

Mahikari, often classified as one of Japan's 'new new religions', that is, established in the post World War Two era, was founded by Okada Kotama (1901-1974), respectfully referred to in the organisation as *Sukuinushisama* (Great Saviour). In 1959, Okada received revelations from God commanding him thus: 'The time of heaven has come. Rise. Thy name shall be Kotama. Exercise the art of purification. The world shall encounter severe times' (Okada Kotama 1967).

# A global NRM based on miracles:

## Sukyo Mahikari

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In Japanese, Mahikari means 'True Light', a spiritual and purifying energy. It can be partially conceptualised in terms of the Japanese 'ki' or the Chinese 'chi' (McVeigh 1992), but is distinguished by its divine aspect, as the Divine Light of the Creator, Su God. People become members of Mahikari, or *kamikumite* (those who go 'hand-in-hand with God'), after attending the three day Primary *Kenshu* (training course), a kind of initiation (Huron 1991). On completion they receive an *Omitama* (Divine locket), which enables them to act as a channel through which they project the True Light to other members, their families, members of the public, or even animals, food and localities. Okada, formerly a member of Sekai Kyuseikyō (Church of World Messianity), adapted its central practice, *Johrei* - channelling God's healing light into the body of another - into Mahikari teachings.

### Performing miracles with True Light

The *Omitama* is the spiritual tool which allows ordinary people to perform miracles. It is worn on the upper body of the *kamikumite* and is treated with great respect. It must not be allowed to become wet or touch the ground. That is why children do not become *kamikumite* until around the age of 10, when they are deemed able to take proper care of the *Omitama*. Members then have the ability to transmit the True Light following a detailed ritual procedure of praying to the Creator God, which involves bowing to the *Goshintai* (sacred scroll containing the *Chon*, symbol of Su God, and the central feature of each centre) and then to their partners as an act of politeness. Then, with their backs to the *Goshintai*, they recite in a loud voice, in archaic Japanese, the prayer of purification - *Amatsu Norigoto* - and True Light is transmitted to the forehead of the other person through the raised palm of the hand. Light may then be transmitted to the back of the head and other parts of the body, a complete session taking about 50 minutes. This practice is also known as *okiyome* (purification), *tekazashi* (raising the hand) and *Mahikari no Waza* (the practice of Mahikari). Giving and receiving True Light daily and attending group ceremonies, which magnify the transmission of Light from Su God, are the fundamental activities of Mahikari members. Many new members come to Mahikari through being offered Light by an existing member in response to a problem with their health, relationships or finances. The miraculous healing of incurable diseases such as cancer and the change for the better in relationships and careers, is extensively documented in observably true case histories in the books by Dr Andris Tebecis (the *Bucho* or head of Mahikari's Australia/Oceania division), and the monthly newsletters of the organisation. Mahikari teachings explain that misfortune is caused by spirits who attach themselves to the sufferer due to karmic relationships created by themselves or their ancestors. The process of purification with the Divine Light pacifies these spirits and caused them to leave the person alone. The result is then a healing on the physical, emotional or social plane. The bad deeds of oneself, (in this or former lives), or of one's ancestors are what attracts the resentment of the spirits of those who have been harmed and thus they attach themselves to a victim and cause his or her suffering. Rather than driving these spirits away, in the conventional understanding of exorcism, the process of purification with Divine Light heals them as well and they leave voluntarily.

### Mahikari – a supra religion

Mahikari is open to people of all religions and viewpoints and does not attempt to convert people from their existing religious beliefs (Smith, 2007). Rather it intensifies their understanding of the major spiritual teachings of their religion, which are common to all religions. For instance, members explained to me that a Catholic priest would become a better Catholic priest by practising Mahikari (see also Cornille 1994). The non-coercive nature of the organisation is demonstrated by the fact that there is a significant dropout rate of those who have received the Primary *Kenshu*, a fact freely mentioned by senior members. Mahikari beliefs also reflect this openness by incorporating elements of the 'five major religions': Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Islam and Christianity. This syncretism of belief systems is typical of NRMs. It is not only a recruiting device but also an acknowledgment that most religious traditions share key common values from which founders gain inspiration in their need to set up an all encompassing system of beliefs and values very quickly in order to operationalise their organisations and secure membership.

In the case of Sukyo Mahikari, symbols from these and other major religions can be seen in the architecture of the Main World Shrine (*Suza* or *Sekai So Honzan*) and in the Mahikari Divine Emblem, which incorporates the circle, the cross, the six-pointed star and the 16-petalled crest, symbolic of the Japanese Imperial family who are regarded historically as the representatives of the Shinto gods on earth.

