

Okinawan Shamanism and Charismatic Christianity

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DURING THE LAST QUARTER of the twentieth century we are witnessing the revival of conservatism and the rise of new spiritual or renewal movements within religious traditions all over the world. In the case of Christianity, this phenomenon is evident in the growth of neo-pentecostal or charismatic sects and denominations. Various sociological and anthropological studies have shown that these movements play an important role in the lives of many individuals as they attempt to cope with and adapt to rapid urbanization or industrialization. In this respect, the social significance of these movements within Christianity may be understood to be similar to that of the New Age movement in America and the burgeoning of various new religions in advanced industrial societies.

Since the 1980s, a charismatic renewal movement often referred to as the “third wave of the Holy Spirit” has arisen in some evangelical churches in many nonwestern countries. What is noteworthy about this movement is that it has been inspired and formed by the Third World. In fact, there are some theologians who are regarding this as a “paradigm shift” that will radically change the worldview of Western theology. Churches affected by this “third wave” may be found in China, the Philippines, Indonesia, and most conspicuously in South Korea. While this movement is not yet prominent in Japanese churches, there are some signs that it is beginning to form in Okinawa Prefecture. As an archipelago

located southwest of the four major islands of Japan, Okinawa has been little affected by Buddhism and Shinto. On the other hand, it is an area where the propagation of Christianity was attempted on a massive scale during the American occupation (1945–1972).

This paper presents finding of intensive field research on a charismatic Christian church named the Okinawa Christian Evangelical Center (hereafter referred to as OCEC). It began in the mid-1970s as a small Brethren meeting with just a few participants, but in less than twenty years it recorded the baptism of nearly 1,500 people. This is a remarkable figure for Japan, where the number of baptisms per year for most Christian churches is usually less than ten. In the 1980s alone, OCEC is the church that baptized the largest number of people in Okinawa Prefecture. The concrete activities observed in this church will be explained as one typical example of the reorganization of a religious meaning system as individuals search for effective solutions to the new demands of modern urban life. It will be shown that these demands emerge from the struggle between the indigenous shamanistic religion and the various features of modern industrial society that are rapidly becoming a part of life in Okinawa.

NAKAHARA MASAO AND THE OKINAWA
CHRISTIAN EVANGELICAL CENTER

The founder of OCEC, Nakahara Masao, was born in a northern village on the main

island of Okinawa in 1948. While attending a professional school in Kyoto to obtain a radiologist's license, he began to participate in a Brethren meeting where he was eventually baptized. Returning to Okinawa, Nakahara worked as an X-ray technician in a local hospital. While actively participating as a member of an independent church led by a foreign missionary, he began to conduct a home Bible class on his own.

In 1976 Nakahara was unexpectedly hospitalized with a serious illness. Confined to a hospital bed in physical pain and mental depression, he spent much of his time each day in prayer. On one occasion during prayer he had a mystical experience in which Jesus Christ spoke to him directly. This revelatory experience was accompanied by complete healing of both his physical and mental illnesses. Through this experience he realized that his Christian faith until then had been too conceptual and that he had not actually expected God to work in this world. As a result of this moving experience, Nakahara decided to offer the remainder of his life to Christian missionary activity.

In the fall of 1977, he resigned from his job as a public servant and established an independent Christian fellowship. Shortly after his decision to become engaged in full-time Christian work, various charismatic phenomena—such as speaking in tongues, prophecy, and healing—began to accompany his ministry. Many people suffering from mental and emotional illness also found release through exorcisms performed by Nakahara. As news of these miracles began to circulate, many who suffered from various pains, illnesses, and troubles began to come to his church in search of healing.

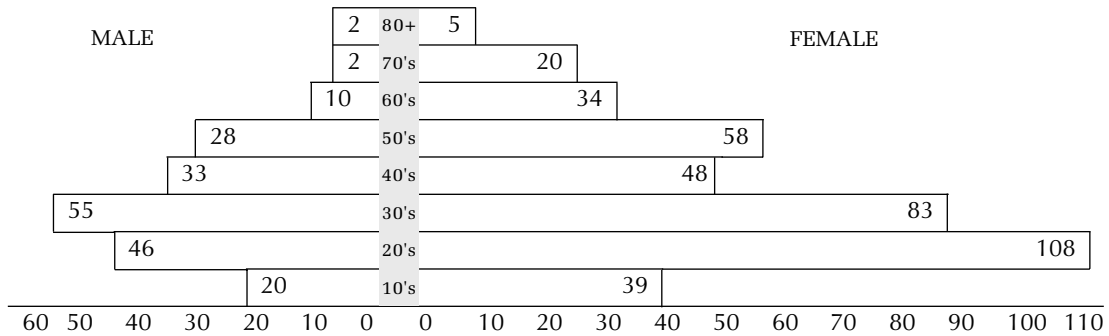
OCEC was registered with the government in 1985 as an independent religious organization (*shūkyō hōjin*). The church continued to grow rapidly and recorded scores of baptisms in the mid-1980s, expanding through branch churches in sev-

