Mahikari in the Caribbean

Laënnec HURBON

Since the seventies, the Caribbean has become a stamping ground for the most diverse new religious movements. Not only are the traditional religious sects — such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Adventists, and Pentecostals, that took root a long time ago (that is, since the beginning of the century) — recently experiencing a revival and seeing their numbers grow, there is also an invasion of new religious movements that originated in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Japan. Taken together these movements give the impression of a dense forest, entrance into which can be gained only by recourse to the specific history and the culture of the Caribbean, the only factors that can explain their success.

In the framework of this article,[1] I propose to show that the success of a religious movement like Mahikari in the French Antilles of the Caribbean, far from being a superficial phenomenon, is rooted in a substratum of traditional beliefs that in a hidden way rule the social and cultural life of these islands.

The Expansion of Mahikari in the Caribbean

The Mahikari movement, which was founded in Japan as recently as 1959, has experienced a rapid expansion in Asia, Europe, and North America, and has also reached central Africa, Brasil, and Mexico. It appeared in the Caribbean only recently and actually entered *via* France, where it spread among the immigrants from the Antilles, who then used their family relations to assure the implantation and expansion of the sect on the islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique.[2] There was a constant growth in the movement on the islands between 1976 and 1980,

---

[1] The present contribution builds on an article of mine published in the *Archives des sciences sociales des religions* (1980b). I have brought it up to date and added some elements of analysis that I have proposed in other articles on the new religious movements in the Caribbean (in 1986 and 1989).

[2] On the island of Martinique, some 5,000 people have already been initiated.

and since 1980 initiation centers are to be found in dependencies of
Guadeloupe, such as Saint Martin and Marie-Galante, where some male
and female teachers have been able to use their network of relationships
with the parents of their pupils. In Puerto Rico, where I conducted re-
search from 1981 to 1983, I noticed that Mahikari was presented
officially as an association with a religious aim, while in the French An-
tilles, on the contrary, it presents itself first of all as an art of living and
a system of therapeutic practices. In the dojo that I have been able to
visit in San Juan, the directors of the instruction sessions are mostly Jap-
anese. Still, most probably the movement was implanted in Puerto Rico
as a result of the frequent contacts that converts among the Puerto
Rican immigrants in the United States have with their families in San
Juan. Some Haitian workers who immigrated into Guadeloupe have
also been touched by Mahikari, but in too feeble a way for them to be
able to contribute to the expansion of the sect in Haiti.

All in all, Mahikari appears to be on the way to taking firm root in the
French Antilles; if you take into account the imposing character of the
dojo at Pointe-à-Pitre and in Martinique, which have been built with the
financial contributions of the initiated, you cannot but admit that
Mahikari already has an enduring cultural influence in the Caribbean.

On the islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique recruitment of mem-
bers started among the *petits bourgeois* (teachers, minor functionaries)
and later, through family relations of these members, also touched an
as yet tiny layer of workers and small farmers. In the social structure of
Guadeloupe, teachers and functionaries who live in the towns come
from agricultural families, with whom they keep very strong links. It is
they who assure the economic survival of the family, and in most cases
they are obliged to live with their families.

The speed of the propagation in Guadeloupe must have surprised the
leaders of the movement themselves. At the time of this writing, nearly
2,000 people have been initiated. True, from the first moment the per-
son shows any sign of opening up to the doctrine, he/she is quickly en-
rolled in an initiation session that consists of three consecutive days of
instruction, at the end of which he/she is received into the movement as
a member. And no demand at all is made that one abandon one's former
religion. The initiation sessions, held many times a year, produce one to
two hundred new members each time. At the present moment, four
meeting places in Guadeloupe have obtained the character of true cen-
ters of the cult (dojo): in Pointe-à-Pitre, in Basse-Terre, in Le Moule, and
on the island of Marie-Galante (a dependency of Guadeloupe). These
centers function full-time, and every day a good number of sick people
come there to receive "the light." The success of Mahikari is such that
the leaders plan the construction of a greater dojo, to be financed again
by contributions from the converts. The initiation sessions, and also the

assemblies for "thanksgiving" or "testimony," take place in hotels, or in a hall of the airport of Pointe-à-Pitre, or again in the rooms of the House of Youth and Culture.

In comparison with Haiti, where the persistence of Voodoo testifies to the existence of an original popular culture, Guadeloupe, which has been living under French domination for more than three centuries, is mostly considered not to have its own cultural identity. According to some, its history would fuse more and more with that of France.[3] All the cultural elements — Créole language, traditional music and dances, specific types of family organization — inherited from Africa and slavery would be undergoing a deeper and deeper erosion under the pressure of cultural assimilation. And as for the practices of magic and witchcraft, they would stay scattered and without real impact in daily life.[4] From there one could be tempted to conclude that the religious sects in the Antilles are a short-lived and superficial phenomenon.

Mahikari: An Art and an Organization

Before entering into the analysis of the witness stories of conversion to Mahikari, it may not be superfluous to present the fundamental elements of the doctrine and practices of this movement.

The Mahikari movement does not consider itself to be a sect, but an art and an organization. It takes as its aim the unification of all religions and has developed a certain number of religious practices: liturgical assemblies, cultic places (dojo), religious symbols (medallions), initiation, prayers, canticles, preaching, and propagation.

Its founder, the Japanese Okada Kōtama (called *sukuinushi-sama*, "the Savior"), a former career soldier, is said to have received from the god *Su* (creator of the universe) the mission of unifying all religions and saving humanity. His revelations are written down in the *Goseigen*, the "Book of Sacred Words." Until now, Moses and Jesus had transmitted only a part of the knowledge necessary for the salvation of humankind. With the founder of Mahikari the remaining knowledge can now be put at the disposition of all. He has the task of bringing about paradise on earth, the garden of Eden, while purifying the world.

The doctrine spread by Mahikari is simple, although it is a mixture of

---

[3] This is precisely the aim of the departmentalization policy. The geographer, Guy Lasserre, writes: "Policy in the Antilles rests on the observation that these islands are and want to be French. . . . In Africa and Asia decolonization was indicated, because the African and Asian countries were vast, had a different history, different languages and civilizations from ours. But in the Antilles there is nothing of the kind. . ." (LASSERRE 1974, pp. 78–79).

