

## The Vitalistic Conception of Salvation as Expressed in Sūkyō Mahikari

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It is common for members of the New Religions to be criticized for only being interested in worldly benefit (*genze riyaku* 現世利益). Certainly limited exposure to the discourse, activities, and members of these groups may lead one to agree that these movements have little concern for the more “spiritual” side of religion. However, a more careful examination and evaluation of their teachings should dispel the charge of a “this-world-only-benefit” mentality.

In order to test the argument of TSUSHIMA et al. (1979) that these groups do in fact possess a concept of spiritual salvation—though one that differs considerably from Western formulations about the nature of salvation—I will apply their ideas to the New Religion called Sūkyō Mahikari 崇教真光. This is the primary aim of this article. As a related aim, I intend to demonstrate the cosmo-logic motivating the behavior of its members, sustaining their belief system, and providing ideological integrity to the movement.<sup>1</sup>

Commonly referred to as Mahikari, the movement in question was founded in 1959 by Okada Yoshikazu (later known as Sukuinushisama, “the Lord Savior”), who claimed to have “received an important directive from God that revealed how radiating the Divine Light of the Creator can produce health, harmony, happiness, and freedom from emotional pain and financial hardship.” Members practice wearing a divine pendant (*omitama* 御み霊) and participate in *okiyome* お浄め (cleansing) sessions in which people receive and radiate the Divine (or True) Light in order to purify their physical, astral, and spiritual bodies

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on several revised sections of my dissertation. Research lasted two years and was supported by a Monbushō Scholarship and funds from Princeton University's Anthropology Department and East Asian Studies Department. I am grateful to the members of Mahikari who shared their beliefs and experiences with me. I am also indebted to Miyanaga Kuniko, Richard Young, Richard Anderson, and Ronan A. Pereira, all of whom offered useful suggestions and insights of their own during the data-collecting stage of research.

and souls. They describe Mahikari as more than just a religion. Its doctrines encompass and transcend the truths found in all religions, science, medicine, politics, and ideologies. Concentrated in the major urban areas of Japan with numerous overseas centers, its membership has been estimated at between 350,000 to 400,000.<sup>2</sup>

Because the concepts of salvation (spiritual, transcendent, universalistic, this-world-denying) and worldly benefit (materialistic, human-centered, particularistic, this-world-affirming) are often counterpoised, it has frequently been alleged that the New Religions lack a concept of salvation. The counterpoising of salvation and worldly-benefit, which is related to other polarized notions such as religion-versus-magic and value-oriented versus goal-oriented rationality, indicates the “deeply-rooted bias of a modern culture which has been heavily influenced by Christianity and other historical religions” (TSUSHIMA et al. 1979, pp. 141–42). Because of this bias, an entirely new approach is demanded, an approach that conjoins concepts of salvation with worldly benefit. Tsushima et al. suggest that, despite surface diversity, a very similar ideological structure underlies the teachings of the New Religions. This common ideological structure has its roots in the cultural tradition of an agricultural society in which the idea of fertility, for obvious reasons, played a central role in the community. However, at the level of folk belief the concept of what actually brought fertility and propagation was vague and fragmented. It was up to the founders and followers of the New Religions to systematically organize and elaborate a set of ill-defined concepts into a set of teachings (TSUSHIMA et al. 1979, p. 151).

Related to the early ideological underpinnings of the new religious movements, Shimazono points out that these groups share a common source in folk belief (*minkan shinkō* 民間信仰). But, as folk beliefs and practices came into contact with the more salvation-oriented religions such as Buddhism, “folk religion” (*minzoku shūkyō* 民族宗教) emerged. This refers to

a faith-system that remains related to its foundation in folk belief but, in consequence of continuing contact with salvation-oriented religion, is to some extent characterized by salvation religion-type organization, doctrines, and rituals (SHIMAZONO 1979, p. 391).

Tsushima et al. believe that despite doctrinal diversity, the New Religions are rooted in folk religion. What unites these movements is a *vitalistic conception of salvation*. Before dealing with how this conception finds expression in Mahikari, I set the groundwork by discussing this

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<sup>2</sup> For detailed works on Mahikari, see DAVIS (1980) and MIYANAGA (1983), who researched the World True-Light Civilization Religious Association, the group that Mahikari broke off from. Also, see YOUNG (1990) and ANDERSON (1988).

version of spiritual salvation from eight angles as understood by TSUSHIMA et al. (1979, pp. 142–49).

1) *The essence of the cosmos*. The cosmos is regarded as a living body or a life force in which everything is constantly growing, functioning harmoniously, and interdependently related. It is from the living body of the cosmos that all things, including human beings, receive life. Since we receive everything from the cosmos, it is thought of as a beneficial source that nurtures and sustains all life and is thus considered inherently good. Therefore, gratitude and thankfulness toward the world of nature are important common themes found in the New Religions.

In some groups, the idea of a vitalistic cosmos tends to be impersonal and the image of the deity is less prominent. At times the deity is not even mentioned. In other groups, the primary religious being is personified and more attention is directed toward the characteristics of the deity.

Discussing Ōmoto, THOMSEN relates that in this group God is conceived as the prime source of the universe, and the universe itself is the source of divine vitality (1963, p. 134). In his discussion of P. L. Kyōdan, he captures the idea of a life-giving cosmos:

There is nothing man can do by his own efforts. It is by the Power of Nature that man is born, is enabled to grow up, live, work, and make self-expressions during the whole span of his life. Besides mankind, the progress and development of the whole creation also depends solely upon the Power of Nature. . . . There exists a great power in this universe. We are manifestations of that great Power of Nature and are allowed to live our daily life in accordance with the breathings of that great nature. This power of great nature, the spiritual power constituting the fountainhead of life and activity not only of man but also of everything else, is called God. . . . God is power and love which, while embracing everything, creates everything, nurtures everything, and makes everything progress and develop. (1963, p. 190)

In the Holy Words of Mahikari we learn that God “arranged to change His Eternal Life into the wave of the great universe or the Wave of Spirit” (OKADA 1982, p. 67), and in a teaching of Mahikari’s founder, we are told that “all things in the universe and all that is allocated a divine spiritual nature are the manifestation and materialization of the divine will” (OKADA 1984, p. 12). In other references we come across discussions of the “Great Original Spirit” (*daigenrei* 大源靈), and, concerning the creation of the world, we are informed by God that every-

thing that is materialized  
is controlled to gather and spread, separate and unite, flourish  
and wither, prosper and fade, and transmigrate and reincarnate.

Thus I let it eternally live, grow, expand, spread, become luxuriant and prosper. By doing so, I desire to perfect the exciting Great Arrangement for the beauty of the vast nature which is overflowing with the joy of God, Human and all creatures. (OKADA 1988, p. 82)

2) **Primary religious being.** Despite the fact that some New Religions give little or no emphasis to a primary religious being, many do. This being, the Original Life that bears and nurtures all living things, is often monotheistic and transcendent. However, the deity is “recognized as pantheistic and immanent, omnipresent in all things and therefore providing an internal and undying life force” (TSUSHIMA et al. 1979, p. 144).

3) **Human nature.** As a part of the Original Life, human beings are considered inherently divine, unpolluted, pure, and perfect. Thus, everyone partakes of the divine and eventually will return to the Original Life. Since all humans come from the same Original Life, we should relate to each other harmoniously. As branch streams or individualized manifestations of the deity that are permitted to live by the power of the Original Life, we cannot exist independently of it. This is why we are expected to express our gratitude toward the deity.

