

The Rise of a Japanese “New New Religion” — Themes in the Development of Agonshū —

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Agonshū 阿含宗 is one of a number of religious movements that have come into prominence in recent years in Japan and which are often referred to by Japanese scholars as “new New Religions” (*shinshinshūkyō* 新新宗教). Probably the best known of these “new New Religions” is Mahikari 真光, which strongly criticizes Western medicine, interprets misfortunes as a result of possession from malevolent spirits that are often ancestral, and believes that all problems can be resolved through a process of spiritual healing and purification.

Others that incorporate similar themes include Byakkō Shinkōkai 白光真宏会, which, besides some of the spiritual purification themes found in Mahikari, adds the dimension of a campaign for world peace through prayer, and Shinreikyō □□□, which claims the ability to produce miracles, to heal the sick and to lead people to higher stages of evolution through the harnessing of divine power transmitted to its followers through the mediumship of its founder. Others still affirm a Buddhist stance, such as Agonshū, the focus of this article, and Shinnyoen 真如苑, which will also be discussed to some degree later. Both of these combine themes from esoteric Buddhism with ancestral concepts and beliefs that are deeply rooted in the Japanese folk tradition.

The “new New Religions,” of whom the above-mentioned are but a selection, have attracted attention focusing on common characteristics such as their rapid growth and high profile activity, their charismatic leadership, and their syncretic nature, incorporating an emphasis on miracles and spiritual causation, which translates into an anti-modern irrationalism rooted in Japanese folk religious traditions. In particular, analysis has

focused on the charismatic founders and leaders of such movements and the relationship that exists between this charisma and the Japanese shamanic tradition.¹

Certainly when looking at Agonshū one cannot but be conscious of the high profile taken by Kiriya Seiyū 桐山靖雄, its founder and leader, and of the reverence accorded his every utterance and action by the membership. The importance of his personality for the growth and development of Agonshū is beyond question. Yet other aspects of this religion (and other of the “new New Religions”) appear, in my view, equally worth looking at. What interested me from my first contacts with Agonshū was the way it seemed to straddle two seemingly contradictory themes and to use both in tandem to great effect. Like Mahikari and others of the latest wave of religious movements in Japan, Agonshū uses folk concepts from the Japanese tradition and appears to have its roots in that particularized and localized religious environment. However, it has not merely flourished in a modern, urban setting but has taken great pains to adopt the most advanced aspects of modernity available to this society while expressing concepts of universality that appear to transcend the limitations of the localized environment.

It is my view that this apparent dichotomy between an anti-modernism centered in one localized tradition, and a modernity that points towards universality, is an important key for understanding such religious movements. As this article will seek to make clear, such elements that appear from the outside to be dichotomous are not at all so when viewed from the perspective of Agonshū itself. Rather, they form a continuity, working together to create a whole, a world view which provides such movements with a sense of legitimacy, identity, and centrality in religious terms. This in turn serves to fuel and augment a sense of increasing confidence which is transmitted to its followers and gives them the psychological tools through which to deal with, and transcend, problems on both personal and social levels and to function positively in contemporary Japanese society. At the same time, through the process of being able to deal with the issue of life in contemporary society, members are provided with a frame-

¹ The term *shinshinshūkyō* (“new New Religions”) appears to have come into use around 1981. For an analysis of some of the themes on these religions, and for an outline of some of the research done on them by Japanese scholars, see NUMATA 1988, pp. i–iii, 21–126. The main work on any of these religions in English is DAVIS 1980 on Mahikari (written before the term “new New Religions” was coined) which deals particularly with the themes of miracles, anti-modernism, and irrationality, while Byakkō Shinkōkai has been discussed by PYE 1986. At present, however, the overall study of this phenomenon is at a rather undeveloped stage.

work through which to view and understand their cultural past and the traditions that still exist in their consciousness even as they seem to be out of step with the changes of society. In other words, the combination of elements that superficially seem to be dichotomous is in fact quite consistent.

Agonshū will be used a model because it makes such great efforts to draw attention to itself, and almost demands analysis. Perhaps the most spectacular of all contemporary Japanese religions in the events it holds, it has achieved a prominence that is perhaps out of proportion to its current size. It also is extremely ambitious for itself and its members and has been especially forceful in its claims of universalism, as well as being extremely critical of the religious establishment in Japan. Furthermore it is probably the most modern of all religious movements in Japan (or, for that matter, anywhere) in its use of state of the art technological means such as videos and telecommunications satellites to put across its messages.

The message it puts across, however, is that it is a very old, traditional religious movement. In fact it claims to be a return to the true and original Buddhism of Śākyamuni the historical Buddha as (it believes) is expounded in the Āgama (Japanese: *Agon*) sūtras from which it takes its name. It also has a cosmology with obviously Japanese folk elements, in which the spirits of the dead afflict the living and threaten their welfare, and uses overtly Japanese religious symbols while proclaiming them to be universal. Further, Kiriyaama himself appears to straddle different worlds and themes. He “sees” and communes with spirits, receives visitations from Buddhist figures, is said to have the power to release the souls of the dead from their turmoil, but is equally at ease talking to the media or holding a microphone and delivering talks on positive thinking.

