist of religion Yoshihide Sakurai’s 2009 short treatise on the topic, *Rei to kane*:

Supirichuaru bijinesu no kōzō [Spirits and money: The structure of the spiritual business]. Sakurai uses the term to refer to the transactions taking place in healing sessions led by the *ogamiya* (traditional type of shamanistic practitioner) and *uranai-shi* (fortune-teller) living in urban centers and by all those practitioners who appear on screen when inserting the word *supirichuaru* (spiritual) in an internet web search engine (Sakurai 2009, 10). Later, Ioannis Gaitanidis offers a narrower definition of the term, which he claims should indicate only the activities of those who are part of a post-1995 media phenomenon in Japan that brought to the fore individuals who openly distrust organized religions and what they consider to be traditional “obsolete” beliefs perpetrated by the *ogamiya* (2011, 188). The same year, a market researcher, Arimoto Yumiko, provided a definition that is even wider than that of Sakurai: “it is a business that appeals to spiritual satisfaction by transcendental means that remain unexplainable by today’s science” (Arimoto 2011, 48).

2. According to Koike Takehiko (2005, 34), at least two photos of which we are aware today are competing for the position of first spirit photograph in Japanese history. One is a photo from 1878, showing the figure of a soldier from Kumamoto who was supposed to have died already in the Satsuma rebellion of 1877. The other, which has been preserved to this day, is that of a woman who thinly appears at the background of the portrait of a Buddhist monk, taken in Yokohama in 1879.

3. The last *supima* was held in summer 2017.

4. In foreign currency, the two-page explanation would cost approximately 21 pounds sterling, 27 U.S. dollars, or 24 euro, and the fifteen-page explanation would be sold for 70 pounds sterling, 91 U.S. dollars, or 80 euro (January 24, 2019 exchange rates).

5. Many popular books written by spiritual counsellors, aura readers, and other practitioners of the spiritual business in Japan, such as Ms Watanabe, whom I introduce later in the article, often refer to the Japanese translation of theosophist E. Norman Pearson’s *Space, Time, and Self* (1964). The book, first translated in Japan in 1996, is titled *Shinchiigaku no shinzui* [The essence of Theosophy] and is therefore presented as providing the basics of Theosophical thought.

6. Another more recent example is that described by Naoko Frances Hioki, who connected to the influence of Leadbeater’s aura theory a series of colorful teacups known as *yō-wan* (luminous bowl) artwork produced between 1944 and 1945 by Deguchi Onisaburo, spiritual leader of the new religion Oomoto (Hioki 2017).

7. All names preceded by Mr or Ms are pseudonyms. Furthermore, to protect the anonymity of my informants who may have mentioned these interviews online, I do not include the dates of my interviews.

8. Ms Watanabe commented that Coggins has always been very secretive about how his camera works and has never revealed the mechanism to his partners. None of the photographers I talked to nor anyone on the web seems to know the details of this patented operation.

9. Ms Watanabe informed me that the prices of aura photos depend on the individual reader and are not set by her when she sells them the camera and accompanying accessories.

10. In her book and in her interview, Ms Watanabe complained that Coggins, whom she met in 1992, never explained to her how to read the photos.

11. I thank an anonymous reader for pointing out the value of placing Imura’s ideas in the religious culture of his time.

12. Imura seems to have returned to the original, H. P. Blavatsky’s writings, in which she only refers to three subtle bodies. It was only C. W. Leadbeater and Annie Besant who expanded this theory and arrived at descriptions of not three, but seven subtle bodies.

13. He even says that he reproduced the first phantom leaf experiment on Japanese soil on October 26, 1975 (Imura 1984b, 99).

14. In 1993, *Hands of Light* had 225,000 copies in print and had been translated into nine languages (Angelo 1993, 72). In 2004, the book had been translated in twenty-two languages and had sold over 1 million copies (Albanese 2007, 458). The book was translated into

Japanese in 1995 and the most recent version I could find on Amazon dated from 2011, which was the nineteenth print.

15. Katō Yukiko has argued that it was Leadbeater who first associated the seven colors of the rainbow to the seven chakras (Katō 2015, 177).

16. Sometimes, as in Ms Watanabe's book, instead of white, purple is the last color, and incidentally the color of the crown chakra. In that case, the last-but-one color is described as indigo (*ai*). Yet, often the same pamphlets or books on the subject of aura or chakra colors contain more than one version of this series. Later in the same book, Ms Watanabe's list of colors shows as follows: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet, white.

17. In 1957, the camera's penetration rate for households in Japan was 35.7 percent. In 1974, it was 75.6 percent, and in 1995, when the first digital cameras came to the market, the rate was 85.7 percent (Yamada 2002, 161).

18. In her interview, Ms Watanabe mentioned a recent phone call to her office by an unknown man who was claiming that European airports use aura cameras to identify passengers.

19. The full set of Coggins's aura camera sold by Ms Watanabe costs 2,100,000 yen (approx. 14,800 pounds sterling, 19,200 U.S. dollars, or 16,900 euro. These are January 23, 2019 exchange rates).

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