4) **Life and death.** Though the New Religions do not ignore man’s destiny after death, there is a definite emphasis on the here and now that contrasts with the pessimism of the other-worldly-oriented conceptions of salvation. For the New Religions, salvation can be obtained in this world, and the fruits of salvation are health, happiness, and harmonious human relationships. Unlike Buddhism, which stresses the impermanence of earthly existence, the New Religions “optimistically accept change as the process through which the energy of the Original Life constantly reasserts itself toward unlimited growth” (TSUSHIMA et al. 1979, p. 146).

5) **Evil and sin.** The vitalistic conception is very much concerned with maintaining a positive and harmonious relation with the living cosmos. However, if man forgets that his life is inextricably bound up with the Original Life, cosmic functions begin to lose their vitality, so that the Original Life’s “potential for germination, growth, and efflorescence is stultified” (TSUSHIMA et al. 1979, p. 146). This negative state of affairs results in poverty, sickness, and discord. Often the teachings of the New Religions explain “That deviation from a proper relationship with Original Life in the past has an unavoidable impact on the present” (TSUSHIMA et al. 1979, p. 147). However, the New Religions offer means by which one can be restored to a vital state, thus returning to a proper relationship with the great energy of the cosmos. The dichotomy between a pure, unsullied, and vital relationship and an impure, sullied, and weakened relationship with the Original Life is very commonly

symbolized by a discourse about purity and impurity. This is a very deep-rooted notion in the Japanese religious tradition, and is also used to symbolize morality, or the lack of it.

6) *Means of salvation*. In order to be liberated from a disharmonious relationship with the Original Life, we must repent past sins, acknowledge our selfishness, and establish a feeling of gratitude for the benefits received from the Original Life. Most New Religions do not employ extreme ascetic disciplines, sometimes found in the more established faiths. Rather, the New Religions “have devised simple religious practices as direct and instantaneous means for the restoration of vitality” (TSUSHIMA et al. 1979, p. 148).

Besides advocating the use of simple practices (such as chanting, wearing amulets, and various ritualized actions) to reintegrate oneself into a harmonious relation with the Original Life, the New Religions preach a lifestyle that strongly resonates with mainstream values of Japanese society. This emphasis on certain norms with a rather traditional and conservative flavor has played an essential role in the success of these groups. Therefore, it is my contention that without taking these espoused values into account, we cannot fully appreciate the significance of modern Japanese spirituality. It is no exaggeration, as I will attempt to demonstrate in the case of Mahikari, to state that it has been the consistent advocacy of a particular moral outlook that has been the primary reason for the success of the New Religions.

HARDACRE, using Kurozumikyō as an example, also believes that despite doctrinal diversity, the New Religions share a common worldview that arose at the end of the Tokugawa period. This normative order, though expressed in a more or less fragmented manner in these groups, has been remarkably tenacious. According to Hardacre, “the idea that the self-cultivation of the individual determines destiny” has been central to the worldview of modern Japanese religions (1986, p. 188), and in Kurozumikyō the values of gratitude, sincerity, perseverance, and optimism are stressed, themes common to all the New Religions (1986, p. 76).

7) *The saved state*. Worldly benefits and boons “are thought to be concrete manifestations of the efflorescence of the life force and are therefore inseparable from the total conception of salvation” (TSUSHIMA et al. 1979, p. 148). The concept of salvation varies from group to group, and is perhaps emphasized in certain movements more than others. But its role cannot be ignored. I can remember being told many times in Mahikari *dōjō* (centers) that, while receiving miracles from God is to be expected, being saved – and saving others – should be the primary goal.

8) *Founders*. The founders of the New Religions usually claim to have had an encounter with the divine that imparts to them a special knowledge, power, and mission. It is here that the shamanistic roots of the New Religions become obvious. More than just instructors or leaders,

the founders are often referred to as “living gods,” and “he or she is the only person who has been given the mission and the power to reveal the divine will for universal salvation” (TSUSHIMA et al. 1979, p. 149). Thus, they often act as if they were the “ultimate media or outlets for the welling forth of Original Life, while followers regard them as the embodiment of this life and also the model for and proof of the saved state” (TSUSHIMA et al. 1979, p. 149). A good example of how followers of Zenrinkai regard their spiritual leader is provided by ANDERSON’s description of a ceremony called *osugari* (“clinging”):

He stripped off his shirt and was led through the participants by a number of teachers who stand in front of and behind him. The people frantically touched his arms and body. When he circulated through the whole crowd, he returned to the front, raised his right hand in a blessing, and quickly disappeared. . . . There was complete chaos. (1988, pp. 40–41)

It should be noted that even in movements that lack a clearly stated notion of a living god, leaders and presidents are accorded special treatment, so that followers come to regard them as somehow above ordinary status.<sup>3</sup>

Building upon the insightful work of TSUSHIMA et al. (1979) and SHIMAZONO (1979), I propose a four-aspect paradigm. Though I believe it applies to modern Japanese spirituality in general, my primary concern is to offer it as an intellectual framework for beginning to understand Mahikari.

#### *A Paradigm of Power, Personage, and Practice*

Several qualifications are in order before I outline this four-aspect paradigm. First of all, this is not meant to be a “trait list,” since if it were it would “fail to articulate the internal coherence of the separate items,” thereby failing “to discover the most basic unity of religious orientation, of which the traits are expressions” (HARDACRE 1988, p. 7). Secondly, this paradigm is meant to be a starting point from which more detailed studies can proceed. It is not a reduction, and its abstract quality is meant to be provisional, not conclusive. Serious students of any religious movement must seek out what is distinctive, characteristic, and particular in a sensitive manner. Since members of any given group are well aware of the differences between their own group and others, researchers should be held responsible for providing accounts of these differences. The differences are important. Thirdly, heeding ANDERSON (1988, pp. 331–34), I do not intend this vitalistic paradigm to be an

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<sup>3</sup> See MIYATA’s *Ikigami shinkô* (1970) for a historical treatment of the idea of the “living god.”

attempt to find the “unique” characteristics of Japanese culture as expressed in religion. Though it certainly deals with cultural themes found in Japan, elements of this paradigm can be found outside of Japan as well. Fourthly, since this paradigm is an intellectual starting point to be used to come to terms with Japan's modern spirituality, we should not expect it to apply in any perfect manner to the great doctrinal, ritual, and organizational diversity found among the New Religions. Some groups may emphasize one (or more) aspect of the paradigm, still others another aspect. In fact, the intellectual contours of this paradigm may appear to apply in only the weakest sense in certain groups. But since the paradigm is more of an abstraction than a description, this is only to be expected.

1) *Divine Source*. Following TSUSHIMA et al. (1979), the first aspect can be thought of as the Original Life, or the Primary Being, in which all existence and life originates. In some groups, this aspect is only vaguely referred to, if at all. In other groups, it is personified. In Mahikari, it is called *Su no kamisama* 主の神様, the parent God of all other deities and mankind. For my purposes, I refer to this aspect as the Divine Source.

2) *Divine Power*. The second aspect, which may be thought of as being a manifestation of the Divine Source, I call the Divine Power. It is the embodiment of the Divinity in terms of energy, vitality, and essence. Depending on the context, it may be identified with the natural world. At this point I propose a tentative definition of the Divine Power that will become clearer as we proceed: a transferable, transferring, controllable, controlling cosmic energy, vitality, or essence that exists in, among, and between people and things, animating all existence.

