

## The Symbolic Image of Ancestors in the Church of World Messianity

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By analyzing the narratives of the “ancestral spirit” experiences of Japanese-American and Caucasian-American members of the Church of World Messianity in Los Angeles, California, I attempt to generalize major thematic patterns and to arrive at cultural “paradigms” underlying the narratives of these two groups. Divergences and convergences of the two ethnic groups’ narrative patterns will be elicited, and socio-cultural factors responsible for them will be examined. Despite the fact that the two ethnic groups share the general ideology and ritual behavior of the Church of World Messianity, why do these groups exhibit marked differences in their world view? What are the socio-cultural processes responsible for their divergences?

If we accept the idea of Clifford GEERTZ that “religion” is a “cultural system” of which the “symbols” are a significant subsystem (1973), then we may ask what kind of transformation the core symbols of a religious group undergo when that group attempts to spread its teaching beyond its own society? In other words, how are the symbols of a religious group that originated in one society interpreted and reinterpreted by members of another society in which that group transplanted itself?

To investigate these questions, I examined one Japanese religious organization that is conducting missionary activities in the United States, a Japanese New Religion named the Church of World Messianity (hereafter, Messianity) in Los Angeles, California. I paid special attention to “narratives of religious experiences” in which members orally express various religious experiences that occurred in the course of their lives. These narratives exemplify how the major symbols of Messianity are interpreted—they are important material by which one can construct the “culture” of the narrator.<sup>1</sup>

I would especially like to focus on the “ancestor” symbol because it is

<sup>1</sup> See YAMADA 1984 for more detailed description and analysis of the narratives.

a crucial component of the ritual and teaching of Messianity. This will be done by analyzing the narratives of the “ancestral spirit” experiences of the Japanese-American and Caucasian-American members of Messianity. These narratives are just one segment of more extensive narratives of religious experience. After they describe various healing experiences that often form the basis of the individual’s conversion to Messianity, it is common for members of Messianity to depict their experiences with various ancestor spirits. This portion of the narrative elaborates the experiences dealing with ancestor spirits, such as dreaming of ancestors or spirit possession.

This paper will compare the narratives of the Japanese-American and Caucasian-American members of Messianity and generalize the underlying pattern of these two groups, to arrive at an understanding of how these two ethnic groups view the symbol “ancestor.” I shall look at narratives of Iida and Peacock (pseudonyms). The former is an example of Japanese-American narratives, the latter of Caucasian-American narratives. The first section of this paper is a brief introduction to Messianity in Japan and the United States; the second is a description and analysis of the Iida and Peacock narratives; the third is a comparison of the narrative pattern. Finally, I explore the implication of the differences and similarities between the narrative patterns.

### *The Church of World Messianity in Japan and in the United States*

#### MESSIANITY IN JAPAN

The Church of World Messianity is known in Japan as Sekai Kyūseikyō 世界救世教 and is one of the medium-sized Japanese New Religions in which faith healing is a core element of the teaching.<sup>2</sup> It was founded in Tokyo in 1935 as the “Great Japan Avalokiteśvara Society” (Dainihon Kannon Kyōkai) by Okada Mokichi 岡田茂吉 (1882–1955). The present headquarters are located in Atami, Shizuoka Prefecture. The founder of Messianity, Okada Mokichi, is called “Meishusama” 明主様 by the group’s members. Members consider “Meishusama” to be the supreme heavenly intercessor, a semidivine figure.<sup>3</sup> At present, his daughter Itsuki is the leader of Messianity.

Three major principles of Messianity are nature farming, consciousness of art (practice of art), and faith healing through the special prayer *jōrei* 浄霊. Of the three, the single most important act of one’s

<sup>2</sup> See INOUE 1990 for current historical, social, and doctrinal information on Japanese New Religions.

<sup>3</sup> See SEKAI KYŪSEIKYŌ 1983 for biographical data on Okada Mokichi.

purification is the ritual act of *jōrei*. In Japanese, this means “purification of soul,” and it is a prayer done by raising one’s hand over another to radiate healing light. It is believed that if one practices this sincerely, the “Divine Light” (*ohikari*) will flow from one’s palm and completely heal any illness. It is a sacred act that is given prime importance by the members. The major source of the healing power is believed to exist in a golden medal contained in a small bag worn by the member around the neck like a pendant. Like the actual Divine Light that flows from one’s palm while performing *jōrei*, the golden medal is called *ohikari*, and one is always required to wear it. It is believed that unless one wears this medal, one is unable to heal others.

