

The Phoenix Flies West: The Dynamics of the Inculturation of Mahikari in Western Europe

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The symbolism of the phoenix has in Japan often been transferred from the divine emperor to the leader of a new Japanese religion. In rising from his or her ashes, the leader is believed to encompass the whole universe. This provides an impulse toward mission beyond the islands of Japan. Over the past decades, many a new Japanese religion has developed missionary activities in the West.

This presence of new Japanese religions in the West calls for a different interpretative framework from that which was developed within the Japanese context. The religious vacuums that emerged after the Meiji Restoration and after World War II, the demographic and social changes that accompanied the rapid social growth, and the identity crisis that followed the process of internationalization and Westernization are of little use in attempting to understand the appeal of some of the new Japanese religions in the West. The social, economic, and religious realities differ radically. In *The Social Dimensions of Sectarianism* Brian Wilson juxtaposes the social functions that new religions fulfill in Japan with the individualistic orientation of the West, and questions how the dispositions of individuals are changed to match the particular focus of these new and alien religions. Why and how do people accept a redefinition of their needs and deficiencies in terms of a foreign ideology and world view (cf. WILSON 1990, p. 218)?

In coming to the West, the new Japanese religions are themselves confronted with a new reality with which they are called to interact. This process of interaction between a religion that emerged within a certain cultural context, and a new culture, has come to be called "inculturation." It is usually applied within a Christian context to denote a particular, reciprocal interaction between religion and culture in which a mutually critical relationship evolves that enriches both. Religions may, however, also refuse this form of profound inculturation and limit

themselves to mere translation or adaptation, or they may, on the other extreme, immerse themselves to such a degree that they disappear within the culture. Here, the dynamics of inculturation and the appeal and integration of new Japanese religions in the West is discussed through a case study of one of the most successful of those religions, Sūkyō Mahikari, in western Europe.¹

Mahikari: From Japan to Europe

Mahikari is one of the many new religions that emerged in Japan after World War II. It was founded in 1959 by Okada Yoshikazu, who took the name Okada Kōtama (jewel of light) and was eventually addressed by his disciples with the honorary title Sukuinushisama (lord savior). The cosmology, values, and rituals were borrowed by Mahikari largely from another new Japanese religion, Sekai Kyūseikyō, which in turn was strongly influenced by Oomotokyō, one of the oldest New Religions of Japan. They contain elements of Shintoism (the emphasis on purity, the reference to gods, and the veneration of the emperor), Buddhism (belief in karma and reincarnation), and Japanese folk religion (the divine status of the leader, miraculous healing, etc.). Mahikari revolves around the ritual of *okiyome*, which involves the transmission of divine light through the palm of one who has been initiated to the forehead, neck, kidneys, and any point of ailment of another person. This light is believed to purify the body from possessing spirits and from "toxins," poisonous material accumulated in the body. It is not only people but the whole physical world that is seen as defiled and in need of purification. The light is thus also administered to food, animals, plants, houses, streets, and entire cities. The power and authority to administer the light is given through the *omitama*, or the amulet received during the initiation ceremony that concludes the three-day elementary course.

As the movement grew in Japan, it developed an organizational structure that includes *dōjō* (training centers) of various sizes, *okiyomechō* (cen-

¹ This study has been conducted mainly through participant observation, through attending rituals and courses, both in Japan and in Europe, through interviews with high officials at the headquarters in Takayama, with the *shidōbuchō* of Europe, with the presidents of the dojos of Osaka, Kyoto, Tokyo, Paris, Marseilles, and Brussels, and with numerous Japanese and European members and a few ex-members. A survey was conducted among members in Belgium. A short questionnaire focussing mainly on personal data, the level of involvement, and accounts of miracles was distributed in all the main Belgian centers (the dojo and the *okiyomechō*, both French and Flemish). Responses totaled two hundred of the estimated total membership of about one thousand. While it may be assumed that those who responded were the most committed members, the responses are sufficiently representative for the purpose of this study, which is concerned less with quantitative than with formal aspects, i.e., with the degree and form of inculturation.

ters for the transmission of light), and *han* (home centers), with a corresponding hierarchy of *dōjōchō* (president of a dojo), *dōshi* (ministers), and *hanchō* (leaders of a squadron or of a small center), each with assistants and lesser officials. At the head of different regions there came to be appointed a *shidōbuchō* (head of guidance division). Mahikari is financially maintained through an elaborate system of donations that allows each dojo to be self-supporting. This system has, moreover, enabled the movement to build a huge shrine and headquarters in the city of Takayama.

As is the case with the overseas mission of most new Japanese religions, Mahikari's overseas mission may be seen as a consequence of the economic expansion of Japan. The first Mahikari member in Europe was a Japanese businessman who worked in England in the late sixties. A few Japanese students were converted, returned to Japan for a short period of training, and then came back to Paris with a more formal mission.² They started to "raise the hand" in a Japanese restaurant, and in 1971 the first elementary course was offered. This marked the official beginning of Mahikari in the West. A small dojo was opened, and a hierarchy established. In 1973 the founder visited Europe, thereby affirming and encouraging the mission to the West. He was received in private audience by the Pope, an event that is still part of Mahikari propaganda, being interpreted as Christian recognition and legitimation of the status and role of Sukuinushisama.

Paris was made the fountainhead of the Mahikari mission in Europe. The dojo of Paris was promoted from a small to a medium-size dojo, and made into the focal point of the west-European mission, as illustrated in one of the founder's many attempts at *kotodama*, or word-science: "PA possesses the spiritual power of the dynamic opening; RI possesses the power to unify the result of the expansion by realizing the cross between the obtained results."³ The purification of Amsterdam was proclaimed to be the main mission of Mahikari in Europe,⁴ and Belgium was seen as fulfilling a crucial function in the pursuit of this goal. An adjunct-dojo (*jun-dōjō*) was established in Brussels (where the light had already been

² Mrs. Sachiko Koyama, still one of the pivotal figures of Mahikari in Europe (she translates the teachings and more or less runs the *shidōbu*, or "guidance division"), was one of those original missionaries.

