IPRPD
International Journal of Arts, Humanities & Social Science
ISSN 2693-2547 (Print), 2693-2555 (Online)
Volume 01; Issue no 05: October 15, 2020

Mariko Mori: Intertwining Art and Shamanic Spirituality

Silvia Rivadossi[1]

[1] *Department of Asian and North African Studies, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Venice, Italy*
E-mail: silvia.rivadossi@unive.it

Received: 17/09/2020
Accepted for Publication: 25/09/2020
Published: 15/10/2020

Abstract

By looking at the Japanese artistic milieu between the late 20th century and the first decades of the 21st century, it is possible to notice that the category "shaman" and the connected narratives are defined, used and re-negotiated in many ways. To illustrate this process of re-appropriation and re-invention of "traditional" terms and themes, this paper investigates the case of contemporary artist Mariko Mori. Her interest in spirituality, "traditional" religions, and archaeology has led her to construct a personal narrative of shamanism that develops in three main phases, going from a representation of the shamanic actor to the evocation of its role and, finally, to the embodiment of the latter. Her main aim of revitalizing the connection between humans and nature, by using the most advanced technology, can be traced back to "new spirituality" and, within it, to what has been defined as "shamanic spirituality".

Keywords: Mariko Mori, shaman, spirituality, nature, contemporary art.

Introduction

At the turn of the 21st century, a new discourse on shamanism emerged in the Japanese metropolitan context through the re-appropriation of "traditional" motives by artists, who then mingled them with more contemporary elements.

A remarkable example is offered by Mariko Mori[1], a Japanese artist who lives and works between Tokyo and New York. Her production includes photographs, videos, multimedia installations, performances and sculptures, which have been exhibited all over the world. She has received prizes and awards including a Honorable Mention at the 47th Venice Biennale in 1997 and the "Annual Award for artists and scholars in the field of contemporary Japanese art", awarded to her by the Japan Cultural Arts Foundation in 2001.

Her interest in spiritual themes began in 1996, as a consequence of an experience of death and rebirth, which Mori describes as

> an event that I experienced as death. Rather, my consciousness programmed me to die, so to speak. First, I found my vision was changing. Then, all my memories, from the present back to my birth, came to me. I even remembered the time before my birth. And everything turned black. I was conscious that I was in darkness for a time – five or six hours, perhaps. It took a long time to recover my consciousness. I struggled hard, for my desire to live was strong. I saw myself struggling and I knew the moment when I returned. The moment of return was a state of total blankness or nothingness. The first thing I remembered was the fact that I was a living being. In other words, the

> consciousness of being alive recovered first. Then, I gradually remembered that I was not merely a living being, but a life with some meaning. A long time elapsed before I finally remembered that I was a human being. I felt as if I had been reborn in my consciousness, as though I had become a different being. (Hayward, 2007, Texts)

Since then, a common theme in her artistic production has been shamanism, which she has developed in three main phases. In the first, the artist, acting as the protagonist of the artwork, embodied the shamanic actor and role. During the second phase, starting in the early years of the 21st century, Mori created sculptures inspired by her studies of Japanese archaeology. On the occasion of some exhibitions devoted to these works, Mori offered ritual-like performances, by means of which she intended to vitalize her works, thus evoking the shamanic role. These ritual performances became central in the last phase, which coincides with the creation of a non-profit organization with the mission of connecting humans and nature through Mori's artworks.

Mariko Mori's works are strongly interconnected: there is a continuous recurrence not only of specific themes, but also of specific materials, techniques and intentions. One constant feature is the extensive use of the most advanced technologies,[2] which Mori employs to achieve the key objective of her whole production: to revitalize the connection between humans and nature.[3] As will become clearer through this paper, this aim is strictly connected to Mori's interest in the various Japanese religious and spiritual traditions. Throughout her artistic path, she undertakes a search for answers to a need for spirituality, which leads her to range from hyper-futuristic themes to traditional Buddhist and Shinto ones, and from these to the study of the Japanese prehistoric period. The artist therefore moves between an imagined future, a present within which she isolates some characteristics of the more "traditional" forms of spirituality, and a distant past, which is crystallized and strongly idealized.

