Asian New Religious Movements are attracting converts in every continent. They offer members a comprehensive cultural system of beliefs, rituals, daily routines, diet, dress styles and patterns of relationships. While often based on pre-modern Asian values and practices, these are accepted by converts from a global sweep of cultures without modification. As agents promoting the truly global application of holistic cultural systems, they warrant our attention.

Asian New Religious Movements as global cultural systems

About Asian New Religious Movements

When considering the impact of new religious movements (NRMs) on people’s lives, one is struck by the fact that these movements transcend any globe. Joining such organisations radiates a spiritual and social dynamism. It stems from a philosophy that focuses on life. But even more important is the fact that many NRMs have made this impact across a global sweep of cultures with little perceivable variation in the way converts from different national origins accept the new system. This phenomenon is especially striking when the NRMs are from Asia and introduce radically different ritual and daily life practices from those found in the West.

My aim is to compare the NRMs with multinational corporations (MNCs) in terms of their global presence: the scale of their operations, membership numbers, property holdings and human resource management (HRM) practices, and their impact on the cultures of daily life. MNCs too have had the power to override traditional cultural values and practices through their globalised systems of production and consumption. For instance, young Muslim factory women in Malaysia leave their families and go unescorted into the night to work the shift before multinational semiconductor corporations, transcending strict Islamic values about the supervision of unmarried women by the male members. Working class Malaysian families take their children for a ‘staff outing’ to a KFC outlet, even though they are poor. The deep fried chicken drumsticks sold at roadside stalls may be tastier and cost one-third of the price. But these are still picturesque responses to global culture. It is only at the level of middle class affluence that the global values of consumer culture have come into play. How we live is now often dictated by the latest fashions, which may conflict seriously with our traditional cultural heritage. The power of NRMs to embrace their new spiritual path. And this happens to the same degree among all the members within one NRM, uniformly, across a global sweep of cultures both east and west. Because the NRMs are ‘new’, hybridity of practices and beliefs have not had time to develop, as is the case in the established religions.

NRMs as MNCs

Organisationally, it is also significant that these NRMs can be compared to MNCs on many levels. Firstly, in terms of their global reach, many of them have branch centres in the capital cities and other major regional cities of countries in all continents. Moreover, some of them were constituted to have this global focus from the outset and their very nature reflects this. For instance, a neo-Hindu movement based in New Delhi, India, is called the Brahama Kumaris World Spiritual University (BKWSU) and a Shinto NRM based in Japan, is called the Church of World Messianity (Seiki Kyoue Kye).

The global focus is more than in name only. However, many movements have pilgrimage places which members from all over the world, and it is a thought-provoking sight at a time when globalisation has become a cliché, to see members from widely disparate geographical and cultural regions mingling together, totally unified by their common adherence to the faith. In this sense, the ‘corporate culture’ of the spiritual organisation acts strongly to dominate national or ethnic cultures of origin. (Smith 2000). The services are conducted with simultaneous translation in many languages. But the global mind-set of the organisation is not just a matter of making the doctrine available in foreign languages. It stems from a philosophy that all humanity is one, albeit with Japanese or Indian culture as the original culture. Often NRMs frame themselves as supra-religions, which, they assert, transcend the established religions and avoid their narrow and limiting conceptualisations. This philosophy is built into the name of another Japanese Shintoist NRM, Sakyoku Mahkaji (Soka Shusin of True Light).