Underlying the major ritual of *jōrei* is the key concept of purification (*jōka* 浄化). On the basis of Messianity’s view that the world is divided into two counterparts, a “spiritual realm” and a “physical realm,” it is believed that *jōrei* is the force of the former that eliminates the negativity of the latter. It is further believed that the major cause of illness among humans are the toxins or “clouds” that accumulate in the human body as a result of negative “spiritual causes” such as bad emotions, desires, and evil spirits. Thus, to heal the body, such “unclean” and “unpurified” spiritual elements have to be purified by *jōrei*. In Messianity, such a spiritual transformation from a state of negative health to positive health is termed “purification.” This concept is frequently expanded to explain the process of solving family or financial problems and easing effects of accidents or disasters. The concept of purification serves to reinterpret all negativity as a process through which a positive end will be achieved.

After one becomes a member of Messianity, one is required to worship certain objects and to perform several rituals. Perhaps the most important object is the *mitamaya* (Sacred Spirit House) and the ritual associated with it. Messianity requires that members install an ancestral altar, a *mitamaya*, in their homes. A sort of miniature Shinto shrine in which ancestral spirits are believed to dwell, the *mitamaya* often contains the memorial tablets of one’s ancestors. The installation of this object, which I refer to as the “ritual of ancestral spirit pacification,” is important when one attempts to pacify evil ancestral spirits. Often negative states such as illnesses or family feuds are attributed to the work of “unclean” or “unpurified” evil ancestral spirits that are not yet saved in the “spiritual realm.” The unsaved status of the ancestors is believed to be due to a negative relationship that exists between the ancestors and descendants. Installation of the *mitamaya* is believed to be a symbolic means of reestablishing a positive relationship between the two parties.

The interrelated core rituals of *jōrei* and *mitamaya*, as well as the teaching of *jōka* described above, are extremely important in our later analysis of the narratives.

## MESSIANITY IN THE UNITED STATES

Messianity was established in Hawaii in 1953 and in Los Angeles in 1954. The number of current American members is estimated to be a few thousand. Most of the members reside in Hawaii, California, Colorado, Utah, New York, or New Jersey. The majority of mainland members are concentrated in Los Angeles, where membership is estimated to be close to one thousand. A majority of the members are Japanese Americans born in California. Among them, most are married females, a significant number of whom are over the age of forty. There are large numbers of Nisei (second-generation Japanese American) members in Los Angeles Messianity. (The predominance of married middle-aged females is noticeable in other Japanese New Religions as well.)

Messianity is known for its heterogeneous ethnic composition: it is characterized by a significant number of non-Japanese members. Although there are small numbers of Korean, Thai, and Hispanic members, the majority of the non-Japanese are Caucasian. I would estimate that approximately one-fifth to one-sixth of the members are Caucasians. As with the Japanese, a majority are women aged forty and over. The differences in socio-cultural backgrounds of the two major ethnic groups, Japanese American and Caucasian American, are strikingly apparent.

Most of the Japanese Americans were members of Buddhist churches (mostly the Nishi Hongwanji sect, a branch of the Jōdo-Shin sect) before converting to Messianity. Unlike the Caucasians, very few had experiences in other "esoteric" religious groups prior to their commitment to Messianity. These ethnic Japanese Americans are very similar to the Japanese Americans who are members of other Japanese religious groups. Thus, like other Japanese religious groups, Messianity is an "ethnic religious institution" (KASHIMA 1977). By offering various ethnic cultural activities for the Japanese-American community, such as picnics, art exhibitions, flower-arrangement classes, etc., Messianity functions primarily as a social center for an ethnic community.