[4] Michel LEIRIS has noted the scattered state of the magic beliefs and practices in Guadeloupe, but maintains that they were "extremely important" in daily life (1955, pp. 53–54).

Christian (biblical) elements and East Asian philosophy and techniques. The genesis myth is practically taken over in its entirety: In the beginning humans knew happiness, but later their disobedience to God brought suffering into the world. God then sent mediators — Buddha, Moses, Jesus — to transmit new means for the reestablishment of happiness. Today, accumulating catastrophes (wars, cataclysms, moral depravation) announce the end of the present civilization. A new mediator has now appeared, the last envoy of God to put humanity definitively back on the road to the garden of Eden. From now on, to be saved, one must have the desire of God, i.e., radically change one's *sōnen* or desire, while becoming obedient to the laws of God. The universe, consisting of a structure that is at the same time material and spiritual, is an interlacing of three worlds — divine, astral, earthly — that are in constant interaction. Only divine science is the true one; besides it, the rest is only superstition, for God is at the origin of all creatures. The human also comprises three dimensions: physical, psychic, spiritual; every person has a secondary soul that accounts for the presence and constant action of guardian spirits sent by the ancestors, and also an astral body that comes from participation in the divine world.

As an organization, Mahikari intends to "look for the seeds of the spiritual and divine civilization" and to multiply the number of initiated people, *kumite*, whose task is the realization of the garden of Eden. The fundamental practice of the members consists in transmitting the *mahikari*, the "light of truth" (divine light, spiritual or cosmic energy), through which people are cleansed from their impurities. This light, which emanates directly from God — for God is infinite light — enables the human to submit to the spiritual world. The impurities of human beings are precisely the consequence of forgetting that spiritual world, the constant action of which on the terrestrial world must be recognized. The *omitama* is the medallion offered to every initiated person, and it must be reverently carried in all circumstances. By the power of the glint of light that it radiates, it protects from evil spirits. Prepared under special conditions by the daughter of the founder, to whom the *sukuinushi-sama* is supposed to have transmitted all his power before his death on 13 June 1974, the medallion serves as the relay between the human and the divine worlds. Inside the medallion one can find encased a small piece of paper inscribed with the symbols of the god *Su*.

The activity of Mahikari centers essentially on the problem of illness. Every illness is deemed to have its source in the action of "possessing spirits." Mahikari is the art of purifying these spirits by transmitting "the light" to them. In the three-day period of instruction preceding the initiation, the new member learns how to recognize the different "points" of the human body wherein the illnesses nestle and wherein therefore the spirits enter to "disturb" the life of the person. In this vision, medical

science passes through a radical critique: Medications and surgical interventions are considered to be "barbaric" and "superstitious" practices, which one must get rid of as quickly as possible in order to become receptive to the benefits of Mahikari.

Witness Stories

The witness stories in my files have been collected on the occasion of several conversations with new members, sometimes directly during the initiation sessions or the assemblies of thanksgiving. Other stories have been graciously communicated to me. The framework of this article does not permit me to make use of all the documents at my disposal, but the two stories that I intend to analyze here give us access to an understanding of the social and cultural significance of the Mahikari movement in Guadeloupe.

WITNESS A (AN OFFICE WORKER)

Four years ago, God gave us a very cute little daughter, whom we have given the name of F. When with my husband, our conversation always turned around F.

Some weeks after the birth, I noticed that the growth of my daughter was abnormal in comparison with that of other children. She was pale and refused to drink her milk. I then started to worry. In the month of April, when she was three months old, I took her to the clinic, because she had not gained any weight. As the only diagnosis, the doctor gave a name to the illness of my daughter, implying that there was an abnormal opening to her heart. It was hard for me to imagine that, and I therefore took my daughter to another hospital for further examination. The result, however, was identical. The doctor told us, in bureaucratic tones: "She is too small to endure the operation now. You should wait three years for that, and should start saving money right away, because it is a very costly operation."

We then started bewailing our lot and passed the next days complaining: "Why must we, we in particular, have to suffer so?"

At that moment we turned to a religious group, Jehovah's Witnesses. I tried to find a solution to our problem with the help of that religion, reading their publications and attending their meetings. But one day I asked the instructor, "Why is that person, who so passionately tried to teach others the doctrines, dead from starvation?" and the answer he gave me was: "When one saves unhappy persons, one has to suffer in their stead. One saves others by suffering in their place." I lost all hope. I asked him another question: "Is there no means to take away the cause of our ills?" and instead of answering me, the instructor only got angry.

These answers of this leader chilled me. Still, I continued to attend the meetings, but without finding a solution to our problems. My unrest grew day by day and I fell into a deep depression. I regret very much that at that time I was not lucid enough to become aware of the gravity of our impurities and of those of our family.

In December, F became eleven months old. Her skin color had never been normal, she had difficulty breathing, and it took her two hours to drink a 50-gram milk bottle. When I saw with relief that she had finally finished the bottle, she would start vomiting it all out. I gave up all hope of being able to rear my daughter. At this point, when we felt a great spiritual, mental, and physical fatigue, God sent us a neighbor who extended a helping hand. We immediately went to the dojo to be initiated. In this way we learned the way to take away the cause of our ills, something we had been looking for for a long time.

Two days after the initiation, my daughter, who since birth had never had any fever, ran a 40-degree fever and started coughing, spitting, and running from the nose. The great purification had begun. For us, as parents, it was a cause of great astonishment to see that the simple fact of having received the *omitama* could provoke such a change in our child. We have also learned the principle of purification. Parents and child have received the light, and F's fever easily came down, and her color became better and better.

We then had a second child. Brother and sister are playing in the garden just now. The sun has started to illumine our family. We have no need any more to save money for the operation and can use the money now for the realization of God's will.