A striking example of a NRM with a global approach from the outset is Tenrikyo, with two million followers, 900,000 outside Japan, served by 200 overseas churches. Tenrikyo is Japan’s earliest major new religion, founded before the Meiji Restoration by Miki Nakayama, a 41 year old woman from a peasant family, after she received divine revelations in 1838. It established its own library, university and ethnological museum in the 19th century, in order to aid the missionary activity of its early adherents. The Tenri University displayed the daily artefacts of the countries where missions would be sent so that they would be familiar with the cultures they would have to interact with. The Tenri University was set up as an institution for teaching foreign languages to missionaries, and so strong is the movement’s outward gaze that its religious texts were published in 16 foreign languages from the early days. All these institutions are located in Tenri City, established 1881, which is a pilgrimage place for members from all over the world. As MNC style organisations, NRMs also have extensive property holdings. They usually have a headquarters complex which includes sacred spaces, often able to seat very large gatherings of tens of thousands of people, administrative offices and accommodation for pilgrims. Often the organisations include philanthropic institutions such as hospitals and environmental projects such as ecologically sensitive farms – Sakyoku Mahkaji’s ‘Yoko agriculture’, or beautiful parks such as Seiki Kyoue Keji’s gardens in Japan, (see www.msv-int.or.jp/english/shinsenkyo/ shini.html).

In line with their extensive property, is the magnitude of the NRMs’ financial revenue, with the turnover of capital in the form of donations and events management – the BKWSU regularly feeds 10,000 pilgrims attending its ceremonies, for instance - demonstrating organisational expertise which rivals that of very large scale business enterprises. Like MNCs they have the challenge of recruiting, training and retaining good administrative staff, many of whom qualify primarily in terms of their spiritual stature and have to be trained thereafter to run an organisation or centre in a secular context. However, the nature of the belief system makes staff posted to foreign centres more easily able to transcend the cross-cultural issues which bedevil corporate managers on overseas postings - as the NRMs ‘corporate culture’ which is shared by everyone, becomes the culture of interaction. Indeed the NRMs have policies to actively post their spiritual leaders and administrators to countries foreign to them. For instance, in the BKWSU, which has 800,000 members worldwide, served by over 50,000 centres in 128 countries, the country coordinator in Greece is Australian, in Italy is British and in Japan is Indian.

NRMs as agents of truly global forms of culture

It is the ability of these global NRMs to provide a total cultural system to their members which distinguishes them from NRMs and gives them a higher level of global status. Conversion often involves members changing their daily lifestyles and even leaving long term relationships. Conversion to the religion is on an individual basis, taking the individual away from established community patterns of worship and belief. Often other family members may follow although this is not always the case and it can impose hardship if the dramatically altered lifestyles and values cannot be accepted or adopted - by relatives or friends of the convert. Brahma Kumaris in the inner, committed circle, are vegetarian, celibate, and rise daily at 4am to practice raja yoga meditation. This lifestyle gives expression to the Indian spiritual traditions of brahmawarriors (celibacy) and the satvic (pure) diet. Married converts have often had to forgo their marriage partnerships. Strict adherence requires that they only eat food cooked by themselves or other Brahma Kumaris in order to benefit from the pure vibrations of the person cooking the food. This has meant that some members do not eat food cooked by their mothers or other relatives who are not in the movement, thus challenging one of the most basic social activities which fosters social relationships, eating together.

Brahma Kumaris attach their local centre for meditation, the reading of a revealed text and class discussion from 3.50 to 7.00 am. In earlier times, Brahmakumars around the world dressed in white, a colour of spiritual practice in India and other Asian cultures, even during secular activities, but this has now been modified outside India. Yet the benefits of such a lifestyle include enhanced soul consciousness and a sense of peace which those from outside the movement notice and comment upon. At the same time, members are encouraged to participate fully in secular society and many hold full-time professional, clerical or manual jobs and remain incognito as far as possible. Sakyoku Mahkāji does not impose dietary or marriage restrictions, but members are encouraged to come to the centre each day and engage in the practice of mahākāri no waza, the transcendence of Pure Light or divine energy. The centres are very Japanesene in style - members must wash their hands, as one does when visiting a Shinto shrine, and remove their shoes before entering, kneel on the floor and bow to the shrine and to each other, as in Japan, in many social and ritual contexts. Behaviour and attitude are very formal and emphasised is on thoughtfulness to others. The prayer which precedes the giving of Light, Amita Nīngetō, is recited in archaic Japanese in a loud voice and all members have memorised it. I have observed centres in Japan, Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, and everywhere, the atmosphere and practices are the same, despite the
fact that some of these practices are very alien to the members’ native cultures. It is also significant to observe, for instance, young women giving Light to elderly gentlemen, Indians to Chinese, in other words, not only ethnic boundaries but also gender and age differences are transcended to an unusual degree in an Asian cultural context. Moreover, at home, members are encouraged to maintain an ancestral altar and offer food to the ancestors several times a day, a practice which has overtones of Japanese Buddhist observances in traditional households. In Scientology, these practices which focus on purification, are associated with the occurrence of miracles in the healing of many illnesses, and other aspects of members’ lives regularly turn for the better, (Tebecis, 1983), but the relationships and social activities of the members gradually drift away from pre-conversion patterns and activities of the members gradually drift away from pre-conversion patterns and come to revolve around the centre and other members.

