

Ronan Alves PEREIRA

## The Transplantation of Soka Gakkai to Brazil

### Building “the Closest Organization to the Heart of Ikeda-Sensei”

Up to the 1980s, Buddhist influence in Brazil was, at best, exiguous and marginal. The Buddhist Society of Brazil, established in 1923 by Theosophists, was short-lived, and was only reestablished in 1955 with little public visibility and activity. In areas with a high concentration of Japanese-Brazilians, temples, and monks of different denominations were the closest contact some Brazilians had with this religious tradition. Still, it was chiefly a “Japanese thing” or an alien practice “for Japanese.” Zen’s appeal to some intellectuals from the 1960s was a limited phenomenon, somehow related to the counterculture movement in the country. From the 1980s on, the media was instrumental in popularizing Buddhism in Brazil, particularly Zen and the newcomer Tibetan Buddhism. This follows a trend in the United States called “Tibetan chic.” Against this background, Soka Gakkai International (SGI) is becoming familiar to many Brazilians as it receives more social visibility and legitimacy. This article initially presents the history of SGI expansion from Japanese immigrants to Brazilians. The focus then changes to its organizational structure and activities. Finally, some remarkable aspects of Brazil-SGI are highlighted to show the particular trajectory of the movement.

KEYWORDS: Soka Gakkai — SGI — Nichiren Buddhism — Ikeda Daisaku — NSB — ecology — literacy — Ichijoji

Ronan Alves Pereira is Professor of Japanese Studies and former Chair of the Center for Asian Studies of the University of Brasilia.

JUST FIVE months after being inaugurated as the third Soka Gakkai president in 1960, Ikeda Daisaku (born 1928) traveled abroad to launch the world diffusion of Nichiren Buddhism (*kōsen rufu*) and, simultaneously, collect material to build the Grand Reception Hall (*Daikyakuden*) at Taisekiji. During his first trip, he opened the first overseas branches that later reported to Soka Gakkai International, which was established in 1975. In so doing, Ikeda was imprinting an international orientation to his movement.

SGI started off in Brazil as a loose movement of postwar Japanese immigrants. Its systematic diffusion in the country came later in the context of the global agenda imposed by Ikeda. The movement faced different sources of hindrances and challenges but overall has been successful. Its history in Brazil can be divided into six distinct periods as follows:<sup>1</sup>

#### PIONEERING PERIOD (LATE 1950S)

The first SGI members arrived in Brazil in the late 1950s, after the movement was rebuilt in Japan from what survived following the Japanese government's repression. When Ikeda visited the country in 1960, he was informed "that the membership numbered some one hundred households, spread throughout the country, and that the members there had held several discussion meetings" (IKEDA 1998, 232).

These pioneers were newcomers in the country and were thus still settling in on the occasion of Ikeda's visit. They counted on published materials from Japan to keep up their practice and activities, which were basically limited to the family circle and/or a few neighbors and friends.

#### PERIOD OF STRUCTURING AND LEGALIZATION (1960–1965)

On 2 October 1960, the thirty-two year old Ikeda Daisaku left Japan to visit nine cities in three different countries: the United States (CUSA and Hawai'i), Canada, and Brazil. Ikeda and his entourage arrived in São Paulo in the first hours of 19 October, a date that came to be celebrated as the "Brazil-SGI Foundation Day." Between twenty and thirty people welcomed the group at the airport.

The next day, Ikeda held a discussion meeting with approximately one hundred and forty members in a Japanese restaurant hall in Liberdade, the most important Japanese neighborhood in the city of São Paulo. This meeting is considered to be the first Brazilian "convention" in which the creation of the first

1. This periodization comes from my PhD dissertation (PEREIRA 2001) with some additional information from WATANABE 2001.

chapter outside Japan was announced. The “Brazilian Chapter” was initially composed of three districts and included a Young Men’s Division (YMD) and a Young Women’s Division (YWD).

In January 1962, the Brazilian Chapter already counted eight districts. The next year, the organization showed signs of growth with the creation of two new chapters: São Paulo Kita and São Paulo Nishi. In July 1964, it was legalized as Sociedade Religiosa Soka Gakkai do Brasil (Soka Gakkai Religious Society of Brazil). At that time, the first community center was founded in São Paulo’s Vila Mariana ward, which also served as the South American headquarters.

From 1961 through 1964, Soka Gakkai leaders were dispatched on a South America guidance tour, giving much needed encouragement and advice to members in this initial period. In 1964, Midori Chiba was sent to Brazil as the first fulltime employee to supervise the administrative and organizational management of the South American Headquarters. Another key figure was Yasuhiro Saito, who was assigned to the leading position of the South American YMD in December 1962 while working for the Nissho-Iwai Trading Company. Saito (born 1928) graduated from the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and had previously worked in Argentina for the same trading company. In December 1964, he returned to Japan and quit his job. On this occasion, Ikeda met with Saito and appointed him as the organization’s general director. His wife Etsuko (1936–1993) became leader of the South American YWD. In 1974, the couple took Brazilian citizenship as Roberto and Silvia Saito.