But permit me to cite some experiences our family has had and that we can recognize as phenomena of *misogi* (purification). We must undergo these purifications because of the impurities of our family, but they are at the same time a help offered by the light of God. As long as there are impurities left, some expiations are necessary but, thanks to Mahikari, we can overcome them much more easily.

In February my two children had a great purification, the measles with a 40-degree fever for a week, but thanks to Mahikari they recovered quickly.

In March my son had a 40-degree fever and suffered from convulsions. On seeing the sufferings of my son, I realized the gravity of our impurities. We then went before the altar of God and sincerely asked forgiveness. After the prayer I approached my son to give him *okiyome*. When this was over, my son had no more convulsions. I then deeply understood the doctrine of the *sukuinushi-sama*: "The spiritual ties between parents and children are very strong."

One morning, some initiated friends and ourselves were able to watch the sunrise. The sun was magnificent. When we thanked God by turn-

ing toward the sun, particles of golden dust fell on us. All we could do
was stretch out our hands while thanking God for sending us such en-
couragement.

On another day we saw a mini-rainbow before the altar of the ances-
tors of my husband. Every time that God permits us to see such mirac-
ulous happenings, we find more courage and enthusiasm to transmit
God's light.

In June my non-initiated grandmother died at the age of ninety. I re-
gret not having been able to give her *okiyome* before her death; when I
came near her, her physical body was already cold and rigid. Because of
a leg fracture, it was difficult to put her in the coffin, but after having
practiced *okiyome* — and not for long either — the legs grew very supple
again.

In the house where we lived there were always many cockroaches; I
detest these creatures and was very annoyed. I then practiced *okiyome* for
a month and I have not seen them any more.

In January, F had a 39-degree fever and her body was rigid. She trem-
bled, saying there was a snake in her bed. I changed her bed, but she
kept saying there was a snake in her bed, and added: "I am scared, I am
scared!" I then understood that the possessing spirit was manifesting it-
self and immediately practiced *okiyome*. After that, I brought my daugh-
ter to the dojo, where she received *okiyome* and became especially calm,
something that seemed abnormal to me. But when we returned by bus,
I soon saw that she was gripped by a strong convulsion: her eyes did not
move, her lips had become purple, and her mouth was clamped tight. I
then asked the passenger next to me to open her mouth and put a hand-
kerchief into it. I prayed to God, recited the *amatsu norigoto* and made
the 8-point protective sign. After ten minutes, F regained consciousness.
All the passengers — none of whom had asked me to call for a doctor —
now exclaimed: "How wonderful!" The fever still continued and F often
exclaimed: "I'm suffocating!", but after *okiyome* she calmed down and
slept. The next day, she still had a fever and cried again: "I am scared;
there is a snake in my bed!" When I telephoned the dojo to ask for ad-
vice, the director told us to put ourselves before the altar to really ask
forgiveness, to ask God to guide us and enlighten us about our errors.

Leaving the child, who continued to suffer, we asked God for forgive-
ness for all the errors committed and for our inefficacy in his service. F
was still crying during our prayers. I took her in my arms while contin-
uing to ask God's pardon for all the errors of our family, weeping myself
all the time. I noticed then that I had left many things, even some masks,
in the closet above the *Chon*.[5] I had everything removed and noticed

[5] The *Chon* is the point in the center of the universe and is the symbol of God. Every

then that F had calmed down. This taught me how important it is to ask God forgiveness for all our past and present errors, if we want to face God continually according to the law of justice.

January 15 was the day of the thanksgiving ceremony. After the ceremony, I received *okiyome* and the spirit showed itself, saying: "Eight people in my family have been stabbed to death and beheaded by the ancestors of your family."

If we had not had the grace of knowing Mahikari four years ago, F would not exist today. We cannot imagine how we would have overcome this great difficulty without Mahikari. To respond to the infinite love of God, who saves us and also saves the possessing spirits, we must absolutely concretize our gratefulness to God by making known this marvelous art that is Mahikari.

WITNESS B (FEMALE SCHOOLTEACHER)

Before my initiation I was skeptical: Was this not a new secret society introduced among us, where there is already too much spiritism? It has taken me three days to come here.

I suffered from psychopathic troubles, while being obliged for ten years to take care of my husband. Day and night I had a headache; my head was heavy; I had become like a robot. Every day I felt a bit weaker, and I thought that I would die. My left side was paralyzed. Notwithstanding the good care of my neurologist and cardiologist, I did not get better. The spirit that disturbed me showed itself on the eve of my initiation.

I received the light two days in a row, and the third day I sensed a strong smell of tobacco. When I woke up, I was relaxed, I felt light, I was cured! God, how can I thank you? I am going to do the Will of God. The Great Master wanted me to be a missionary. A force pushed me to raise my hand everywhere. I experienced much friendliness, but also negative manifestations. One day gravel was thrown at me and one stone grazed my temple but I was not injured. On April 1977, on Holy Saturday, while going to Mass, I fell into a ditch. I cried: "My God, save me!" and felt helping hands. I had to call for the fire brigade, and saved only my Mass book.

I then had to wait three hours for the doctor, who told me: "You are lucky. You should be dead by now; the person who fell into the ditch before you died." I felt myself falling into a void. For two years now, I have

---

initiated person is recommended to set up at home a *goshintai*, a kind of altar consecrated to the god *Su*. The ideogram is composed of three horizontal lines, which stand for the three worlds (divine/astral/terrestrial), traversed by a vertical line, which symbolizes the ruling principle of these three worlds, and is crowned by the point *Chon*.

seen no doctor, nor taken any medicine. I know it is God's Mercy, although I have offended Him. . . .

Analysis of the Testimonies

I shall now try to point out the social and cultural problematics in analyzing these conversion stories.

First, all the testimonies at our disposal turn around the recognition of the therapeutic action of Mahikari. Each member is invited to understand himself as a sick person who has found healing. At the beginning no doctrine is proferred to the person. It is enough for him to receive the "light," i.e., to permit an initiated person to raise his/her hand in the direction of the seat of the illness in the body. The conversion stories try to recount that miracle: the experience of a speedy recovery of mental and physical health.