³ From a short unpublished history of Mahikari in Europe, provided by the Brussels dojo. The Japanese pronunciation of Paris is "pa-ri." For an explanation of *kotodama* see note 29.

⁴ Amsterdam is regarded as the scene of the ultimate struggle of the spiritual world, and the ultimate struggle in Europe. The future of humanity is seen as dependent upon the process of purifying Amsterdam, which is itself linked to the purification of Canada and the transformation of the Soviet Union. (From the words of Sukuinushisama recorded in the history of Mahikari in Europe.)

transmitted for two years in the Hotel Albert I by its owner, who had been converted to the movement in Paris), and other centers emerged in Switzerland, Italy, and Germany. It was also through Paris that missions developed in North and South America and in Africa. The authorities of Mahikari argue that the rapid spread of the movement has never been directed or controlled from above. Members transmit the light in various places and people spontaneously gather and form a group. Only then might teachers be sent to give initiation courses and create an organization. When a member has gathered a sizable group, he or she may obtain the sacred objects: the *goshintai*, or sacred scroll on which are inscribed the word *mahikari* and the *chon* (a comma-shaped symbol of the god Su), from which the divine light is believed to emanate; and the statue of Izunomesama, the god who represents the materialization of spiritual energy and who is worshipped and thanked for material benefits. The acquisition of these objects represents the establishment of an *okiyomechō*, of which several emerged in France, Switzerland, Germany, and Belgium. The *okiyomechō* are dependent upon the dojo from which they emanate. Some have become so large and important, however, that they have become independent dojo in their own right.⁵ As the existing dojo grew larger, they, too, rose in rank, with the Paris dojo becoming a *daidōjō* (large dojo) in 1975.⁶

In 1974 an international office was created in Japan to coordinate missions abroad. This was also the year Sukuinushisama passed away. A struggle of succession ensued between the founder's adopted daughter, Okada Sachiko (or Keishu-sama, as she is respectfully called by followers), and one of his closest associates, Sekiguchi Sakae. Before a legal verdict was made on who the lawful successor was, the group around Okada Sachiko took hold of the headquarters and announced her to be Oshienushisama, the "Reverend Teacher" and new head of the movement. In Japan, most dojo came under her authority, while European members were kept ignorant of the fact a struggle was going on. Mahikari was organized into different regional "guidance divisions" (*shidōbu*), with one responsible for Europe and Africa.⁷

The dojo of Paris is still the only *daidōjō* in Europe. Currently there

⁵ This happened in Marseilles, Nice, Toulouse, etc.

⁶ As the dojo grew, it moved to larger locations three times in ten years, until in 1982 a special Mahikari dojo was built in Paris. In becoming a *chū-dōjō*, the Belgian dojo similarly needed a more apt setting than the basement of a hotel. Numerous taboos surround the sacred objects. Ideally, they should be kept in a place where no one can walk above them, where someone is present to protect them around the clock, and where there is no risk of their being defiled. Because of these requirements, the Brussels members are now considering building a new dojo.

⁷ This *shidōbu* for Europe and Africa was originally located in Paris, but in 1990 moved to Luxembourg, to the castle of the baron d' Ansembourg, who had become a dedicated member.

are dojo of various sizes in Marseilles, Nice, Saint-Nazaire, Toulouse, Milan, Geneva, Torino, and Brussels, each with a number of dependent *okiyomechō* that in turn supervise various *han*. In Belgium this structure has recently been reorganized, with a reduction in the number of *okiyomechō* and an increase of *han*. This allows for more local initiative without loss of central control.

The interior of a European dojo is almost identical to the Japanese model, but with carpet instead of tatami on the floor. It is striking to Westerners for its sobriety (with only the scroll, the statue, offerings of arranged flowers and fruits, and a curtain), its emptiness, and its cleanliness. In contrast to the practice in Japan, the light is often transmitted to people seated on chairs rather than kneeling in Japanese fashion.

The European dojo are registered as non-profit organizations. Like their Japanese counterparts, they are supposed to be self-supporting. The same donation system as exists in Japan, including the Japanese nomenclature for donations, has been introduced.⁸ The pressure to attend to these donations regularly seems gradually to have increased. A separate enterprise, the *Yōkō Shuppan*, tends to the business affairs of Mahikari in Europe. It is also responsible for the publication of a Mahikari journal. The translation of this journal into all European languages is the latest initiative of the *shidōbu* for Europe and Africa.⁹

Mahikari Membership in Europe

The Japanese term *kamikumite* 神組み手 (people who walk hand-in-hand with one another and with God) is used for Japanese as well as European members of Mahikari. In contrast to Japan, where pamphlets are distributed and people approached in the streets, little overt proselytization is done in the West. Members are told not to be conspicuous, to “act normal,” i.e., not to say their Japanese prayers and incantations out loud in public, or “raise their hands” unless asked or explicitly permitted to do so. Seventy-five percent of my respondents said they became aware of Mahikari by word of mouth, through family or friends. Only one out of seven to ten people introduced to Mahikari ultimately becomes a

⁸ There is the monthly membership fee (*reisen hōji onrei*); the daily offering for receiving and giving the light (*okiyome onrei*); the expression of gratitude for protection (*otamagushi*), and special gifts for the local *dōjochō*, the headquarters in Japan, or the project for building a mausoleum for the founder. In addition, the dojo receives a considerable income from registration fees for courses. For major projects, however, such as the building of a new dojo, funds may come from headquarters in Japan.