By this time, the movement had undergone a considerable degree of acclimatization as well as organization, claiming a membership of eight hundred families. In 1963, Brazil Soka Gakkai organized the first pilgrimage of twenty-three members to Taiseikiji in Japan. Two years later, another group of seven members made the same pilgrimage. The first exam of Buddhism in Portuguese was held as early as 1964. In the same year, the movement sponsored the first athletic festival of South America. In 1965, around eight hundred people attended the first *gohonzon* (object of worship) conferral by Nichiren Shōshū priests. The movement also launched a bulletin in Portuguese, *Nova Era* (New Age), the precursor of the present-day newspaper *Brasil Seikyo*. Two years later, the magazine *Terceira Civilização* was created as a complementary tool of propagation. These advancements and changes were due to the growing number of members, particularly of Japanese-Brazilians.

As the organization was expected to receive a visit by Ikeda in 1966, members united around the common goal of converting ten thousand families as a way to prepare for the visit. This vigorous *shakubuku* campaign had the Women’s Division in the frontline. Here the leading role of Silvia Saito is remembered due to her previous experience as a *shakubuku* champion in Tokyo and to her tireless use of this experience to convert immigrants around São Paulo.

PERIOD OF EXPANSION:  
FROM SHAKUBUKU TO CULTURAL ACTIVITIES (1966–1978)

This period starts off with the second visit of Ikeda to Brazil in March 1966. The president was welcomed by a culture festival that involved four hundred performers and an audience of nearly on thousand, seven hundred people. Brazilian members were particularly proud to be able to offer as a gift to Ikeda the amazing accomplishment of converting approximately ten thousand new families in just one year.

Having been introduced into the country by postwar immigrants, SGI was now reaching out to prewar immigrants and second-generation Japanese-Brazilians. Although the movement was almost doubling its membership yearly, the result of these *shakubuku* drives came with a bitter consequence of animosity and criticism. Leaders of the Japanese-Brazilian community as well as of other Japanese religions accused SGI of using the same forceful conversion method it used in Japan, which would ultimately work against the internal harmony of the Japanese colony and its integration in Brazil.

Furthermore, SGI opponents exploited the fact that Kōmeitō (Clean Government Party) parliamentarians were coming regularly on “guidance tours” to the country. Eventually, this information reached Brazilian authorities and raised concerns about the possible political intentions of Soka Gakkai in the country. The timing could not be worse as Brazil was then under a military regime (1964–1985). The Department of Political and Social Order started monitoring Gakkai activities and, in 1974, a planned third visit of Ikeda was cancelled as he was not permitted to enter the country.

With the number of new converts growing quickly, it became evident that there was a need to build a temple with a full-time live-in monk in charge of religious services, mainly for the conversion ceremony (*gojukai*). Thus, on 16 February 1968, the Kaisenzan Ichijoji temple was inaugurated in São Paulo.

In July 1966, the organization changed its name to Sociedade Religiosa Nitiren Shoshu Soka Gakkai do Brasil. This name was short-lived as it changed again in February 1967 to Sociedade Religiosa Nitiren Shoshu do Brasil, frequently referred to as NSB. In 1970, Roberto Saito became the general-director of the movement in South America. This South American management from Brazil was later interrupted with the creation of the Soka Gakkai International (1975) and its development in each country.

With the above-mentioned cancellation of Ikeda’s visit, NSB leaders decided to change the organizational orientation. It was time to mend relations with the Japanese-Brazilian community and expand ties with society at large. Accordingly, NSB became more culturally activity-oriented by participating in government-sponsored activities (such as Independence Day) and festivals to celebrate Japanese immigration to Brazil with fife and drum corps presentations and

cultural performances with emphasis on the so-called “human arts.” In sum, this period began with a triumphant output of militant and forceful *shakubuku* drives and ended up with less stress on conversions and more emphasis on cultural activities. With the combination of these two different orientations, NSB was guaranteed a strong basis in Brazil.

#### PERIOD OF ESCALATING FRICTION WITH THE PRIESTHOOD (1979–1990)

This period starts and ends with conflicts between SGI and its parent-sect Nichiren Shōshū. This sort of conflict occurred on an almost seasonal basis: it happened during the war when the priesthood accepted government control of religions whereas Gakkai’s first president, Makiguchi, defied this control and consequently was jailed; it happened with the second president, Toda, who would frequently criticize Nichiren Shōshū clergy; and, finally, history repeated itself with Ikeda, this time with a deeper and irrevocable result.

Ikeda maintained his strategic support for the priesthood at the same time as he confronted it and even tried to reinterpret traditional Nichiren Shōshū doctrines, stressing the role of lay practitioners. On April 1979, however, Ikeda resigned from his post, notwithstanding becoming (Japan’s) Soka Gakkai Honorary President and keeping his post as SGI President. His unexpected resignation was the end result of a conflicting relationship with the priesthood as well as other Soka Gakkai leaders.

What was the impact of this conflict upon NSB? To begin with, the chief priest of NSB’s Ichijoji temple belonged to Shōshin-kai, a movement of young priests who criticized Ikeda’s writings as attempts to defy Nichiren Shōshū’s authority and tradition. As a result, Ichijoji temple was temporarily closed from 1979 to September 1980. Meanwhile, its *gohonzon* was taken back to Japan, which meant that during this period no ceremonies were held, particularly the conferral of new *gohonzon*. In this atmosphere, some members left the organization out of disgust and deception, with NSB membership dropping from forty thousand to twenty-four thousand households. After the priesthood issue was addressed in a reasonable manner, NSB tried to recover ground by raising capable leaders and deepening members’ faith and understanding of the doctrine through study and summer training courses. Despite less emphasis on *shakubuku*, membership started growing again in the 1980s.