In short, Agonshū appears to manifest all the diverse and apparently contradictory themes associated with the “new New Religions.” It has also grown remarkably fast, gaining some three hundred thousand members, many of them young, since its founding in 1978, and has ambitions to reach one million within a very few years. Its appeal has been noted in the Japanese press. The Mainichi Daily News, in an article entitled “Agonshū—the Original Buddhism for a Modern World” stated:

It attracts young people. Kiriyaama Seiyū consciously interprets Buddhism into a language that young people can relate to—thus the satellite broadcasts, the modern temple building, his friendly sermon and his approachable manner. All this adds up to a user friendly religion appropriate to the needs of the modern Japan (Oct. 15, 1987, p. 5).

The “user friendly” epithet is quite striking. Agonshū states that its tradition dates back 2500 years to the historical Buddha, it has a distinctly pre-modern view of causation rooted in Japanese folk religious ideas, yet it is described in the terminology of the computer age!

This is not mere journalistic license: there is distinct sense in which Agonshū sees and publicizes itself as a “computer age” religion of the future presenting the truthful original essence of Buddhism. Moreover, its whole ethos is geared towards making its members feel good and at ease in the Agonshū framework of interpretation and action. A computer is called “user friendly” because it gives customer a sense of confidence when using it and enables them to feel they can achieve something with it. In similar ways, too, Agonshū aims to offer its members such a service.

In order to suggest how a religion may be both described in computer-esque terminology, be seen as viable for young, modern Japanese and, at the same time, be so “anti-modern” and folk-oriented, my examination will follow two channels. One will be to describe two major Agonshū religious events so as to provide a view of the religion in action. Following on from this, a brief outline of its historical and theoretical developments will illustrate the processes whereby Agonshū has come to its “user friendly” present. This will be followed by an analysis of meanings incorporated in the rituals and history and some suggestions concerning their potential relevance for the study of the “new” New Religions in general.

Agonshū Festivals and Rituals: Religion in Action

The event for which Agonshū has become best known in Japan is its annual *hoshi matsuri* 星まつり (“Star Festival”) held at Yamashina outside Kyoto on February 11th. This has rapidly become one of the most spectacular and dramatic events in the Japanese religious calendar, attracting over half a million visitors each year to witness the burning of two huge fires, each over ten meters across and six meters high in an esoteric ritual. It is widely publicized in advance through the use of posters displayed at stations and other public places, by door to door leafletting and by advertisement in the press and on television. The following description is based on my observations made at the festival both in 1987 and 1988 and seeks to provide a general overview from which later conclusions may be drawn. It is not intended as a comprehensive analysis of the multiple images, symbols, and motifs that are on view on this day.

The festival lasts all day, from around 7 A.M. until 5 P.M. Everything is organized with precision on a mass scale and with the joyful participation

of volunteer members so frequently found in the activities of many new religions.² Every possible technological means is used to make sure things run smoothly and to transmit all that happens to those unable to come to the site. Cameras film the proceedings (for later transmission on regional television throughout Japan) and (starting in 1988) a television satellite transmission station ensures that the events will be beamed to other Agonshū centers across the country. Volunteers use two-way radios and headphones so that they can keep in contact with each other and keep the crowds moving smoothly. This provides a striking image in the combination of traditional and modern themes, for many of those wearing headphones and using two way radios are wearing the traditional clothing of *yamabushi*.³

The precise organization of the festival starts when one reaches Kyoto. Fleets of buses provide transportation from railway stations in Kyoto to the festival site, where people are met by happi-coated Agonshū volunteers with the words *o-kaerinasai* (“welcome back”). This greeting, also used by Tenrikyō 天理教, Shinnyoen, and other Japanese religious groups, is intended to convey the notion that one is, rather than going somewhere, actually returning to the roots of original belief. In Agonshū’s view this return is to the roots and origin of Buddhism, which it claims to represent in the modern day.

Although Agonshū views itself as representing the true, authentic and original Buddhism of Śākyamuni as expounded in the pre-Mahāyāna Āgama sūtras, the festival incorporates many eclectic features from esoteric Buddhism, from Japanese mountain religion, and from Shinto. Many members, including Kiriyama himself, are dressed as *yamabushi*, and tend the two huge fires which are central to the festival. These fires represent the two maṇḍala worlds of esoteric Buddhism, the *taizōkai* 胎藏界 (“womb world”) and *kongōkai* 金剛界 (“diamond world”), and are fueled by millions of *gomagi* 護摩木, wooden sticks which people have purchased and on which they have written prayers, imprecations, and requests for help. Such fire rites of course occur in Shinto, esoteric Buddhism, and *yamabushi* contexts in Japan. Agonshū’s combines motifs from all, but places them on a scale far larger than usual. The area around the fires is cordoned off with

² The “mass event” and “happy participant” dimensions have, of course, been given prominence as reasons for their success and popularity in many writings on the new religions. See McFARLAND 1967, pp. 71–96, esp. pp. 91–92; THOMSEN 1963, pp. 18–29, esp. pp. 20–22.