Speech patterns are also modified through membership of NRMs. Brahma Kumaris refer to other people as ‘souls’, and male and female members as ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’. Mahikari members speak with reference to their gratitude for everything that happens to them, both good and bad, and preface accounts of their own doings with “I was permitted to...”, thus showing respect for the divine plan of Su God. In order to speak within the community of members, one must make a mental adjustment to the rules of discourse of the movement. This is of course easier if one is only interacting with other members but if one is moving in and out of secular society, it is a reminder of the layers of culture within which one exists.

These outward speech patterns are a manifestation of an inner transformation which has taken place in terms of members’ understanding of the divine underpinnings of human life. Hence the Shinto emphasis on cleanliness, and the Hindu emphasis on purity in food, and Brahmacary, which are mainstream elements of these global NRMs, have been adapted to within question by committed members of these religions, regardless of the degree of disparity between these ideas and practices and those of their original cultures or socio-economic and socio-political backgrounds.

References


Windy Smith

is an anthropologist who studied Japanese management transfer to Malaysia and now teaches cross-cultural management and international business. She is the Director of the Centre for Malaysian Studies, Monash Asia Institute, and a senior lecturer in the Department of Management, Monash University, Australia. windy.smith@buseco.monash.edu.au

Japan aktuell
Journal of Current Japanese Affairs

Call for Papers

JAPAN aktuell – Journal of Current Japanese Affairs is an internationally refereed academic journal published by the Institute of Asian Affairs (part of GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies), Hamburg. The bimonthly journal focuses on current developments in Japan. It has a circulation of 500 copies and reaches a broad readership in the academia, administration and business circles. Articles to be published should be written in German or English and submitted exclusively to this publication.

JAPAN aktuell is devoted to the transfer of scholarly insights to a wide audience. The topics covered should therefore not only be oriented towards specialists in Japanese affairs, but should also be of relevance to readers with a practical interest in the region. The editors welcome contributions on contemporary Japan that are concerned with the fields of international relations, politics, economics, society, education, environment or law. Articles should be theoretically grounded, empirically sound and reflect the state of the art in contemporary Japanese studies.

All manuscripts will be peer-reviewed for acceptance. The editors respond within three months. Research articles should not exceed 10,000 words (incl. footnotes and references). Manuscripts should be submitted to the editors in electronic form: japan-aktuell@giga-hamburg.de. For detailed submission guidelines see: www.giga-hamburg.de/lauf/stylesheet.

Recent topics:
• Japan’s leading role and EU influence on financial integration in East Asia
• Economic mega trends in Japan and their implications for the industrial structure [in German]
• Japan’s securitization towards North Korea [in German]

Editors: Anja Walke • Dirk Nabers
Institute of Asian Affairs
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies
Röthenbaumchaussee 32 • 20148 Hamburg • Germany
Phone: +49 40 4288740 • Fax: +49 40 4107945
Website: www.giga-hamburg.de

G I G A
German Institute of Global and Area Studies

[advertisement]