On the other hand, the Caucasian members were typically members of other "esoteric" religious groups prior to their commitment to Messianity. My interviews, as well as the questionnaires, indicate that they once belonged to sects such as Self-Realization Fellowship, Science of Mind, Mazdaznan, UFO cults, Theosophy, and other spiritualist groups. Thus, unlike for Japanese-American members, Messianity does not necessarily represent for the Caucasians a merely "ethno-religious institution." Rather, these individuals are part of a larger group of participants in non-established, non-Christian religious groups in the U.S. that have been prevalent since the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The "culture" of these two groups is illustrated in the narratives of

religious experience that follow. Through analysis, we can generalize from them the cultural paradigms of each group.

*Narratives and Their Analysis*

THE IIDA NARRATIVE

Mrs Iida is a sixty-two-year-old Nisei member of Messianity. Her “ancestor spirit” experience describes the conversion process of her husband.

After becoming a member of Messianity, Mrs Iida successfully converted most of the individuals in her nuclear household, including her son and daughter. However, her husband refused to be converted to Messianity. Her son later received training in Japan to become a minister of Messianity. She continued the painstaking process of attempting to convert her husband.

One day, she and her husband got into a heated argument over membership. He felt that the atmosphere of the household had become very tense. Her son came home and discovered that an argument had occurred. He attributed this negativity to the negative ancestral spirits of his father’s family. These unsaved ancestors were obstructing the father’s membership. Her son says, “Just channel *jōrei* and set up a *mitamaya*.”

Mrs Iida requested and received a *mitamaya*, but she wanted to wait for a good day, when all of her children could attend, to hold the dedication ceremony. In the meantime, she had left the *mitamaya* in the corner, unattended.

Her husband then developed a strange headache and couldn’t discover the cause of the pain. After he suffered several weeks of discomfort, Mrs Iida one day decided to go to the church to consult with her son about it, but he wasn’t there. She nonetheless did volunteer service at the church and then went home. There she found her son, who looked at her sternly and scolded her for leaving the *mitamaya* unattended for a long time. She explained the reason, that she wanted to pick a good day for the dedication ceremony. Her son told her that she should not postpone it any longer, and that he had temporarily installed the *mitamaya* for her. He told her to take good care of it and to perform *jōrei* for her husband.

When Mrs Iida performed *jōrei* on her husband one day, he told her that he felt good, light, and completely relaxed, “almost like a lid on the top of my head was lifted.”

One night when Iida’s husband asked her when the pre-introductory course would be held, she answered that the first lecture would be the

following Saturday. He said he would attend. She was very happy, but tried not to act too excited. Her husband finished the introductory course, received the *ohikari*, and finally became a member.

#### ANALYSIS OF THE IIDA NARRATIVE

The two major themes of the above narrative are how one should interpret the negative state of a non-saved individual and the symbolic resolution of a negative social relationship in the household. In the above episode, the mother and son formed a partnership to convert the father. In contrast to the mother-son relationship, the father-son relationship is depicted as negative. The “religiosity” of the mother and son is contrasted with the “secularism” of the father. The narrative elaborates on the symbolic transformation of the negative social relationship to a positive one.

In the incident depicting the conflict between Mrs Iida and her husband, the incident was given symbolic meaning by the son’s act of pointing out that the argument was due to negative ancestral spirits. This was the first “purification” event, since it started out as a negative situation that went on to attain the positive end of the conversion, or salvation, of the husband.

When the son pointed out to his mother that she should perform *jōrei* and set up a *mitamaya*, we see him in the act of saving his father, which later becomes the major theme. The healing rite (*jōrei*) and the ancestral rite of *mitamaya* are two rituals that purify the living and the dead. To achieve purification, the need to perform both rituals is stressed. The two ritual processes, healing and exorcism, are symbolically linked and have parallel meanings.

Like the previous events, this one depicts the interrelationship between Mrs Iida, the husband, and her son. The connotation is that if the negative spirit, which is the major element blocking the husband’s conversion, is eliminated, a positive relationship between Mrs Iida and her family will then be achieved. Again, “spirit” is used as the symbol of a negative intra-household relationship.

