Theme Introduction

Asian new religious movements as global organisations

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Religions are the earliest global organisations, their missionary activity proceeding or accompanying trade and political domination across continents from centuries ago.

Unlike the established religions, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, which spread from their founders' societies into totally new cultural contexts in an ad hoc fashion, the founders of new religious movements (NRMs) often adopted a world focus from the outset. This is reflected in the names of several Asian NRMs discussed below: Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, Church of World Messianity, World True Light Civilization Church (the original name of Mahikari), and Perfect Liberty Kyodan, significant in using English words in its Japanese name.

New religious movements typically arise and flourish in times of political and economic upheaval or rapid social change. Characteristically, they engage the individual convert in a quest for self renewal and finding 'here and now' solutions to illness, poverty and unhappy relationships rather than focusing on benefits in the hereafter. Often they offer ritual practices for doing so, whose outcomes are frequently seen as miraculous. With the demise of rural peasant communities through industrialisation, rural-urban migration and the creation of urban working class and middle class mass society, religious affiliation disengaged from family or community contexts and became a matter of individual choice. Along with these historic developments, the 'spiritual supermarket' of religious organisations (see Pereira's essay p.8) has grown in size, aided by the accessibility to its products provided by the internet. As a result, even established religions are subject to global market forces and all must chart their long term growth or even survival strategies in a global context. Organisations must structure appropriately to implement these strategies, as corporations do, paying attention to the design of their products and services in cross-cultural contexts and managing their human resources effectively through appropriate training and staffing policies. Here, NRMs are experiencing the benefits of the 'late developer' effect and are able to respond more quickly to opportunities presented by information technology, and more flexibly to the needs and concerns of their membership base in rapidly changing societies.

Fertile ground

Asian societies have been fertile ground for the spawning of NRMs, especially Japan, whose unique experience of almost three centuries of national seclusion during the Tokugawa era provoked a dramatic reversal - aggressive political expansion overseas and rapid social change at home through the adoption of Western industrial technologies and public institutions after the Meiji restoration of 1868. Over 700 Japanese NRMs have emerged in the last two centuries. Homage must be paid to Peter Clarke who has pioneered the comprehensive survey of Japanese new religions overseas in English language publications. (see, for instance, Clarke 2000) Appropriately, five of the six case studies in this special theme issue deal with Japanese NRMs: Soka Gakkai (founded 1930), Church of World Messianity (1935) and Sukyo Mahikari (1959) have a truly global presence; Seicho-No-Ie (1930) and Perfect Liberty (PL) Kyodan (1946) are most strongly represented in North and South America, with representation in other western nations and developing countries, such as France, Portugal, Australia, Thailand (PL), Taiwan, Thailand, UK, Germany, Hong Kong, Australia (Seicho-No-Ie). The Indian NRM, Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University also has a global presence, between that of Soka Gakkai and Mahikari, in terms of membership and locational range.
The rapid expansion of Japanese NRMs in industrialising economies such as Brazil, a focus of the essays by Matsuoka, Nakamaki and Pereira, or in marketising economies such as Russia (a striking case here is that of the now discredited Aum Shinrikyo), highlights the power of NRMs to organise people into supportive new communities which provide alternative institutions for their daily wellbeing and cultural fulfilment. Indeed the repression of Falun Gong by the Chinese government attests to the perceived potential power of NRMs to challenge the hegemony of the state.

Doctrine and drive

The NRMs' drive to internationalise is sometimes aided by doctrinal elements, the most powerful one being that they are supra-religions, non-denominational, perhaps monotheistic but transcending any one religion. This helps them to attract followers who are reassured that they will not need to renounce their current religious beliefs to join. In this forum, Sukyo Mahikari (Supra Religon True Light) and Seicho-No-Ie (House of Growth) have philosophies such as this. Once inside the organisation however, the comprehensive 'corporate culture' of daily rituals, regular study groups, codified modes of speech and behaviour, usually exert a stronger influence than anticipated and converts gradually drift away from their former social activities and religious observances.

The distinctive cultural base of Japanese NRMs, arising out of Japanese Buddhist (Soka Gakkai) or Shinto (PL Kyodan, Mahikari, Messianity, Seicho-No-Ie) traditions, or the Hinduistic Brahma Kumaris NRM from India, demonstrate just how willing foreign members are to embrace the alien cultural systems underpinning these movements and effectively cut themselves off from family, friends and their wider societies, in order to fulfil the distinct lifestyle requirements of membership in their religion of choice. Asian NRMs are an example of the phenomenon of cultural colonisation of the West by eastern religious, aesthetic and martial arts movements.

NRMs as MNCs?

Building on the pioneering idea of Nakamaki (1985, English translation 1991 and 2003), distinguished, ardent field researchers of Japanese NRMs, Hardacre (1988), Reader (1991), Matsunaga (2000) and Matsuoka (2007), have noted the organisational parallels between Japanese multinational corporations (MNCs), which began their international advance in the 1960s, and the spread of Japanese NRMs which, despite an international presence in the pre- and post World War One eras in Japanese colonies in Manchuria, Korea, China and Taiwan and migrant worker communities in Hawaii and Brazil, began to expand their international membership into non-ethnic Japanese communities at around the same time as the expansion of Japanese MNCs, post World War Two. Did the superior products and production regimes of Japanese multinationals abroad support foreign positive opinion towards these religions, with their emphasis on personal development, positive thinking (see the essay by Matsunaga p.5), the restoration of respect into family and social relationships and their spiritual technologies of miraculous healing (for instance in the case of PL, Mahikari, Messianity)?

Recruitment of foreign members, both spontaneously, through word of mouth and serendipitous expansion into foreign locations (PL, Mahikari), and planned as an internationalisation strategy supported by missionary activity (Soka Gakkai, Messianity), brought organisational challenges to the movements: Language policies had to be decided: should rituals be translated (PL) or would it be more important to preserve the power of the words in their original language (Soka Gakkai International, the mantra *'Namu Myoho Renge Kyo'* and Mahikari, the *Amatsu Norigoto*)?
How would foreign branches be staffed? Would it be necessary to send authorities from the headquarters in Japan (PL, short term posting, Messianity, lifetime posting) or India (BKWSU, long term posting), those who had been close to the founder and manifested spiritual power, who would have the credentials to safeguard the doctrine and the purity of ritual practices in a foreign culture where alien cultural practices did not provide adequate support for the new cultural forms associated with the NRM? Or would a training scheme with an international cohort of students provide religious specialists who would be able to fulfil their roles in any centre in the world (Mahikari)?
Where would foreign members be trained in the religious and administrative roles necessary to staff an organisation with growing global reach? Locally (PL, Messianity, Seicho-No-Ie, BKWSU) or at headquarters (Mahikari)?
What would be the basis of leaders' authority (kinship ties with the founder (Mahikari), a lineage of discipleship from the founder (Soka Gakkai) or spiritual stature as recognised by peers (BKWSU)? And to what degree would decision making be decentralised to local contexts where leaders would be more in touch with the problems and worldviews of local members?
What strategies could be adopted for recruiting and retaining members in cultural environments very disparate from the core culture of the organisation, causing members to undergo stress and dissonance in their dealings with old friends and family members who were not members of the movement?

These and many more questions relating to the leadership, organisational strategies and structures of six representative Asian NRMs are discussed in the essays which follow.
Aside from making the case for a theoretical comparison between globalised NRMs and MNCs in this special issue, the study by Matsunaga, of Seicho-No-Ie and the department store Yaohan which its leaders created, is a most valuable example of the real life conjunction of a Japanese NRM and a Japanese company with international operations.

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