

principles in management, leading to, comparatively speaking, very low levels of conflict and organisational malaise in an institution of this size and cross-cultural complexity. This organisational harmony must be attributed to the fact that members share a common 'organisational culture' of practices for all key aspects of daily life, such as a clearly defined daily schedule, including attending early morning class and periodic pauses for meditation, vegetarianism, and celibacy. These are standard across the globe, in other words, they constitute a global cultural system which transcends the national cultures of members. This group cohesion is reinforced by daily readings of a text, the *murli*, the same one being read throughout the world on a particular date, which then forms the basis of study and discussion. The global community's cohesion is reinforced by annual pilgrimages to the Mt Abu headquarters to participate in mass meetings with the Supreme Soul, Shiv Baba, through a trance messenger, and through regular daily meditation and the effort to attain a state of soul consciousness which transcends gender, social status and other culturally determined roles and relationship

Tamasin Ramsay and Wendy Smith

Monash University, Australia
tamasin.ramsay@med.monash.edu.au
wendy.smith@buseco.monash.edu.au

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In the Japanese corporate world, the multinational retail group Yaohan, which declared bankruptcy in 1997, was unusual in its close involvement with a Japanese new religious movement, Seicho-No-Ie. An examination of the interaction between these two organisations suggests both possible synergies, and serious potential pitfalls in the interaction of multinational corporations and new religious movements.

Blurring the boundaries between corporation and religion

LOUELLA MATSUNAGA

In her thought-provoking contribution to the Autumn 2007 edition of this newsletter, Wendy Smith suggests a number of parallels between multinational corporations (MNCs) and new religious movements (NRMs). As I have argued elsewhere (Matsunaga 2000), in the case of Japanese MNCs and NRMs in particular these parallels are striking, despite the contrast in the social status within Japan of the two types of organisation (MNCs are elite, highly respected organisations, while NRMs tend to be regarded with suspicion, particularly since the Aum poison gas incident of 1995). In addition to the common organisational characteristics noted by Smith, similarities can also be found in narratives of the lives of the founders of MNCs and NRMs (Matsunaga 2000: 40-43); ritual activities of Japanese corporations (Nakamaki 1992, 1995); and the deployment of ideas, practices, and techniques derived from religious organisations, including NRMs, in company training programmes, in particular those aimed at new recruits (Rohlen 1973, 1974; Reader 1995).

I want to extend the comparison of Japanese MNCs and NRMs through the examination of one particular case where a multinational Japanese company, the (now bankrupt) supermarket chain Yaohan, was closely and publicly linked with a Japanese NRM, Seicho-No-Ie. Although it should be noted that this kind of explicit public linkage is highly unusual in Japan, this case is of interest as it gives an opportunity to explore the interaction between an NRM and an MNC in a context where both are seeking to expand their global reach.¹

Seicho-No-Ie, meaning the House of Growth, is a new religious movement founded in Japan in 1930, and was originally organised as a publishing company, publishing the thoughts of its founder, Taniguchi Masaharu,

before officially becoming a religious organisation in 1941. Put simply, the movement teaches that there is a world of reality in which human beings are perfect, children of God; and a phenomenal world of our perceptions. All problems come from the phenomenal world, which is an illusion. If we cultivate the right state of mind, and thus put ourselves in touch with the world of reality, these problems will disappear. In the emphasis on changing one's life through changing one's state of mind, the influence of the Positive Thinking movement is evident. At the same time, notions familiar from writings on Japanese society and ethics are also stressed: for example the importance of gratitude, especially to one's seniors.

An adaptable philosophy

The philosophy of Seicho-No-Ie has proved itself to be adaptable to the business context in Japan, as its elements have been harnessed to the promotion of a work ethic which emphasises effort and the importance of service to others through work. During World War Two, Seicho-No-Ie was active among medium and small sized enterprises in Japan as part of the drive to increase efficiency and production, and in the post-war era Seicho-No-Ie established a subsidiary organisation called 'The Prosperity Association', which holds seminars, lectures and research meetings devoted to questions of business and management. In the 1990s its most well-known member was Wada Kazuo, president of the Yaohan retail group, who became head of the Prosperity Association in 1995.

By the 1990s the Yaohan retail group had grown from a small, family-run greengrocers with a single store in Kanagawa prefecture to become a multinational chain of stores with branches in countries including China, the US and the UK. Wada Kazuo was the eldest son of the couple who opened the original Yaohan store, and was largely responsible for the company's expansion. Both Wada Kazuo and his mother, Katsu, were active members

of Seicho-No-Ie, and, unusually in the Japanese corporate context, chose to give Seicho-No-Ie a central role in the development of Yaohan.

As the Yaohan business began to expand, and to open more branches within Japan in the 1960s, the company began to offer induction training for new employees, in line with the general pattern for large Japanese companies. However the Yaohan programme was distinctive in its strong emphasis on spiritual training² based on the principles of Seicho-No-Ie. In particular, the idea of expressing gratitude to customers through 'service' – that is, hard work in the store, was stressed. This use of Seicho-No-Ie teachings caused a crisis when an employee reported Yaohan was using Seicho-No-Ie teachings to exploit employees. This led Taniguchi to contact the Wadas, and to suggest that their approach could cause a serious misunderstanding.