The failure of medical and hospital care, of which every witness speaks, does not lie at the bottom of the new faith in Mahikari; it only furnishes the occasion for verifying the art of Mahikari, as the only thing capable of responding to the real needs of the sick person. But—and herein lies the originality of Mahikari's situation there in Guadeloupe — the experience of illness is the experience of the "spirits" around oneself and one's body. A Western or Westernized doctor barely takes such matters into account. Mahikari, on the contrary, puts itself on the same wavelength as this imaginary and symbolic scheme that, in Guadeloupe, forms the basis of the traditional interpretation of the body, of illness, and of health. Or, more exactly, it is this traditional view that predisposes one to accept the discourse proposed by the Mahikari on "pollutions" (wars, natural cataclysms, moral depravation, social conflicts) as signs of "impurities" each individual must rid him/herself of in order to regain psychophysical health and spiritual salvation.

Thus, we find that the description of illness in each of the stories follows exactly the traditional interpretation presupposed by the magico-religious practices of the African type and elaborated during the years of slavery.

TESTIMONY A

—Symptoms of illness: Abnormal growth ("The growth of my daughter was abnormal . . ."); emaciation ("F did not gain weight . . ."); paleness; difficulty of breathing; vomiting; hallucinations ("F said there was a snake in her bed").

Over against all these symptoms (which naturally make you think that something is at work in the body of the girl that wants to bring her little by little to her death), the diagnosis furnished by the doctor (an abnormal

orifice in the heart) appears totally irrelevant to the real demands of the mother. For her, the classical effects of a spell are at work, and one must go back to the source of the illness, to "take away the cause of our ills." Her real problem is: "Why must we in particular suffer so?" and it stays without a solution, even after she turned to Jehovah's Witnesses. A person who knows the doctrines of a religion should not die of hunger; in other words, the truth of a religious doctrine is proven by the material benefits that it brings. Still, the episode of the Jehovah's Witnesses is already a sign that the mother is looking for a magico-religious solution to the illness of her daughter. Indeed, it happens often in Guadeloupe that people pass from sect to sect until they find a response corresponding to their demands.

In the case under consideration, the expectation of an "envoy" (the neighbor, a helping hand to clarify the mystery of the illness) is itself an important element of confirmation of this interpretation. The individual is not alone any more with his/her problem; the support of the community manifests itself. From now on, all the things of which the mother had a foreboding are going to become clear in her eyes: she becomes aware, says she, of the gravity of her "impurities" and of those of her family. For the art of Mahikari addresses the very cause of the misfortunes. The initiation presents itself as the "great purification." The medallion or *omitama* will confront the persecution by the spirits as a mightier spiritual force, able to engage in true battle against the evil that besets the little girl. And the signs of recovery (coughing, spitting, etc.) are first of all a confirmation of the diagnosis offered by Mahikari, in as far as this conforms to the traditional interpretation of illness. Therein, "coughing, spitting, running nose" are metaphorical signs of the progressive extraction of the evil lodged in the body of the child, in other words, of the dis-spelling process itself. The mother now knows the truth about the illness of her daughter. From now on, the "impurities," i.e., the manifestations of possessing spirits, will have to reach all the members of the family: "In February my two children had a great purification . . . in March my son had a 40-degree fever. . . ."

These are all tribulations (connected with the illness of the daughter) that furnish proof of the activity of the spirits within the family. But the mother already feels relieved. Every new case of sickness, every unfortunate event integrates itself into a series, a meaningful chain, which is nothing but the normal unfolding of an evil, the first cause of which is already known and which by this fact itself ceases to be irremediable.

The last symptom mentioned shows us clearly that this testimony definitely puts us in the sphere of the imaginary and symbolic. F has convulsions accompanied by hallucinations: "She trembled, saying there was a snake in her bed." This description fits with great precision the traditional symptoms of possession by a spirit, symbolized here by

the snake. Everybody knows that the spirits lodge in certain animals (toads, cats, butterflies, snakes, etc.), in trees (such as the kapok-tree), sometimes in water (wells, rivers), or again in the sugarcane mills that go back to the period of slavery. The sugarcane mills are especially the hiding places of snakes, which are manifestations of spirits of the dead who demand a cult. There are some pilgrimage places centered in mills that contain a sanctuary dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

In our story, the more the mother of the sick child is brought back, thanks to Mahikari, into the orbit of the traditional magico-religious system, the more the spirits of the dead of the family seem to have re-doubled their desire to manifest their presence and their power: "[On January 15,] the spirit showed itself, saying: 'Eight people of my family have been stabbed to death and beheaded by the ancestors of your fam-ily.' "

But by the time the mother obtained that revelation, the whole trag-edy of the illness of the children had already ceased to exist for her. She had found in Mahikari the powerful means to stop the persecuting ac-tivity of the spirits. For one thing, she had to get rid of any ambiguous practices that could only drag out her daughter's illness: "I noticed then that I had left many things, even some masks, in the closet above the *Chon*. I had everything removed. . . ." Would this refer to "fetishes" rem-iniscent of a "two-handed" magic? In any case, not all traditional magic practices are considered as errors: "When we thanked God by turning to the sun, particles of golden dust fell on us"; "We saw a mini rainbow before the altar of the ancestors." These positive signs, which are an as-surance against a return of the anger of the spirits of the dead, are again written in the code of the traditional magico-religious system: prayer at sunrise (a practice aiming at the obtaining of economic advantages, the punishment of an enemy, or the success of some enterprise), and prayer before the altar of the ancestors (a small shelf installed in the bedroom of the house on which one puts bowls of food for the dead of the family).[6]

TESTIMONY B

Symptoms: Headaches, the body becoming a heavy mass, progressive weakening, partial paralysis.