Divine Power comes very close to probably the most central concept in traditional Shinto thought, *kami*, which at least from one perspective may be thought of as life-giving powers. Often translated as “gods,” *kami* have very particularistic, pantheistic characteristics, since “mountains, seas, rivers, rocks, trees, birds, animals – anything that evoked awe was regarded as *kami*” (HORI et al. 1972, p. 14). However, human beings who possessed some extraordinary power or quality were also viewed as *kami*. HERBERT provides a useful definition: “[*Kami* is] the deification of life-force which pervades all beings, animate and inanimate. *Kami* is the invisible power which unites spirit and matter into a dynamic whole, while it gives birth to all things without exception” (1967, p. 25). While many *kami* are anthropomorphized, it is perhaps useful to regard this term as possessing *mana*-like functions, as suggested by MCFARLAND (1967, p. 72). SCHNEIDER points out some of the terms used in different groups that capture the spirit of the Divine Power as energy/vitality/essence: *kiai*, “spirit-pressure or coercion by the spirit”; *seiki*, “(radiation of the) life force”; *reiki*, the “spirit force”; and even *reishi*, “which has

been coined from an analogy with the electron and translated as ‘pneumaton’ (1962, pp. 140–41).

The clearest example of energy/vitality/essence in Mahikari is *mihikari* 光, the “Divine Light” that God transmits to this world in order to rid it of illness, social strife, and hardships (also called *mahikari* 真光, the “True Light”). Put simply, there is nothing in the world that the Divine Light cannot help, cure, improve, revise, and spiritually cleanse. It is humanity’s answer to everything. Another example of the Divine Power in Mahikari is *ki* 気, which, depending on the context, can mean energy or essence.<sup>4</sup> Though not talked about as much as the Divine Light, the concept of *ki* is the best example of Divine Power, since it sums up its three aspects.

The Divine Light, *ki*, and similar concepts are more than just cosmological in significance. The cosmo-logic underlying their use is also employed in discourses about one’s spiritual level, moral purity, and, from a more social-scientific perspective, sociopolitical relations.

3) *Divine Personage*. The third aspect of the vitalistic paradigm concerns how the Divine Power, as the manifestation of the Divine Source, is brought into this world where it can work its beneficial effects. I refer to this aspect as the Divine Personage. What is needed is a mediator, a medium, a special individual who, for the welfare of mankind, acts on behalf of the Divine Source: “This idea of the living kami founder who binds together the human and the divine is closely linked to the idea of the shamanistic living kami in Folk Religion” (SHIMAZONO 1979, pp. 402–403). As someone carrying out the mission and purpose of the Divine Source, the living kami founder does more than just transmit the Divine Power—he or she embodies the energy, vitality, and essence of the cosmos. In this capacity, the founder is regarded as the savior of mankind. It is this concept, that of the living kami, “that stands as the ultimate foundation for the salvation-belief central to the New Religions” (SHIMAZONO 1979, p. 403).

In Mahikari, Sukuinushisama, the Lord Savior, embodied the will of the Divine Source. His role has been taken over by his adopted daughter, Oshienushisama, the Great Teacher. Compared to ordinary persons, the Light and *ki* she possesses is much greater.

4) *Divine Practice*. The fourth aspect is the least abstract and most concrete of the four-aspect paradigm. This concerns the practical operation of actually receiving, gaining, and somehow manipulating the Divine Power. This aspect is called Divine Practice. Usually a founder will reveal to his or her followers a special ritual, ceremony, or other activity

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<sup>4</sup> In standard Japanese *ki* is written 気, but in Mahikari a variation with *ka* 火 (fire) is used. See the section of this article entitled *Ki: The Fabric of the Cosmos*.

that allows each individual access to sacred forces. Sometimes it is chanting, and often it involves wearing an amulet. Many practices involve communicating with the spirits of the deceased or kami, and have their roots in shamanism: “The New Religions appear to have routinized mediumistic rituals and enlarged their role” (SHIMAZONO 1979, p. 401).

In Mahikari, wearing a special amulet and receiving and radiating the True Light during *okiyome* sessions in which spirits may manifest themselves are the primary activities.

I now turn to the powers and forces, impersonal and personal (particularly the former), that comprise the cosmic fabric, control the universe, and bless, empower, and at times admonish and punish mankind.

### *The Powers of the Cosmos*

As part of Mahikari’s standard iconography, a calligraphy painting hangs on the walls of all dōjōs with the characters *shinki mandō* 神氣満堂 . Painted by the Lord Savior himself, it might be translated as “The hall is filled with God’s Spiritual Energy” (or “Spiritual Vitality” or “Spiritual Essence”). No matter how one chooses to gloss this piece of calligraphy, its brevity is deceiving, for it captures in four characters the basic cosmological principle of Mahikari. This is the idea of an underlying energy holding the universe together, and it is a leitmotif of Mahikari’s ideology. The True Light is the exemplar of this energy, and as we will see below there are other examples. At times *kamikumite* (meaning members, but literally, “persons who walk hand-in-hand with God”), talk about this cosmic-logic in a general manner, using the terms *pawā* (power) or *enerugi* (energy). But, regardless of the way they speak of it, this principle is a “transferable, transferring, controllable, controlling divine energy, vitality, or essence that exists in, among, and between people and things, animating the cosmos.” Though this cosmic energy/vitality/essence is most appropriately thought of as the second aspect (Divine Power) of the four-aspect paradigm, its relation to the three other aspects (Divine Source, Divine Personage, and Divine Practice) cannot be ignored if we are to fully appreciate its ideological impact. Thus, as I treat this topic, I will relate it to the entire four-aspect paradigm. It is in this section that I demonstrate that there is a common logic motivating the various activities of *kamikumite*, and that if this logic is understood, their behavior and beliefs become sensible. Administering the True Light is just part of a wider cosmic-logic.

This cosmic-logic of energy/vitality/essence is probably part of a very old, implicit folk tradition that arose from a concern with agricultural success and concepts of fertility:

At the level of folk belief . . . the idea of a life force as the bringer

of fertility and propagation has been vague and fragmented. . . . vitalism remained at the stage of an unconscious receptivity. The New Religions . . . took up this receptivity and elaborated it to arrive at a systematically organized set of teachings on salvation. (TSUSHIMA et al. 1979, p. 151)

The idea of a life force that animates all existence is a common theme in many of the modern religious movements in Japan. For example, THOMSEN notes that in Ōmoto, “the Prime source of the universe is vitality, which is Divinity,” and “the universe is the manifestation of vitality, or the fragments of the Divinity” (1963, p. 134).<sup>5</sup> An updated version of faith in a cosmic energy/vitality/essence can be found in a now extinct group that venerated electricity as its central object of worship and regarded Thomas Edison as a deity (HORI et al. 1972, p. 99).

Below I present what I regard as the concrete manifestations of the cosmic energy/vitality/essence in the case of Mahikari. Each example, as a particular instance of the Divine Power, has a set of special functions and contexts in which it appears. But taken together, all the examples point to a very deep-seated cosmological principle that acts as the conceptual foundation supporting Mahikari’s ideology.

It must be made clear that these various ways of expressing this principle are actually a method of making abstract ideas about human relations concrete—indeed, tangible. These divine energies, as impersonal as they are in themselves, are a metaphoric means of establishing a discourse about sociopolitical relations. As such, they are not politically neutral, since they are employed to symbolically mark personal influence and rank individuals. It is also important to point out that the following explication is highly abstract in that *kamikumite* do not systematize their beliefs about cosmic powers in such an orderly, methodical manner.