eral other locations in Okinawa. At the present time, OCEC consists of six branch churches and two mission outreach centers. It also operates several communal living situations (brother-houses for men and sister-houses for women) where several unmarried members live together and take care of those possessed by demons (i.e., people with mental illness). Within OCEC there are also a number of affiliated groups organized according to age, occupation, and residence. For example, there are nine groups for women, twelve home cell-groups, two groups for junior and senior high school students, a gospel-folk singing group, and an association for street missionaries. None of the pastors graduated from a theological school and only a few are college graduates. Some were called *ochikobore* (dropouts) or *bōsōzoku* (reckless motorcyclists) in their school days.

As may be seen in Table 1, men and women in their 20s and 30s constitute the majority of the adherents, but many women in their 50s and 60s also actively participate. The occupational background and social status of members varies considerably, including former gangsters and prostitutes, college students, policemen, company managers, and university professors. Within OCEC, however, secular or social status holds no authority. Rather, authority rests in Nakahara and the pastors under him, all of whom are expected to live in humility. Members address one another as “brother” or “sister,” and secular titles such as “president” or “professor” are deliberately excluded.

At the evangelical meetings held each Sunday afternoon and Wednesday evening, pastors preach sermons and members give their personal testimonies. Each service concludes with prayers for healing. Usually, all those in attendance raise their hands high and pray enthusiastically. A time for individual counseling and exorcism is held after each service. These heal-

Table 1. The Age Structure of OCEC Membership



ing services, as well as early morning services (5:30 a.m.), were introduced in the mid-1980s following the pattern of a number of Korean churches, particularly Yongi Cho’s Yoido Full Gospel Church. Church leaders also perform a special ceremony for those members who wish to destroy household idols, such as the *ihai* (ancestral tablets), *butsudan* (household Buddhist altar), or various kinds of amulets.

THE CONTEXT: OKINAWAN SHAMANISM

Although OCEC regards ancestor veneration and traditional religious ceremonies as idolatrous and encourages members to burn their ancestral tablets, it does not deny the reality of the spirit world—either demonic spirits or the work of the Holy Spirit. In fact, these spiritual realities are accepted with utmost seriousness. In other words, the shamanistic spirit-world beliefs of indigenous Okinawan religion are preserved to a large extent in the cosmology and soteriology of OCEC. It is the competitive relationship with folk shamans that has created the dynamic or energy for this church to grow so rapidly.

In Okinawa there are many folk shamans referred to by various local names such as *munushiri*, *ugansa* or *kankakarya*, but most

popularly known as *yuta*. Since this name first appeared in eighteenth-century historical documents, Yuta have been persecuted by political authorities. Even today they are scorned by the majority of intellectuals and often become the target of criticism in the mass media. Nevertheless, they still are widely supported by the inhabitants of Okinawa who continue to request their religious services. Although there are some Yuta who are men, for the most these shamans are women and serve a clientele that consists largely of women. In the 1960s, W. P. Lebra estimated that there were about 1500 Yuta in the Okinawan islands. While the total number has probably decreased since then, one can observe the “birth” of many young Yuta even in urban areas. In Yakena, a local village in the middle of the main island of Okinawa, out of a population of 5,483, I confirmed the presence of nine Yuta (eight women and one man), and about ten Yuta-like persons in 1986. Of that number only four were popular Yuta with a clientele that visited them every day.

