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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 relationship. 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

WENDY A. SMITH

New Religious Movements (NRMs) present holistic social systems of beliefs and values, rituals for coping with crisis and uncertainty, daily routines, codes for dress, diet and relationships, ways of speaking, greeting, annual festivals and rituals for birth, marriage (where appropriate) and death, to converts across the globe. Joining such organisations radically changes a convert's cultural perspective 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 third shift for multinational semiconductor corporations, transcending strict Islamic values about the supervision of unmarried women by their male relatives. Working class Malaysian families take their children for a 'status' outing to a KFC outlet, even though the deep fried chicken drumsticks sold at roadside stalls may be tastier and cost one third of the price. But these are still piecemeal responses to global culture. It is only at the level of middle class affluence that the global values of consumer culture are imposed as a total lifestyle, as people cut traditional ties and consolidate their efforts to achieve prosperity for the nuclear family as the main unit of consumption.

The power of multinational economic organisations to transcend local traditional cultural values and material lifestyles is well documented, but I wish to focus attention on the similar role of multinational or 'global' NRMs in having equal, if not more, power to transform the behaviour, values, material cultures and patterns of social relationships of people in both traditional and modern cultures with a uniformity and universality which is striking. Their effect is even more powerful than the piecemeal power of the MNCs because active membership frequently involves a total transformation of one's daily lifestyle and relationships. In this way the NRMs present a comprehensive

cultural package to their followers. What is even more striking is that this cultural package will be taken up equally by followers all over the world, and from every socio-economic stratum, often when it is quite different or even antithetical to their original cultural background.

These global NRMs frequently originate from Asia, in which case their beliefs and rituals are grounded in the Asian culture of origin, often in its pre-modern form. This makes for quite an extreme form of cultural dissonance with followers from the West, Africa and Latin America. Yet converts accept the total package of doctrine and lifestyle and modify their persona, personal values, daily routines, kin and voluntary relationships, not to mention diet, speech patterns and dress, in order 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 name reflects this. For instance, a neo-Hindu movement based at Mt Abu, Rajasthan, India, is called the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (BKWSU) and a Shintoistic NRM based in Japan, is called the Church of World Messianity (*Sekai Kyusei Kyo*).

The global focus is more than in name however. Many movements have pilgrimage places which attract 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 geographic 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 2002). The services are conducted with simultaneous translation in many languages. But the global mindset 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 Shintoistic NRM, *Sukyo Mahikari* (Supra Religion of True Light).

A striking example of a NRM with a global approach from the outset is *Tenrikyo*, with two million followers, 500,000 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 Museum displayed the daily artefacts of the countries where missionaries 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 – *Sukyo Mahikari's* Yoko agriculture, or beautiful parks such as *Sekai Kyusei Kyo's* gardens in Japan, (see [www.moa-inter.or.jp/english/shinsenkyo/shin.html](http://www.moa-inter.or.jp/english/shinsenkyo/shin.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 5,000 centres in 128 countries, the country coordinator in Greece is Australian, in Italy is British and in Japan is Indian.

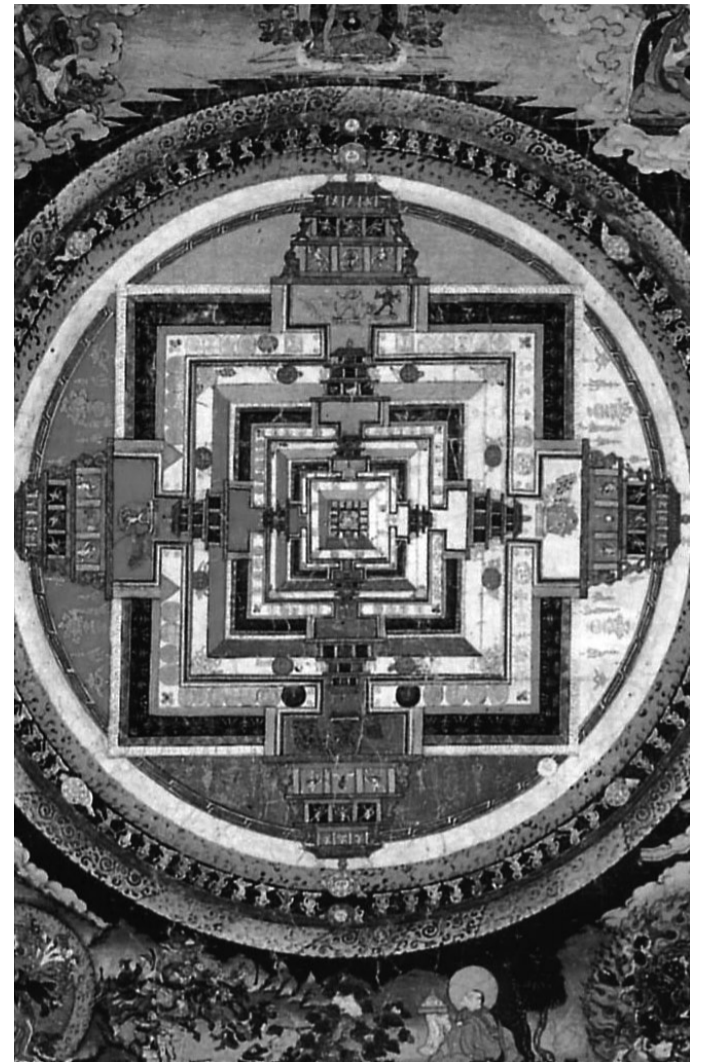
## NRMs as agents of truly global forms of culture

It is the ability of these global NRMs to provide a total cultural system to their members which distinguishes them from MNCs 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 practise raja yoga meditation. This lifestyle gives expression to the Indian spiritual traditions of *brahmacharya* (celibacy) and the *satvic* (pure) diet. Married converts have often had to forgo their

marriage partnership. 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 attend their local centre for meditation, the reading of a revealed text and class discussion from 5.30 until 7.00 am. In earlier times, Brahma Kumaris 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.

*Sukyo Mahikari* does not impose dietary or marriage restrictions, but members are encouraged to come to the centre each day and engage in the practice of *mahikari no waza*, the transference of Pure Light or divine energy. The centres are very Japanese 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 emphasis is on thoughtfulness to others. The prayer which precedes the giving of Light, *Amatsu Norigoto*, 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 *Sukyo Mahikari*, these practices which focus on purification, are associated with the occurrence of miracles in the healing of major illnesses, and other aspects of members' lives regularly turn for the better, (Tebecis, 1982), but the relationships and social 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 *brah-*

*macariya*, which are mainstream elements of these global NRMs, have been adopted without 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. ■

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