³ Later in this article I shall return to an analysis of such themes and images, but suffice it to say that everyone I know who went to the festival in 1988 commented on this image and had taken photographs of these electronic age *yamabushi*.

shimenawa and other Shintoesque symbols commonly used in Japanese religious rituals to define sacred space. The rite takes place before an altar and display of offerings encompassing both Shinto and Buddhist features.

The two fires have two different functions that form interlocking parts of Agonshū's belief system and message. The *taizō* fire is for *gedatsu* 解脱, the liberation of afflicted souls of the dead that are, in Agonshū, seen as spiritual hindrances that impede and cause problems for the living, while the *kongō* is for *hōshō* 宝生, giving life to the inner wishes of people and transforming them into reality. The *gomagi* are placed in two separate piles according to category and are carried to the fire site itself and burnt by members. The two themes interlock so that the spiritual interference of the ancestors as a hindrance to personal progress which is removed through the *taizō* fire is complemented by the externalization of personal wishes epitomized in the *kongō*.

The two fires thus encapsulate two major themes in Japanese religion in general, the performance of ritual for and veneration of the ancestors (*senzokuyō* 先祖供養, *sosen sūhai* 祖先崇拜) and the achievement of personal wishes and welfare in the present (*genze riyaku* 現世利益). As such, the ritual itself may be said to have a specifically Japanese religious orientation closely related to the core of popular Japanese tradition. Both these themes are of major importance in Agonshū's teaching and, as will be demonstrated later, work together to provide, on a number of levels, a corporate and cohesive world view tailored to the needs of Japanese Agonshū members (and, of course, potential members).

The explicitly Japanese orientations and connotations are underlined also by the date of the festival: February 11th is National Foundation Day (*kenkoku kinenbi* 建国記念日), a public holiday with distinctly nationalistic undertones that was proscribed during the Occupation but which has subsequently been restored. The nationalistic elements are further emphasized by frequent references to the souls of past Emperors, and by the use of culturally loaded terms such as *Yamato no kuni* 大和の国 and *yamato-damashii* 大和魂 (the "spirit of Yamato") in the prayers and invocations that are chanted.⁴

There is, however, another theme to the festival besides these overtly Japanese ones. The festival is also held for the benefit of world peace (*sekai*

⁴ Some observers I talked to, especially Westerners, were rather perturbed by these elements of nationalism. There is a degree to which the posturing, the evocations of national symbols, and the rather martial music may cause unease. Personally I feel that it is little more than posturing in a rather spectacular setting, although one has to remain aware that postured nationalism, by playing on emotional feelings, could become something more extreme.

heiwa 世界平和), a theme that, according to Agonshū spokesmen, unites both fires and which is a major element in all Agonshū activity. The religion contends that it is actively leading a campaign for world peace through its rituals. Though there is no fire for world peace, Agonshū hand-outs given to people at the site state that this is one of the things that may be prayed for with the *gomagi*. Later in this article I shall return to the implications of this concept of world peace taken in context with the more concretely Japanese elements of the festival.

The Hoshi Matsuri itself is a visual sign of the movement's rapid growth and economic strength: the size of the fires is determined by the number of *gomagi* purchased (at 100 yen apiece) and offered. The prototype of these fire ceremonies was held by Agonshū (at the time under an earlier name, the Kannon Jikeikai 観音慈恵会) in 1970 near Mount Fuji. At that time little more than two hundred people attended and some one hundred thousand *gomagi* were burnt. The festival has been held at Yamashina since 1976, soon after the movement acquired the present site, and has grown yearly. In 1979, for the first time, one million *gomagi* were burnt, while by 1986 the number had reached eighteen million, with more than half a million visitors to the site (MURŌ 1987, pp. 26–33; YAJIMA 1985, pp. 15–26). In 1988 the figure was over thirty million (CHŪGAI NIPPŌ, Feb. 17th, 1987, p. 14).

All this adds up to a spectacularly impressive ritual, heightened by the large teams of Agonshū members in *yamabushi* clothing hurling *gomagi* onto the fires to the accompaniment of chanting and drumming and loud, dramatic music (composed specially for the occasion) amplified through huge arrays of loudspeakers. The festival acts quite naturally as a potent and alluring advertising rite for potential members, as well as a recurrent exhibition to members both of the strength of Agonshū and its increasing popularity. This quite naturally serves to underline the movement's view of its own importance and to encourage its assertions of paramountcy.

Although the fires themselves are the most immediately visible elements in the festival, there are two other important charismatic foci present that are vital to Agonshū and which function to unite the diverse themes within the religion. One is Kiriya himself, while the other is Agonshū's main object of worship, a casket at the center of the altar containing what is, according to Agonshū, a genuine bone relic of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, presented in April 1986 to Kiriya by President Jayewardene of Sri Lanka. Kiriya, as the main active participant in all important Agonshū rites, oversees the entire festival in an impressive manner, marching around the site constantly flanked by a phalanx of attendants, dispensing

blessings and exuding an air of power and authority.