In 1983, Nichiren Shōshū high priest Nikken Abe and over thirty priests traveled to Brazil to inaugurate the new location of Ichijoji temple. Next year, in February, Ikeda was finally able to visit the country for the third time to participate in the celebrations of NSB’s silver jubilee. Again, the leader was welcomed by a grand culture festival with eight thousand performers and an audience of twenty thousand people. During his trip, Ikeda had not only an internal agenda for this celebration, but also followed a carefully organized series of political and

social meetings. Among others, he met with the then president João Baptista O. Figueiredo and some of his ministers, top government officials, and the rector of the University of Brasilia.

In 1987, the Educational Department started a literacy project for adults. Next year, NSB took part in the eightieth anniversary of Japanese immigration to Brazil, celebrated in the Pacaembu Stadium, São Paulo. In the event, it put together a “human panel” with ten thousand people, which resembled the huge cultural and athletic festivals organized by Soka Gakkai in Japan.

From the mid-1980s, just like the Japanese-Brazilian community at large and other Japan-originated religions, SGI started suffering the consequences of the *dekasegi* (temporary migrant workers) phenomenon. Due to major changes in the economies of Japan and Brazil, Japanese-Brazilians started going to Japan to work as non-specialized laborers. Because NSB had always been dominated by Japanese and their descendants, the increasing number of members leaving for Japan raised concerns about stability in certain regions. But, as WATANABE (2001, 362–63) has accurately pointed out, the *dekasegi* phenomenon was instrumental in creating opportunities for non-Japanese members to climb to higher positions in the organization.

In 1990, Ikeda was expected to visit Brazil again, but he could not make it, most probably because of the friction with the priesthood that led to SGI’s formal excommunication in the following year. Instead, Ikeda sent his son, SGI Vice President Ikeda Hiromasa, to represent him.

Despite the conflicts between the laity and the clergy during this period, NSB promoted numerous cultural and musical festivals, athletic championships, conventions, exhibitions, and similar events. Additionally, it underwent a series of changes in its structure in tune with the needs of its growth. For example, new posts and organizational arrangements were created such as the posts of NSB president and vice-president; and age-specific groups and profession-specific departments, such as those of Education, Culture, and Arts.

#### PERIOD OF TRANSITION AND CONSOLIDATION (1991–2000)

The second major conflict with Nichiren Shōshū priesthood was triggered in December 1990, when Rev. Nichijun Fujimoto, Nichiren Shōshū General Administrator, presented a tape in which Ikeda allegedly disrespected the priesthood and questioned high priest Nikken Abe’s integrity and doctrinal vision. Following a series of accusations, SGI was formally excommunicated in 1991.

As a result of this excommunication, NSB changed its name to Associação Brasil Soka Gakkai Internacional (or BSGI) on 23 April 1991. Possibly two-thirds of the one hundred and fifty thousand NSB members aligned with the SGI leadership while some members gave up their practice out of disappointment. Those faithful to Nichiren Shōshū were reorganized through the Associação Religiosa

Hokkeko do Brasil or Hokkekō Religious Association of Brazil. According to Nagatani Yuji (personal communication), Hokkekō coordinator in Brasília, this association had an estimated five thousand members as of December 1998.

In November 1991, monks and adepts linked to the Ichijoji temple made a move to dismiss the temple's board of directors, which was composed basically of BSGI leaders. The following month, the dismissed board filed a cause of action in court to be reinstated at the temple. The case was only concluded on April 2000, when the Brazilian Supreme Court confirmed a 1998 judicial decision by the São Paulo State Court that reinstated the original board of directors. In effect, this meant the transfer of rights to the temple from the Nichiren Shōshū priests to SGI leadership. Eventually, the temple was renamed as Jōshō Kaikan or "Ever-Victorious Community Center."

In October 1993, BSGI underwent a process of restructuring, which elevated its Vice President Eduardo Taguchi to the top position of the movement. Roberto Saito became BSGI honorary president. In the following year, BSGI's new members started receiving copies of the *gohonzon* transcribed by the twenty-sixth high priest Nichikan Shōnin (1665–1726) issued by the Jōenji temple in Oyama, Tochigi Prefecture. This was a milestone as the distribution of *gohonzon* had not happened since the excommunication.

On his fourth visit to Brazil in 1993, Ikeda had a very busy agenda from mid-February through to the beginning of March. He lectured at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, became a corresponding member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, visited the São Paulo Art Museum (MASP), and met with the governor of São Paulo state.

From this time on, top officials of BSGI had a series of meetings with leading Brazilian politicians and invited numerous public opinion makers to their activities such as the former First Lady, Ruth Cardoso. Additionally, Soka University has offered the title of *honoris causa* Doctor to Brazilians in key positions, such as politicians, diplomats, university rectors, and others. Undoubtedly, BSGI's focus was on consolidating the newly-established organizational structure and capitalizing on the spoils of the NSB split, securing for itself the largest number of members. In addition, a deliberate effort to gain legitimacy and social visibility has been in place through the intensification of ties with various Brazilian institutions, political meetings, formal agreements with universities and government agencies, participation in official campaigns, exhibitions in public spaces, and others.

Such endeavors to connect to public figures paid off very quickly as SGI and its leaders started receiving public homage, awards, and acknowledgements. Interestingly, the vast majority of public honors and recognition occurred after the split between Soka Gakkai and Nichiren Shōshū: only five awards from 1960 up to 1991 compared to four hundred and fifty-two since then (as of April 2006). Ikeda alone has received two hundred and seventy-six awards and hon-

ors, which makes up 60.3 percent of the total of four hundred and fifty-seven awards. Additionally, most of this public recognition occurred in the states of São Paulo (one hundred and sixty-one) and Rio de Janeiro (one hundred and forty-three), the two states with the largest number of BSGI members. This suggests a deliberate, active, and effective policy toward the legitimizing objective.

