

Translating ‘culture’ to transcend the ‘nation’

Cultural activities of a Japanese religion in France

Below left:
Association Culturelle
Franco-Japonaise de
Tenri in central Paris.

Masato Kato



Tenrikyō and its postwar cultural dissociation

Tenrikyō originated from a movement/faith community that centred around a woman named Miki Nakayama (1798–1887). After her death in 1887,³ the movement started to become institutionalised and later gained official recognition as an independent faction of Sect Shinto [Kyōha Shinto] in 1908.⁴

As was the case with other contemporary movements, Tenrikyō developed against the background of Japan’s modern nation-building. During the years from its sectarian independence in 1908 to the end of WWII in 1945, Tenrikyō’s official doctrine and practices were to a large extent influenced by the regulation and ideology of the government that entailed contribution and service for the state. In the aftermath of Japan’s defeat in the Pacific War in 1945, however, the religious organisation announced an initiative called ‘restoration’ [fukugen] as an effort to restore the teaching to the original as taught by Miki. This process led to a major reconfiguration of the doctrine and faith practices, and as a consequence many aspects of the teaching came to be marked by abstracted interpretations of cultural particularity and historical roots. For instance, doctrinal discourses that were marked with Japan-centred interpretations were altered in such a way that signifies more abstracted meanings. Moreover, Tenrikyō left the Sect Shinto Union [Kyōha Shinto Rengōkai] in 1970 and eventually removed some of the major Shinto-related ritual materials.⁵ This could be seen as Tenrikyō seeking to restore its teaching in such a way that divorced itself from the nation and culture of Japan.

Tenrikyō’s cultural strategy in France

It is against this historical background that this article proceeds to analyse Tenrikyō’s cultural activities in France in the postwar period. In the early 1970s, the religious organisation founded two legally separate organisations involving a ‘religious’ association (Tenrikyo Mission Centre in Paris, or *Tenrikyō Pari Shutchōsho*, which was later renamed Tenrikyo Europe Centre, or *Tenrikyō Yōroppa Shutchōsho*) and a ‘cultural’ association (*Association Culturelle Franco-Japonaise de Tenri*, or *Tenri Nichi-Futsu Bunka Kyōkai*) in and near the French capital. The founding of the cultural association, which was intended to help gain visibility and legitimacy of the religious group (and its name ‘Tenri’) through the promotion of cultural exchange between France and Japan, coincided with a period of growing interest in the Japanese language⁶

It is probably not unusual for expatriates in general to take advantage of cultural resources of their country of origin to make a living abroad or for other purposes. Japanese expatriates are no exception in this regard, as noted by Harumi Befu in his discussion of the globalisation of Japan.¹ The implications may not be simply about using cultural resources for one’s living, however, when a religious group that proclaims a culturally dissociated religious message uses cultural resources associated with Japan. What does it mean for them to use such cultural resources? This article addresses this question through the case of a Japanese religion known as Tenrikyō² as it operates in France.

(and later with the popularity of Japanese popular culture such as anime and manga⁷) in France. Aside from its main activity of a Japanese language school, the cultural association has promoted various kinds of cultural activities, including one-off events as well as continuous ones such as courses in calligraphy, flower arrangement, and tea ceremonies. As far as the relationship with the religious tradition is concerned, the cultural association conducts no formal activity of proselytisation as per the French legal regulation concerning non-religious associations.

Negotiating the boundary between Tenrikyō and Japan

One may wonder how followers who have been involved in Tenrikyō’s propagation in France make sense of the use of cultural resources associated with Japan in light of the culturally dissociated doctrinal discourses and practices in the postwar period. The ambiguity surrounding Tenrikyō’s cultural identity in relation to Japan means there is a discursive vacuum in which social actors can interpret the relationship between Tenrikyō and Japanese culture. There are indeed diverse manners in which those followers understand the roles of cultural activities. Notable in this regard is that these followers—almost all of whom are Japanese nationals—understand the term ‘culture’ in an abstract or general sense rather than particularly in relation to Japanese culture as currently promoted through the cultural association. Expressed during interviews with these followers is the view that the cultural activities represent one way of contributing to French society in response to the public interests in Japanese culture in particular and cultural activities in general. In another yet related view, it is emphasised by several people that religious traditions in general promote cultural activities as part of their propagation efforts, and therefore it is logical that Tenrikyō conducts such activities. In this frame of reference, Tenrikyō’s cultural activities are understood as an integral part of religion’s propagation efforts—regardless of the kinds of cultural resources they employ. The understanding of ‘culture’ in their view is in line with the underlying characteristics of Tenrikyō’s postwar doctrinal discourse, which de-emphasises the cultural and historical contexts.