Inextricably linked

The response of the Wadas was surprising. They decided to formally extend the connection linking their family with Seicho-No-Ie to the entire Yaohan company, so that henceforward all Yaohan employees would also be members of Seicho-No-Ie. Employees who resisted, some on the grounds that they did not wish to become members of an NRM, were told that they could seek jobs elsewhere, and in the end the majority complied. Yaohan training programmes continued to have a strong Seicho-No-Ie content, and in the following year Yaohan held a six day induction course at a Seicho-No-Ie training centre, which included elements such as Seicho-No-Ie style meditation.

Seicho-No-Ie's close involvement with Yaohan continued to be important during Yaohan's overseas expansion. The first country targeted by Yaohan

was Brazil, a choice suggested to Wada Kazuo by the vice chairman of Seicho-No-Ie. It seems that Wada calculated that the strength of Seicho-No-Ie in Brazil would help Yaohan to establish itself by providing both a source of employees and of potential customers. In the early 1970s Yaohan opened a total of four stores in Brazil, however the combination of the oil shock of 1973 and the high rate of inflation in Brazil meant that the venture ran into difficulties, and by 1980 Yaohan no longer had any stores in Brazil.

Despite this setback, Yaohan's overseas expansion continued, to Singapore in 1974, Hong Kong in 1984, and subsequently to mainland China, as well as the US and the UK. Although employees of overseas branches were not required to become members of Seicho-No-Ie, Seicho-No-Ie principles continued to be used in Yaohan training programmes, a policy which met with a range of responses from Yaohan's overseas staff. In Singapore Yaohan's approach caused controversy: Muslim employees objected to references to 'God' in Wada Katsu's lectures during the training programme, pointing out that Islam enjoins the worship of one God, Allah, and that they could not therefore recognise Mrs Wada's god. Training materials were re-written as a result, substituting the term 'the Creator' for 'God'.

In Hong Kong the picture appears more complex: May Wong (1994) suggests that the Chinese employees were receptive to the content of the training programme, partly because aspects of the teachings such as the emphasis on filial piety and gratitude to seniors resonated with their own cultural background. However, Heung Wah Wong (1999) points out that local Chinese staff were largely excluded from Seicho-No-Ie activities within the company, and argues that this exclusion from the symbolic heart of the company reflects the differential value placed on local Chinese staff who were seen as peripheral, compared to the Japanese managerial core.

Drawing on my own research, in Yaohan Plaza in the UK, similarly, participation in Seicho-No-Ie events such as meditation or prayers was confined to the Japanese staff. Seicho-No-Ie based training was offered to managerial staff, who attended courses in Hong Kong (an experience which met with a mixed response), but on the whole Seicho-No-Ie seemed to have little impact on the local staff. It was also noticeable that, at this distance from the headquarters of Yaohan and from the Wada family, even the Japanese employees of Yaohan UK showed little enthusiasm for Seicho-No-Ie activities, to the dismay of local Seicho-No-Ie groups, who had hoped that the opening of the UK store in 1993 would provide a boost to their organisation. Between the period of my fieldwork in 1995 and Yaohan's bankruptcy in 1997, Seicho-No-Ie activities within the store showed a marked decline, a situation which, according to one British manager, may have been exacerbated by the decline of the company itself. He commented: "If the company had been a success [Seicho-No-Ie] would have been an excellent vehicle to keep everybody interested and positive, and to create a strong culture which creates loyalty...I'm sure things would have been very different."

Yaohan's involvement with Seicho-No-Ie during the period of the company's growth, initially within Japan and later overseas, highlights both similarities and contrasts between NRMs and MNCs as both types of organisations seek to expand globally. It seems that both Yaohan and Seicho-No-Ie entertained hopes that they could cooperate in order to promote the Seicho-No-Ie philosophy, and in so doing to also help to create a distinctive corporate identity for Yaohan characterised by a strong work and service ethic. In addition, they hoped to make use of each other's organisational strengths: for example in Brazil, Seicho-No-Ie was envisaged as a source of both employees and customers for the new Yaohan stores, while in the UK local Seicho-No-Ie groups anticipated that Yaohan would provide a new source of members and organisational support.

Patchy commitment, active resistance

In practice, however, these hopes were not fulfilled. Although the incorporation of Yaohan employees as Seicho-No-Ie members was accomplished relatively easily, at least on a nominal level, in Japan; in other countries the introduction of practices seen as religious into a workplace, or training environment, conceived of as secular, met with resistance, in particular where these practices were seen as in conflict with pre-existing religious affiliations, as in Singapore. Furthermore, evidence from the UK suggests that many Japanese employees may have seen their membership of Seicho-No-Ie as a purely formal obligation, imposed by the Wada family. Both Heung Wah Wong's research on Yaohan Hong Kong and mine on the UK suggest that in the overseas context membership of Seicho-No-Ie and participation in Seicho-No-Ie activities took on a symbolic value, ironically serving to differentiate Japanese and local staff, rather than furnishing a source of corporate unity.