⁹ This fits into the policy of the current *shidōbuchō*, Mr. Shirasaki, who considers the language barrier to be the main obstacle impeding the spread of Mahikari in Europe. The first issue appeared in January 1991. It features the castle of Ansembourg on the front and back covers, and the history of the castle is elaborately documented.

member, and among the members there is a very high dropout rate (leaders admit to about 70%). This makes membership estimates haphazard. While the *shidōbuchō* of Europe and Africa estimated that the number of European *kamikumite* was about 20,000, half this number is probably closer to reality. France has about 5,000 members, Belgium, Switzerland, and Italy about 1,000 each, and Germany, Luxembourg, Holland, and England between 100 and 200 each. The youth movement of Mahikari, the Mahikaritai, which was introduced into Europe in 1983, has about 500 members. The profile of the European membership seems to be similar to that of Japan: the largest group of members are people between 40 and 50 years of age, sixty percent of the initiates are female, and the membership in general is lower middle class.¹⁰

In the late seventies, Mahikari underwent a number of crises in Europe that resulted in a large drop in membership. The French leader of the *daidōjō*, who was an important figure in society, resigned and left the movement. About the same time, a document began to be circulated, written by a former dedicated member, questioning the legitimacy of Oshienushisama and the authenticity of the movement.¹¹ This caused some consternation in western Europe. A number of members left Mahikari in Belgium and formed a separate group, the Light Center, in which the transmission of light was continued without the use of Japanese prayers and rituals.

The large turnover of members in the West has led to a policy of mission or socialization in depth. While originally more flexible, the requirements for enrolling in the intermediate and advanced courses have been made as severe as they are in Japan. Members are now supposed to wait two years between courses and to bring in two members before they can enrol in the intermediate course, and five members before they can enrol in the advanced course. They are encouraged to attend the elementary course repeatedly, while their curiosity about, and desire to enrol in, the higher courses is stimulated. Among the respondents to the questionnaire, 40% had taken only the elementary course (most often more than once) that is offered monthly in the local center, while 35% had followed the intermediary course offered twice yearly for the whole

¹⁰ Ten percent of the interviewees were unemployed, 11% were housewives, and 7% were in retirement.

¹¹ In the three years between the death of the founder in 1974 and 1977, the European members were not informed of the power struggle for succession that took place in the course of those years. The adopted daughter of the founder took control of the headquarters and most of the dojo unwittingly came under her authority. The court, however, decided that it was the other leading contender for leadership who was the legitimate successor, and he obtained custody over the headquarters. The document is a report by a Mahikari initiate who went to Japan to find out the truth of the matter, and it accuses Sūkyō Mahikari of purposely misleading and exploiting its members.

of Europe, and 25% had travelled to Japan to attend the advanced course.

There is much emphasis in Mahikari on frequent visits to the center or dojo (where the light is stronger), and on not only receiving but also voluntarily giving the light. Half of the respondents visit the center two or three times a week, and 15% do so more often. A majority attends the monthly thanksgiving ceremony, the *mimatsuri*. While those who responded to the questionnaire are frequent visitors to their dojo or center, there remains a large number who are rather loosely affiliated with the movement. They may visit sporadically, most often in times of trouble. They are what are called "hibernating members," not real members but clients, who make use of the services offered when necessary without becoming deeply involved.

Mahikari Theocracy and Leadership in the West

The process of inculturation generally requires the development of a local leadership, the formation of leaders and teachers who, while belonging to a particular culture, are thoroughly steeped in the religion that attempts to take roots in that culture.

The leadership of European dojo was originally largely local. They were mostly the earliest members who transmitted light, gathered a group, and spontaneously assumed leadership. As the movement grew, however, more organizational talents were required, and the *dōjōchō* were assigned by the central hierarchy in Japan. Since a local leadership was necessary to bridge the language, social, and organizational barriers, at first Europeans were assigned to those posts. But in a movement such as Mahikari, which is based on a theocratic notion of authority and is strongly centralized, clashes between the European leaders and central Japanese leadership were bound to occur. Within the Mahikari theocracy, the central leader, Oshienushisama, is regarded as the vessel of divine revelation and rule, as the absolute authority. Every instruction from above thus needs to be minutely followed, and every initiative from below sanctioned.

The departure from this principle by French and Belgian leaders led to a few major crises in the main European dojo. European leaders often understood their authority in a democratic sense and sometimes took the initiative in matters of organization, missionary strategies, and even teaching, without consulting or asking approval from headquarters in Japan. "Democracy," it is taught in the advanced course, "is an invention of the devil." The Europeans were replaced by Japanese leaders whose loyalty was beyond question. Of the eleven dojo currently operating in Europe, six are led by Japanese *dōjōchō*. To secure loyalty, and to prevent the accumulation of too much personal power within a dojo

or a center, the leaders are regularly rotated.¹² The *shidōbuchō*, or central leader for the whole of Europe and Africa, has always been Japanese. The policy of inculturation seems to depend largely upon the personal preferences of this leader. But the rotation even on this highest level (Mr. Shirasaki, the current *shidōbuchō*, is the sixth in twenty years) makes a long-term strategy of inculturation difficult to implement.

The training of European ministers (*dōshi*) has been a matter of trial and error. In Japan, the training lasts three years: one year of formal training, and two of apprenticeship in Japanese dojo. At first, local requirements led to the appointment of a few Europeans to the rank of *dōshi* without the training in Japan. Two of the Europeans who did follow the course ultimately left Mahikari. This has led to a more careful screening and preparation of European *dōshi*. A candidate must first spend time as an assistant to the leader of a dojo. If considered serious and dedicated, he or she must then spend a year of preliminary training in the *shidōbu* of Luxembourg before being sent to Japan.