Here we can indicate again that these are traditional symptoms of the possession of an individual by a spirit. The body's becoming heavy and paralysis are tokens of the activity of a spirit gone literally astray and

---

[6] The Mahikari members are invited to install in their house a small altar for the ancestors on the father's side. This practice permits them to take up again the tradition of offerings to the dead. This altar of the ancestors exempts them from going to the graves in the cemetery and of having Masses celebrated for the dead.

wanting to be recognized. The doctrine of Mahikari talks precisely of disturbing spirits, i.e., of non-purified spirits that have not found their true place and that therefore can manifest themselves everywhere and at any time, but that, at the same time, are liable to all sorts of manipulation: "there is too much spiritism here." The light of Mahikari is supposed to send the spirit to its true place. To the heaviness of the body, caused by the persecuting activity of the spirit, corresponds, as a sign of recovery, relaxation, a feeling of lightness: "When I woke up, I was relaxed, I felt light." The strong smell of tobacco symbolizes the departure of the disturbing spirit. The "negative" events that follow—the gravel thrown and the fall into a ditch—are now only tribulations that form an illustration of the rightness of the interpretation of the illness as not natural, but preternatural.

This first approach gives us for the moment only indications of a much more complex problematic, of which we still have to find the great parameters. Behind the practices and the doctrine spread by Mahikari another language has seemed to operate. Mahikari thus appears to be taken up into another interpretation, and this permits us to speak of its double functioning in Guadeloupe. A more systematic analysis now becomes indispensable. For the sake of clarity of exposition, we shall distinguish two aspects, the social and the cultural, which are intimately linked in the strategy used by the members.

Conservatism, or Challenging the Social Order?

Activists, who struggle against French colonialism, generally bring out the conservative character of the sects that develop in Guadeloupe. They would all collaborate in drawing the attention of the people away from the necessary social and political struggles. But if one focuses merely on the conservative discourse officially spread by the sects, one cannot fully understand the deeper mechanism of the functioning of these movements on the specific terrain of Guadeloupe. The main factor to explain is why the masses adopt them with such eagerness and fanaticism.

First of all, the social strata that are influenced by the sects, whether they be farmers, workers, small traders, small employees, functionaries, or teachers, are haunted by the feeling of the growing precariousness of their economic situation. The closure within ten years of six sugarcane factories, the increase in the rate of jobless people, the acceleration of urbanization, and the destruction of the traditional habitat[7] leave an

---

[7] On the importance of the traditional habitat (*la case*) in the cultural life of the Antilles, see "Structure ressentie et structure symbolique: la case guadeloupéenne," extracted from a

important part of the population without support. The sects capture a hidden discontent while reactivating the traditional mode of interpretation of economic and social power.

The problematic of illness, on which all the stories of conversion to Mahikari are centered, is from beginning to end symbolic of the social disorder. "Pollutions" and "impurities" are deemed to derive from the actual course of a civilization that has lost its anchor and generates social conflicts and wars because of its forgetfulness of the spiritual world. At the same time, however, a new frame of reference is offered to the social challenge: the framework of millenarianism, the promise of a paradise on earth, by which this challenge can keep itself in suspense and in reserve. The doctrine of Mahikari speaks precisely of a garden of Eden that is very near, and this permits the believer to put up with the present social problems, as if these problems lose all consistency and disappear before this phantasm of a reconciled and harmonious world in the near future.

However, this indifference to social and political struggles is accompanied by some social advantages, that are felt as satisfying to each individual. On the one hand, the new member has access to a new social solidarity in each case of illness and in every unfortunate event in his personal life (family breakdown, difficulty in finding a job, accidents, etc.). This solidarity appears as a substitute for the traditional enlarged family, which finds it difficult to withstand the onslaught of the dominant capitalist system. On the other hand, the new member obtains a personal recognition and a social dignity, by quickly engaging, from the moment of conversion, in a type of valorizing activity—as an initiated member, he is invested with the power to "transmit the light," i.e., to guide others to the promised paradise. Still more, he/she has the "divine science," the source of all knowledge, at his/her disposal, for the light of Mahikari is also called the "light of truth." In this way the new convert ceases to be a part of the excluded and ignorant, and believes that he/she overcomes the divisions of intellectual/worker, literate/illiterate or semiliterate.

The possibility of individual success, opened up by the sect, presupposes a greater rationalization of the present social relationships, in the sense that the themes of the dominant ideology are taken up with a greater vigor. "Social evil" is not a product of an economic system of exploitation; it has its roots in the forgetting of the spiritual world. That is why Mahikari pretends to bestow a *supplément d'âme* (supplemental spirituality) on all religions and to collaborate in their restoration, for the

---

study made by the group "Architecture, urbanisme, paysages, tiers-monde" (Pointe-à-Pitre), in *Environnement Africain*, special number, 1978, on "Environnement caraïbe," pp. 179–202.

return of social harmony. If each individual converts and "receives the light," the world will be saved. Still, it is only in appearance that individual culpability is brought to the fore. On the specific terrain of Guadeloupe, the strength of Mahikari appears to lie in a keeping in suspense of the "individual interiorization of culpability":[8] the evil is not interior; it is pushed back on the objective plane of the world of the spirits that direct the individual as well as the collective life. It is most probably through this last aspect—the return to the traditional interpretation of evil—that we shall best succeed in capturing the double-edged functioning of the Mahikari language.

The Other Language, or the Quest for a Re-Rooting

The reading of the conversion stories has put us on a very surprising track: the fact of people in Guadeloupe being haunted by or trying to denigrate traditional magico-religious practices and beliefs. The language offered by Mahikari appears to be crossed by another language: the language that, since the period of slavery, underwent constant suppression by the arbitrary domination of French culture. This language, which has always succeeded in perpetuating itself in spite of the efforts at deculturation by the people in power, is precisely the one that assures the symbolic cohesion of the people, their belonging to a common history, and it constitutes the basis of the building, against all odds, of a proper identity (see HURBON 1980a). Having evolved until now in the shadow or in the flanks of the Catholic Church, this language is showing today a precariousness that it refuses to acknowledge as such but that prompts it to look for a new prosperity in the very bosom of the new sects. And the establishment of these sects under the combined cracking of the whips of Catholicism and the socio-economic system has been made possible only by a re-adoption, in an oblique manner, of the language of the traditional magico-religious practices and beliefs.