In the light of this, it is perhaps not surprising that Seicho-No-Ie and Yaohan were also largely unsuccessful in making use of each other's organisational strengths – although individual contacts at the higher levels of the respective organisations seem to have been good, at lower levels individual commitment to Seicho-No-Ie on the part of Yaohan employees has been patchy at best, and sometimes characterised by active resistance, thus limiting the effectiveness of collaborations instituted from the top down. In the UK case, for example, Yaohan management was willing to let its premises be used for Seicho-No-Ie meetings, but Yaohan employees and their families would rarely participate in local Seicho-No-Ie group organised events. In addition the store was very inconveniently located for local Seicho-No-Ie members, so meetings at the store tended to be poorly attended.

Overall, although Seicho-No-Ie has a considerable worldwide presence, the expansion of the movement was not helped by its association with Yaohan, nor did Yaohan derive any substantial benefits in its expansion overseas from its association with Seicho-No-Ie. It is difficult to draw firm general conclusions from one rather unusual case, especially given

Yaohan's eventual bankruptcy – as the manager quoted above pointed out, the story could have been very different if Yaohan had been successful. However, it does suggest that, however compelling the parallels and potential synergies between NRMs and MNCs may be, as the two types of organisation both seek to expand globally, the blurring of boundaries between them is experienced as problematic.

Louella Matsunaga

Department of Anthropology,
SOAS, University of London
lm38@soas.ac.uk

Notes:

- 1 For a more detailed account see Matsunaga 2000
- 2 Spiritual training programmes are well documented in Japanese companies, see e.g. Rohlen 1973, 1974. However it is unusual for such programmes to be based on the teachings of an NRM.

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In the mid-1980s Hirochika Nakamaki wrote about Perfect Liberty Kyōdan (PL), a Japanese new religious movement with a strong presence in Brazil, comparing it to a multinational enterprise¹. Nakamaki was the first to name such religions 'multinational religions'. A later article by Nakamaki on another popular Japanese NRM in Brazil, Seicho-No-Ie, employed the analogy of the epidemic to what he called endemic religion². This article briefly summarises the major findings of these two important studies.

Japanese NRMs as 'multinational enterprises' and 'epidemics'

HIROCHIKA NAKAMAKI

PL's propagation in Brazil started when one of its Japanese members went to Brazil in early 1957. Subsequently, an instructor was dispatched from the headquarters in Osaka and its overseas propagation system gradually became well established. It was further intensified after Rev. Tokuchika Miki, the Second Patriarch, began to travel overseas after 1960. Rev. Tokuchika Miki, who worked hard for religious cooperation, had an audience with Pope Paul VI in the Vatican in 1973. The photograph of the meeting between the Pope and the Patriarch is displayed in all PL churches in Brazil, and has had a profound effect on

avoiding friction with the Catholic Church. By the end of 1988, there was a total of 200 PL churches overseas: one in the United States, one in Canada, 172 in Brazil, nine in Argentina, five in Paraguay, 11 in Peru, and one in France. PL has developed its overseas presence in a way which is analogous to that of Japanese multinational enterprises, which spread their business, employing local people and establishing organisational hierarchies. This is because PL has been eager to proselytise among non-Japanese since the late 1960s.

Early propagation in Brazil was focused on Japanese immigrants to Brazil and their descendents, mainly located around the

State of São Paulo, but the number of non-Japanese Brazilian followers has increased since the mid-1960s. The main reasons for this were (1) emphasis on miracle-based faith by *oyasikiri* (the taking of an oath to God) and on thanks-based belief towards the bliss of God; (2) the linking of sympathetic personal counselling with religious practices in everyday life; (3) active propagation in Portuguese; and (4) the adoption of a system that placed Brazilian instructors at the front line of propagation when preaching to Brazilians. The PL Church has thus spread from São Paulo State to Rio de Janeiro, then on to Minas Gerais, and further to other main cities throughout Brazil. An instructor training school was founded

in São Paulo in 1977. 80 percent of its 73 members up to the eighth cohort of graduates were non-Japanese Brazilians. The number of non-Japanese assistant instructors has also increased. PL purchased a piece of land in Arujá in the suburb of São Paulo in 1965, and constructed its South America "Holy Land" there. The outdoor altar, where the spirits of the dead are enshrined, is located at the centre, and is surrounded by the Instruction Department office, training hall, gymnasium, graveyard and Botanical Research Institute. A golf course and a recreational park were also constructed on the property. Fireworks at the Founder's Festival attracted tens of thousands of people from 1973 to 1979.

Then the Festival was cancelled due to the traffic and security problems. Various international congresses and events have been held at the Holy Land.

In principle, all regular rituals and events are held only in Portuguese, differing from other Japanese NRMs with overseas branches, such as Tenrikyo and Sukyo Mahikari. However, the PL newspaper, *Jornal Perfeita Liberdade*, is published both in Portuguese and Japanese. Six works by Tokuchika Miki have already been translated and published in Portuguese. When they were translated, a mention of baseball, for example, was replaced by soccer so that local people might feel more familiar