Scholars have observed a pattern of several steps in the process of becoming a Yuta. The process begins when an individual is possessed by a spirit and manifests an unusual set of mental and physical symptoms, such as visual or auditory hallucina-

tions, sleepwalking, chronic illness, insomnia, and a decrease in appetite. In Okinawa this is referred to as *kamidari*, but throughout most of Japan this phenomenon is known as *kamigakari*. These symptoms are regarded as a sign that a particular ancestor or deity (*chiji*) wants to be worshipped and cared for. If the possessed person accepts the demands of the *chiji* and the call to become a shaman, the negative effects of the spirit gradually diminish and are transformed into positive spiritual powers. The *chiji* then becomes a guardian spirit of the newborn shaman. Clients expect Yuta to perform a number of different services, including fortune-telling, prayers of health and wealth, healing, providing spiritual explanations for misfortune, and to act as a medium and transmit messages from the world of the dead. A shaman often enters an

altered state of consciousness to perform these roles and provide these services. This shamanistic background cannot be ignored if we want to have an accurate understanding of the OCEC.

THE SPIRIT WORLD OF OCEC: AN ANALYSIS OF TESTIMONIES

In order to delineate more clearly the characteristics of OCEC, I would like to turn to an analysis of the testimonies given by members at a variety of church meetings. More than 300 "testimony tapes" have been recorded and distributed by the mother church. The tapes vary in length, but on the average are about one hour. Table 2 lists examples of testimony tape titles that were determined by church leaders and Table 3 presents the basic content of the 50 tapes (20

Table 2. Examples of OCEC Testimony Tape Titles

Men

An attempt to kill my father; Separation from my wife; Adultery.
 Militarism; Communism; Betrayed by my intended wife.
 Incest; Depression; A broken heart; Revocation of a driver's license.
 As a son of a Yuta (folk shaman).
 Even though I had been a gangster.
 Aiming a gun at my parents; Having a neurotic wife.
 Being teased; An irritable father; Despair; Attempting suicide.
 Hatred for my mother; Impurity; Remaining in Darkness.
 So depraved that I cried out, "I want to be truly human."
 Saved from vacillation.

Women

An alcoholic husband; An obstinate mother-in-law; In complicated human relationships.
 With an alcoholic husband and debt-entangled son, about to commit suicide.
 Deceived; Absorbed in Yoga; Going to India; Experiencing mysterious phenomena.

Giving credit to a Yuta for fifteen years; Unwilling marriage; Hatred; Being annoyed by mysterious phenomena.
 The loss of my mother in early childhood; My father's mental illness; Hatred for my foster mother; An epileptic daughter.
 Inferiority complex; A barmaid; Neurosis after childbirth; Almost killed my child.
 My daughter was afflicted by demons.
 Attempting suicide twice; Experimenting with many religious groups; Kamidari (indigenous shamanic syndrome).
 An impure childhood; Bestiality; Evil deeds.
 My husband's adultery; Quarrels with my husband; Tempted by another man; Esoteric Buddhism; Attempting suicide.
 Hatred of my parents-in-law; Believing in a Yuta; In the end, my daughter-in-law and I were afflicted by *Majimun* (demons).
 Nightmares coming true; Becoming able to see the spirits.
 Deliverance from the lusts of the flesh.
 Taking care of my demon-afflicted mother.
 Recurring uterine cancer; My son's asthma; A domestic skirmish.

men, 30 women) randomly selected for analysis. On the basis of this testimony analysis, I would like to discuss three important issues: 1) problems related to spiritual experiences; 2) problems related to an individual's awareness of sin; and 3) problems associated with the affirmation and denial of prevailing worldly values.

First, there are many testimonies in which individuals relate experiences with demons. Some vividly express the complicated feelings of possessed individuals when their demons were exorcised. These testimonies indicate that some members of this church continue to share much of the

spiritual worldview of traditional Okinawan folk shamans. Indeed, some adherents refer to Nakahara as "a Yuta (shaman)-like pastor." By recognizing the reality of demonic spirits and attributing their sickness or misfortune to certain external objects or agents, individuals find release from their sense of guilt. This process may be referred to as the "externalization of the causes of misfortune," and is very similar to what occurs in indigenous Okinawan religion. This transfer of responsibility from the individual to some external object is apparent in the frequently used expressions in testimonials. These include, for example, "an evil idea

Table 3. The Contents of OCEC Testimony Tapes (50 cases)

	men (20)	women (30)	total (50)
SINS			
awareness of one's own sins	18	24	42
sexual sins or impurity	15	20	35
sins of hatred or envy	11	23	34
sins of arrogance or vanity	13	14	27
DESPAIR			
empty life or enervation	8	10	18
attempted suicide	5	7	12
ILLNESS			
one's own physical illness	5	9	14
family member's physical illness	3	10	13
one's own mental illness	7	11	18
family member's mental illness	3	10	13
FAMILY RESTORATION			
Experiences of Spirits demons	8	15	23
the Holy Spirit	9	18	27
(by feeling or sensation)	4	2	6
the Holy Spirit	2	9	11
(seeing the Lord or hearing his voice)			
RELIGIOUS INVOLVEMENT PRIOR TO OCEC			
with folk shamans	6	11	17
with other religious groups	4	5	9
with other Christian churches	2	2	4
yoga, special diets, psychotherapy, etc.	2	4	6

entered me," "a quick temper invaded me," and "Satan put fear into my mind." In sermons, Nakahara himself states plainly that *omoi* (thinking or an idea) is *rei* (a spirit).