Mori has stated that what she represents in her works is reality, thus offering the viewer a perspective to understand her artistic production:

> I think my work is misread sometimes. People think I'm creating a fantasy world to escape from reality. But I believe that a synthetic world has its own reality and consciousness – it's what you experience, what you feel, what you dream. (Wallis, 2008, 5)

"Traditional" shamans and contemporary shamanic spirituality

Before presenting the means by which Mori has employed and re-negotiated the discourse on shamans, creating her own version of it, it is useful to briefly reflect on the terminology involved, and especially to consider the difficulties in clearly defining what the terms "shaman" and "shamanism" stand for[4]. It is undeniable that these concepts, which are frequently taken for granted, are nothing but historical constructs: a universal form of shamanism does not (and cannot) exist. Therefore, instead of trying to define what shamanism is and means universally, it is more fruitful to analyze what people, in a specific historical and cultural context, think it is and what meanings they assign to it. In order to achieve this goal, a useful theoretical framework could be the one offered by discursive approaches to religion, in the specific form of critical discourse analysis (see von Stuckrad, 2013; von Stuckrad & Wijsen, 2016).

Mariko Mori's discourse on shamans intertwines "traditional" elements with more contemporary ones: she makes a clear reference to traditional Japanese shamanic actors, and, in general, to the religious traditions of the archipelago (especially esoteric Buddhism), while at the same time talking about energy, light, and the importance of technology, which are all elements in line with the so-called "new spirituality movements and culture" (Shimazono, 2004, 275-30) that developed during the Nineties. Within this category – not limited to the Japanese context – one finds what can be labeled "shamanic spirituality" (Townsend, 2004, 52), meaning a fluid contemporary discourse on urban shamans, whose practices are centered on the individual. Their aim is mainly to empower the individual and reconstruct a harmonious relationship between him/her, nature and spirits. As will

soon become clear, this is the same goal toward which Mori has been addressing her production, especially in the last few years.

As for the connection with the shamanic tradition, in the first artwork to be analyzed below Mori uses the word *miko*, which identifies the classical Japanese female shaman, especially in the pre-modern period. Mori often refers to other traditional actors as well, namely those still active in the Ryūkyū Islands, and especially those known as *noro*, who perform rituals designed to preserve the connection between the community and its natural environment.

Looking for the true essence of Japanese spirituality and for ways to re-connect humans and nature, Mori has undertaken a study of the Jōmon period (ca. 10,500 BC – ca. 300 BC). Because this was the last historical period before contact with Chinese culture was established, it is believed to hold the core of authentic Japaneseness, of which harmony with nature appears to be a characteristic feature. We thus find an evident influence from *nihonjinron*, theories on "Japaneseness": discourses on the identity of the Japanese people which emphasize its alleged uniqueness and homogeneity (Befu, 2001).

Going back in time to the prehistoric period in order to find one's core and elements thought to be useful to solve contemporary problems is common in the sphere of shamanic spirituality, and not merely in Japan.

That said, we can now move on to an analysis of Mori's representations of the shamanic role.

First phase: *Miko no inori*

Miko no inori. Link of the Moon is a video installation realized in 1996 and presented by Mori as "the first work I made after the transition from earthly to heavenly themes. I was undergoing an important spiritual transformation" (Hayward, 2007, Texts).

The original installation consists of five screens[5] that simultaneously show a video lasting about three minutes and entitled *Miko no inori*, also known by its English translation The *Shaman-girl's Prayer*. It is interesting that Mori herself has chosen to translate the Japanese term *miko* as "shaman-girl", thus welding together the meanings and imageries conveyed by the two words.

The performance was created and filmed inside Osaka Kansai International Airport, which was designed by Renzo Piano and built on an artificial island between 1987 and 1994. The choice of this non-place was motivated by its futuristic architecture and by the fact that it is completely artificial and thus devoid of natural elements: a "technological place" (Farani, Goretti, & Schneider, 2011, 55), as Mori defines it in an interview, in which she inserts the *miko*, represented as having hyper-technological and futuristic traits.

In this artwork, as in all her early works, the protagonist is Mariko Mori herself: she is the costume designer, the actress, the singer and the director of the video.