I shall proceed now to a reflection on three fundamental elements that structure the stories and practices of the members in the Mahikari movement: 1) The relationship with the spirits or with family organization and with Africa; 2) the structure of the initiation in the process of conversion; 3) witchcraft and antiwitchcraft.

1. THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SPIRITS

In most of the conversations which we have had with members of

---

[8] Through lack of space we cannot develop this hypothesis here. A suggestive analysis has been made on Harrisism in the Ivory Coast. Cf. PIAULT 1975, especially the contribution by A. Zempleni (1975, beginning on p. 207).

Mahikari, illness has always been presented to us as central in the pro-
cess of conversion. It seems as if the crisis of the entire (economic, cul-
tural, and political) system came to shower all its evil effects onto the
body of the individual. To understand this, we have to remember the
constitution of the social structure in Guadeloupe. There, the work of
ideology has always been explicitly and directly linked to the body. This
can be understood, first of all, by the fact of slavery as a total derooting
of the individual. Having become the body of somebody else (the white
master), Africans under the yoke of slavery in the Antilles had to hang
on to whatever they could conserve of their African traditions. They had
to create a new imaginary and symbolic framework so their bodies could
live. What was left to the master or appropriated to the master was only
the corpse. And all the true rediscoveries about their bodies by the slaves
presupposed the establishment of a new relationship to the ancestors,
and thus to Africa.

The colonial period, which runs from 1848 until the present day, has
only produced a reshuffling of this problematic, without working any
real upheaval, because this period is characterized by an acceleration
and intensification of the "gallicization" of the Guadeloupean individ-
ual. Even the color black came to be transformed, in the eyes of a good
number of the Antilleans themselves, into a symbol of decadence, as an
effect of the overevaluation of the whites (their economic power and
their culture). The body will be the geometrical locus of all the effects
of the task of cultural assimilation. The rejection, from the moment one
enters school, of the Creole language (the mother tongue) necessarily
leads—as is sufficiently known today—to very grave conflicts on the
level of the constitution of the image of the body.

Moreover, the media partly succeed in producing a veritable cultural
amnesia among the people, insofar as they systematically underplay one
of the most important musical creations in the history of Guadeloupe:
the Gro-Ka. Furthermore, the exigencies of the economic life push
many people who have a public function to conform, at least publicly,
to the dominant French cultural patterns.

However, the promise that the adoption of these models seems to hold
can in fact not be kept. The actual economic crisis is such that certain
social strata come to feel the precariousness of their conditions in life.
In this context, the forceful return of the "spirits" denotes a return of
the suppressed. As to the significance of this turning to the spirits, one
would be mistaken if one hastily saw in it merely simple leftovers from
old "superstitious" beliefs. The phenomenon is deeper: it refers to a
quest for a new taking-on of roots, precisely at the moment that these
beliefs in "spirits" are shaken.

True, it is difficult to find in Guadeloupe a veritable "Olympus," as is
the case in Haiti for the Voodoo. But, just as in Haiti, here too the "spir-

its" relate to a symbolic language, the coordinates of which have barely
been clarified.[9] The information that I have been able to gather from
the *gadèdzafè* (specialists in things sacred in the popular traditions of
Guadeloupe) indicates that the "spirits" constitute a hierarchical uni-
verse, consisting of good/bad spirits, with symbolical seats (trees), places
of epiphany, particular circumstances of persecution/possession of indi-
viduals, and symbolical correspondents in Catholicism (images, statues
of saints, etc.); and that the relations with spirits necessitate the setting
up of a whole protocol that shows a close affinity to that demanded by
the *loua* of the Voodoo. With the Mahikari members, among whom one
mainly finds social categories belonging to the Guadeloupean petite
bourgeoisie, beliefs in the spirits are explicitly restored to a place of
honor under the name of disturbing spirits or spirits of the ancestors,
which one should either master or respect and treat with the maximum
of attention.

In the Mahikari movement, a new legitimation of the belief in spirits
is brought to bear. But even here, the universe of spirits is the recall of
the Guadeloupean family organization. Indeed, because one has forgot-
ten that one is a member of an enlarged family, of a greater body (not
reducible to the Western nuclear family but comprising the deceased of
the family, the ancestors), the spirits reappear, thus pointing at the law
of tradition, the law of the ancestors, against which one must at all costs
situate oneself in order to regain psychological and social security, phys-
ical and mental health, and a chance at social success.

The problematic of the "spirits" is, ultimately, the problematic of a
cultural heritage that comes from very far: from the ancestors, and
therefore from Africa itself—a heritage constantly denied, forgotten,
and censured, but one that nevertheless keeps itself constantly in the
wings ready to reemerge at every misstep of the individual in the im-
portant moments of life (marriage, illness, death, etc.). We can con-
cretely catch the path of the spirits by observing the process of the
conversion to the sects.

2. THE PROCESS OF CONVERSION AND THE STRUCTURE OF INITIATION

Initiation continues to play a central role at the core of the magico-
religious practices of the African type in Guadeloupe. Every stable rela-

[9] There exist but few studies on the magico-religious system in the Antilles. The best-
known works clearly show a "folklorizing" tendency and tend to reinforce an exotic view of
the Antillean world. Thus, for example, Maurice MESSÉGUÉ and GAYOT (1968). Instead, one
can find information of ethnographic value in the work of Eugène REVERT (1951). Unfortu-
nately, I cannot here expand on the organization of the magico-religious system of Guade-
loupe. I have attempted a preliminary approach in my "Pratiques magico-religieuses et
pratiques médicinales en Guadeloupe" (forthcoming).

tionship with the spirits presupposes a passage through initiation. Initiation is not reserved to the *gadèdzafè*, *manti-mantè*, or *kinbouazè* (specialists of the sacred, diviners, interpreters of the language of the spirits, and healers), but is open to any individual who has received an appeal from the spirits. This appeal generally manifests itself in dreams or hallucinations. But according to the explanation of a *gadèdzafè*, the true inaugural moment of the sequence of initiation is illness.