Leaders of *okiyomechō* and *han* are most often local. Loyalty and obedience are also important criteria for selection of leaders. The main goal of the recent development of a local leadership in the centers and *han* is to facilitate the process of socialization, to bridge the gap between them, the dojo, and the Japanese leaders at the apex of the system. The small domestic center and local leaders provide a familiar setting and models, a sense of the “normality” of Mahikari, and the possibility of social mobility. The authority of these leaders is, however, limited. They help the members to assimilate Mahikari rationality, to interpret their lives, their misfortunes, and their blessings in terms of the Mahikari cosmology. But they do not possess the authority to adapt the Mahikari teaching to local traditions and dispositions.

A strict hierarchy of doctrinal and ritual authority has been developed that maintains a centralization of power and control. While a few long-standing European members of Mahikari have been given authority to teach the elementary course, it is the *dōjōchō* who hands over the *omitama* during the initiation ceremony that concludes the elementary course; the intermediate course is taught by a Japanese; and the advanced course is offered only in Japan. The monthly teachings of Oshienushisama are handed down through *dōjōchō* to all the initiates. He or she may explain, but not interpret, the teachings. The *dōjōchō* of Europe gather monthly to receive directives from the *shidōbuchō*, while leaders of the smaller centers receive special instructions and explanations for the guidance of others. A tight system of control and communication is thus

¹² In Japan, leaders of large dojo, such as that of Osaka, stay an average of three years in the same dojo.

maintained. Little is left to the personal judgment or creativity of the local leaders. Only the *dōjōchō* has the authority to interrogate the spirits when they manifest themselves. It is he or she who offers the prayer of intercession to the god Su on behalf of the believers. By belonging to a foreign culture and speaking a foreign language, a Japanese leader generates a stronger sense of mystery and power in many of the European members.

The politics of leadership are thus complex. While local leaders are necessary to bridge the gap between Japan and the local social, political, and cultural traditions, Japanese leaders seem to be more effective, both in keeping and transmitting the official teachings and in generating the respect and obedience necessary to implement those teachings. Because of this system, Mahikari has till now been able to avoid the splitting off of overseas missions from the central authority in Japan that has threatened many of the new Japanese religions abroad.

The Appeal of Mahikari in the West

In Japan, the appeal of the New Religions has most often been explained through crisis-theories relating to the peculiar religious, social, psychological, and economic situation of Japan. The success of these religions outside their original context, however, requires a different interpretation, or must be explained in terms of their answers to more universal needs or aspirations.

Mahikari promises salvation in terms of *ken* (health), *wa* (harmony), and *fu* (riches). This vitalistic and this-worldly orientation contrasts with the Christian conception of salvation dominant in the West. However, it is precisely the promise of an immediate solution to one's problems and needs, and the offer of a tool or technique to bring this about, that are the main grounds of Mahikari's appeal, in Europe as in Japan. The main problem upon which Mahikari focuses and its principal pole of attraction is the promise of healing.¹³ It is also the main theme of Mahikari discourse. Miraculous healing forms the main theme of the testimonies presented at the monthly thanksgiving ceremony, is an important topic of discussion in informal interactions and the exchanging of light, and was elaborately documented in response to the questionnaire. While some themes of the miracle stories were moral (generating more self-criticism and tolerance toward others; harmony in the family) and ma-

¹³ Among the respondents to the questionnaire, 26% reported to have joined for altruistic reasons, 22% was explicitly hoping for healing, 21% was interested in the teachings, and 18% was attracted by the light therapy. Considering the fact that altruism relates to the healing of others, that the teachings focus largely on healing, and that the light is the means for healing, the dominant motive for joining may be seen to relate to health and healing.

terial (better business; elimination of moles from the garden), the large majority related to miraculous restoration of health or the prevention of diseases. Very often, the discovery of Mahikari follows many years of suffering from headaches or insomnia, or severe handicaps, or less serious problems affecting the back or eyes. Treatments by classical medical methods and even paramedical approaches having failed, Mahikari becomes the last hope in an otherwise desperate situation. Medicine is regarded as poison in Mahikari. This idea has its appeal within the over-medicated context of Japan as well as the West. Still, in Europe a more ambivalent attitude toward classical medicine is retained. Although Mahikari and classical healing methods are described as a cross, the two lines of which must work together, testimonies tend to encourage a heroic resistance to all medicine and to emphasize the miracles that ensue when medicine has been rejected.

While health problems are most often the occasion to visit a Mahikari center in the West, a number of additional motivations, of both a theoretical and a practical nature, enter the picture to ground and strengthen a person's commitment. Within the "rationalist" West, the appeal of Mahikari is, no less than in Japan, the possibility of a magical manipulation of reality. Almost all respondents to the questionnaire did not limit the giving of light to people or food but also performed *okiyome* on their houses, cars, plants, even on cities and rivers—in short, on "everything at all times." From being a curative device, *okiyome* may thus be used to complement the traditional limits of rationality and control, and to gain a complete mastery over reality. The extension of ritual practice requires an expanding of the notions of defilement and contagion toward the whole of reality. This in turn presupposes a further integration of Mahikari cosmology.

Although Mahikari has presented itself as the religion of miracles and the magical manipulation of reality, its focus is currently on the integration of the ideology and the theodicy for "when magic fails." The world view, values, and rationality of Mahikari are, however, more or less foreign to the Christian West.