The second process of “purification” begins with Mrs Iida’s husband’s headache. By the suggestion that the failure to set up a *mitamaya* has caused the headache, a symbolic connection is thus made between the negative spirit and negative health. To heal the husband, or to purify him, the ancestral rite of *mitamaya* has to be conducted, so that the proper relationship between ancestor and descendants can be established. Through the son’s act of setting up the *mitamaya*, the proper relationship between ancestor and descendants is attained. Like the son’s identification of the negative ancestral spirits as the cause of friction between his parents, this also is a crucial act by which the son saves the

father. We should notice that here the son performs the ancestral rite *for* the parent, and that, by this act, the symbolic positive relationship between son (child) and father (parent) is produced. The wife performs the ritual of *jōrei* for her husband, thus completing the purification process. In this way, a positive relationship between husband and wife is attained.

Other Japanese-American narratives also demonstrated that the manner in which ancestral spirits reveal themselves is vague and formless. For Japanese Americans, they appear as negative health conditions or incidents such as a heart attack or chronic illness.

#### THE PEACOCK NARRATIVE

Mrs Peacock is a fifty-seven-year-old Caucasian woman whose “ancestral spirit” experience revolves around a dream about her father that she had after becoming a member of Messianity.

Mrs Peacock first spoke about her relationship with her father when he was alive. He gambled, drank, smoked, and gave away all his money. Later, whenever he needed funds, he came to her to get some, and their relationship therefore was not a good one. She said she still had strong feelings against her father. Even when he passed away, these conflicting emotions remained unsettled.

To her surprise, in the dream her father looked much younger, and, living in the spiritual realm, seemed rejuvenated. “I couldn’t understand it,” she said, “because he’d only been dead ten years, and according to the Christian teachings, if anybody had done what he had done, then you should look for him in hell, not in a nice place.” In the dream, Mrs Peacock and her father conversed, and she learned that all of her spiritual searching in the past had benefited him. The dream ended with Mrs Peacock giving *jōrei* to him.

But she continued to wonder why her father was in such a good place and looked so young in the dream. She asked “Reverend H.” of the Los Angeles branch of Messianity why she had such a dream, and was told that the negative acts of her father were a sort of purification of the “family line.” Mrs Peacock recalled that, “One of the first things [Reverend H.] asked me was, ‘What did your grandmother and grandfather do?’” She answered that her grandparents were in the lumber business and had a sawmill in Washington State. Reverend H. commented that the grandparents had profited from the destruction of nature and had therefore sinned. So that the family line could be purified, Mrs Peacock’s father had been born a spendthrift, in order to get rid of the ill-gotten money accumulated by her grandparents. Mrs Peacock then felt she understood the meaning of her father’s life. Meishusama has a teaching about the black sheep of the family and why they are chosen to do positive things for the family. Mrs Peacock mentioned that, because

in the dream her father talked to her and indicated that what she had done was passed on to him. She therefore realized that he had benefited from her spiritual practices. Although there were differences between her and her father, she now knows that they had a very close bond as father and daughter. Understanding the meaning of her father's life and beginning to feel quite differently, Mrs Peacock set up a *mitamaya* at home at the suggestion of Reverend H.

#### ANALYSIS OF THE PEACOCK NARRATIVE

In this narrative, symbolic resolution of the inner conflict with one's father is sought through the dream experience. Several themes are noteworthy. First, prior to the dream, family conflict, especially the negative father-daughter relationship, is depicted. Second, in the dream, her father's present attributes (youth and health) in the spiritual realm are depicted as positive and different from the attributes of her father while he was living in the physical realm (i.e., old, worn out, divorced, alcoholic, thriftless habits). The salvation of the dead in the spiritual realm is expressed symbolically in dreams by the appearance of a young and healthy parent. In other words, the positive physical appearance and rejuvenation of the dead seen in the dreams are a metaphoric expression of their saved status in the "spiritual realm." As opposed to Japanese-American narratives, the symbolic resolution of the conflict is not seen while the parents are living but after they have passed away.

Secondly, the ritual act of *jōrei* and the conversation with the father also delineate one of the major themes of the dream. Since *jōrei* often stands for the formation of a firm and perpetual social and symbolic relationship between the one performing *jōrei* and the one for whom it is performed, it perhaps indicates that, at least symbolically, the relationship between Mrs Peacock and her father has turned into a more positive one. In addition, we should pay attention to the verbal act, the explanation, of the father, indicating that he had benefited from the past act of the daughter. She, the living descendant, has helped raise the spiritual level of her father, the dead. The father's verbal act provides a key by which the "spiritual cord" between daughter and father is rediscovered.