Agonshū's claim to be a return to true Buddhism is based on Kiriyaama's teachings (which will be discussed further in the next section of this article) and on his assertion that he has discovered its true essence through his understanding of the Āgama sūtras. Underlining this assertion to truth is the relic presented by Present Jayewardene, which has been at the center of the altar in the 1987 and 1988 festivals. Known as the *shinsei busshari* 真正仏舍利 ("true relic of the Buddha") but usually called by the abbreviated form *busshari* by members, it has, since April 1986, become the main object of veneration for members. They obtain a small representation of it in a miniature copy of the main casket and use it as the focus of their prayers and religious activities at home. The *busshari* itself is believed to have immense powers, embodying the Buddha's virtues and wisdom, which are "transformed" into relics via the performance of esoteric rituals by Kiriyaama. The power of the *busshari*, according to Agonshū, is able to unite the two central themes of the Hoshi Matsuri, for it can both liberate the souls of the dead and turn them into realized Buddhas (*jōbutsu* 成仏), can remove spiritual hindrances, and can allow people to realize their wishes (AGONSHŪ 1986, pp. 24–31; MURŌ 1987, pp. 219–241).

The presentation of the *busshari* has been a seminal event in Agonshū's history with repercussions on members' religious practice and belief structures, as well as on Agonshū ritual in general. It has also given tremendous impetus to Agonshū's claims that it represents true Buddhism in the modern world and has fueled the organization's growing self-assurance and sense of legitimation. Kiriyaama's insistence that he alone has found the true essence of Buddhism has been legitimated, at least in members' eyes, by the presentation, which Agonshū has widely publicized.⁵ Photographs of Jayewardene together with Kiriyaama and the casket appear in Agonshū leaflets and publicity throughout the country. According to Agonshū this action was completely unsolicited and represented the approval and recognition, by the government of a country with a long Buddhist tradition, of Kiriyaama's adherence to true Buddhism.

⁵ See the remarks made by Kiriyaama himself in an interview in MURŌ 1987, p. 230. Agonshū people at the Tokyo Agonshū center have told me that some friendly contacts were made through Sri Lankan Buddhist organizations before the event and it is almost certain that these influenced the passing of the casket to Kiriyaama. It is not known quite what the Sri Lankans make of the subsequent claims made by Agonshū for the relic, although one doubts whether they expected what has transpired. All my attempts to get information from the Sri Lankan government via letters to Embassies and government offices have elicited no responses so far.

Of course there is, in Buddhism, a long history of the acquisition of relics purported to come from the Buddha and other Buddhist figures, and Japan has been no exception to this. Indeed, other such relics have come from Sri Lanka and elsewhere in recent years. However, Kiriya is adamant that all other relics but his and one other, presented to Japan by the King of Thailand at the turn of the century, are false and symbolic of the failures of the religious establishment in this age. Other religious groups besides Agonshū, he states, are praying to false relics, pieces of stone or sand (AGONSHŪ 1986, pp. 28–31; Mainichi Daily News, Oct. 15th, 1987, p. 5). This veneration of false relics can be seen, also, as a metaphor for their following of false doctrines and failure to see that the truth of Buddhism lies in the Āgama sūtras.⁶

The *busshari* has become the main focus of worship not just at the Hoshi Matsuri, but has also given rise to (or, at least, become a major focus at) other new events. Since April 1987 a monthly *goma* rite has been held on the first day of the month in its Tokyo headquarters, which is simultaneously broadcast to twenty other Agonshū centers throughout Japan via satellite. This is proudly emphasized as being the first use of such methods by a Japanese religious movement.⁷ This event, the *tsuitachi engi hōshō goma* 朔日縁起宝生護摩, interpolates the power of the *busshari* to grant wishes with the charismatic force of Kiriya himself, and consists of two interlocking parts which illustrate the messages and themes which Agonshū provides its followers.

The rite takes place early in the morning, starting at 6.30 A.M. Nonetheless it attracts crowds of two thousand or more people (as well as those watching on screens at other centers in Japan). What follows is a description of the rite I attended on 1 July 1987, but is similar to the other monthly *tsuitachi goma* rituals that have been held (in the Mainichi Daily News, October 15th 1987, p. 5, there is a similar description). The first part consisted of a *goma* rite, performed by Kiriya before the relic. Excellent

⁶ In 1965, for example, Shinnyoen received, from Thailand, ashes said to be those of the Buddha. It also proclaimed its surprise at being so presented, reasoning it to be because Shinnyoen is true Buddhism (SHINNYOEN 1977, p. 82). See also CHŪGAI NIPPŌ, June 19th 1987, p. 12, for a report of Buddha relics being presented, along with a message from President Jayewardene, by Sri Lankan monks to the temple Tōsen-ji in Tokyo.