After I treat the impersonal powers, I then turn to the more personal entities of the Mahikari universe. The former are static and their effects more or less mechanical. The latter are spiritual agents and involve us in questions of intentionality.

#### SU GOD: THE DIVINE SOURCE

It may seem strange to list Su God among the impersonal powers. Certainly *kamikumite* do regard him as a basically personal entity. However, my justification for placing him among the more impersonal powers of the Mahikari cosmos is because he is often talked about—when he is talked about at all, which is actually less than the True Light—as if he

<sup>5</sup> In relation to this, see the HARDACRE discussion of *ki*, the “vitalistic principle” in Kurozumikyō (1986).

were a vital force or power, constantly generating and maintaining all existence. Su God is often discussed as if he were a personified aspect of the natural world. This should not be surprising since, according to the Lord Savior,

Monotheism holds that this world is ruled by one absolute God, the Creator. This in itself is not wrong. However, when we speak from the point of view that the absolute highest God descends to the lower worlds of the sixth, fifth, and fourth dimensions, divided into various spiritual characters (deities), each of which has particular activities, we are speaking of polytheism. Furthermore, viewed from another aspect, all things in the universe and all that is allocated a divine spiritual nature are the manifestation of the divine will. Viewed in this light we cannot deny the reality of pantheism. Therefore we can say that the ideas of monotheism, polytheism, as well as pantheism, are each true and at the same time false, and that all of them are true. (OKADA 1984, p. 12)

But regardless of Su God's pantheistic attributes, he is also described with personal characteristics, such as being righteous, austere, and possessing a "great strictness" (*daihi* 大悲) that is just the other side of his "great mercy" (*daiji* 大慈). And like an ordinary human, he has a spiritual body and "soul" (*shinkon* or *kamutama* 神魂; literally, the "divine" or "God's" soul).

Next, I discuss the most important manifestation of the Divine Source: the mysterious healing energy of Su God.

#### MAHIKARI: THE DIVINE POWER

Sometimes referred to as the "Divine Light" (*mihikari* み光), the True Light is a powerful cleansing energy that *kamikumite* rely on to cure illness, purify defilement, repair things, save souls, and improve the general well-being of the world. There is virtually nothing that cannot use a dose of Light. By simply raising one's hands and aiming, sick pets regain their health, broken-down cars are repaired, stocked goods sell, rowdy students calm down, and bothersome colleagues at work cease gossiping. The True Light is the exemplar of the Divine Power, mediated through the Divine Personages of the Lord Savior and Oshienushisama, and put into Divine Practice in *okiyome*.

The notion of a divine energy administered through the hand can be found in other New Religions. In Ōmoto there is the belief in *shinki* 神気 / *reiki* 霊気 (divine spirit) that is radiated in a ritual called *miteshiro* み手代 (divine hand-substitute). Sekai Kyūseikyō's *hikari* 光 (light) is given in a ritual called *jōrei* 浄霊 (spirit cleaning). *Jōrei* is very similar to Mahikari's *okiyome*, as is Ōmoto's *miteshiro*, and the Lord Savior was undoubtedly

influenced by the former while a member of Sekai Kyūseikyō (DAVIS 1980, pp. 73–79).<sup>6</sup>

According to some *kamikumite*, similarities between *okiyome* and the practices of other religions are due to the fact that originally Su God revealed to early mankind *manate* 真手 or *anshu* 接手 (laying on of hands), as performed by Jesus. Then came *maibuki* 真息吹 (purification by [True] breath), and in the present age we have been granted the most powerful means of spiritually purifying ourselves, the True Light.

*Kamikumite* usually exchange light during *okiyome* sessions at the *dōjō*, but, occasionally, small groups will walk around the local neighborhood of the *dōjō* and focus on an area that is in need of *reikai okiyome* 霊界お浄め (giving Light to the spirit world). I was told that, when I passed through the less reputable parts of town I should give Light to these areas, since they were morally unclean. It was not unusual to observe members, in as inconspicuous a manner as possible, raising their hands as they walked down a street, purifying the area. In many places outside the *dōjō* *kamikumite* could often be seen, in an almost unconscious way, administering True Light to the sore joint or painful limb of a relative, friend, or even someone they had just met, as they chatted.

An examination of how the True Light is discussed in different contexts reveals that there are two ways it affects the world. The first is as something *directed* at a particular body part or object. The second is as something that is *diffused* throughout the entire cosmos, with particularly strong concentrations found at the Main World Shrine, in altars or *dōjōs*, and in the personage of Oshienushisama. After I had the opportunity to meet Oshienushisama with a group of other *kamikumite* from overseas, members at my *dōjō* would still refer to this auspicious event months later, asking how I felt when I shook her hand and did the True Light from her cause any strong cleansing in my body. The political nature of such thinking should be obvious.

If thought of as something that originates in the Divine Source and that is found everywhere in the world, the True Light becomes a unifying cosmic power par excellence. It is very close to TSUSHIMA et al.'s notion of Life Force (1979). There is nothing abstract about the True Light. Listening to *kamikumite*, it quickly became evident that it is something concrete, felt, even seen. Here is how a young boy describes the effect of the True Light's glare in a poem:

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<sup>6</sup> DAVIS points out that in Japan there is actually a broad, nonformalized tradition of manual healing (1980, pp. 78–79). For example, see MIYAZAKI (1960). In addition, see HARDACRE's discussion of *majinai* in Kurozumikyō, a healing practice that uses hands and breath (1986, pp. 94–96).

“The Wonderful Divine Light”

Whenever I attend the Beginning-of-the-Month Ceremony,  
 Before I know it,  
 I see the glare of the Divine Light  
 and feel its warmth.  
 Nodding and dozing, I end up falling asleep.  
 There’s so much Divine Light,  
 and it’s so bright.  
 Each and every month,  
 I want to meet God and Oshienushisama.

(*Mahikari* May 1986, p. 96)

One member reported how she can see the Light coming from Oshienushisama’s mouth as she speaks at ceremonies. At a huge rally where television sets had been set up so the entire congregation could see Oshienushisama on stage, a *kamikumite* wondered if the Light given off by her passed directly through the walls (the television sets were in rooms separated from the main hall) or if it somehow was transmitted through the television sets. A movie called *The Great Spirit World (Dai reikai 大靈界)* had some scenes shot at the Main World Shrine. Though the movie itself did not square perfectly with Mahikari’s official doctrine, I was told that non-*kamikumite* who viewed it would be exposed to the True Light. This was because the film itself could somehow pick up the Light radiated by the Main World Shrine and project it to unsuspecting audience members in the theaters. I was also once told that small pins worn by Mahikari members with the Divine Crest should be worn as much as possible, since they give off Light.

The notion that the True Light is a field of energy is not socio-politically neutral, since certain places, things, and people can radiate more of it, symbolizing rankings of power and influence. Though not a common term, *kōatsu* 光圧 (literally, light pressure) is used to indicate noticeable concentrations of divine energy emanating from a person or thing. Sometimes the sociopolitical nature of the True Light is not so obvious. For example, written materials approved by the headquarters radiate Light, thus ensuring their purchase and reading. Another example involves where one should receive Light. Some members were reprimanded for not frequenting the *dōjō* enough, because even though one can receive and give Light anywhere outside (even to oneself), it was explained that the Light at the *dōjō* was more powerful. A person wearing the divine pendant can receive Su God’s energy, but it is recommended that one receive at the *dōjō*, where more of it accumulates. The practical reasons why the authorities might want to emphasize the idea that one receives more Light at the *dōjō* include a steady stream of donations, group involvement and support, and a regular

transmission of teachings and information about the organization once someone is at the dōjō.