#### PERIOD OF RESUMPTION OF GROWTH (2001–PRESENT)

Throughout the previous period, the BSGI leaders' endeavors converged to solve the dispute with Nichiren Shōshū's priesthood and react to the counterpropaganda of the opponent group. In 2000, however, BSGI prepared the organization and its members to begin a new phase, taking advantage of the symbolism and expectations related to the new century and millennium. The leadership focused on organizational and doctrinaire consolidation in order to boost the members' morale and thus promote BSGI's expansion in the years to come.

This change of orientation was actually in tune with a SGI campaign launched by President Ikeda as "the second phase of the Seven Bells" (2001–2050). This metaphor of the "seven bells" originated in an observation made by Toda Jōsei, according to whom the most meaningful events for Soka Gakkai occurred every seven years.<sup>2</sup> Shortly after Toda passed away, Ikeda recovered this metaphor when he announced the project of the "Seven Bells" during the Spring Convention of 1958. This working plan was a vision for the SGI in the following twenty one years, divided into three periods of seven years. In 1980, Ikeda abandoned this allegory and launched a program of four cycles of five years each, to develop and propagate the movement. As this program, which ended in 2000, did not follow the seven bells metaphor, Ikeda proposed "the second phase of the Seven Bells" starting on 3 May 2001, with concrete measures to expand the movement.

Accordingly, BSGI 2001's theme was "A New Century: Year of Total Victory," which sounds like a catchphrase to start this "second Seven Bells" phase. Commenting on this theme, BSGI President Eduardo Taguchi declared: "This year especially, let us channel our efforts to accomplish *shakubuku* and propagate Buddhism. Soka Gakkai basic activity is the promotion of *shakubuku*" (BSGI 2001, 16). Taguchi also launched the target of ten thousand new conversions in the following years. This target has been accomplished as its June 2000 membership of 104,358 constituents had increased to 134,778 by April 2006 (Getúlio Nakajima, personal communication, 10 April 2006).

The past years have also been a period of expansion in terms of new assets. In 2001 the organization founded the Brazil Soka Kindergarten in São Paulo, which became an elementary school in the following year. Also in 2001, BSGI

2. Toda was referring to the following events: 1930, foundation of the movement with Makiguchi's book, *Soka kyōiku taikēi*; 1937, inaugural ceremony of the *Soka Kyōiku Gakkai*; 1944, death of Makiguchi in prison; 1951, inauguration of Toda as Soka Gakkai's second president.



opened the Daisaku Ikeda Ecological Research Laboratory in Amazonas state and the Culture Center in the city of Ribeirão Preto, São Paulo state. Another Culture Center was also founded the next year in the state of Pará.

### *Statistics, Organization, and Activities of Members*

Today, around 90 percent of BSGI members are composed of non-Japanese Brazilians. The majority come from urban lower-middle and lower classes and have a low level of education, not above the equivalent to junior high-school. While young people count for 42.5 percent of the membership, female constituents represent 61.1 percent. Members are organized in four large areas: the state of Rio de Janeiro, greater São Paulo city, the state of São Paulo, and other states. Over 50 percent of BSGI members live in the state of São Paulo, reflecting the fact that this state has over 70 percent of the Japanese-Brazilians.

Similar to other Japanese religions in the country, the top positions of the BSGI administration have been filled by Japanese and their descendants. The first and the second presidents of BSGI respectively, Roberto Saito and Eduardo Taguchi, are Japanese (*issei*) who naturalized as Brazilians, while only five of the thirty-five vice-presidents have no Japanese ancestry. In fact, non-Japanese leadership mainly occupies positions of chapter leadership and below and have only recently climbed the hierarchy to the top.

The organizational structure closely follows the complexity of its Japanese model. The basic structure is the *bloco*, which ideally aggregates ten or twelve families. From this, in an ascendant line, come the *comunidade*, *distrito*, *regional* or *área*, and others up to the central headquarters in São Paulo. In each level of the local organization, the traditional “divisions” based on age and sex should ideally be reproduced. They are: Men’s (*Divisão Sênior*), Women’s (*Divisão Feminina*), Young Men’s (*Divisão Masculina de Jovens*), Young Women’s (*Divisão Feminina de Jovens*), and Student’s (*Divisão dos Estudantes*) Divisions. Each division has its own “horizontal groups,” each with different purposes. On top of the divisions and groups, BSGI still has an educational division (with three departments), a cultural division (with seven departments), a Department of Buddhism, and a Department of *Kōfu* (to deal with its members donations).

As of April 2006, the organization has one complex of buildings forming its headquarters (which includes the President Daisaku Ikeda Auditorium, the Brasil Seikyo Publishing House, and other facilities), seventy-one regional headquarters, 8 culture centers, numerous community centers, the Amazon Ecological Research Center, the Josho Community Center (formerly Ichijoji temple), a training center (or Centro Cultural Campstre, which includes the Soka University’s Nature and Ecology Research Centre, an ecological park and a charnel house), and a primary school.