The above two acts indicate that the symbolic relationship between Mrs Peacock and her father had gradually turned more positive after a dream experience. However, the true underlying meaning of their relationship is not revealed until the Reverend H. interpreted the dream using the concept of purification. This reversal of status is through physical rejuvenation. It is a device that resolves the tension and conflict of two antithetical principles, such as life versus death, parent versus child.

In the last segment of the narrative, the dream-interpretation, Rever-



end H. interpreted the father's past negative actions as a "purification." Her father, by spending all the family's "unclean" money, eliminated the negativity in the family. Although his actions were negative, he eliminated a negative acquisition. He therefore not only saved his ancestors from torment in the spiritual realm but also turned his relationship with his descendants into a more positive one. This allowed him to be saved in the spiritual realm.

Mrs Peacock relates that this interpretation of the dream made her understand the meaning of her father's life and rediscover the "spiritual cord" between them. Here, by a new interpretation of her father's negative actions, she attains a positive appreciation of her father. Further, her father's relationship to his ancestors, to his descendants, as well as to his daughter is revealed. Like Mrs Iida, Mrs Peacock also sets up a *mitamaya*. This suggests the importance of the ancestral rite among Caucasian-American members of Messianity.

Dream experiences are frequently found in Caucasian-American narratives, while they are rare in Japanese-American narratives. Dreams often depict a reversal of the status of the dead after they have entered the spiritual realm. One of the major characteristics of the Caucasian-American narratives is that the "shamanistic" and "unconscious" device of the dream is often used for communication with the dead. In addition, unlike Japanese-American narratives, the ancestor appears as a specific human being such as a parent.

#### *Comparison of the Narrative Patterns*

When we compare the two narratives dealing with the "ancestral spirit" experience, differences are more apparent than similarities. Nevertheless, some important similarities are seen in the fact that both narratives emphasize the significance of the core rituals of Messianity (*jōrei*, *mitamaya*) and its teaching (purification). I will come back to the significance of similarities later. First, some of the distinguishing features of the Iida and Peacock narratives will be summarized.

Although both Iida and Peacock go through the ancestral spirit experience, the "form," "process," and "theme" of this experience differ greatly for each group. The form contrasts as follows: In the Iida narrative, the ancestral spirit takes a vague, nonhuman form. The negative state, act, or process is often seen as the result of a vicious ancestral spirit. On the other hand, in the Peacock narrative, the ancestral spirit takes the human form of a parent and is experienced in a dream. We are able to see that the form of religious experience is rather personal.

Second, the two narratives also show differences in the process and underlying meaning of the experience. Initially, among Japanese Americans, the negative state, act, or process, such as the recurrence of

an illness, a family feud, or social conflicts, is depicted. Often this negative state is attributed to the work of negative spirits. The *mitamaya* ritual, what I call the "ritual of ancestral spirit pacification," is performed to alleviate the negative state. In the end the negative state is changed to a positive one, thanks to this ritual.

The point to stress here is that, in the Iida narrative, the vicious acts of the negative spirits are often considered to be the direct cause of suffering for the living. Here, the ancestral spirit is used as a symbolic device to explain the negativity of the living. As in the underlying logic of purification, such experiences are treated as a negative process by which to attain a positive end. Thus, often the experience of a negative spirit is treated as a process by which to attain healing and to resolve social conflict. It is sometimes the essential component of the conversion process. In other words, the negative spirit experience is a symbolic embodiment of the cause of the negative state of the living and is also in itself a process that attains a positive end. Therefore, in the Iida narrative, the world of the dead is believed to explain or to give meaning to the world of the living. One might say that the world of the dead is a mere reflection of the world of the living, and the former exists only for the latter. Here, we are able to see the life-centered and this-worldly orientation of Mrs Iida. This is in marked contrast to the Peacock narrative, in that "this world" and "the other world" are kept conceptually separate and remain in tension and conflict. The dialectic between these two realms becomes the major underlying issue.