Mori's *miko* wears a white synthetic fabric dress whose neck is transformed into a sort of pair of plastic wings. White is the color also used for the long nails and the bob wig with strands of blue and indigo hair. The *miko* also wears a small and shiny silver crescent-shaped tiara that reflects the surrounding environment and reflective contact lenses that give her an ethereal and, at the same time, alien appearance and that lead the viewer to immediately realize that she comes from a highly technological, non-earthly reality. The eyes are highlighted by an indigo tattoo that forms a mask around them. Art historian Allison Holland associates the tattoo with the characteristic mask that the raccoon has around its eyes and defines it as "shamanistic totemic markings" (Holland, 2011, 13), referring to the North American context – a reference that has not been confirmed by the artist.

The chromatic choice – a recurrent feature both in most of the artist's later works and in her personal life, since she only dresses in white – was motivated by Mori with the following words: "I feel it's the closest to light. Every being seems to me to be light, kind of invisible light. It's a source of energy. You don't see it physically, but life equals light" (D'Arenberg, 2013). The light represents an attempt to raise awareness of the vital energy that permeates nature and humans.

The shaman in this video performance has traits that associate her with aliens or cyborgs, also in the sense expressed by Donna Haraway when she writes that "biological organisms have become biotic systems, communications devices like others" (Haraway, 2000, 313): the body of Mori's *miko*

constitutes a system with a technology that increases her powers and abilities and makes her a powerful channel for communication with a non-human reality.

The shaman holds a 12 cm diameter crystal ball in her hands, with which she interacts with slow and precise movements: during the performance she passes it from one hand to the other, raises it to her face, and then brings it back to her lap. The sphere seems to acquire the function of a torimono, an object which, held in the hands while dancing during a ritual performance, allows the dancer/shaman to obtain particular powers and to contact and invite non-human entities to take part in the ritual, possibly by possessing his/her body.[7] Thanks to this object, Mori's miko manages to establish contact with non-human entities and, presumably, to communicate with them, as can be inferred by looking at her eyes, which seem to be focusing on something that she perceives as present. The frame is sometimes entirely occupied by the crystal sphere that alternately reflects the surrounding environment, turning it upside down, and the miko's face, amplifying the meaning of the ritual that is taking place on the screen.

The shaman's movements are accompanied by a musical background and a continuously repeated sentence which, like a mantra, helps Mori's *miko* to get in touch with another world and to offer her prayer: *kotoba wa tokete, kotoba wa hitotsu*, "the words melt and become one".[8]

Commenting on *Miko no inori* when it was presented at the Koyanagi Gallery in Tokyo in 1997, Mori said: "We have lost the sense of spirituality in this century. We have to create harmony and peace for the next century" (DiPietro, 1997). With these words she constructs and defines the framework within which to situate and understand her shaman and her artwork, explaining, at the same time, the role that she intends to play as an artist within contemporary society.

Second phase: Primal Memory and Rei-okuri

From the beginning of the 21st century Mori began to devote herself more and more to the study of Japanese prehistory, and especially of the Jōmon period (about 12,000 BC – 300 BC). Her research inevitably influenced her works, which in this phase – as already mentioned in the introduction – took the form of abstract sculptures. Moreover, the artist continued to pay attention to the topic of spirituality and to attempts to connect humans and nature. Mori aimed to create exhibitions in which the viewer, immersed in the most advanced technology and surrounded by simple and essential forms, could perceive the connection with his/her past and with a form of a "primitive" religiosity: "the connectedness created by modern technology has something in common with the kind of oneness expressed in ancient religion" (Nicholson, 2006, 118).

An interesting example is Primal Memory, a circle of lucite stones[9] illuminated by LEDs that was created in 2004. The arrangement of the stones was inspired by the stone circle of the Jōmon period located in Ōyu, Akita Prefecture. The last constitutive element of the installation is a transparent acrylic mask hanging on the wall, a replica of a terracotta mask from the late Jōmon period.[10]

As anticipated, on the occasion of some exhibitions of her works, Mori has offered ritual performances, moving her sculptures around. Between 2004 and 2006, for example, the installation of *Primary Memory* was accompanied by a performance entitled *Rei-okuri or Ceremony of Transcendence*, which Mori explained to be a ritual evocation of the spirits of the dead from the Jōmon period.[11]

This performance was accompanied by a musical background of around half an hour created by the musician Ken Ikeda and based on a single repeated note, a feature that created an atmosphere perceived as "spiritual" and "meditative". Mori, who was wearing a sort of white overcoat with *kimono* sleeves, white *tabi* and an acrylic mask, moved slowly to the rhythm of the white castanets she held in her hands.