According to my observation in the metropolitan area of Brasília, members

normally participate in two weekly meetings. On Tuesdays, there is the chanting meeting or *reunião de daimoku* (called alternatively *shodaikai* or *daimoku tōsō*) in their district organization (Port. *comunidade*). The focus is on prayers aiming at a specific objective for the organization, such as the construction of a new regional headquarters, the privilege to be visited by President Ikeda, the success of a BSGI cultural festival, or the development of the local community. On Thursdays, there is a study meeting or *reunião de estudo* (*bukkyōkai*) in their block organization (Port. *bloco*) that focuses on the learning of *gongyō* (a sequence of prayers intermingled with recitation of passages from the Lotus Sutra) and the study of Nichiren Buddhist teachings and Ikeda's writings. Once a month, there is a discussion meeting or *reunião de palestra* (*zadankai*), a district or chapter get-together for members to pray, share experiences, deepen their faith, and above all introduce new or potential members. Moreover, there are numerous specific meetings by district, division, department and others.

In order to inform members, the leadership organizes various courses, seminars and workshops such as the "Course for the Improvement of BSGI leaders" or the "Forum of the *Alvorada* Group." Furthermore, Buddhism exams allow members to ascend to pre-established degrees of specialization in Nichiren Buddhism.

In addition to the two main publications—the weekly newspaper *Brasil Seikyo* and the monthly magazine *Terceira Civilização*—there are also the *Revista Dez* (a monthly magazine for students), the quarterly magazine *SGI Quartely*, and a wide range of publications, chiefly Portuguese versions of Ikeda's writings.

Members can also have access to the numerous websites of all SGI organizations including BSGI's own site, which was established in 1998. Since the end of 2000, this website has been reformulated, with the most striking change being its split into two parts. There is one section directed to the external public and another exclusive to BSGI members, called Extranet. In this exclusive section, members have online access to the *Brasil Seikyo* and *Terceira Civilização*, among other services. Furthermore, members have created their personal pages and blogs, chat rooms, and various discussion lists.

Life as a member is based on three pillars: faith (in Nichiren teachings, especially in its mandala or *gohonzon*), practice ("for oneself," which is the *daimoku* chanting, and "for others," which is *shakubuku*), and study (of Nichiren's scriptures, the Lotus Sutra, and Ikeda's writings). *Daimoku* (recitation of the title of the Lotus Sutra) is chanted during *gongyō* and meetings. Depending on the level of involvement or the objective of the member, *daimoku* chanting may last for hours and may be repeated millions of times. In sum, the ideal faithful and active member is the one who recites daily *gongyō* and *daimoku*, studies Nichiren Buddhism, attends one's community meetings and activities on a weekly basis, proselytizes whenever possible, takes up responsibilities and leading posts, periodically makes financial contributions, and subscribes to BSGI publications.

As for activities directed to the external public, they include seminars, edu-

cational projects, campaigns, exhibitions, participation of BSGI music bands in celebrations of National Day throughout the country, and others.

### *Some Remarkable Aspects*

BSGI's organizational structure in Brazil basically follows the model originating in Japan. The same arrangement of divisions, horizontal groups, and departments can be found in BSGI. The movement's centripetal point is the *zadankai* (discussion meeting) as the key to attract new members. The basic practice revolves around the *daimoku* chanting and the study of the SGI version of Nichiren Buddhism. In this last part of the article, some aspects of BSGI will be highlighted in order to show its specific features.

#### BUDDHISM, BUT OF A DIFFERENT SORT: A DUAL DISCOURSE

The first impression of an uninformed visitor to the BSGI website may be quite puzzling (BSGI 2006). The presentation text defines SGI as an "association." Mention of Nichiren Buddhism occurs in the fourth paragraph only as an "inspiration" for the movement. The text then switches again to speak of SGI as a non-governmental organization (NGO). The visitor is told that members use their Buddhist practice as a way to attain the ideal of "global citizenship." The history of the movement contains short biographies of Soka Gakkai's three first presidents and their encounters with the "humanistic philosophy" of Nichiren Daishonin, but fails to cite Nichiren Shōshū. The inclusion of the SGI Charter and BSGI activities just adds more elements to reinforce its self-description as an NGO. A "Philosophy" section is heavily based on Yasuji Kirimura's *Fundamentals of Buddhism*.

Apart from this accessible area of the BSGI official site, the visitor is told about the existence of a restricted area, called Extranet, reserved for BSGI members. This exclusive area deals with the BSGI "backstage," that is, its religious engagement and day-to-day organizational issues. Here members can access a wide range of material concerning the movement and every level of its organizational structure, its publications, all sort of topics related to Nichiren Buddhism, and so on. Members also have access to chat rooms and online forums; can download computer wallpaper or read Ikeda's poems; compare their local organization's national ranking in terms of *shakubuku* or number of subscriptions to BSGI's newspaper and magazine; and can even watch institutional videos.

The separation of the website into two areas reflects a "dual discourse" within this Buddhist group. Indeed, inside the movement there is an emphasis on its religious side. This side revolves around the indoctrination and practice of its members, and the attraction of prospective converts to expand the movement. The main events are *daimoku* chanting, discussion meetings, exams on Buddhism, workshops for leaders, and others. For outsiders, however, the focus rests on the group's secular activities as an NGO dedicated to peace, culture,

education, and the environment. This dual discourse cannot be detached from the syncretistic origin of Soka Gakkai (which combined Nichiren Buddhism with Makiguchi's pedagogy) and its present-day hybrid format (a neo-Buddhist movement with ever-expanding worldwide activities as an NGO).