The major mechanism and underlying meaning of the ancestral spirit experiences of Mrs Peacock can be summarized as follows. Preceding the dream experience, by depicting the negative relationship of oneself to one's parent in the physical realm and the continuation of this negativity after one's parent has passed away, the opposition of, and conflict between, the dead parent and the living child is laid out. This is perhaps a symbolic statement of the unresolved, buried conflict between oneself and one's parent. We should note that, unlike the Iida narrative, which exhibits rather diverse negative social relationships among the household members, the Peacock narrative stresses negativity in terms of the particular social relationship of parent and child. Furthermore, the opposition between dead parent and living child demonstrates the dualistic character of the dream experience.

When the ritual of ancestral spirit pacification is performed, the narrative moves toward resolving this conflict. As mentioned before, both Mrs Iida and Mrs Peacock perform this ritual. However, the underlying significance of the ritual for Caucasian Americans seemed to be focused on reestablishing the specific, symbolic, and one-to-one relationship between parent and child. Thus, unlike Mrs Iida, for whom the ritual becomes a means to establish a general social relationship between the

ancestor and descendant, the ritual has a more specific meaning for Mrs Peacock. The ritual is a symbolic act for her, which integrates the living and the dead. Finally, Mrs Peacock dreams of her parent in the spiritual realm having positive characteristics, such as being young or wearing nice clothes. The dream represents the symbolic reversal of the dead in the spiritual realm through depicting the physical rejuvenation and re-birth of the parent. The dream in itself embodies the fact that the dead parent is now purified by the rite.

Furthermore, it is also a symbolic mechanism by which such reversals are achieved. By the reversal of the status of the dead, the integration and merging of the living and the dead is accomplished, and the final resolution to the *ū*conflict is given. Thus, the major underlying theme of the dream experience is the dialectical process of antithetical opposing elements: the world of the living represented by the child and the world of the dead represented by the parent. Unlike Mrs Iida, for Mrs Peacock the former is simply a reflection of the latter standing by itself, and is considered to be a separate entity opposed to the latter. These elements are in tension and in conflict. Thus, efforts are made to integrate the two. The dream also has the underlying meaning of establishing a personal, symbolic, and one-to-one relationship with a figure of the other world, which in this case is the ancestor-parent.

### *Two Paradigms*

When we observe the Iida and Peacock narratives, we find two distinct patterns. These patterns were reflected in other Japanese-American and Caucasian-American narratives. The Japanese-American vision of the world mainly focuses upon "this world" and the act of living in the physical realm. Their universe is rather one-dimensional and the spiritual realm as a separate entity is rarely mentioned. If we chart the major elements that compose the narrative, we realize that it delineates the horizontal relationship among self and others in this world. Furthermore, in terms of their experiences, Japanese Americans do not experience altered states of consciousness that are dualistic (e.g., dreams), which are significant components of the Caucasian-American narratives. It would therefore seem as if the spiritual realm and the physical realm are one and the same. The Japanese-American vision of religion is highly pragmatic and even "functional."

On the other hand, the Caucasian-American vision of religion is more "dualistic" in that it focuses on the dynamic interaction of the physical and spiritual realms. Religious experiences such as dreams are a significant part of their narratives, which aim to resolve the various psychic and social conflicts of an individual. The conflict is that of the dead/spiritual realm and the living/spiritual realm, or the God/spiritual

realm and the human/physical realm. These two worlds, as signified in the dream- or vision-unconscious versus the awakened-conscious are separate and distinct. One must constantly make a conscious effort to unite the two. Unlike Japanese Americans, for whom the main focus is on "this world," the major Caucasian-American attempt is to unite "this world" and the "other." We can therefore say that their world view is more "dialectical" than "functional."

The ancestors of Caucasian members of Messianity take the form of parents. This is a drastic departure from the concept of ancestor in Japan, where ancestors are usually depicted as deceased kin of multiple ascending generations. Here the image of ancestor has more of an "American" flavor. The ancestors are one's dead parents. Initially, Oedipal-like conflict between the parent and child is depicted and resolved using folk psychotherapeutic means such as dreams. The "individualistic and personal"<sup>4</sup> nature of the experience illustrated here might reflect the types of Caucasian-American individuals that are likely to join Messianity: "esoteric" individuals, who have spent many years in a "spiritual quest" seeking and experimenting with various different religions.