Another sociopolitical side to the True Light relates to the belief that more experienced *kamikumite*, and those with a more sincere *sōnen* 想念—one's innermost thoughts—can radiate more Light. Dōjō presidents are considered to have particularly powerful radiations, being closer to the Divine Source in the cosmic hierarchy.

The True Light emanates from the altar, and a typical dōjō would be arranged with the active giver's back facing the altar (the back is considered sacred) and the passive receiver facing the altar when the main soul was being purified. Both would normally sit in the *seiza* position (seated on one's heels) on cushions.

The altar itself (of which there are four standard sizes) is referred to by the Shinto term *goshinden* 御神殿, the most sacred part of the dōjō. It is the area to which attention is directed during prayers and ceremonies. Before *okiyome* sessions start, people must first face the altar and greet Su God, asking him for Divine Light.

The altar is not just "symbolic," since it allows us to "intercommunicate with the Spirit of God," and is an area of intense spiritual power where human vibrations are matched with Divine vibrations, a place of strong purification and other Divine blessings. Prayers made to Almighty God in front of Goshintai [scroll] are much more direct than if made elsewhere. (TEBÉCIS 1982, p. 35)

The inside of the altar is papered with gold leaf and is kept immaculate and bright. Centered on the back wall of the altar hangs a framed scroll with the characters 真光 (*mahikari*, the True Light) painted on white. This is the *goshintai* 御神体, another Shinto term, literally meaning "the body of god," and this is the actual object of worship.<sup>7</sup> Above the characters on the scroll is a cross with a gold disc. In the center of the disc is a comma-shaped symbol, called *chon*, from which the True Light emanates. The *chon* is described as the shape or physiognomy of the spirit of the supreme divinity and is also the first sound of the forty-eight sounds of Japanese, and thus of all existence.<sup>8</sup>

#### YŌ: THE PRINCIPLE OF POSITIVENESS

Carrying connotations similar to those of the True Light is *yō* 陽, a word which in ordinary Japanese can mean "yang, male, heaven, sun, day-

<sup>7</sup> When the altar is on a floor above which people walk, only *mahikari* is written on the scroll. But if the altar is on the top floor a longer version of Su God's name is written: *moto mahikari ōmikami* 元真光大御神. This is because no one is allowed to walk above Su God's name.

<sup>8</sup> KOEPPING notes how this symbol resembles the third of the 214 radicals used in Chinese character dictionaries (1967).

time, positive.” It has wide currency in Mahikari, with members referring to themselves as *yōkōshi* 陽光子, the “Sunlight Children.” This term is found in other religious movements, as in Kurozumikyō (HARDACRE 1986). The term *yōki* 陽氣 (positive spiritual energy/vitality/essence) is often heard, because it refers to something desirable. Just as the Light can be experienced, so, too, *kamikumite* sometimes speak of feeling “waves of positiveness” at happy gatherings and events.

#### *KI*: THE FABRIC OF THE COSMOS

*Kamikumite* do not theorize about *ki* (sometimes called *reiki* 靈氣) as much as they do about the True Light. But its use in Mahikari is just as ubiquitous, if not more so. Perhaps more than the True Light, *ki* captures in a more comprehensive manner the cosmo-logic of an energy, vitality, and essence constituting and animating all existence. According to one *kamikumite*, at least, the True Light was a manifestation of the more fundamental energy of *ki*.

Contextual analysis of its use in Mahikari reveals three basic meanings: 1) the atmosphere, ambience, or feel of a place, thing, or person, but usually a place; 2) the psychological state or bodily substance of a person; and 3) the vitalistic, unifying force of the cosmos.

*Ki* is a word found in other New Religions, and though its meaning varies somewhat from group to group, it seems to possess a core meaning of a vitality or essence underlying existence. But even outside the New Religions there is an extremely widespread notion that *ki* is a basic constituent of the psychological, natural, and spiritual worlds. This is reflected in the hundreds of books about *ki* that can be bought in almost any bookstore in Japan. Subject matter varies, from how to increase one’s mental abilities, physical strength, or supernatural powers, to how to master one’s own *ki* for use in the martial arts, calligraphy, and the tea ceremony. The number of meanings, interpretations, and practical uses of *ki* are astounding. Much of the discourse about *ki* has been shaped primarily by traditional Chinese medicine, with its related ideas of yin/yang and *kikō*, a system of breathing exercises and movements that integrate one’s own being with that of the universe.<sup>9</sup> But no matter how this immense intellectual tangle of traditional healing, cosmic energies, psychic powers, and mysticism is approached, there is a common

<sup>9</sup> For a very thorough and scholarly treatment of its intellectual foundations in China, see ONOZAWA et al. (1978) and KURODA (1977). For the ubiquitous nature of *ki* in the Japanese language, see AKATSUKA (1974). On *ki* in a medical context, see LOCK (1980). For more practical views on the actual use of *ki* see TOHEI (1976) and REED (1986). For the psychological aspects of its use, see ROSENBERGER (1989) and ROHLEN (1976). The popular literature on *ki* is immense, but as an example of the various views on the nature of *ki* see TAKARAJIMA HENSHŪBU (1989).

thread that holds everything together: a type of energy that, if properly dealt with, integrates one with the cosmos. The similarities with the True Light are obvious.

In ordinary Japanese *ki* possesses such a wide range of meanings that even a brief sketch becomes a formidable task. It comes up in religious, philosophical, natural scientific, and physiological terminology, with a particularly strong showing among words denoting psychological states and dispositions. A convenient way to obtain an intellectual grasp of the incredibly rich lexicon of *ki* words is to list the eight major headings found under this term in *Kenkyūsha's New Japanese-English Dictionary* (1974): 1) spirit, mind, heart; 2) mind, an intention, will; 3) one's feelings, mood, humor, frame of mind; 4) a mental disposition; 5) care, precaution, attention; 6) air, atmosphere, gas; 7) ether, essence, spirit, breath; and 8) flavor, savor, smell, fume. Mahikari's use of *ki* is grounded in all these various meanings, but with its own doctrinal spin. This is represented by the fact that *kamikumite* write a variation of this word, using 気 rather than the more standard 氣. The former has "fire" 火, symbolizing the positive, bright "fire" essence of Su God, the Divine Source.

Below I provide examples of the basic ways in which *ki* is used in Mahikari, beginning with 1) atmosphere, then turning to 2) psychological states and bodily substances, and concluding with 3) the fundamental fabric of the cosmos.

When used to describe a place, *ki* is very similar to *yō* mentioned above. Thus, it is a desirable, positive characteristic, and besides events, ceremonies, and activities, people also are at times talked about as possessing *ki*. Sometimes the word *yō no ki* 陽の気 (positive spiritual energy/vitality/essence) is used, as is its undesirable opposite *in no ki* 陰の気 (negative spiritual energy/vitality/essence) for unhappy situations or gloomy places. Some *kamikumite* rank the *dōjōs* they visit according to the amount of *ki* or *kiatsu* ("ki pressure") they feel.

What is significant about the atmospherics of *ki* is the sociopolitical component to feeling it; people are encouraged to experience positive feelings, or perhaps, more correctly, to possess a positive attitude about the event or activity at hand, thereby supporting the immediate goals of the group and ultimately the entire organization.