Interviewed by Holland on the occasion of the performance held on February 10, 2005 at the Hamburger Bahnhof, Mori explained that before the performance she conducted "a ritualized purification and sanctification of the mask"(Holland, 2011, 20), similar to what Noh theater actors do before entering the scene.[12]

It is evident, therefore, that in this phase Mori attributed ritual value to her actions, transforming herself into a sort of "shaman" who by means of specific performances was able to vitalize the artworks in order to recreate a connection between humans, nature and spirits.

Third phase: the Faou Foundation

In 2004, Mori moved to Kudakajima, an island in the prefecture of Okinawa also known as *kami no shima*, "Island of the gods"[13]. On the island, Mori meditated facing the ocean, reconnected with nature and, inspired by this, built a circle of stones on the beach which she then photographed, using the pictures for some of her exhibitions. In Kudakajima she also met a *noro*, or "priestess", and participated in one of her rituals, which deeply moved her:

> It seemed deeply rooted in nature, unchanged from our remote ancestors of prehistoric time. I felt the importance of this heritage and wished to pass this along to future generations by instilling site-specific installation to honor nature. (Di Marzo 2016)

Her studies on Japanese prehistory therefore seemed to find confirmation and actualization on the island of Kudaka, where, according to Mori, the *noro* perform rituals that have remained unchanged for centuries and people live in perfect harmony with nature and spirits.

This experience signals the beginning of the third phase in Mori's representation of the shamanic role: her embodiment of this role, and not merely through her artistic work. Mori decided to lay claim to the inheritance of the noro by honoring nature in her own way. This culminated in 2010, when she established a non-profit organization, the Faou Foundation (www.faoufoundation.org), whose name "means light, more specifically, an invisible light. Our mission is to connect between human and nature once again" (Farani, Goretti, & Schneider, 2011, 57).

Through Faou, Mori intends to create and permanently install six artworks in six natural spots all over the world with the aim of increasing environmental awareness. The first installation, *Primal Rythm*, was installed in 2011 in a bay on Miyakojima, a Japanese island closely connected with shamans. The second one, entitled *Ring: One With Nature*, was installed above the Véu da Novia waterfall, in the city of Mangaratiba, not far from Rio de Janeiro and was inaugurated on the occasion of the Olympic and Paralympic Games of Rio, in August 2016. The circular shape of this second installation is intended to express the Olympic values and, above all, the unity between humans and nature, a central theme in Mori's work.
AThe Foundation's website states:

> These permanent works promote a deeper understanding of humankind's connection with the natural environment. They serve to help preserve the environments and engage the communities that host each installation. The locations have been chosen based on their pristine natural setting and engaging local culture and history. Through the gifting of six site specific installations, Faou continues the primal tradition of honoring nature. (http://www.faoufoundation.org/about-1)

However, it is to be noted that these artworks have been permanently installed in natural places, thus altering them forever and making one wonder how this can help increase people's awareness of the relevance of nature.

During an interview with the online magazine *Ocula* in February 2014, Mori reaffirmed her mission by defining herself as a bridge that can make people living in cities aware of being part of nature. When the interviewer asked her how she experienced her relationship with nature, considering that she divided her life between Tokyo and New York, she answered:

> I was able to stay in Okinawa Island for one month during the summer and just sit in front of the ocean and do some drawings. Even though I work in New York, I had opportunities to spend time surrounded by nature. That way I was able to

> experience and feel myself also as nature. But at the same time, I feel like I'm a bridge to bring those elements back to the city. The people in the city are very much reliant on natural resources, which are outside of the city in nature. The people in the remote places are actually caretakers of nature, but the people in the city don't have this consciousness. We could easily spoil remote nature, so it's important to bring the essence into the city. I find it quite important to bring my work into the city, to produce the work and plant a seed about how much we are sustained by nature in order to support nature in remote places. (McDermott, 2014)