On the other hand, among Japanese Americans, the ancestral spirit took form as vicious spirits possessing non-human traits. The Japanese-American narratives seem to emphasize the theme of resolving social conflicts among the living members of the household. The theme here seems not to be Oedipal but rather intrahousehold conflicts and their resolution, the seeking of unity among kin. Many Japanese-American religious groups are "culture-centered" and provide the atmosphere of an extended family for Japanese Americans. For many, Messianity symbolizes this, and the narrative therefore might reflect this pattern.

The two distinct paradigms presented above suggest that there are two different "cultures" in Messianity. Although the underlying meaning associated with the religious behavior of the two is quite divergent, the two groups nonetheless share certain behavioral characteristics. These are exemplified in the fact that they both perform the same ritual and share a consensus that the ritual is the crucial element of identity as a member of a single religious organization. Thus, in contrast to the divergent meaning, there is a consensus as to the significance of the crucial religious behavior, the ritual.

#### *The Socio-Cultural Implication of the Narrative Patterns*

A major prerequisite to be satisfied before a religious group can propa-

<sup>4</sup> See BELLAH 1985 for the nature of individualism, the significance of therapy, and its relationship to American religion.

gate, especially to a society other than its own, is to “universalize” its teachings. However, in this attempt to universalize, teachings must constantly go through sociocultural adaptation processes. This is because crucial symbols that make up these teachings (e.g., sacred texts, rituals, religious objects) are not “universal” but bound to a “culture” and are “culture-specific.” The relationship between the meanings attached to the symbol (what is signified) and the symbol itself (the signifier) is neither causal nor direct. The relationship is always mediated by the crucial element of a society’s “culture” (e.g., the ethos and world view).

When a series of symbols from one society is introduced into another, the symbols often take on new meanings, because of various interpretations and reinterpretations by different actors or groups of actors. This process of symbols adapting to the new social environment and transforming the sets of meanings attached to them could be called “localization,” the process of interpretation and reinterpretation by the members of the new society.<sup>5</sup> The transformation of symbols’ meanings through “localization” occurs because religion is a cultural and social phenomenon that is constantly adjusting and readjusting to an environment.

“Localization” is not necessarily a uniform process; it could be multiple. Uniform localization occurs when a symbolic system enters a relatively homogeneous society, but a multiple process of “localization” occurs when a series of symbols enters a new society composed of several ethnic groups. This happens because each ethnic group attempts to “localize” the symbols and to readjust them to its own ethos and world view.

The existence of two subcultures within American Messianity is an example of multiple “localization.” We can therefore say that the two distinct cultural paradigms are a result of this “localization” process.

There is potential danger to a religious organization when different ethnic groups within it go through an entirely different process of reinterpretation or localization. When the differences become too apparent, the group will likely split into different subgroups. The organization must therefore devise some means of creating intergroup unity. Such intergroup unity can be attained if a group possesses or creates powerful symbols that different subgroups can strongly identify with or encompass the divergent meanings attributed to them by different actors. The multiple localization process of symbols thus implies latent conflict and tension.

Despite the existence of different subcultures within Messianity, there are powerful symbols such as *jōrei* and the *mitamaya* ritual that hold the

<sup>5</sup> The process of localization of a symbolic system in the case of Islam was explored by GEEKTZ (1968). YAMADA (1988) also studies the socio-cultural adaptation process of ideology and the organizational structure of Nichiren Shōshū and Rishō Kōsei-kai in Australia.

two groups together. As long as the power of these symbols is sustained, the unity of the divergent ethnic groups that make up the organization will also be sustained.

Therefore, the divergences and convergences in the way members relate to the symbol-system of Messianity indicate the integrative and disintegrative forces that are inherent in the power of symbols. This also suggests that, during the process of "universalization" of religious teachings, divisions and conflicts can occur as a result of different "localizations." This is the disintegrative aspect of the process. However, if the group enlarges the repertoire of meanings attached to the symbols, without the symbols thereby becoming ambiguous, then the process of "universalization" succeeds in performing its integrative function.

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