The Category of Purity in the West

While Mahikari may cater to universal needs of health and power or control, its metaphorical language is grounded in Japanese tradition, with its particular sensitivities and values. The central metaphor, the "meta-metaphor" (MCVEIGH 1991), used in Mahikari discourse is that of "purification." Man is created pure, and all transgressions of a moral, physical, or spiritual nature are seen as defilements. Both personal disorders, such as diseases and misfortunes, and cosmic calamities, such as floods and earthquakes, are seen as caused by impurities, but in them-

selves purifications. The apocalyptic notion of "baptism by fire," which is the main theme of Mahikari's scripture, the *Goseigen*, is understood as a cosmic purification, expected before the end of the millennium. The main ritual practice, the exchanging of light, *okiyome*, is understood and experienced as a ritual of purification. The light purifies both the physical and the astral body; it expels defiling spirits, and it melts the toxins in the body that are the cause of diseases. Care of the amulet, the *omitama*, is also surrounded by numerous taboos of purity. It needs to be wrapped in various layers of sheets and, when not worn, kept in a specially purified box, or hung on a specially reserved hook. If the *omitama* falls on the ground, is kept in a non-purified place, or is unintentionally washed, then taboos are transgressed and numerous rituals of expiation are therefore prescribed to restore its purity. This illustrates how the notion of purity coincides with that of power.¹⁴

While categories and rituals of purification permeate Japanese society as a whole, the West has been less conditioned by metaphors of purity. When being initiated into Mahikari, Westerners thus need to assume a new world view and unfamiliar customs based upon the dichotomy purity-impurity. When one enters the dojo, shoes must be removed, hands and mouth washed, and valuables stored. Rather than its equivalent in Western languages, the Japanese concept for purification, *misogi harai*, is most often used. The cleansing of both the sacred objects in the dojo and the *omitama* are in the West subject to the same severe prescriptions and taboos as in Japan. The concept of evil thus moves from the traditional Christian moral or spiritual notion of sin to a more or less physical or mechanistic notion of defilement. This relieves the subject of guilt and promises a sure removal of the impurities that cause disease and misfortune. In spite of this mechanistic and magical world view, Mahikari still advances a belief in a transcendent, monotheistic god, called Su-God or God-Su, who is invoked before every session of *okiyome*, and to whom prayers and thanksgiving are addressed. It is this combination of continuity (with the Christian reference to a transcendent God) and expedient discontinuity (relief from notions of sin and guilt, and a means of purification) that allows for the ready assimilation of the metaphor of purity in the West. In personal experiences, a traditional Christian analysis of a problem may be combined with the Mahikari cure. As such, the light may be experienced as a purification of moral sin and guilt, and the purification of Amsterdam that is emphasized in Mahikari may be conceived in terms of its reputation as a city of licentiousness.

While it is the hermeneutical flexibility that facilitates integration of

¹⁴ The term "okiyome" may also be understood as "empowering," "giving *ki*."

the Mahikari notion of purity and related values, the direction is toward a gradual integration of the meanings advanced by Mahikari. The values of gratitude, obedience, humility, and love become ways of ensuring surrender to the Mahikari hierarchy and teachings, the active transmission of light, and the gaining of new members. It is thus the dynamic relationship between the familiar and the new understandings of the metaphors and values that brings about a gradual integration of the teaching and a strengthening of one's commitment to Mahikari.

The Belief in Spirits, Ancestors, and Reincarnation in the West

The belief in reincarnation presented in Mahikari seems to be not so much a stumbling block as an attraction. For the 21% of respondents who said they joined Mahikari because of its teachings, the belief in reincarnation was the main point of appeal. While this belief is becoming an increasingly popular alternative to Christian eschatological conceptions, the theories of reincarnation that have been introduced in the West remain vague. Mahikari, on the contrary, proposes a very concrete view. It states exactly how long the intermediate period in the spirit world normally lasts, which events in past lives are the cause of present disorders and ailments, and how to act in order to ensure a good rebirth. Thus, the Mahikari view of reincarnation may provide both a sense of reconciliation with the present condition and hope for a better future rebirth.

While the notion of reincarnation promotes a passive acceptance of the present condition, the rationality of spirit possession advanced by Mahikari provides an active control over it. Possession by spirits is regarded as the cause of 80% of all disorders and misfortunes. Winston DAVIS understands this belief within the context of the distribution of responsibility and guilt, which, as he points out, "is quite foreign to Western notions" (1980, p. 155). Richard YOUNG, on the other hand, argues that "rather than an archaic cognitive anomaly, contemporary spirit-belief might better be understood as an expanded rationality with its own modality of logic" (1990, p. 29). From this second point of view, the belief that disorders are caused by spirits that may be expelled, or summoned to leave, may appeal as well to the "scientific" West as to the East. It is the functional, rather than the purely rational, dimension of this belief, however, that has allowed for its integration in the West. As in Japan, the belief in spirits allows for some relief from guilt, but this rationality mainly provides an added means of control over reality—through *okiyome* administered to the forehead, the spirits may be brought to leave the body, thereby restoring health and order.

Spirits are believed to manifest themselves in the possessed before they leave the body. Spirit manifestations are, however, less dramatic

and less frequent in the West than in Japan. They are most frequent among African members of Mahikari in Europe. This may sustain the argument that spirit possession is a learned reaction. Since spirit manifestation is seen as evidence of the truth of the teaching, a minimal interpretation of it is advanced—a slight shaking of hands or the blinking of eyes are seen as manifestation. Given such an interpretation, it is not surprising that about 40% of the respondents reported that they had an experience. Only the *dōjōchō* are authorized to investigate the spirits that so manifest themselves. In Europe, the identification of the spirits is adapted to European history and to the particular history of the persons in whom they are manifested.¹⁵