In this last phase, therefore, the narrative of a shamanic actor as a bridge between humans and nature is not limited to artworks but extends to Mori's life. The most recent manifestations of this role she embraces are two performances organized for the inauguration of the first two works realized with the Faou Foundation. In both cases Mori carried out what she describes as "ceremonial performances": in Miyakojima she performed alone in front of the sea, and then prayed with a local *noro* for the successful installation of her artwork, thus drawing a clear connection between herself and the traditional shamanic actors on the island[14]. As for the inauguration of *Ring: One with Nature*, Mori officiated her ceremony at the foot of the Brazilian waterfall dressed in white and barefoot. The connection with elements and gestures from the Japanese religious traditions is evident – the "ritual" use of a rosary, the act of purification with water by means of a wooden ladle (which also recalls the tea ceremony), the use of precise movements –and helps to ensure that the artist continues to present herself as a sort of charismatic guide whose main task is the reconstruction of the bond between humans and nature, bringing awareness to the necessary preservation of the latter.[15]

Conclusion

Both the common understanding of what a shaman is and most definitions of this figure describe its role as connecting humans with other-than-human entities, such as spirits, gods and – as in the sphere of shamanic spirituality – energy and nature. As my analysis has shown, Mariko Mori has decided to play this very role through her artistic production, particularly for the benefit of people living in cities. During the last two decades, the artist has developed this project and has gone from representing the shamanic actor, as in the video *Miko no inori*, to evoking the shamanic role during the ritual performances of the second phase, to actually performing it within the Faou Foundation. Mori re-invents the traditional shamanic role and uses the narratives connected to it to create her own narrative, being influenced not only by Japanese religious traditions but also by the new spirituality movements and culture. Through the intertwining of art and shamanic spirituality, she intends to raise people's environmental awareness, leading them to re-establish harmony with nature, which she perceives as having been lost, thus embodying the role of a shamanic guide.

End Notes

[1]Since the artist is better known internationally as Mariko Mori, with the name preceding the surname, I will refer to her in this way within my paper.

[2]Mariko Mori's interest in technology is partly due to her father, Mori Kei, who was a professor at Keio University's Department of Science and Engineering and is known as the inventor of a solar lighting system called Himawari (literally, "sunflower"), a device that Mariko Mori uses in some of her works. Details about this system and its uses are available on the website http://www.himawari-net.co.jp/index.html.

[3]This has been made explicit during a video interview for Artnet News, available at: https://news.artnet.com/art-world/an-interview-with-japanese-artist-mariko-mori-55270.

[4]For a comprehensive overview of the history of the word "shaman", see Znamesky (2007).

[5]The presence of such a large number of screens helps the viewer to feel part of the ritual shown by the video, the effect of which is thus amplified. In some exhibits, however, the Miko no inori video is shown in a loop lasting about half an hour on a single screen.

[6]"Si un lieu peut se definer comme identitaire, relationnel et historique, un espace qui ne peut se definer ni comme identitaire, ni comme relationnel, ni comme historique définira un non-lieu" (Augé, 1992, 93).

[7]Irit Averbuch describes torimono as follows: "Essentially shamanic tools, they are the most explicit and recognized yorishiro [object inhabited by a spirit] through which the kami [Shinto deity] enter the shaman's body. Shaken and waved by the possessed shaman, the torimono becomes a magical tool to energize or revitalize the spirits of the kami (tama furi; shaking the spirit), and to pacify them (tama shizume)" (Averbuch, 1995, 102). The earliest description of the use of torimono is found in the two oldest extant historical records of Japan: Kojiki and Nihon shoki (or Nihongi). See also Tōru Itaya (1987).

[8]Part of the video Miko no inori is available via the video produced for the exhibition "Mariko Mori: Oneness" at the Groninger Museum in 2007: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=acxYOBJ5Y4Q&index=26&list=PL02FC26D3FD0B0282.

[9]Mori asserts that "Pre-historical stone circles have a multidimensional composition reminiscent of Buddhist mandalas. The order inherent in a seemingly illogical arrangement embodies the cosmos itself" (Hayward, 2007, Texts). However, it should be noted that Buddhism was only introduced in Japan at the end of the 6th century.