⁷ Since February 1988 the Star Festival (Hoshi Matsuri) has also been broadcast by satellite. When I discussed this use of telecommunications with members involved in publicity and communications at Agonshū's Tokyo center they were extremely proud that their religion was the first in this field. Interestingly they were extremely aware of methods used by American television evangelists and talked at length about the comparative use of techniques (interviews conducted in Tokyo, 1 July 1987).

stage presentation served to make to this into a dramatic affair. The lights were dimmed and Kiriyama, dressed in brown Buddhist robes, came out onto a large dais which contained a Buddhist altar with the *busshari* at its center. His entry was marked by a reverberating drum beat. The rite lasted about fifteen minutes, during which time those present chanted prayers and mantras while Kiriyama performed various esoteric actions, including mudras, and consigned a number of *gomagi* to the flames.

After this the fire was extinguished, Kiriyama left, and the lights were turned up. Shortly after, he returned, this time wearing yellow robes. Whereas during the *goma* his face was stern and solemn, on his return it was smiling and friendly; during the *goma* his back was to the crowd but in the second part he faced it. Taking a microphone, he began a dialogue with the audience as follows:

Kiriyama : *Ogenki desuka* (are you well?)

Audience : *Hai, genki desu* (yes, we are)

However, Kiriyama complained that this was not strongly enough expressed. It did not sound really *genki*. Everyone was encouraged to shout out again, louder, that they were really well. Having worked everyone into a positive mood in this way, Kiriyama began a short sermon on positive thinking and on the pitfalls of negative thought. Such loan words as *mainasu* (minus/negative) and *purasu* (plus/positive) were dotted throughout the talk, with the former condemned with the words:

A minus (negative) human life is a useless life (*mainasu no jinsei wa dame no jinsei desu*).

In contrast, he told everyone to be positive and determined to succeed in all things. He talked about problems he had had earlier in his life and how he had surmounted them: everyone else could do the same. One should focus on creating a sense of self-respect and optimism, through which one could achieve what one wished. Frustrated ambitions were liable to cause personal problems and hence one had to make sure to develop the confidence necessary to attain one's ambitions. He ended with the words: "let us without fail do well" (*kanarazu umaku iku o yaruzo!*) and then got the congregation to shout in unison:

Let's do it! I will certainly succeed! I am blessed with very good luck! I will certainly do well! I will definitely win! (*Sā yaruzo! kanarazu seikō suru! watakushi wa totemo un ga ii no da! kanarazu umaku iku! zettai ni katsu!*)

These five exhortations are regularly chanted at Agonshū meetings and

are also set out in various of its publications, along with the injunction that reciting them regularly will help alleviate one’s problems.⁸ After this recitation everyone clapped and Kiriya left the stage. The whole performance including the *goma* had taken thirty minutes.

There was a striking contrast between the somber religious esotericism of the first part and the happy sermon with its audience participation, which would not have been out of place at a sales convention or a seminar on positive thinking. In a sense one was witnessing a combination of religious ritual and secular advancement, of arcane tradition and positive modernism, welded together into one unit. The unity was provided both by Kiriya’s personal performance and by his message of surmounting one’s problems and succeeding in life. Performed before the *bushari* that is believed to enable one to achieve one’s wishes, the *goma* symbolizes ritual legitimation and approval of those wishes on a spiritual level while the subsequent expression of personal determination to succeed concretizes it on the practical. Thus the religious and traditional dimensions of the ritual combine with the secular and modern nature of the talk to instill a sense of positivism in members’ minds.

The Hoshi Matsuri and the *tsuitachi goma* are by no means the only Agonshū rituals or the limits of its overt actions. It organizes all sorts of group activities as well as personal counseling, and members worship before their own *bushari* at home. However, the two events just described form the core of Agonshū’s most public front at which the general populace encounters the religion and, as such, may be seen as typical examples of Agonshū in action. Both provide a degree of excitement and ritualized drama for participants, and as such are important elements in and symbols of Agonshū’s growth.

However, it would be far too superficial to determine that excitement and the chance to dress up in special clothes are the only things Agonshū has to offer or that its members seek. It does seek to offer those who follow it a structure through which to deal with and express problems and feelings on a number of different levels. Further, this structure has evolved through a series of events in Agonshū’s short history in such a way as to imply that it alone is able to provide true solutions, just as it alone is true Buddhism. In order how to understand how this has come about, and to gain a clearer understanding of how the events I have described have evolved, I will next outline a brief history of Agonshū’s development.

⁸ The five exhortations are, for example, set out in the organization’s youth magazine *Seiren* 70 of 12 December 1987, p. 7, under the title “Positive words guiding us to success” (*seikō ni michibiku purasu no kotoba*) (AGONSHŪ 1987c).