In spite of considerable common ground, OCEC terminology and methods for expelling the causes of misfortune vary considerably from those of traditional folk shamans. While folk shamans differentiate between various particular causes of misfortune, OCEC understands misfortune to be the work of a single agent: Satan or the Devil. Furthermore, these evil works will be destroyed by the authority of the one and absolute Creator. In other words, this church rejects the multiple causes of evil and misfortune that have been recognized traditionally in Okinawan religion, consolidating them under the one name of Satan.

The testimony tapes not only narrate experiences with demons, but also with the Holy Spirit. Although OCEC carefully avoids regarding glossolalia or the gift of prophecy as proof of salvation, there are a number of testimonies that contain claims to have "seen the Lord" or "heard his voice." These experiences of the Holy Spirit are usually expressed emotionally or with reference to physical sensations such as "seeing light," "feeling warmth," or that it was "such a pleasant feeling that it cannot be put into words." Both Nakahara and the other pastors also acknowledge their direct communication with God and claim that "this church decides everything on the basis of prayer." Individuals speak directly to God through prayer and are given specific answers to their various questions. This decision-making process is quite similar to the shamanistic divine judgment (*hanji*) practiced by Yuta. Nakahara recognizes that folk shamans can also cure illness or foretell future events, but he insists that they are all messengers of Satan and do this only to tempt us. For this reason, OCEC stresses that members must be able to discern between the experience of demons and that

of the Holy Spirit. The path to spiritual discernment is explained with reference to everyday life.

This leads to our second area of concern, namely, the emphasis placed on the awareness of sin. Members are not only expected to abstain from such practices as drinking and smoking, but are instructed to live in purity, free from all sin and impure acts. Sexual impurity, arrogance, and hatred must be removed from one's everyday life. It is thought that "demons swarm around impure persons just as flies swarm around decaying food." Particular attention is given to the danger of such sexual sins as adultery, premarital sex, homosexuality, prostitution, self-abuse, and even playful sexual activity in one's early childhood. According to OCEC pastors, the real proof of being filled with the Holy Spirit is the ability to confess and repent of these sins.

The third issue I wish to consider concerns the church's stand on worldly values. Nakahara frequently repeats in his messages that "neither money, knowledge, honor, nor health can make us ultimately happy." His sermons also contain many references to the second coming of Christ and the necessity of preparing for the rapture. These eschatological ideas, however, are not always understood or equally emphasized by most members. Eschatological ideas were not mentioned in any of the 50 testimony tapes analyzed in this study.

It is rather significant that the rejection of worldly values, such as wealth or social status, is related to the strong yearning of many adherents for the traditional bonds of family and kinship. In fact, OCEC plays an important role in restoring these bonds. As summarized in Table 3, many people claimed that the Christian faith had saved their families from collapse. The idea of God's universal love is used to repair the family bonds that had been torn through sin. Here, it is also worth noting that the traditional idea of the subordination of women in

the family is being tacitly reinforced.

CHARISMATIC CHRISTIANITY,
NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS, AND
MODERNIZATION

It should be apparent from the discussion above that the activities of this church can be linked to the relatively recent worldwide growth of the “Holy Spirit Movement” in Christianity. As the same time, however, we cannot ignore the close relationship between OCEC and the indigenous spirit world of folk shamanism. One could even regard this charismatic Christian group as a revitalization movement of traditional spirit-world beliefs and practices. We could even go so far as to say that these movements are actually contributing to the “globalization” of shamanism.

In concluding this essay, I would like to consider the role of OCEC in light of the social science debates concerning the relationship between new religious movements and modernization. In other words, we need to consider whether OCEC activities enable individuals to adapt to modernity or encourage them to reject or transcend modernity.