Closely related to the notion of spirit possession is the practice of ancestor worship. The worshipping of deceased ancestors by keeping a small home-altar for the ancestors (*butsudan*), with tablets (*ihai*) upon which their posthumous names are inscribed, and by offering flowers, food, and drink, is a long-standing tradition in Japan. Though not originally part of Buddhism, it has become fully integrated in the Japanese Buddhist tradition, and up to only the most recent times it was observed in most Japanese homes. The emphasis on this tradition in Mahikari may be seen as part of the overall return to prewar Japanese values and traditions. During the first fifteen years of Mahikari's mission in Europe, this practice was not imposed upon Western members. Only in exceptional cases was the installation of an altar recommended. Dr. Tebēcis, who has become the main spokesman of Mahikari for the West, states that it was the most difficult but also one of the most important elements of Mahikari teaching and practice to adopt: "I remember being very skeptical when first told that my deceased relatives can actually be helped or fed by giving offerings in front of name-tablets in an altar. It took me many months to be awakened to the importance of *Sorei Matsuri*. However, after holding the ceremony and making regular offerings to my ancestors I grew to appreciate how real and important it is" (TEBĒCIS 1982, pp. 45-46).¹⁶ Since 1988, when Mr. Shirasaki was appointed *shidōbuchō* of Europe and Africa, all European members are encouraged to have an altar where they offer food and prayers to the ancestors. While the form of the altar, the bell, and the memorial tablets

¹⁵ The possessing spirits are most often one's own ancestors or famous historical figures. From a functionalistic perspective, this may be seen as based upon the fact that the influence of spirits is homeopathic, and that the tendencies of the spirits must be known in order to explain the disease or misfortune of the possessed. An example of the homeopathic logic of causality is that, if one finds oneself in need of frequent treatment with needles, this means that one's ancestors or possessing spirits were themselves guilty of piercing others with swords.

¹⁶ This is a typical case of how doubt and volition lead to the enforcement of belief.

are the same as in Japanese models, the posthumous names given to the deceased ancestors are local. In an attempt to familiarize the Western members with this practice, teachers often compare it to the celebration of All Souls and All Saints in the Christian tradition, which are seen historically as derivative versions of this tradition. The success of the introduction of this practice in Europe may be seen in the fact that 69% of the respondents to the questionnaire said they possess an altar for the ancestors. It is universally appealing in that it provides solace in a continued interaction with loved ones. But for those who have accepted the logic of spirit possession, it enhances the sense of control over one's own life and of caring for ancestors.¹⁷

The emphasis in Mahikari is not so much on orthodoxy as on orthopraxis. As a result, there are different degrees of integration of the Mahikari world view and rationality among members. Very few join the movement on a purely logical or rational basis. The primary appeal of Mahikari is its promise of healing. Acceptance of the doctrine is proportional to the degree of despair and to the efficacy of the practice.

The Divine Leader in the West

Like many of the new Japanese religions, the founder of Mahikari has come to be absolutized. He has been regarded as a living kami and endowed with the veneration and honor due such status. His successor within the Sūkyō Mahikari line, Oshienushisama, has claimed as her inheritance the same status and authority.¹⁸ While the Japanese are familiar with the idea of humans bestowed with divine power and authority, Western monotheism has precluded such notions. The divine status assumed by or granted to the leaders of New Religions in Japan clashes with the Christian belief in the uniqueness of Christ. In seeking to establish itself within a predominantly Christian context, Mahikari is thus forced to define itself with respect to Christianity.

Already in the *Goseigen*, the sacred scripture of Mahikari, there are numerous references to Christianity and to the figure of Jesus Christ.

¹⁷ A particular problem relating to ancestor worship in the West is the fact that only the ancestors of the male side of the family are worshipped. This has caused some feminist revolt. A woman who could not reconcile herself to the idea that only the ancestors of her husband were worshipped was subject to several forms of suffering (back problems and the suicide of her brother). These events were interpreted as caused by her lack of obedience, and led to her repentance. Now she has become an antitype for those who would express feminist tendencies with regard to veneration of ancestors.

¹⁸ The present leader of the other lineage, Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyōdan, Sekiguchi Sakae, officially renounced a claim to the same power and authority as the founder. He explicitly stated that it was only Sukuinushisama who received divine revelations, and that his own role was merely that of an interpreter of those revelations.

Sukuinushisama proclaims himself to be the “First Messiah” (p. 3), the one who reveals the ultimate truth that previous teachers such as Moses, Gautama Buddha, and Jesus “were not permitted to reveal to the public even though they had knowledge of it” (p. 4; see also pp. 27, 73, 206). The life and teachings of Jesus Christ are reinterpreted in Mahikari in accordance with its own categories and in function of their fulfillment in Sukuinushisama. The essence of the teachings of Jesus is seen to be the accomplishment of miraculous healings. He is believed to have acquired this from Shinto sages in the period between his puberty and public life. Jesus did not die on the cross (his brother was crucified in his stead) but returned to Japan, married a Japanese, and died at an old age (108 or 116—the documents do not agree).¹⁹ The mission of Sukuinushisama is then regarded as the completion of that of Jesus Christ. The biblical notions that the “Light comes from the East”²⁰ and that the “Spirit of Truth” will be sent to complete the work of Christ²¹ are constantly quoted with reference to Sukuinushisama.

The meeting in private audience of Sukuinushisama with Pope Paul VI in 1973 is seen as the Christian affirmation of Mahikari, the official papal acknowledgement of the spiritual role and religious authority of the founder.²² It is constantly reiterated in speeches, books, pamphlets, and other forms of propaganda.²³

While all other religions are regarded as valuable and true for their times, Mahikari is seen as the final teaching, or the teaching of the final age. Within Mahikari’s evolutionary scheme, Christianity belonged to the period of dominance of the yin-gods, or water-gods, which is now bypassed and replaced by the era of the fire-gods, in which Mahikari offers the final truth. It sees itself not as a religion, but as a supra-religious organization (hence its name Sūkyō 崇教), a spiritual organization, an art. As such, it argues that one can remain Christian while adhering to Mahikari teaching and practice.