First, the person falls into a swoon or prolonged fainting spell, during which he/she is considered to take a trip, just like the shamans do, through the world of the spirits. Then, during a period that can last several months, the person experiences a number of indefinable discomforts (headaches, insomnia, anorexia, etc.). He/she usually speaks about them to somebody in his/her immediate environment, who will bring him/her to a *gadèdzafè*, who will interpret these indefinable ailments as the work of spiritual forces in the body and as signs of a vocation.

It often happens that the individual who hears the appeal hesitates and is recalcitrant before the demands of the spirits but, sustained by the *gadèdzafè*, who offers to accompany the new elect through all the phases of the initiation, he/she finds the courage to surrender. A new process is then begun: a time of vows and penances. The patient clothes him/herself in white, blue, or chestnut-brown, goes from church to church and addresses the saints, and especially the Virgin Mary, in all the places of pilgrimage. This phase ends when the person begins to experience the "wisdom" or "gifts" of the spirits by healing a sick person.

We have only summarily described the sequence of initiation, but this description may be sufficient for what we are aiming to do here: reduplicate the sequence behind the processes of conversion to Mahikari. First of all, the sick person, healed thanks to the action of "the light" (Mahikari), is deemed to have lived the troubled experience of the spirits gone astray in society, in the environment, and in the body. Strictly speaking, he/she is not the same person any more but has passed through death. The truth of Mahikari is attested to by the healing, i.e., by deliverance from the "impurities" caused by the activity of the spirits. The conversion to Mahikari presents itself, therefore, as the process whereby one relocates and fixes the spirits in a delimited place, from which they will no longer be able to play the role of disturbers. A member told me: "The problem is that people do not respect the world of the spirits. Here in the Antilles, because of all the dead in slavery, there are all kinds of spirits that come to disturb us."

Being initiated to Mahikari thus means to be reborn to a new life, thanks to the recognition of the efficacy of the spirits. The doctrine of Mahikari insists precisely on the necessity, not of the expulsion of the spirits from the body of the sick person, but of dialoguing with them so

that they may be transformed into protecting spirits.[10] In this perspective, illness as possession by the spirits is taken as an obligatory moment of passage to the new state, which from now on one is able to communicate by transmitting the art of Mahikari.

3. WITCHCRAFT AND ANTIWITCHCRAFT

It has been noted already how the problematic of witchcraft occupies a central place among the alleged reasons for conversion to the Adventists in Martinique.[11] One could say that we are here at the core of the specificity of the religious sects and movements that prosper in the Antilles. Indeed, the actual destructuring of society, on the economic and social levels, is accompanied by a collapse of the traditional taboos; and the members of Mahikari can speak, without risk of being contested, of a general "confusion," wherein the spirits, the dead, have lost their bearings.

The whole of daily life comes to be strewn with traps, for all manipulations of the sacred have become possible. And this general deregulation is the sign that witchcraft can no longer be brought under control by the ordinary means. It has become literally true that one does not know any more which saint to turn to. It is as if there has been a total release of the supernatural powers as a result of the breakdown of traditional taboos, by means of which one knew how to keep all "doers of evil" at a distance and in a subordinate position. One has, therefore, to find a remedy for the misfortunes that beset individuals and society: illnesses, family and scholastic failures, joblessness, alcoholism, delinquency, individualism, etc. "Nowadays there are too many *gadèdzafè* and far too many non-purified spirits of the dead roaming around Guadeloupe," one member told me. In such a context, nobody feels protected. The art of Mahikari is then seen as the *supplément d'âme* (supplemental spirituality) needed by all religions to overcome the new trials and to

---

[10] In Mahikari, belief in reincarnation serves as the basis for the disturbing activities of the spirits of the dead. The dead always seek revenge for the maltreatment or suffering they underwent in former lives. In the initiation courses, many cases are submitted for the consideration of the members, as for instance the case of a boy possessed by the spirit of a farmer whom his grandfather had murdered. For revenge, the spirit influenced the boy into causing a car accident. Every time that, in Mahikari, one speaks of "asking God for forgiveness," it is a question of "spiritual compensation" for errors committed by ancestors. These ancestors can sometimes be reborn in animals. It also happens that ancestors wait several generations before they take revenge.

[11] See the excellent study by Raymond MASSÉ (1978), especially his chapter 3 (pp. 37–44), "Adventisme, Quimbois et exorcisme," where he writes, for instance: "A few weeks of living with Antillean Adventists are enough to be struck by their insistence on the necessity of abandoning all practices of witchcraft and on the urgency of making all nonbelievers conscious of all the evils engendered by the pagan practices" (p. 37).

confer immunity against evil. Some converts told me: "I had tried every-thing, I had consulted several *gadèdzafé*, before finally encountering Mahikari."

The *gadèdzafé*, while having the powers to combat evil, also procure the means to commit acts of witchcraft, particularly by manipulating the spirits of the dead. In the traditional beliefs, illness is not always the sign of election by a spirit; it can also come from persecution by evil spirits, sent against an individual. In certain cases it is the result of spirits of the dead that have gone astray that find lodging in the body. A member of Mahikari said: "There are in Guadeloupe an innumerable crowd of spir-its of the dead: people dead by accidents, people that died prematurely during the days of slavery. No cult is offered them. Therefore, they still circulate freely in certain places, for example on the roads. We must therefore go everywhere and 'give the light,' in order to neutralize their eventual action against passersby." And other new converts told me: "In the actual phase of society, the *gadèdzafé* lack the powers to regulate the world of the spirits; they even do more harm than good." Thus, Ma-hikari is understood as the only system adequate for procuring protec-tion against evil, against vengeance by spirits of dead people that seek reincarnation in order to gain compensation for the evils they under-went formerly, and against the "sending" of spirits manipulated by the *gadèdzafé*.