Interestingly, however, there was a case in which the abstracted understanding of the term culture led to re-particularisation of Tenrikyō’s postwar doctrinal discourse and related ideas. This was expressed by one of the former presidents of the cultural association as his personal opinion both in his unpublished writing as well as during an interview. In his view, the Japanese language as used in Tenrikyō’s ritual is identified as a sacred language in a rather universalistic sense, with Japanese culture and the language being stripped of their cultural

particularity. It is indicative, however, that he thereby paradoxically accords a special status to Japanese culture and language in relation to others. Intriguing in his case is that the particularity associated with the geographical location of Tenri as well as the Japanese language used in Miki’s writing was discursively subsumed under the universalistic understanding of culture, which in turn gave special status to Japan and the Japanese language in a spiritual sense. Put differently, the perceived particularity of the location and the language is not directly connected to Tenrikyō’s doctrinal discourse, but rather mediated through the universalistic postulation of the concept ‘culture’. This suggests that the abstraction of the term culture can work in both ways, allowing certain cultural characteristics to be attached to or detached from the teaching of Tenrikyō.

Concluding remarks

The case of Tenrikyō in postwar France provides a distinctive picture of a Japanese religion that seeks to transcend the nation by translating culture. In its expansion into the French cultural context, Tenrikyō sought to transcend the national boundary by drawing on the resources and representations associated with Japan at a time Japanese language and culture were gaining popularity in France. In so doing, the followers involved in Tenrikyō’s propagation in France construed the term ‘culture’ in a universalistic or abstracted sense, discursively detaching the meanings of culture associated with Japan. In one case, which is by no means fully representative of followers involved in Tenrikyō’s propagation in France, the abstract construction of the meaning of culture paradoxically led to the re-particularisation of the otherwise culturally dissociated doctrinal discourse. In this sense, Tenrikyō in France has been able to transcend the nation through culture in terms of responding to the popularity of Japanese culture as well as in a sense of discursive negotiation, provided that the abstract postulation of ‘culture’ avoids the particularisation of the meaning. When abstracted, the term ‘culture’ has multiple implications for a religion that seeks to expand transnationally, and in this sense the case of Tenrikyō can provide insights into the ways in and the extent to which a religion can transcend the nation by translating the culture that is associated with the nation in which it developed.

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Notes

- 1 Befu, H. 2003. ‘The Global Context of Japan outside Japan’, in Befu, H. & Guichard-Anguis, S. (eds) *Globalizing Japan: Ethnography of the Japanese Presence in Asia, Europe, and America*. Routledge Curzon, p.9.
- 2 In this article, I follow the convention of using diacritical marks for Japanese words including names of religions, except where religious organisations concerned use unmarked ones as English proper nouns.
- 3 In Tenrikyō’s official doctrine, Miki Nakayama’s death is referred to as “physical withdrawal” as she is believed to still be alive as the ‘Shrine of God’ [kami no yashiro].
- 4 For a more comprehensive overview of Tenrikyō, see the author’s entry in the ‘World Religions and Spirituality Project’ (WRSP): <https://wrlrels.org/2015/03/22/tenrikyo>.
- 5 For further discussions about the historical change of Tenrikyō, see Hatakama, K. 2007. ‘Hataraki: Hinokishin’, in Tenri Daigaku Oyasato Kenkyūsho (ed.) *Tenrikyō no kosumōshi* [Foundresses [Tenrikyō’s cosmology and contemporary society]. Tenri Daigaku Shuppanbu, pp.85–130; Hatakama, K. 2012. ‘Kōhon Tenrikyō Kyōsoden no seiritsu’ [History behind the compilation of the manuscript edition of Kōhon Tenrikyō Kyōsoden], in Hatakama, K. (ed.) *Katarareta kyōso: Kinse, kingendai no shinkōshi* [Foundresses in narratives: History of faith practices in early modern and modern Japan]. Kyoto: Hōzōkan, pp.193–240; Hatakama, K. 2013. ‘Oshie no ashimoto wo terasu: “Fukugen” to shakai’ [Illuminating the foundation of the teaching: ‘Restoration’ and society], in Tenri Daigaku Oyasato Kenkyūsho (ed.) *Gendai shakai to Tenrikyō* [Contemporary society and Tenrikyō]. Tenri Daigaku Shuppanbu, pp.59–83; Kato, M. 2018. “Translating a ‘Religion’, Translating a ‘Culture’: Cultural Negotiation of a Japanese New Religion in a Transnational Context”. PhD thesis, SOAS University of London, Chapter 3; Nagaoka, T. 2015. *Shinshūkyō to sōryokusen: Kyōso igo wo ikiru* [New religions in total war: Survival after the death of the founder]. Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai.
- 6 See, for instance, the annual survey reports on Japanese language educational institutions abroad [Nihongo kyōiku kikan chōsa] compiled by the Japan Foundation [Kokusai Kōryū Kikin]: <https://www.jpf.go.jp/e/project/japanese/survey/result>.
- 7 Fujita, Y. 2006. ‘Furansu ni okeru Nihon no manga anime no juyō’ [Reception of Japanese manga and anime in France], *Ronsō* 47:189–201 (Tamagawa University journal of literature); Yamashita, C. 2012. ‘Furansu ni okeru Nihon anime: Keizai kōka to bunka shinryaku’ [Japanese anime in France: Economic impact and cultural invasion], *Lilia candida: Furansugo Furansu bungaku ronshū* 42:95–126 (Shirayuri University journal of French studies).