Of the 60% of respondents who were practicing Christians at the time of joining Mahikari, 75% continued to consider themselves Christians, and about half of those are still regular churchgoers. Since the emphasis is on orthopraxis, Mahikari allows for a selective adoption of the teach-

¹⁹ This is said to be reported in the Takenouchi documents, mysterious writings belonging to a Shinto priestly family, which the founder considered to be revealed.

²⁰ Gen. 3:24, Job 38:24, Is. 41:2, Ez. 43:1–2, Matt. 2:1–2 and 9–10, etc.

²¹ John 15 and 16.

²² In Japan, where Christianity is associated with universality, this meeting is seen and presented as the universal affirmation of the authority of the founder and the legitimacy of Mahikari.

²³ The current leader, Oshienushisama, is also often dressed in papal vestments, and her picture framed in purple.

ings. Some members in the West may not share the veneration for the leader, nor believe in reincarnation, nor worship the ancestors, while at the same time fervently transmitting the light. *Okiyome* is then regarded as a means for helping oneself and others. Others regard Mahikari's rejection of the notion of the redemptive suffering and death of Christ — which they say they never were able to understand or believe — as proof of the truth of Mahikari teaching.

But the emphasis on the divinity of the leader and the reinterpretation of the life and meaning of Christ have also been stumbling blocks for Christians. The history of Christ in Japan is introduced during the advanced course, after members have invested too much to easily renounce their membership. Most then come to regard it as nonessential within the whole teaching. For others, however, it has been a ground for doubt, or for radical rejection of Mahikari. Circulation of Tebēcis's book, *Mahikari. Thank God for the Answers at Last*, in which the movement's views of Jesus Christ and Christianity are propounded, has therefore been carefully controlled within the European market.

While multiple religious affiliation is the rule in Japan, the West is more concerned with doctrinal orthodoxy and consistency and reconcilability of teachings. Although only 17% of the interviewees immediately turned away from Christianity to Mahikari, many become gradually alienated from Christian teachings and practice as they become more and more immersed in Mahikari. When the rituals of Mahikari and of Christianity overlap, many tend to participate in the former. Little by little they come to internalize the belief that Christ and Christianity are superseded and thus made superfluous by Mahikari and its founder and leader.

Japanese Nationalism in the West

Mahikari emerged in a period of internationalization and challenge to the Japanese identity and pride. In reaction to this, it developed explicitly nationalistic and ethnocentric beliefs and practices. MIYANAGA understands Mahikari as a "naturalist-nationalist revival" (1990, p. 51) and McVEIGH (1991) focuses on its restoration of traditional Japanese values. Japan is believed to be the land of origins, the heart of the original continent "Mu," the center of the world, and the place whence salvation is bound to spread over the world.²⁴ The Japanese were the first people created,²⁵ the chosen people called to restore spiritual civilization, and

²⁴ Elaborate references are made to obscure codexes and fossils found to prove that this continent existed and that Japan was its center, the place from which it was ruled.

²⁵ "The first humans were created in Japan, in Hidama, in the area of the city called Takayama." (TEBĒCIS 1982, p. 390.)

Japanese is the language of the gods.²⁶ The Suza, the main world shrine in Takayama, is the center of the world, the final home for all people and all religions, and the greeting for foreigners who arrive at the Suza is "Welcome home."

This idolization of Japan may be thought to appeal to those Westerners who are awed by the industrial and economic wonder of post-World War II Japan. But the questionnaire shows that they are in fact a very small minority. Most respondents had no special fascination with Japan at the time of joining Mahikari, or even after that.²⁷ The emphasis on Japan and the Japanese language thus functions somewhat differently in Europe. The explicitly nationalistic ideas are somewhat tempered.²⁸ While Japan is still presented as the land of origins and of restoration of the world, all "five colored races" are given a specific role. It is emphasized in Europe that the Japanese language used in prayers is "not Japanese" but *kotodama*, the language of the gods,²⁹ the power of which does not lie so much in the meaning as in the vibrations. The radical unintelligibility of the prayers for Westerners adds to their magical quality.³⁰ This also applies to the calligraphy of the term *mahikari* that is imprinted on the *goshintai*. The *Amatsu norigoto*, a prayer that is recited before every session of *okiyome*, is said to be untranslatable. It thus acquires the nature of a spell for Westerners. Japanese terms are also used in Europe to denote Mahikari ideas, values, and practices. Mastering the Japanese prayers and concepts belongs to the process of initiation. The Japanese language and rituals thus function to enhance the esoteric nature of the movement.

The nationalistic elements in Mahikari, combined with the militarism expressed in the training of the Youth Corps, the Mahikaritai, has raised some suspicion and fear in the West. While the love of uniforms and discipline and order is part of Japan's social ethos, different associations are made in the West. Seeing the youth in uniform goose-stepping and

²⁶ "He [Sukunishisama] said that the Japanese language is the language of the gods, the first language ever." (TEBÉCIS 1982, p. 379).

²⁷ There was, however, some correlation between following the advanced course in Japan, in which the nationalistic ideas are presented, and a belief in Japan as a providential country.

²⁸ Although the enthronement of the new emperor was a major event in Japan, with Mahikari members parading in the streets, it was barely mentioned in European dojo.

²⁹ *Kotodama* is an ancient Japanese form of language-science, a pseudoetymology in which words are given a new reading from the "hidden" meaning of syllables. The *Goseigen* also contains the *kotodama* of English words such as "science" or *sa-i-e-u-su*: to divide and separate, the transference of God's Will, a sword hilt and a trivial matter, the divine function to unify, and Su-God or the Origin (p. 91). The *kotodama* of "Christ" or *ku-ri-su-to* is suffering, tightening, an end, stop (p. 251).