BSGI leadership seems to be interested in keeping this duality and separating the two realms, although they are interconnected and diversely targeted with the same objective of reproducing the movement. For instance, BSGI Public Relations is extra-careful to depict SGI as a worldwide NGO, affiliated with the United Nations, represented in Brazil by the BSGI. It is never presented as a "Buddhist NGO." For outsiders, Ikeda Daisaku is presented as a worldly laureate poet, philosopher, peace activist, and humanist. Always called "Doctor Ikeda," he should never be referred to by members as "our president" or "Ikeda-sensei" in front of authorities and opinion makers. Even the propagation material is painstakingly sorted out: the newspaper *Brasil Seikyo*, and the magazines *Terceira Civilização*, *Revista Dez*, and *SGI Graphic* are for internal consumption only; the external public should receive the magazine *SGI Quarterly* or other magazines specifically intended for the public.

#### SOFTENING DRIVE OF A POPULAR BUDDHISM

Different from other groups, BSGI is not limited to the Japanese-Brazilian community, as is the case of the well-established Nishi Honganji. Normally, it is not perceived as just a philosophy of life and/or meditation technique, as is frequently the case of Zen. BSGI has appealed to the urban lower-middle and lower classes, which is very much in contrast to the propagation of most Japanese and even Tibetan Buddhism. In fact, an increasing number of members have a similar low socio-economic background to that of Raimunda and her husband, Manoel Matias. They are responsible for their BSGI unity (*bloco*) in Itaquaquecetuba City, northeast of São Paulo. Although she and her husband are both illiterate, she endeavors to teach the *daimoku* to sympathizers while her husband teaches the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese characters that make up *gongyō*, which he has memorized with great effort. Mrs. Matias became a BSGI member at the beginning of the 1980s and is a champion of *shakubuku* in her community as she has so far converted eighteen families to her faith (BSGI 2002, 5).

This popular appeal of BSGI can be credited to different elements. First of all, there is an emphasis on the *daimoku*, a very simple ritual preferentially performed in front of the *gohonzon*. This practice is supposed to activate the member's innate Buddha nature. However, *daimoku* chanting has been particularly captivating in a country plagued by a continuing social crisis, as it is used by individuals or the whole community to stand against violence, lack of a reasonable healthcare system, unemployment, drugs, stress, and so forth. Frequently

members give testimony of their feeling of self-empowerment, hope, and dignity after joining the movement.

Another possible explanation of BSGI's popular appeal is the precept of "adapting to local customs" (*zuihō bini*) being applied to Brazilian syncretistic religiosity. Some authors have noted that, facing huge pressure from this religious environment, the organization is becoming more tolerant of people who engage in more than one form of religious practice (CLARKE 2005. WATANABE 2001. PEREIRA 2001). Nowadays, it is not rare to find members or sympathizers with multiple religious practices: a young Catholic sympathizer who keeps her original faith while taking part in some BSGI activities; a BSGI member who attends Theosophy meetings; a senior BSGI member who joins a group pilgrimage to a syncretistic and popular Shinto shrine. Moreover, there are testimonies of rank-and-file constituents developing a personal and somehow "magic" relationship with the *gohonzon* and the Buddhist deities, in a way similar to the relationship followers of other faiths maintain with saints, *orishas* (Afro-American deities), guardian entities, or *kami*. An additional sign of flexibility is the memorial services performed by BSGI members on 2 November, a national holiday that is originally a Catholic memorial day.

Cultural adjustments to the Brazilian environment made by BSGI leaders can also be attributed to this popular aspect of the movement. It is true that the BSGI structure still retains much of its Japanese roots and that this characteristic may be even more accentuated in the Brazilian branch than in most SGI organizations around the globe. Notwithstanding this, here and there one may find some changes. For instance, although the top positions are still predominantly occupied by male Japanese and their descendants, it has been long acknowledged that the only chance for the movement to grow is outside the Japanese-Brazilian community. Hence, the movement has changed its focus toward society at large in the past decades. Presently, although a few meetings are conducted in Japanese, Portuguese is the standard language. Like other SGI members, Brazilians still need to memorize the whole liturgy of *gongyō* as well as key Japanese terms, such as *daimoku*, *gohonzon*, *ichinen sanzen*, and *jikkai*. But it is also true that members have access to a growing range of resources in Portuguese such as newspapers, magazines, books, videos, websites, and so on. In truth, there have been limited and regulated adaptations involving language use, organizational structure, social, and cultural initiatives in each local division, procedures and arrangements at discussion meetings, and others.

BUILDING "THE CLOSEST ORGANIZATION TO THE HEART OF IKEDA-SENSEI"  
THROUGH *SHITEI-FUNI* AND *ITAI-DŌSHIN*

BSGI leaders have repeatedly expressed their will to foster a special bond

between the Brazilian organization and Ikeda. There seem to be some reasons for this orientation, besides the need to build unity and identity within the movement. To begin with, Ikeda founded the first chapter of the movement outside Japan in Brazil in 1960. Secondly, there existed a close (or mystical, in SGI jargon) relationship between Ikeda and key figures of BSGI.

BSGI's pioneer aspect has been exploited over and over to create a sense of mission among Brazilian members. It is said that BSGI is the oldest sibling among SGI organizations and as such must be a good role model, showing the determination to expand the movement. Ikeda himself has always reinforced the idea of Brazil as the fountain, the pioneer, the model, the "monarch" of *kōsen rufu*, and the farthest country from Japan but the closest to his heart.