If we examine the use of *ki* to discuss psychological dispositions and bodily states, its sociopolitical aspect is also clear. In the monthly magazine *Mahikari*, participants in events are often described as being, having, or carrying *akarui ki* (cheerful *ki*). Other important desirable dispositions are *sunao na ki* (obedient or meek *ki*), meaning the inclination to be obedient; *ittai no ki* (the *ki* to be united); and *moesakaruki* (the *ki* to burn [passionately]).

*Ki* often means intention, not just in the sense of volition, but also as in planning. People receive and understand the *ki* of Su God; at times

this word appears together with *omoi* [thought], thus reinforcing its sense as information. When it appears in such contexts, *ki* is regarded as a force or energy that “goes,” “reaches,” or is “given” or “transferred” to others. Speaking to elders in an audience at a special event, a person said “I want to convey the energetic and cheerful spiritual energy/vitality of the children to you” (*Mahikari* February 1990, p. 58). Referring to the power of many *kamikumite* praying together, someone said, “Our voices and spiritual energy/vitality resound throughout heaven and earth” (*Mahikari* November 1989, p. 79).

It is very important that the nature of *ki*, when used in these circumstances, is clearly understood. *Kamikumite* are not being poetic. Just as they regard the True Light as a very real and effective power, they believe *ki* to be a psychological and bodily force/substance that influences those around them and literally connects them to others.

So far we have examined *ki* as a word used to characterize atmospherics and psychological/bodily processes. Now I turn to *ki*'s role as a cosmological principle, as (at the risk of sounding repetitive) a transferable, transferring, controllable, controlling spiritual energy, vitality, or essence that exists in, among, and between people and things, animating the cosmos. As a cosmological principle, *ki* can be further subdivided into 1) the quintessential substance or stuff out of which the cosmos is made, and 2) the vitalistic power or force that sustains all life. There are other ways to approach *ki*. For example, some *kamikumite* describe it as a type of vibration. But below I only cover the two basic aspects just mentioned.

As the essential stuff of all existence, material and spiritual, *ki* may be called a folk belief version of Plato's Ideas. It is the really “real,” “the essence of the universe” (*uchū no ki* 宇宙の気). One *kamikumite* explained to me that *ki* is the “absolute essence” (*jitsuzai no honshitsu* 実在の本質). When I asked how *ki* 気 differs from *ki* 氣, I was told that the latter was the essence of only the world of three dimensions, but the former was the spiritual and therefore “more essential” essence of the higher worlds of four, five, six, and seven dimensions. It was also stated that this is why plants respond to human speech and feelings; like humans, they are made of the same cosmic stuff, *ki*.

The Mahikari cosmos forms a multi-layered hierarchy with positive associations of high spirituality, purity, power, brightness, and warmth positioned toward the top, culminating with the Divine Source, Su God. Moving toward the bottom we find negative associations of low spirituality, impurity, lack of power, darkness, and coldness, ending in an ocean of mud.<sup>10</sup> This view of things corresponds to “dark” and “clear” kinds of *ki*: “Impure spiritual essence is dark and heavy and submerges

<sup>10</sup> This description is somewhat idealized, since a certain layer may contain varying degrees of these characteristics, most notably the astral world (fourth level).

to form earth, while pure spiritual essence is clear and forms Heaven” (OKADA 1988, p. 201).

I now turn to *ki* as the vitalistic force that sustains life. This notion can be seen in the use of *seimei no ki* 生命の気, the “spiritual energy/vitality of life,” and in *motoki* 元気, the “original spiritual energy/vitality/essence (of the world).”<sup>11</sup>

A good example of *ki* as life force involves ancestors who dwell in the astral world. They cannot eat the food we offer them at their altars, but they can consume its *ki*. They can also absorb the *ki* of cigarettes and use the *ki* of money in the astral world placed on the altar.

#### NATURE: A GIFT FROM THE DIVINE SOURCE

Though *kamikumite* do not explicitly speak of nature as a cosmic power, an analysis of how they conceive and treat the natural environment reveals its function as another cosmic force and as a gift from Su God. This is why *kamikumite* point out that, according to the conventions of *koto-dama* 言霊 (spiritual power and hidden, sacred meanings of words), *shizen* 自然 (nature) actually means *shizen* 至善 (the supreme good). Evidence of nature as the supreme divinity’s manifestation can be found all around us. For instance, *kaki* 柿, meaning “persimmon,” is really *ka* (no) *ki* 神 [の] 木, “the Tree of God.”

Traditional Japanese spirituality has always paid special attention to the world of nature. Considering the central role it commanded in an agriculturally-based society, this is not surprising. The view of nature as something responsible for the successful growing of food was that of a producing, fecundating, brewing, and fermenting force that sustained man’s existence. This notion is captured by the Shinto term *musubi* 産霊, which may be translated as the “spirit of birth and becoming,” “accomplishment,” “creating,” and “harmonizing” (HERBERT 1967, p. 67). This word, which also includes connotations of development, evolution, and progress, is frequently encountered in Mahikari’s teachings. In Mahikari doctrine, *musubi* also means *musubi* 結び, “crossing, making a cross,” the cross symbolizing the coming together of fire/positive/active/male/mind + water/negative/passive/female/body, resulting in the *nari* 成 - 生 - 也 - 鳴 (“creating”-“materializing”-“completing”-“pulsating”) of the world.

Because Su God has graciously blessed us with nature, we should acknowledge our indebtedness by cultivating with kindness and treating with respect the natural world around us; after all, nature is alive with

<sup>11</sup> *Motoki* uses the same characters used in *genki*, as in the everyday greeting of *ogenki desu ka*, “How are you?” Other glosses for *genki* are “vigor, vitality, energy, pep.”

emotion and volition. Furthermore, we are reminded of the “oneness of nature and Man” (*jūjin ittai* 自入一体 ).

We should be especially nice to plants we grow for food, expressing gratitude to them. Many *dōjōs* have their own plots of land used for farming, called *yōkō nōen*, “Sunshine Farms.” At these places plants receive healthy doses of the True Light. But we should also greet and encourage them, cheering on their attempts at growth, addressing them with terms of respect ordinarily used for people (*san* or *sama*). The *Mahikari* usually has sketches of smiling vegetables, talking with or singing to people around them.

From the standpoint of *kamikumite*, using pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and the like defile the natural blessings from Su God. Therefore, the preferred, more naturalistic method is organic farming (*yūki nōgyō* 有機農業 ), which is really a more “courageous type of farming” (*yūki* 勇氣 *nōgyō*), since it is “farming with spiritual energy/vitality” (*yūki* 有氣 *nōgyō*).

What follows is part of an article that appears in *Mahikari*. Written by a young girl, it is typical of many pieces about farming.

On the first day I was humbly permitted to begin harvesting Mr. Tomato and Mr. Eggplant.

First, I harvested Mr. Eggplant. I greeted Mr. Field, and then while shaking Mr. Eggplant’s big leaves, I addressed each and every one of them and gave lots of *kotodama* [spiritually charged words].

While I was doing this, I was very surprised because I felt as if a big leaf wrapped itself around my hand. Wondering, “Is Mr. Eggplant responding to me?” I became not so much surprised but happy.

Also, while I was harvesting Mr. Tomato who was undergoing a cleansing, I said to him “Please, because of your cleansing, let me know where [you need Light].” And then he rubbed his leaves against each other, letting me know where. These sorts of things happened a lot, so I was surprised and very happy.

When I would use *kotodama* in this way, nature responded to me.

And so I was able to speak to it in such an obedient manner that I couldn’t believe it.