### Challenges of organisational structure

As NRMs expand and develop over time, they face the problem of structuring the organisation to cope with growing numbers, geographical distance and the loss of the personal link with the founder, either through distance, hierarchy or, sooner or later, his or her death. The problem of succession has already been experienced within the Mahikari movement (Inoue et al, 1996, Cornille, 1991). When the founder died, conflict arose over who would succeed him. The movement split into Sukyo Mahikari, with head-



Sukyo Mahikari Australia-Oceania Regional Headquarters in Canberra, Australia

quarters in Takayama, led by his adopted daughter, Okada Keishu, respectfully referred to as *Oshienushisama* (Great Teacher) and Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyodan (World True Light Civilization Religious Organization - the original name of the organisation, note its conceptualisation at the level of the 'world'), with headquarters in the Izu peninsula, initially led by his trusted male associate, Sekiguchi Sakae. Today Sukyo Mahikari has the larger international presence and it is the focus of this essay.

Now with over 300,000 members in Japan and reputedly one million worldwide, and with centres in major capital cities throughout Asia and the developed economies and a presence in all continents, Sukyo Mahikari has made the transition to a global organisation with a clearly defined hierarchy of authority and a sophisticated communication system. A researcher of Mahikari in Western Europe noted that the wearing of uniforms, the marching practice and the emphasis on discipline in the Mahikari Youth Corps imparts a flavour of the military (Cornille, 1991). However, this Corps is not compulsory for the younger members of Mahikari and makes up only a small proportion of Mahikari youth.

Large centres (*dojo* – literally 'practice place') in Japan have video camera monitoring systems installed, explained as a way of making sure that visitors are not neglected. The requirement that those visiting the *dojo* sign in and sign out with the time of their arrival and departure imparts a strict organisational atmosphere. These organisational aspects are not unique to Mahikari but are typical of practices within mainstream Japanese society. For instance academic staff of a Japanese tertiary research institute were required to register the time of their arrival and departure with a receptionist, and the building was subject to video surveillance. However, such features may seem inappropriate in a religious context to non-Japanese.

Mahikari centres are graded according to their size and importance, from *dai-, chu-, sho- and jun- dojo* (large, medium, small and associate centres), followed by *okiyome-sho* (purification places) and *renraku-sho* (communication places). This graded system of centres is common both to Japan and overseas. The largest centre, apart from the Main World Shrine and the Mahikari headquarters in Takayama, is the Kyoto *Daidojo*, with a main hall of 340 *tatami* mats, which accommodated over 1000 people at its New Year ceremony which I attended in 1996. A feature of all these centres is the provision of a family room where parents can be with small children while receiving the True Light or listening to lectures through the installed sound or video system. The homes of senior members who have inaugurated the *Goshintai* and who wish to make them available for this purpose, also serve as *Okiyome* Houses, which are open for several nights a week for people to drop in and receive the True Light, especially if they live far away from the centre.

Overseeing the *dojo* are the Regional Headquarters (*Shidobu*), one for each prefecture in Japan, and one each for Europe/Africa, North America, Latin America, Asia and Australia/Oceania. It is headed by the *Bucho* (division head, a term used for a senior manager in a Japanese corporation), on behalf of *Oshienushisama* and his role (in Sukyo Mahikari, *Bucho* are usually male, as are senior managers in Japanese corporations) includes both spiritual and managerial aspects. He visits centres in all the countries regularly, conducting the Primary Training and bestowing the *Omitama* on new members. He also administers the region, overseeing and recommending staff transfers and promotions in rank, and conducts the *Shidobu* monthly ceremony as the spiritual representative of *Oshienushisama*. Above the Regional Headquarters in the structure of the organisation is the Sukyo Mahikari Headquarters located in Takayama in a building opposite the Main World Shrine. Its role is to transmit spiritual guidance from *Oshienushisama* to the Regional Headquarters. The *Bucho* of Australia/Oceania region is, unusually, a non-Japanese, Dr Andris Tebecis, who wrote the pioneering first book on Mahikari in English, *Mahikari – Thank God for the Answers at Last*, which was a major source of new converts in the early days of the movement outside Japan. Significantly, Dr Tebecis' wife is Japanese and she is a former *doshi*, or minister, see below. This deep personal involvement with Japan gives Dr Tebecis an honorary Japanese status.