The other aspect of this discourse of mission is the need for the members to be faithful to and in harmony with the struggle of their spiritual master, Ikeda-sensei. The following excerpt of the BSGI president is one among many speeches and orientations within BSGI that stress this same idea:

Crowning this great victory of BSGI history, at the new millennium's eve, president Ikeda makes us feel moved by saying: "Our Brazil decided the Soka victory of the twentieth century. And I say more: Let the Soka victory of the twenty-first century be crowned from the actions of our Brazil." ... When I was allowed to lead BSGI, in 1993, I established three points as my goals. It still continues to be my determination *to build (1) BSGI, the closest organization to the heart of President Ikeda; (2) BSGI, the most harmonious organization of the world; and (3) BSGI, the first in the world in happiness and development.*

(TAGUCHI 2000, A3. Emphasis added)

One can find traces of this discourse in the publications as well as in the rhetoric of the organization. For instance, the website of BSGI's Division of Students states that this division "was born with the mission of becoming the best Division of Students in the world, the happiest, and the closest to President Ikeda's heart" (BSGI-DS 2006). The slogan of BSGI's Young Women's Division is "*Kōsen rufu* in (our) life! (Ikeda) Sensei in (our) heart! *Shakubuku* in (our) actions!" One of the slogans of BSGI's Young Men's Division is "Let the Master [Ikeda]'s life live eternally in his disciples' hearts!" Frequently, one may hear leaders saying that "BSGI victory is the biggest happiness of Ikeda-sensei," or "In our daily life, let us correspond to the magnificent heart of the Master of our lives! Let us reconfirm our eternal promise to be the closest members of our Master!"

The way to build "the closest organization to the heart of President Ikeda" is by reinforcing the unity between master and disciple (*shitei funi*). This relationship is described as mystical and a sign of good-luck for and privilege of the members. The "mythical model" for the master-disciple relationship is the previous relationship of Nichiren Buddhism's founder, Nichiren, and his disciple Nikko; also, of Makiguchi and Toda, then of Toda and Ikeda. Here and there,

Ikeda's life and works are portrayed as models to be followed, and his relationship with Toda as the ideal master-disciple tie. This tie is pervasively reinforced by the principle of *itai dōshin* (lit., “many in body, one in mind”), which has become one of the key ideological elements for SGI's cohesiveness.

The relationship between Ikeda and key figures of BSGI have also been portrayed as model relationships. Silvia Saito joined Soka Gakkai in 1955 in search for a solution to the chronic asthma she had suffered since childhood. The next year, she assisted Ikeda in the notorious 1956 Osaka Campaign and became a committed and experienced member in *shakubuku* activity. The fact that she received direct guidance from him at that time created a particular master-disciple relationship. Accordingly, she was in the front line in the *shakubuku* campaign that preceded Ikeda's second visit to the country. Roberto Saito was probably chosen to lead SGI Brazil because of his skills as a businessman and polyglot, and, last but not least, for being Silvia's husband. Interestingly, and in contrast to the Japanese reality of that time, he was chosen directly by Ikeda to a leading position just three months after he formally became a member of Soka Gakkai. The second BSGI president, Eduardo Taguchi, met Ikeda for the first time in 1957. After having taken some leading positions in the movement in Japan, he was sent to Brazil in 1971 as the guidance leader for South America. Like the Saito couple, he has always stressed his master-disciple relationship with Ikeda.

#### CAPITALIZING ON THE WEAKNESSES AND STRENGTHS OF THE COUNTRY

Another remarkable aspect of BSGI is its reproduction of SGI's ability to identify each country's strengths and weaknesses, which may range from issues related to national identity down to social handicaps. In practical terms, SGI leaders have frequently been ready to arrange high profile meetings with top politicians and celebrities, and participate in government campaigns and ritualized public events in many countries. Soka University has also been active in offering scholarships to students and granted titles of *honoris causa* Doctor to key figures outside Japan.

Other initiatives, however, have been done to carve a particular niche, and project a more positive and accepting image of the organization in each country. With the United States, for instance, being a country with greater capability to influence international politics and home of the United Nations headquarters, SGI established the international peace institute Boston Research Center for the 21st Century (strategically built close to Harvard University) in 1993, and two campuses of Soka University of America in the state of California. In France, a country with a much-admired literary tradition, in 1991 SGI acquired the Chateau des Roches, outside Paris, to establish The Victor Hugo House of Literature, a literary museum that strives to enrich the perception of this French writer as a humanist and champion of social justice.

Therefore, what could be the core areas of possible influence for SGI in Brazil? As Brazil possesses the largest portion of the Amazon rainforest, ecology has been a promising area for BSGI militancy since the early 1990s. In 1992 the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (a.k.a. the Earth Summit) was held in Rio de Janeiro. BSGI not only participated actively in this conference with an exhibition and a seminar, but also established in the same year the Centro de Estudos Ecológicos da Amazônia (CEPEAM) or Amazon Ecological Research Center in the state of Amazonas. CEPEAM is a multi-purpose facility for environmental research, education, and conservation, where the Ikeda Laboratory for Ecological Research has functioned since 2001. Soka University has been CEPEAM's partner in at least one project.

Well beyond its official objective and mission, this research center has offered a great opportunity for BSGI to promote its ideals and leaders, aside from establishing a wide network of fruitful relationships with the media, university researchers, politicians, government agencies, and environmental groups. Indeed, environmental activism opened many doors for BSGI, both at local and international levels. For instance, in August 2002, the TV news network CNN produced a report on CEPEAM's sustainable development projects and its work to restore trees in the tropical rain forest.