[10]The mask has no openings for the eyes or the mouth, thus indicating that it was not worn but used in rituals and/or hung.

[11]It is unclear where she found information about this allegedly prehistoric ritual, since there are no written sources from the Jōmon period.

[12]Some pictures of this performance can be seen at: https://www.zfl-berlin.org/media-center-detail/compulsive-beauty.html.

[13]The name "Island of the Gods" derives from the belief that the goddess Amamikiyo descended to Kudakajima to give life to the Kingdom of the Ryūkyū and its inhabitants. For this reason, the island is still considered (and promoted as) a sacred place where spiritual power is present, especially in natural elements. Only women are believed to be able to manage this power. See, for example, Sered (1999), Shiotsuki (2012), and Wacker (2003).

[14]Pictures can be seen at http://www.faoufoundation.org/primal-rhythm.

[15]Pictures can be seen in Cascone (2016).

Works Citation

Augé, M. (1992). Non-Lieux. Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité. Paris: Seuil.

Averbuch, I. (1995). The Gods Come Dancing: A Study of the Japanese Ritual Dance of Yamabushi Kagura. In Cornell East Asia Series 79. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University East Asia Program.

Befu, H. (2001). Hegemony of Homogeneity: An Anthropological Analysis of Nihonjinron. Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press.

Cascone, S. (2016, September 3). Artist Mariko Mori Unveils Stunning Olympics Waterfall Art Installation. Artnet News. Retrieved from https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/mariko-mori-olympic-waterfall-art-installation-305095.

D'Arenberg, D. (2013, June 6). Space Oddity: Mariko Mori. post-ism. Retrieved from http://post-ism.com/2013/06/21/space-oddity-mariko-mori/.

Di Marzo, C. (2013, October 29). A Traveller in Time, from Standing Stones to the Distant Stars: An interview with Mariko Mori. Studio International. Retrieved from http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/interview-with-mariko-mori.

DiPietro, M. (1997). Mariko Mori at the Gallery Koyanagi. Assembly Language. Retrieved from http://www.assemblylanguage.com/reviews/mori.html.

Farani, D. N., Goretti N., & Schneider E. (2011). Mariko Mori: Oneness. Rio de Janeiro: Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil.

Hayward, V. (Ed.). (2007). Mariko Mori: Oneness. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag.

Holland, A. (2011). From Gothic Lolita to Radiant Shaman: The Development of Mariko Mori's Ethereal Personae. U.S. – Japan Women's Journal, 40, 3-28.

Nicholson, G. (2006). Mariko Mori: The Art Seduction. In C. Koolhaas & G. Nicholson (eds). Art Review, 3 (pp. 115-121). London: ArtReview.

Sered, S. (1999). Women of the Sacred Groves: Divine Priestesses of Okinawa. New York: Oxford University Press.

Shimazono, S. (2004). From Salvation to Spirituality. Popular Religious Movements in Modern Japan. Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press.

Shiotsuki, R. (2012). Okinawa shāmanizumu no kindai. Tōkyō: Shinwasha.

Tōru, I. (1987). The Torimono Dance: The Reenactment of Possession and the Genesis of a Nō-type Performance. Current Anthropology, 28(4), S49-S58.

Townsend, J. B. (2004). Core Shamanism and Neo-Shamanism. In M. N. Walter & E. J. Neumann Fridman (eds). Shamanism: An Encyclopedia of World Beliefs, Practices, and Culture (pp. 49-57). Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.

Von Stuckrad, K. (2013). Discursive Study of Religion. Approaches, Definitions, Implications. Method and Theory in the Study of Religion, 25, 5-25.

von Stuckrad, K., & Wijsen, F. (Eds.) (2016). Making Religion: Theory and Practice in the Discursive Study of Religion. Leiden & Boston: Brill.

Wacker, M. (2003). Onarigami: Holy Women in the Twentieth Century. Japanese Journal of Religious Studies, 30(3-4), 339-359.

Wallis, J. (2008). The Paradox of Mariko Mori's Women in Post-Bubble Japan: Office Ladies, Schoolgirls, and Video-Vixens. Woman's Art Journal, 29(1), 3-12.

Znamenski, A. (2007). The Beauty of the Primitive. Shamanism and the Western Imagination. New York: Oxford University Press.