On the second day, I thinned out the plants in a swampy field, pulled weeds out of furrows, and planted the seeds of Mr. Red Turnip. At that time I became friends with the Bugs, who until then I had trouble dealing with. When I would speak to the Bugs with all my heart, sure enough they would try to understand me.

Looking at Mr. Earthworm I would say “Because I’m pulling weeds be careful. Could you please crawl into the ground?”

(*Mahikari* February 1988, p. 92)

## LIFE: THE LIVING COSMOS

Though “life” is a term that could easily be subsumed under the heading for nature, I have given it a separate section because *kamikumite* often use this word.

In the Holy Words we read that our true selves are “connected with God’s everlasting Great Life Force [*daiseimei ryoku* 大生命力 ], and are bathed and living in it” (OKADA 1982, p. 15). *Seimei* 生命 (life) is a force that is everywhere. As a young student noted when observing the methods of organic farming, “I was humbly permitted to revise my thinking: everything has life” (*Mahikari* December 1982, p. 100). And because life is something granted to us by Su God, we do not merely “live.” Instead, we are “humbly permitted to live” (*ikasete itadaku*).

*Seimei* may be translated as “vital” and is another example of an ubiquitous energy animating the universe. *Inochi* 命 also means life, not in the sense of vitality, but rather in the sense of time spent living. However, as if to show how the two are really inseparable, *kamikumite* also pronounce 生命 (*seimei*) as *inochi*. This word may also mean “living spirit” (*inochi* 生靈) and “living blood” (*i no chi* 生の血).

## SPIRIT AND SOUL: THE LIFE OF PEOPLE AND THINGS

In Japanese there are many ways to express the concepts of spirit and soul.<sup>12</sup> As in other parts of the world, a distinction is made between a spiritual entity that acts as the identity or individuality of a person, and the vital, animating force allowing a person to live. Admittedly, this all becomes confusing, since the distinction between spirit/soul as identity and spirit/soul as vitalistic force is often blurred. This is the case to a certain degree in *Mahikari*. *Kamikumite* sometimes refer to their main soul located in the head as *tamashii*, a term that in other contexts denotes animating force. Making things even more complicated, *Mahikari* doctrine teaches us that we also possess a secondary soul in our abdomens, whose function is to provide us with desires. Regardless of these ambiguities, *tamashii* can be glossed as either a spiritual entity providing an individual with identity, or as an animating force. Concerning the question of whether animals have souls or not, *kamikumite* would give different responses. But there did seem to be a general consensus that even if they do possess souls, they are not the same as ours.

Besides the belief in human spirit/souls, there is a Japanese folk belief that all things possess spirit/souls. This is especially true for things we

<sup>12</sup> For example, *tama* or *tamashii*, both written as 魂 or 霊. Traditionally, *tama* are either “living souls” (*seirei* 生靈) or “dead souls” (*shirei* 死靈). There is also the more technical-sounding *reikon* 靈魂, which, unlike *tamashii*, does not refer to the “spirit” of things or ideas, as in “the spirit of scholarship” (*gakumon no tamashii*).

use often. Such things should be treated with respect. There is a belief that if a person dies who had a special fondness for an object, such as a favorite teacup, this person will leave his *tamashii* in or around the thing.

In the Primary Training we were told a story about how a young man, worried about his performance in fencing, gave True Light to his sword and other equipment. Later that night, he heard these things laughing, obviously glad to have been purified. After that, the young man's swordsmanship improved, no doubt helped by the grateful equipment.

*Kamikumite* do not always consciously treat all objects in this manner, though, if asked, some will respond that even non-living things are somehow "alive" and therefore should be dealt with accordingly. This is why they talk to, give True Light to, and make an effort to have the right attitude toward, things. Especially anything related to one's livelihood should be treated gratefully:

First thing in the morning, before entering the store, I say "Good morning, Mr. Store. Let's get to work." And then, while greeting each piece of merchandise, I am humbly permitted to raise my hand [to give Light]. . . . With love I touch the things in my store and raise my hand over them. By addressing all the merchandise at my workplace with *kotodama*, sales increase. (*Mahikari* September 1989, p. 95)

Other stories relate watches spontaneously repaired, old TV sets improving reception, and cars clanking in approval of kind treatment. The best example in Mahikari of treating inanimate objects as if they possessed life involves the *omitama* pendants. Because of the many taboos surrounding and protecting it, the *omitama* acquires a life of its own, becoming an agent in its own right.

There are different ways to account for the belief in Mahikari that everything is animated by a vitalistic principle. At least according to *kamikumite*, it is a way of expressing gratitude toward things that we rely on and have received. Perhaps another reason is that by attributing human characteristics such as volition to things, we can approach them as we would people. They can be talked to, persuaded, and manipulated to do our bidding. Consequently, non-human entities become less threatening, more reasonable, somehow more amenable to our attempts at control.

*Rei* 靈 can also denote spirit or soul, and just as certain places and people have *kōatsu* (light pressure) or *kiatsu* (pressure of spiritual energy/vitality/essence), they may also possess *reiatsu* (spirit pressure). This kind of pressure is positive and desirable, and those who possess it are ranked spiritually high.

Numbers, sounds, and colors have spirit/soul and are respectively called *kazudama* 数靈, *otodama* 音靈, and *irodama* 色靈. There is nothing

abstract about these; numbers, sounds, and colors carry spiritual power or vibrations that affect and change the world. The most discussed *tama* concerns language, and this deserves a separate section.

#### KOTODAMA: THE SPIRITUAL POWER OF WORDS

Though some *kamikumite* told me that all languages have power, there is, nevertheless, the stated belief that only Japanese has true spiritual power. This is why certain prayers must be chanted in Japanese. Other languages are simply ineffective for conveying spiritual energy.

The use of *kotodama* in chants, rituals, ceremonies, and in non-ritualized situations (such as greeting plants or one's place of employment) is an excellent example of how members put a Divine Power into Divine Practice. So far I have employed examples of *kotodama* to expose the multiple, hidden meanings of words. This can be done by turning a single character into a meaning-laden diagram, or by listing different characters (together with their various meanings) that share an identical (or similar) pronunciation. Both methods expand a single term's range of significance.

There is, however, another aspect of the way in which the spiritual power of words is put into Divine Practice that requires attention. This is the belief that clearly articulated chanting, loud, energetic greetings, and warm, friendly addressing of others (and things) have a beneficial effect. This is why plants should receive doses of *kotodama* the same way as they receive Light. Contributors to *Mahikari* often mention how family discord, educational problems, or work-related stress diminish after *kotodama*, in the form of formalized greetings, were conscientiously practiced. In this way it functions like the True Light: a positive power that, if properly employed, rectifies a less than normal situation.

Articles that deal with greetings (*aisatsu* 挨拶) discuss it as a very fundamental, significant activity that is essential in human interaction. One's presence at the *dōjō* is not totally recognized until one has gone through the proper greetings performed on one's knees, and one's departure is made official by formally thanking everyone or informing them that one is temporarily leaving the premises. *Mahikari* ministers give lessons in how to greet others properly, and in one article *aisatsu* is described as the "grease" that helps new members feel comfortable in the *dōjō* (*Mahikari* October 1989, p. 89).

#### SPIRIT CORDS AND THOUGHT WAVES

Like the True Light, *ki*, and *kotodama*, "cords of spiritual vibrations" (*reihasen* 霊波線), "spirit waves" (*reiha* or *hinami* 霊波), and "thought

waves" (*nenba* 念波) are unseen powers and forces that exist between, are projected to, and connect people, things, and spiritual entities.