In Brazil, the CEPEAM forest has been designated as a natural heritage site by the Brazilian Environment Ministry. On CEPEAM grounds, archeological artifacts were found that were used by native inhabitants some 1,200 to 1,500 years ago. The site was eventually named "Daisaku Ikeda Archeological Site." Ikeda was also the namesake of a new flying insect species (*Euhabus ikedai*) discovered in the area by scientists of the Brazilian Ministry of Science and Technology (SOKANET 2006).

In addition to ecology, BSGI has been involved with activities related to education and human rights, two areas that are certainly critical for the country. The field of human rights in Brazil encompasses a huge territory populated by a long history of the extermination of Native peoples, a pernicious heritage of a slavery system that lasted longer than among many countries of the Western hemisphere, the existence of thousands of street children, military coups and the frequent use of torture by police, high rates of homicide, a chronic gap between social classes, low access to education and health care for the lower classes, and so on. In this area, besides its rhetoric of tolerance and dialogue as a way to reach peace, human revolution, and value creation, BSGI has basically sponsored seminars and exhibitions such as "Human Rights, Rights of Everyone," held at the Ministry of Justice in 1996, which received the visit of then President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, his Vice President Marco Maciel, and various ministers.

BSGI educational initiatives must be understood against the background of high rates of illiteracy in Brazil. The situation has been ameliorated in the past



decade due to government campaigns, which managed to cut the illiteracy rate from 15 percent of the population in 1996 to 10.6 percent in 2004. If the concept of functional illiteracy<sup>3</sup> is taken into consideration, only 26 percent of the Brazilian population aged from 15 to 64 years old had full skills in writing and reading in 2005 (CIVITA 2006, 130–31).

From 1983 to 1987, BSGI's Educational Department established an experimental project in adult literacy for its members due to the fact that many illiterate members were unable to fully understand the liturgy and the published material. Later on, BSGI volunteers extended the project to literacy poles in other cities as a public outreach program. Over four thousand people have completed the four series of this forty hour program and thus qualified for public literacy examinations (TAMADA 2006, sec. H8).

With the success of this literacy program, the BSGI educator group published a Portuguese edition of Makiguchi's *Education for Creative Living* in 1994 and established the "Makiguchi in Action Project." As of April 2003, the project has been implemented "in 150 Brazilian elementary and junior high schools, reaching a total of 640,000 children" (SGI 2003). Moreover, in São Paulo in 2001 the organization also created the first Soka school in Latin America, a kindergarten that was expanded in November 2002 to form an elementary school. The organization envisions the establishment in Brazil of a whole educational system up to university level.

### *Challenges and Prospects*

Overall, Soka Gakkai has been a steady movement that has spread to all regions of Brazil. Its strategy of using bilingual and bicultural Japanese-Brazilians to reach out to the non-Japanese Brazilians has been successful. BSGI has also demonstrated the ability to overcome animosity within the Japanese-Brazilian community and governmental suspicion during the military regime. The unity and self-identity of the movement has been guaranteed by ideological notions such as the master-disciple relationship and the above-mentioned principle of *itai-dōshin*. Not by coincidence, the discourse of building "the closest organization to the heart of President Ikeda" implied firstly the organization's top positions being dominated by members of Japanese ancestry, in sharp contrast to its internal diversity; then an indisputable alignment of BSGI with Tokyo, even though its leaders contend that there is no interference by SGI at its Brazilian branch.

BSGI, however, still has some challenges ahead. One is to find a way of keeping its Japanese flavor while advancing the indigenization process. This balance

3. A "functional illiterate" is a person whose skills in reading, writing, and math are insufficient for ordinary practical needs. In Brazil, this concept applies to people over the age of fifteen with less than four years of education.

should involve placing greater importance on the opinion of non-Japanese Brazilians in the decision-making process. Another challenge is to break its concentration of activities in the Southeastern region. This region retains more than seventy percent of BSGI total membership, five of its eight culture centers, and forty-nine of its seventy-one regional headquarters.

Finally, although BSGI's NGO militancy has produced respectable results in some fields and places, it is still restrained and localized. For example, its educational projects have been successful in making a real contribution to the lives of many Brazilians. However, they are concentrated in the richer and more developed Southern and Southeastern regions, and only recently started expanding to other regions. Concerning the environment, BSGI has built research and educational centers, sponsored exhibitions, published a few educational articles in its magazine and even launched a "Movement for Environmental Education" in Greater São Paulo City in 2001. However, Suzana Bornholdt, a Brazilian researcher of BSGI in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, has expressed her disappointment with the fact that BSGI environmental activity is completely absent from the daily lives of members in small cities, particularly outside São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro (personal communication, 20 October 2006). As for the human rights militancy, a 2005 national plebiscite to prohibit firearms sales in Brazil served as a test for BSGI. The organization maintained a low-key position and refrained from the debate just to see the plebiscite reapproved. This attitude contradicts the widely publicized dialogues for peace between Ikeda and world leaders. It also disappointed some BSGI members and led a few to sever ties with the organization.

Despite the above-noted challenges, BSGI still has grounds to grow and develop, particularly outside the state of São Paulo. Its militancy as an NGO that blends humanism, Buddhist philosophy, the environment, human rights, culture, and education has been a strong complement to conversion drives and continues to attract Brazilians, both as potential members and helpful sympathizers.

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