Agonshū's History and Development: A Brief Outline

The history of Agonshū is intricately bound up with the life of Kiriyama who was born Tsutsumi Masuo 堤真寿雄 in January 1921 in Yokohama.⁹ His early life involved, it appears, some poverty and hardship (not an uncommon theme in the lives of the founders of religious movements in Japan) which are at times stressed both by Kiriyama himself and by Agonshū to emphasize an important theme in the movement's message to followers, that all people can gain control of their lives through following the path opened up by the leader. Just as Kiriyama rescued himself from personal problems, so too can the follower. Chief amongst Kiriyama's problems was his arrest and subsequent imprisonment for six months in 1953 for violation of the alcohol tax laws for, in a desperate scheme to make money, he had got involved in the illicit production of alcohol. Later he even contemplated suicide because of business failures when, it is said, a chance finding of a copy of the *Kannongyō* 觀音經 caused him to stop this course of action and turn to a path of religious search (KIRIYAMA 1983, pp. 77–84). He became devoted to Kannon and formed the Kannon Jikeikai, a religious organization devoted to the worship of Kannon in the form of Juntei Kannon 準胝觀音, in August 1954. Juntei Kannon, although no longer the main object of worship in Agonshū since the arrival of the *busshari*, still remains as an important figure of worship.

Subsequently he changed his name to Kiriyama Seiyū and received a lay ordination in the Shingon sect in 1955. From this time onwards he began to undergo various ascetic practices, especially fasting and cold water austerities, and to gather a small group of followers, many of whom have remained with him ever since. Apart from the publication of one book in 1957, Kiriyama appears to have kept a fairly low profile until 1970 when Juntei Kannon appeared to him in a dream and told him to cease the water austerities. His had now eradicated his bad karma and had liberated himself. Henceforth, he was to focus on the practice of esoteric *goma* rites and to become a leader of others.

This dream marks a significant change in direction. Kiriyama changed from being a seeker and, instead, was confirmed as a realized person able to aid and intercede for others. This dream encounter with Juntei Kan-

⁹ Biographical details have been drawn from Kiriyama's own writings, from Agonshū handouts, and from two books (MURŌ 1987, YASHIMA 1985) which are extremely favorable and uncritical accounts. The material has been supplemented by the brief section on Agonshū in NUMATA 1988, pp. 55–61 and by interviews with Agonshū spokespersons and members in Kyoto and Tokyo. As yet no critical biography of Kiriyama and history of Agonshū have been produced.

non (and the fact that it is Kiriyama who has and interprets the dream and its consequences makes no difference to the meaning of the dream in terms of the inner messages it transmits to his followers) provided the impetus and legitimation for Kiriyama to embark on a new course, portraying himself as being in direct contact with entities from the spiritual world. In this new role he started to write extensively, so as to bring his thoughts and perceptions to an ever wider audience. Lists of his extensive publications show that, after the one book in 1957, he wrote nothing else for publication until 1971, from which time several dozen books have appeared and indeed continue to appear at a great rate.¹⁰

The dream also allowed him to describe himself as someone who had “cut” (and, no doubt mindful of his audience used to Westernized words, he uses either the Japanese *kiru* 切る or the loan word *katto suru*) his bad karma and thus became an enlightened person, able to point out the way for others and powerful enough to act on their behalf as an intermediary. In fact, the new path laid out for him was to save all mankind: he had become a teacher with a message and mission for the world (MURŌ, p. 42).

The theme of cutting karma that comes out through this dream continues to be one of major importance in Agonshū’s contemporary teaching and is directly linked to Agonshū’s basic interpretation of problems. All misfortunes and problems that occur to people in the present are, according to Kiriyama’s teaching, caused by events happening in the past. They are the result of bad karma. He uses the Japanese word *innen* 因縁 and the loan word *karuma* カルマ interchangeably. It should be noted that karma is used with wholly negative connotations and appears to be more closely in line with Japanese folk religious preoccupations about the unsettled spirits of the dead having adverse influences on the living than it does to traditional Buddhist concepts.

The importance of this interpretation of events is constantly reiterated throughout Agonshū publications and in Kiriyama’s writings. A companion set of two booklets handed out to visitors at Agonshū centers outlines this issue and the problems that accrue if one does not deal correctly with the spirits of one’s dead ancestors. One of these booklets states that all misfortunes can be reduced to one cause, namely:

the memorial services for one’s ancestors have not been done

¹⁰ A bibliography is provided in YAJIMA 1985, pp. 273–277, and contains twenty-six entries, while a later (1987, although undated) Agonshū publicity handout cites thirty-two volumes. Others have come out since. The average production seems to be two to three books a year at present.

properly. And this results in innumerable “spirits that have not attained Buddhahood” (*fujōbutsurei* 不成仏霊) and “dead souls that cause spiritual interference” (*reishō no hotoke* 霊障のホトケ), which have extraordinarily bad effects on the fortune of all those in the family lineage and on the family fortunes in general (AGONSHŪ 1986, pp. 4–5).