At times it was not clear how these concepts differ, but basically they all bind the inhabitants of the cosmos together into a spiritual community. As such, they resonate with the Divine Source's "Wave of the Great Universe" (*ōmaruki no ha* 大宇宙の波) and "Wave of the Great Spirit" (*ōhi no ha* 大霊の波).

Spirit cords, or spiritual vibrations, connect every individual to his ancestors, who are in turn connected to higher divinities, ultimately forming a link to Su God himself. As receivers and wearers of *omitama*, *kamikumite* possess another spiritual link to Su God, since a spiritual cord exists between each *omitama* and Su God. This is why monthly donations for maintenance of this cord are so important. In addition to vertical links there are also horizontal spiritual cords between family members, relatives, and friends. The strongest cords are between parent and child. The next strongest are between siblings, followed by husband and wife. Cords between friends are thinner, though they become thicker as two individuals spend time with each other.

While spiritual cords are more or less permanent fields of spiritual energy, thought waves ebb and flow according to our *sōnen* 想念. Therefore we are exhorted to have only positive thoughts about others, and to be on guard against negative ones. Our innermost feelings and attitudes can have a beneficial or detrimental effect on the social environment around us. And because we can never know for sure what negative thoughts lurk in our subconscious minds, we must constantly and actively cultivate a *yōki* 陽気 (positive, cheerful) and *akarui* 明るい (bright, sunny, cheerful) attitude.

*Sōnen* not only influences those around us but also the world of nature. Working on a Sunshine Farm, a woman learned that "a slightly bad *sōnen* has an immediate effect on the crops. The fear of a poisonous *sōnen* is something that is actually experienced" (*Mahikari* July 1988, p. 89).

Besides having a direct influence on our environment, bad *sōnen* can also produce negative results in our own bodies. This was explained as follows. A bad *sōnen*, through the Principle of Pā (the principle of creation), produces *dakubiryūshi* 濁微粒子 (very tiny impure particles), which in turn produce pus and other bodily toxins. Eventually, an individual discovers he has cancer or another serious illness.

Prayer itself is a transmission of spiritual and thought waves. This is why the word "prayer" (*inori* 祈り) also signifies "transferring one's will (to God)" (*inori* 意乗り). Rituals are a particularly powerful method of focusing the thought waves of many people, sometimes referred to as the "combining of waves" (*hadōawase* 波動合わせ). It is important to concentrate one's thoughts during prayer in order to make prayers effective.

The discourse about spirit cords and thought waves serves to reinforce

the belief that everyone is part of a huge interacting cosmic web, where even one's attitude results in moral repercussions. This way of thinking encourages desirable social views. It also serves the sociopolitical function of supporting a positive outlook, often in the face of adversity or challenging tasks demanded by the group, reinforcing the organizational structure of the movement.

Below I outline the more personal powers that exist in the Mahikari cosmos. Unlike the impersonal forces listed above, these possess a soul that provides them with identity and individuality.

#### DEITIES: POWER PERSONIFIED

I have already discussed the supreme divinity, Su God, fitting him into what may be called a more pantheistic framework of description (though this should not distract from his very personal characteristics).

Standing below Su God in terms of power and rank are a host of lesser deities. Most *kamikumite* do not know the different titles and particular functions of these various gods in the running of the universe. This knowledge is provided in the Intermediate and Advanced Training. The lack of interest in their different divinities probably reflects the fact that, at least from the standpoint of the average *kamikumite*, these powers have little to do with the management of daily life, unlike the administration of the True Light and the occasional attaching spirit. In general, most *kamikumite* seem to regard them as distant bureaucrats in some unimaginably Byzantine hierarchy.

#### THE LORD SAVIOR AND OSHIENUSHISAMA: MEDIATORS OF COSMIC POWER

Traditionally, Japanese spirituality has never made absolute distinctions between deity and man. The New Religions have inherited this way of thinking, and many founders of these groups considered themselves, and were considered by their followers, as living deities.

Though the term *ikigami* (living god) is not used in Mahikari, its conceptual implication is certainly present. When asked, some *kamikumite* would say that the Lord Savior was a living god. Certainly both the Lord Savior and Oshienushisama receive special treatment. In the magazine *Mahikari* special linguistic forms are used when referring to them, and the honorific *go* (or *o*) is prefixed to their body parts and personal possessions. *Mahikari* also carries a monthly lecture by Oshienushisama that is preceded by a talk from the past given by the Lord Savior. Only the Lord Savior – and now Oshienushisama – was allowed to administer the True Light with both hands simultaneously. In *Mahikari*, contributors who knew him personally or had the chance to at least meet him reminisce

about past encounters and events at which he appeared, and older members of a dōjō occasionally relate anecdotal accounts of his life.

As Divine Personages, the Lord Savior and Oshienushisama stand between the Divine Source and mankind, offering us salvation. In concrete terms, this gift comes in the form of the True Light and the Divine Teachings. Oshienushisama is the present transmitter of the Divine Power, and because of this it may be said that she is above ordinary mortals.

What do the Holy Words say about the nature of the Lord Savior?

As for those who regard thee [the Lord Savior] as a man, leave them be. If those who regard thee as a living god make obeisance on the ground, thou shall also accept it. As for those who do not understand whether thou are just a man or a living god, leave them be perplexed. (OKADA 1982, p. 84)

However, according to the Lord Savior himself,

I am not so crazy and silly to claim – as it is done by many other false religious leaders and so-called prophets – that I am God myself or that I have god in my body. I am only the instrument of God, I am the trumpet of his truth. (KOEPPING 1967, pp. 120–21)

#### ANCESTRAL SPIRITS: RELATIVES IN THE ASTRAL WORLD

Miracles and “coincidences” are really arrangements worked out in the astral world by our ancestral spirits for our benefit. If we neglect their care, we receive warnings, and if these are ignored, we incur their wrath. Other spirits, because of grudges incurred in previous lives, may bring us spiritual disturbances resulting in misfortune, or attach themselves to us causing “spirit afflictions” (*hyōi*), and become “possessing spirits” (*hyōirei* 憑依霊).

#### OTHER POWERS

Other personal beings that populate Mahikari’s universe include the spirits of animals. I refer to them as personal because they, like people, possess volition and agency. As mentioned above, there was some ambiguity as to whether animals have souls, though there was agreement that even if they did, their souls were not the same as ours. Animal spirits attach themselves to people for the same reasons human spirits do – some transgression they suffered in a past life. Snakes were very common resentful spirits, usually angry because they were being inadvertently stepped on.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Less talked about than most other beings, “fairies” (*seirei* 精霊) play a role in Mahikari’s universe. In the May 1990 *Mahikari* a picture of Oshienushisama standing in front of greenery appears. Her white dress glows, and the caption explains that “plant fairies” (*shokubutsu no sei* 植物の精) are dancing on her person.

## Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to demonstrate how the vitalistic conception as proposed by TSUSHIMA et al. (1979) corresponds to the doctrine and the more particular, concrete specifics of Mahikari's teachings. To what degree the vitalistic conception can be used to make sense out of the belief systems of other New Religions is an open question. But in conclusion I would suggest that in order to answer this question researchers would do well to focus on the seemingly minor particulars of the group under study, since it is through a thorough and in-depth analysis that the more abstruse aspects of doctrine become understandable. This is because doctrinal details are the threads comprising the ideological fabric that maintains the legitimacy of these movements.

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