Key leadership roles within the movement are appointments made directly by *Oshienushisama*, as they are considered to be spiritual appointments, but they are nevertheless ranked according to modern organisational principles, with clear lines of authority and communication procedures, and are the same both in Japan and overseas. This gives their incumbents an extra dimension of authority beyond the mere fact of hierarchy. Receiving Light from a high ranking leader is considered to be very powerful and beneficial. Below *Oshienushisama* herself are a few very senior members of Sukyo Mahikari Headquarters. In general the main ranks are *doshi* (minister) and *dojochō* (centre chiefs). Centre chiefs below *Bucho* are spiritually in charge of the centre, are usually from the locality and rarely transferred.

### Special role of the Doshi

*Doshi* play a central and unifying role in the organisation. They are the disciples of *Oshienushisama* who have undertaken a three-year training course. There are from 30 to 50 new trainees in every annual intake, selected from hundreds of applicants. Foreign applicants are recommended by



The Sukyo Mahikari Main World Shrine



the Regional Headquarters *Bucho*. Male applicants should be no older than 35 (younger for females) and *doshi* trainees are expected to be single because they must live in the 'bachelor' dormitory accommodation at the Training Institute in Takayama and then be posted for practical training to any centre in the world for two years. The living conditions at the Training Institute are spartan, living expenses are provided by *Oshienushisama* and their personal income thereafter is minimal. About ten percent of each class are non-Japanese. Women slightly outnumber men as *doshi* trainees, but they are required to resign from the role after marriage. It is considered impossible for them to be able to manage the duties of both *doshi* and female family roles together. After marriage and motherhood, many remain active members of Mahikari centres and assume the role of *junkambu* (administrators assisting the centre chief). Male *doshi* often remain unmarried until their late thirties or forties, and live a spartan existence in the *dojo* itself, serving God 24 hours a day, giving Light to members, helping the centre chief, maintaining the centre and looking after the *Goshintai*.

*Doshi*, being of all nationalities, play an important linking role in the global organisation and may be transferred, often at intervals of about three years across national boundaries. For instance a former *doshi* at the Melbourne centre was a South African, there have been two Japanese *doshi* serving in the Canberra Regional Headquarters and Australian *doshi* has been posted to the International Division in Takayama and to a centre in India. Within the *dojo* there are different group leaders, coordinators and other personnel who coordinate such groups as the Parents' Group, Educators' Group, Older Youth Group, Primary Students' Group, Kindergarten Group and so on. There are also various leadership roles relating to the Youth Corps, *Yoko* agriculture (a horticultural project based on organic and spiritual principles) and medicine. In these systems, spiritual elements and modern bureaucratic principles are combined. For instance, the appointment to a leadership role in one of these groups is officially made by *Oshienushisama* on the basis of the individual's spiritual qualities, yet the size of the group, its hierarchical structure and the communication and recording procedures mirror aspects of the large organisations found in modern society.

### A global cultural system

Membership in Sukyo Mahikari organises the lives of its followers on a daily, monthly and annual basis. In daily terms they are required to give and receive Light to family, members of the public both at the *dojo* and outside. They are required to offer small receptacles of food and drink to the ancestors at their home's ancestral shrine. If they have had a *Goshintai* shrine inaugurated in the home, this requires even more care, since it cannot be left unattended for long periods. There are no dietary codes or dress codes for members, but interaction patterns tend to follow Japanese standards of politeness and respect, and especially in the *dojo*, removing shoes, washing hands, bowing when passing in front of the centrally placed *Goshintai*, necessitate mental and behavioural adjustment away from prevailing cultural norms in most non-Japanese societies. Gradually one's social interactions tend to revolve around other Mahikari members and membership becomes a total life path. When visiting Suza on pilgrimage or other centres overseas, the organisational culture is such that members feel no social or cultural distance between themselves and other nationalities. Thus Mahikari can be said to be truly a global cultural system.

In this paper I have argued that the distinctive organisational style of Sukyo Mahikari has facilitated its rapid expansion overseas, and the main element of its spiritual culture, the ritual practice of radiating True Light has been a powerful factor in establishing uniformity in value systems and behaviour of members in diverse cultures through the process of purification of their innermost attitude (*sonen*). Moreover the occurrence of miracles associated with the True Light has been the main reason for its global spread. Thus it has been useful to look at religious organisations from the perspective of globalised corporate practices and corporate styles, even though they are located in the spiritual realm in the first instance. Just as corporate cultures are understood in terms of theories of religion and ritual, so may the rituals and belief systems of NRMs be analysed as corporate cultures, as religions globalise and are forced to take on the attributes of large modern organisations to handle their global staffing, their cross-cultural memberships and maintain and control the orthodoxy of beliefs and ritual practices.

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