The booklet goes on to list details of the bad effects such spirits may have, as well as suggesting that large numbers of people are threatened by them (pp. 5–8). The second booklet elaborates on this, listing twenty-two separate types of misfortune including, interestingly, “causation leading to imprisonment” (*keigoku no innen* 刑獄の因縁) (KIRIYAMA 1987, p. 28). This has a double message: it helps explain Kiriyama’s own lawbreaking episode as a result of the influences of malevolent spirits and it reinforces the image of his having been like other people, subject to the whims and influences of such entities. By projecting himself as someone who has overcome these hindrances while allowing everyone to know that he has suffered them, Kiriyama is effectively telling those that enter Agonshū that they too can do the same. They can, in the words they are urged to shout at the *tsuitachi goma*, “definitely win.”

In stating that the cause of all misfortune comes from ancestors who have not been properly transformed into buddhas after death, one sees an implicit criticism of established Buddhism in Japan. Established Buddhism has, after all, been seen as the religious structure through which to deal with the ancestors and free the living from any bad influences they might have. Agonshū claims that established Buddhism is unable to do this properly because it has not been using the right texts or using the correct object of worship, which is the Buddha himself as manifested in the *busshari* (AGONSHŪ 1986 pp. 8–10).

The change from austerities to *goma* rituals coincided with an increased interest in Japan in the esoteric tradition (the so-called “Mikkyō [esoteric] boom”). It is claimed in the religion that this “boom” was actually brought about by Kiriyama himself with the publication of his book *Henshin no genri* in 1971 (MURŌ 1987, p. 50). Certainly the publication of this book is an important event in the movement’s growth, for it sold a large number of copies and brought Kiriyama’s name before the general public. It also marks the beginnings of usage of esoteric themes on a large scale and of Kiriyama’s claims to be able to wield formidable spiritual powers. In it he outlined what he said were the five powers of esoteric Buddhism which he had acquired: they were the power of predication, the power of high levels

of activity, the power to change oneself and one's environment by one's own thoughts, the development of great physical and spiritual power, and the development of tremendous power to realize one's, and others', wishes (KIRIYAMA 1971; see also MURŌ 1987, p. 51 and NUMATA 1988, p. 61). All could be gained by the general populace. They were not the preserve of the religious establishment only.

In the eyes of Agonshū followers, Kiriya opened up a new dimension of religious practice so far barred to ordinary people. Murō sums up this feeling with the words:

Nothing was known to the general public about Mikkyō apart from the word itself. The practices of Mikkyō were secret and were not let outside the temple gates; they were concealed behind the iron doors of the esoteric sects. It was Reverend Kiriya who opened them up to the general public (1980, p. 54).

Whether Kiriya was really responsible for the Mikkyō boom is not the point. In the minds of Agonshū members, and according to the literature the religion puts out, he is, and this of course becomes another strand in its process of self understanding and legitimation. Equally, the criticisms of established Buddhism in Japan implicit in Agonshū's position on causation are underlined by accusations that certain Buddhist sects in particular were guarding and concealing from the public methods that could, and should, be available to help in the solution of human problems. Established, especially esoteric, Buddhism thus stands doubly condemned for its failures. Here one encounters overt expression of one of the commonly cited factors in the rise of Japanese new religions, the perceived failure, in spiritual terms, of the religious establishment (THOMSEN 1963, pp. 18–20; McFARLAND 1967, pp. 5–54, p. 225).

These criticisms are further underlined by the claims made by Kiriya and Agonshū that they alone focus on the true teaching of the Buddha Sākyamuni. In April 1978 Kiriya changed the name of the Kannon Jikeikai to Agonshū, taking the name from the Āgama sūtras of early Buddhism. It is in these sūtras, according to Agonshū, that the only direct and true teachings of Sākyamuni are found:

The teachings and practices taught by Sākyamuni during his lifetime are recorded in the body of scriptures known as the Āgama or Nikāya, and it is in these scriptures that one finds detailed instructions on how to attain buddhahood and acquire the power, concomitant with the state of buddha-

hood, to liberate others (AGONSHŪ 1987a, p. 4; cited also in SPIER 1986, p. 61).

Other Buddhist sects are stigmatized for having based their teachings on fallacious, later scriptures which are the words of ordinary people rather than the Buddha. Only in the Āgama sūtras can one find the means to eradicate all problems and to transform the spirits of the dead into realized buddhas (AGONSHŪ 1987a, pp. 5–8; also YAJIMA 1985, pp. 155–166). In my discussion with Agonshū members in Tokyo and Kyoto I have been assured frequently that the basic aim of all Buddhism is to deal in the correct way with the souls of the dead and turn them into Buddhas.

According to Agonshū, Kiriya finally, after years of esoteric practice, realized that the key to Buddhism lay in the Āgama texts. This realization came about because of his study of esoteric Buddhism, which enabled him to see the Āgama texts in a new light and to discover how they could be used for the purposes of liberating the souls of the dead (AGONSHŪ 1987b, p. 2). There is thus a combination of esoteric themes with the early Indian Buddhist themes implicit in the Āgama, and Kiriya presents his teaching as a meeting of the two in which each enriches the other (KIRIYAMA 1978).