There have been many lively debates surrounding the social significance of new religious movements since World War II, often focusing on whether they are positively or negatively related to the modernization of Japan. Dichotomous concepts, such as “pro-modernization” (or “adaptation to modernity”) and “anti-modernization” (or “rejection of modernity”), have become the key terms used in these discussions. New religions that grew rapidly in the 1950s and 1960s, such as Sōka Gakkai, Risshō Kōsei Kai, and PL Kyōdan, attracted considerable attention because they effectively rationalized and modernized every aspect of their doctrine, practice, and organization. According to some observers, this process of rationalization followed the

change in Japanese consciousness brought about by rapid economic growth. Successful adaptation to changes in the larger society and the subsequent numerical growth of these groups have been attributed to their efforts to rationalize both doctrine and practice. In short, by encouraging “disenchantment” (or emancipation from magic) and “pro-modernization” these groups came to be regarded as typical examples of “adaptation to modernity.”

On the other hand, the so-called “new new religions” (*shin shin shūkyō*) or “magical-spiritualistic new religions” that have become prominent since the mid-1970s have been understood as being negatively related to modernity. The approach of these new spiritualistic religions was interpreted as a resistance of the masses (who are trying to restore the real sense of life) or as a reaction of younger people toward the spiritual poverty of this “affluent society.”

It is necessary to note, however, that in reality each of these religious movements is trying to be persuasive by relating positively to modernization in some respects, but appear to be negatively related to modernization when they begin to deal with practical problems. This complex struggle between the “pro-modern” tendency and “anti-modern” tendency can also be observed in OCEC.

The perception of the world in OCEC is more suited to modern society than that of folk shamans. To be compatible with modern society, a world-view needs to be objective and systematic. Its most distinctive characteristic would be a conscious intention to discover specific laws or principles that constitute the cosmos through reflection and analysis. In OCEC, for example, the diverse causes of misfortune recognized by folk shamans are systematized and consolidated into one cause known as “the work of Satan.” The complexities of the spiritual world are then arranged in simple pairs or dichotomies, such as “good versus evil,”

“God versus Satan,” or “purity versus impurity.” This more rationalized understanding of the spirit world is more compatible with the orientation of younger Japanese who have received a modern education.

Modern society also requires individuals who have a sense of personal identity and responsibility. In addition to providing a more systematic worldview, OCEC also cultivates individuals who recognize that they are accountable for their behavior. The stress on such moral values as honesty, modesty, and purity, has the effect of creating a strong personality that copes with challenges of a competitive society. There are some members of this church who even manage human potential seminars and see no contradiction between their faith and the full development of individuals. Folk shamans, on the other hand, emphasize that individuals are largely in the hands of “fate” or “destiny” (often referred by the word *umari*). This fatalistic orientation to life permeates the conventional explanations of the causes of misfortune. Individuals suffer misfortune as victims of some external spiritual agents and personal responsibility is seldom considered. OCEC, however, creatively combines the indigenous method of focusing on the external agent of misfortune with the modern demand that individuals accept personal responsibility. This is apparent in OCEC stress on the need for personal confession and repentance. Although Nakahara exhorts his followers to keep separate from the values of the secular world, it is apparent that adherents have not discarded their aspirations to be active in the world and to seek personal fulfillment or self-realization.

At the same time, nevertheless, OCEC encourages the recovery of traditional family relationships and ties with the local community. It rejects the preoccupation with individual achievement so common in competitive modern society and continues

to support traditional family values, including the subordination of women. Any discussion of the family and kinship relationships in Okinawan society in the late twentieth century must take into account the considerable influence of two momentous events: the Okinawan Battle of 1945 (referred to as the “iron storm”) and the reversion of Okinawa to Japan in 1972. The testimonies I analyzed for this study were filled with numerous examples of pathological family relationships that had been caused either by the war or the rapid social changes after the reversion. Many people are bewildered at the disruption of family relationships and the collapse of local communities due to rapid modernization. OCEC’s stress on “loving” relationships is helping to restore these traditional family bonds.

From this brief discussion it should be apparent that OCEC is providing members with various methods for coping with the many problems that are emerging in the course of Okinawa’s modernization. The role of OCEC, however, cannot be simply categorized as either “pro-modern” or “anti-modern.” Rather, there is a complicated mixture of pro-modern and anti-modern tactics at various levels of this group’s operation. This observation is probably true of many other new religious movements throughout East Asia. In increasingly urbanized societies, religious groups have to create their own methods to cope with the soteriological demands of people who are struggling with both the values of traditional society and those of modernity. In spite of their variation in form, all contemporary religious movements are deeply rooted in the agony of a *fin de siècle* world.

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