³⁰ While the prayers are recited in Japanese, all except the *Amatsu norigoto* are nevertheless provided with a translation in the prayerbook.

saluting, many a Western member of Mahikari has been shocked, and some have as a result even left the movement. Mahikari has been seen as a paramilitary organization that represents a threat to the West. When it was introduced in Europe in 1983, the particular training of the Youth Corps encountered some opposition. The members are made to undergo severe military drill and submitted to long hours of indoctrination. The organization appeals to young members of Mahikari, however, who find purpose, identity, solidarity, and a sense of pride in belonging to the elite troops, to the generation that will form a new civilization.³¹ The notion of pollution or defilement is interpreted in terms of ecological concerns and activities.

While in Japan the emphasis is on marching exercises, the European Mahikaritai spends the greater part of reunions listening to lectures. One of the few prayers that are translated and recited in the native languages is the prayer of the Mahikaritai, the *shimei*. It consists of a radical exhortation to devote oneself to the leader, Oshienushisama, and to the cause of the movement, "the construction of the new, holy, 21st, god-centered, spirit-centered civilization." The Japanese prayer is, however, modified in its translation into European languages. The reference to "being born in the land of the Spirit, in the holy land of the genesis of humankind" is omitted. While certain adaptations have been made to the Western context, youth members who wish to become ministers, or *dōshi*, undergo a profound immersion in the Japanese culture and language and are supposed to conform to Japanese notions of hierarchy and propriety.

Mahikari, like most new Japanese religions, reflects the paradoxical attitude of Japan toward the West. In an attempt at internationalization and the gaining of Western recognition, certain Western styles and ideas are adopted. Western members are treated with extreme respect and politeness when they visit Japan. But underlying this is a deep sense of the superiority of the Japanese culture. Because of their feeling of alienation from Japanese members, Western members of Mahikari in Japan have formed a sub-group.

Conclusion

Over its two decades of missionary activity in the West, Mahikari has not developed any real policy of inculturation. If there is a policy at all, it has been to resist any form of transformation by the culture into which

³¹ When I observed the Mahikaritai in Japan, my suspicion was that it would appeal to explicitly militaristic and fascist youth in Europe. This, however, was not corroborated by the facts.

it moved. This may be seen as characteristic of a movement that is still in the process of formation and self-definition. But it is also symptomatic of the magical nature of Mahikari. It is the correct performance of the ritual and the exact pronunciation of the prayers that brings about the desired results. Both the teachings and the rituals are, moreover, believed to be divinely revealed, and thus not subject to change. While in certain areas Mahikari has become more lenient and has adapted to Western ways, in matters relating to magic it has become, if anything, more severe. The taboos surrounding the sacred amulet, the *omitama*, have increased, and there is much pressure on mastering all the prayers in Japanese.

It is to a certain extent this resistance to inculturation that accounts for the success of Mahikari in the West. The appeal of a religion like Mahikari lies in its functional, explicitly magical nature, in its promise of immediate and this-worldly effects, in its emphasis on healing. While this vitalistic conception of salvation has been most strongly developed in Japan, and runs somewhat against Christian conceptions, it answers to universal needs. The Japanese language, leaders, symbols, and rituals all enhance the sense of mysterious efficacy. Certain explicitly nationalistic or ethnocentric aspects of Mahikari acquire an esoteric function.

It is the healing power of the light that appeals to Europeans. This may be seen in comparing the missionary strategy of Mahikari with those of its parent religion, Sekai Kyūseikyō. When the latter moved into Europe, it somewhat shied away from its magical practices, and focussed instead on the advancement of Japanese culture and language, on natural farming and the promotion of arts. *Jōrei*, the equivalent of *okiyome*, is only gradually and somewhat hesitantly introduced. Mahikari, on the other hand, unabashedly offers the light and transmits it everywhere, and has about ten times the membership of Sekai Kyūseikyō in western Europe. Other new Japanese religions such as Shinnyōen, which requires a major leap of faith or the acceptance of radically new doctrines without prior or simultaneous evidence of their efficacy, have also been unsuccessful in the West. While the teachings of Mahikari are also radically foreign, they are only gradually internalized, as a by-product of the effectiveness of the practice. It is the combination of doubt and volition and the evidence of miracles that brings about a radical conversion, a total reinterpretation of one's problems and their solutions in terms of Mahikari cosmology and practice. The degree of integration of the theoretical framework of Mahikari is often proportional to the degree of despair.

The emphasis on miracles and magic in Mahikari, on the other hand, accounts for the large turnover of members, both in Japan and in the West. While doctrinal flexibility and the lack of social control allow for a variety of degrees of involvement in the movement, they also facilitate

the tendency to drop out when magic fails. This tendency is even stronger in the West, where the discontinuity of Mahikari teaching, practices, and theodicy requires a more lengthy and intense process of socialization. To remedy this, Mahikari has recently been developing a network of home centers to ease the step to the unfamiliar setting of the Mahikari dojo, and to provide a context of social support and control. A radically new world view such as is presented by Mahikari can only be solidly incorporated through an interplay between the familiar and the foreign. It is here that the process of inculturation may eventually be generated.

Of all the elements that characterize the New Religions of Japan, the emphasis on healing answers to the most universal needs and is therefore the ground of their universal appeal. However, many of the beliefs upon which the healing practices are based are radically alien to the Western tradition. They are formulated on the basis of, or over against, traditional Japanese beliefs and sensitivities. In order to gain a more permanent foothold outside Japan, these beliefs will need to be opened to challenge and mutual enrichment within the different cultures, to inculturation. Otherwise, Mahikari will probably remain no more than a Japanese nationalistic ideology, with no lasting impact in the West.

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*Editor's note: An article on Mahikari by Brian McVeigh is scheduled to appear shortly in the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*.

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