Mahikari and the Cataclysms

On the collective level, Mahikari is also deemed to preserve certain zones of the country from cataclysms that would necessarily occur in present times because of the "pollution" and impurities for which mod-ern society is responsible. Guadeloupe and Martinique are precisely re-gions where volcanoes (especially Soufrière in Basse-Terre) can erupt any moment, and where tornadoes and frequent earthquakes can create great panic among the population. Initiated people, who have an altar for the ancestors in their home, are automatically protected. But it hap-pens that courses in survival techniques are offered to the inhabitants of certain quarters, in order to prepare them to face the cataclysms. The initiated people are told, for example, to take refuge as quickly as possi-ble near the altars.

In this way, in the teachings of Mahikari there is a strong insistence on the apocalyptic aspects of the movement, which dovetails with the apprehensions of a population faced with volcanoes, tornadoes, and other natural disasters. Life on an island is here not a source of serenity at all. And in the Caribbean Mahikari can only look all the more attrac-tive for it.

Conclusion

A REAL CRISIS

The full scope of the social, cultural, and political problems, of which the sects are indicators, cannot be fully captured by this summary presentation of the Mahikari movement alone. I leave untouched many problems, the analysis of which is indispensable for confirming my hypotheses: the connections between the image of the body and the language of spirits, the links between oral tradition and text, the critique of medical practices and educational institutions, and so forth.

We have to understand that two things are at stake and articulated in this religious fervor. On the one hand, to acquire the symbols that confer social prestige, one must pass through the denial of one's own identity; on the other hand, the traditional cultural system shows itself too precarious to be worth clinging to, since it has lost its old economic base. It is in the heart of this crisis that the sect installs itself. At the same time that the dominant French culture seeks to impose itself still more – by development of the media, of the school system, and of consumer goods – in order to create a veritable cultural amnesia in the Antilleans, the religious sect installs a new link with traditional culture. One can sense already that a simple analysis of the religious beliefs and practices in ideological terms is not sufficient. If the new sects indirectly permit a reproduction of present social relationships[12] in Guadeloupe, they bring to the fore a more complex problematic: that of the symbolic and the imaginary which, while preceding in a way the ideological, open up for the individual and for society as a whole the space to unfold the question of identity.

THE CREATION PROCESS OF A NEW CULTURE

If one tries to enlarge the perspective gained from Guadeloupe to other Caribbean islands (Saint Martin and Puerto Rico, for example), one will be led to speak of a veritable cultural crisis that especially affects the middle-class people of these islands, who daily are subjected more and more to what one could call an uprooting or deterioration, provoked by the influence of the values of modernity. Indeed, the individual loses the traditional enlarged family links and, on the other hand, is swallowed up by new needs, created by the system of consumption of imported goods. The person ends up by having on his/her hands magico-religious tradi-

---

[12] For a theoretical reflection on the problem of the reproduction of social relationships with the sects, see the suggestive article by Jean SÉGUY (1980).

tions that have lost their meaning but that he/she cannot completely abandon for fear of losing his/her sanity.

In this perspective, Mahikari not only offers therapeutic care but also puts at the disposal of the individual experiencing crisis a grand vision of the world and of history, wherein he rediscovers the great and ancient combat between good and evil, God and Satan, order and chaos, salvation and damnation. Torn loose from his/her own ancient culture, the individual undergoes, thanks to Mahikari, a greater transnationalization. But at the same time, and paradoxically, he/she does not feel lost in this transnationalization. What, on the one hand, one pretends, explicitly or on the level of discourse, to reject, is taken up by the other hand (or rather "underhand") in Mahikari. Maybe we can even speak here of the creation, or refounding, of a new culture that, while not having yet a firm ground, succeeds in somehow fastening together the most heterogeneous elements received from elsewhere.

A traditional zone of conflict among the colonial powers, the Caribbean did not truly escape the regime of the conqueror. And the Utopian dream of appropriating to oneself the history of the Caribbean and of dwelling in this space as in one's proper place is not absent from this rush to the new religious movements—a rush one should read sometimes as the gropings or experiments of a culture that has not yet found its bearings.

REFERENCES

BEBEL-GISLER, Dany
 1976   *La langue créole, force jugulée*. Paris: L'Harmattan.

HURBON, Laënnec
 1980a   Le poids des pratiques magico-religieuses dans la culture
         antillaise. In *Actes du 1er séminaire inter-Caraïbe sur l'inadaptation
         juvénile*, 196–211. Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe: Services et
         Clubs de Prévention.
 1980b   Le double fonctionnement des sectes aux Antilles: le cas du
         Mahikari en Guadeloupe. *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*
         50: 59–75.
 1986   New religious movements in the Caribbean. In *New Religious
         Movements and Rapid Social Change*, J. A. Beckford, ed., 146–76.
         London: Sage Publications.

HURBON, Laënnec, ed.
 1989   *Le phénomène religieux dans la Caraïbe*. Montréal: Ed. du Cidhica.

LASSERRE, Guy
 1974   La malaise politique et social. In *"Les Départements d'outre-mer:*

　　　La Guadeloupe," Notes et Études documentaires, 78–79. Documen-
　　　tation française.

LEIRIS, Michel
　1955　*Contacts de civilisation en Guadeloupe et en Martinique*. Paris:
　　　UNESCO.

MASSÉ, Raymond
　1978　*Les Adventistes du septième jour aux Antilles françaises. Anthro-
　　　pologie d'une espérance millénariste*. Montr̆al: Centre de recher-
　　　ches caraïbes/Ste Marie, Martinique: Fonds Saint Jacques.

MESSÉGUÉ, Maurice, and André GAYOT
　1968　*Ce soir, le diable viendra te prendre; la sorcellerie aux Antilles*. Paris:
　　　R. Laffont.

PIAULT, Colette, ed.
　1975　*Prophétisme et thérapeutique en Afrique noire*. Paris: Hermann.

REVERT, Eugĕne
　1951　*La magie antillaise*. Paris: Éditions Bellenand.

SÉGUY, Jean
　1980　La socialisation utopique aux valeurs. *Archives de sciences sociales
　　　des religions* 50: 7–21.

ZEMPLENI, Andréas
　1975　De la persécution à la culpabilité. In *Prophétisme et thérapeutique
　　　en Afrique noire*, Colette Piault, ed., 155–236. Paris: Hermann.