There is actually very little emphasis on the Āgamas as texts, and virtually no systematic study of them in Agonshū. Kiriya does give talks on the texts (and copies of these talks are available on video at all Agonshū centers for those who wish to watch them), but members as a rule do not use the texts as a means to understanding Buddhism. Although various Agonshū publications contain brief expositions, from an Agon viewpoint, of sections of these sūtras, one finds, for instance, no mention at all of the texts in the basic Agonshū member's handbook (AGONSHŪ 1982). Rather, their chief use appears to be in terms of ritual usage, with certain sections being chanted by members before their personal altars. Kiriya's discovery of the "essence" of the Āgamas is enough. They can provide the key to "true" Buddhism even if members do not read them.¹¹

This "use" and interpretation of texts is not an uncommon theme in Japan. One can point to many organizations that assert that they have discovered the true essence of Buddhism in a particular text, frequently through the special insight of a realized or powerful teacher. The Nichiren tradition and its various interpretations of the *Lotus Sūtra* (and indeed the divisions between groups such as Sōka Gakkai, Reiyūkai and Risshō Kōsei-

¹¹ The monthly Agonshū journal *Agama* carries brief explanation of aspects of the texts each month, but this is by no means either comprehensive or systematic.

kai) both operate from this stance and provide examples of teachers who find an interpretation others have somehow failed to see. One finds very similar themes in Shinnyoen. The leader Itō Shinjō 伊藤真乗 found the essential truth of Buddhism in the *Nirvāṇa sūtra* which had been overlooked by all others in Japan (SHINNYOEN 1977, pp. 17–26). Shinnyoen's members, too, do not study the text so much as use it in rituals and rely on their leader's interpretation. Further, Shinnyoen also heartily criticizes established Buddhism for having kept the truths of Buddhism as set out in this text from the public (1977, p. 19). Both Agonshū and Shinnyoen are using general public disinterest in established Buddhism to show that they have somehow “liberated” the truth. It somehow does not seem to matter that they hardly pass on the materials to their followers save through ritualized action. Clearly the major importance of the texts in both cases is in terms of the legitimation they offer rather than in their actual content. The text as document of truth legitimates the importance of the group that focuses on it, even as the group neglects it in terms of inner content.

Events have developed rapidly especially in recent years since the discovery of the truths contained in the Āgama texts. The Star Festivals have attracted more and more people, membership has risen sharply and Agonshū has expanded its spheres of activity. Festivals aimed at appeasing the souls of war dead and creating new conditions for peace have been held in the South Pacific and China, Kiriyaama has traveled to Rome to meet and be photographed with the Pope (almost a mandatory action for ambitious leaders of new religions in Japan!), held a highly publicized fire ritual with the Dalai Lama in Tokyo, and been to Sri Lanka to receive the *busshari*.

As Agonshū has taken such a high profile course, and as it has forcefully asserted its centrality in the Buddhist world, various religious events have occurred as if to ratify such claims. Over the past few years a number of spiritual entities have manifested themselves at Agonshū events (particularly at the Hoshi Matsuri), each in turn apparently underlining the legitimacy of the religion and all that it is saying. Particularly from 1978 onwards various spiritual entities have appeared in the flames of the fires at the Hoshi Matsuri and manifested themselves to Kiriyaama. First, in 1978, was Nanda the dragon king who stated he would be the guardian of Agonshū, and next, in 1979, a triad of Dainichi, Sākyamuni himself, and Juntei Kannon appeared. In 1980, Sākyamuni appeared in meditation, followed by a huge retinue of figures such as Fudō, Juntei Kannon, and Bishamonten. In 1982 Muchalinda the serpent king, the first being in Bud-

dhist mythology to see Sākyamuni after his enlightenment and a traditional legitimator of holy sites in Buddhism (FAURE 1987, p. 339), appeared. All of these visions have been “seen” by Kiriyaama, although Agonshū insists that anyone with correct spiritual vision can also “see” them. Indeed it publishes photographs of the flames in which these figures “appear” (MURŌ 1987, pp. 33–37).

All these visions helped convince Kiriyaama that the Yamashina site was a holy one, a meeting place of the physical and spiritual worlds. A further encounter with the spiritual world, in India in 1982, showed him that he had been chosen to not just rebuild Buddhism in the present day but also to save mankind. Agonshū has produced a video entitled *1999 nen: karuma to reishō kara no dasshutsu* (AGONSHŪ 1981), based on the book of the same title by Kiriyaama, to illustrate this message. Many of Kiriyaama’s books and activities have been transposed onto videos to make them more accessible. Video machines are available at all Agonshū centers for this purpose. This particular video shows Kiriyaama at Sahet Mahet, site of the first Buddhist monastery in India, “feeling” a vibration which he believes comes from the Buddha (and which is interpreted as being a direct communication from Buddha to sanction Kiriyaama in his teachings). The video itself interweaves discussions of Kiriyaama’s “true” way of Buddhism with claims that others have failed, thus leading the world into ruin. A subsidiary theme of the film is the prophecies of Nostradamus, in which world doom is suggested for 1999 unless a suitable means can appear to save mankind. Naturally the film hints that Kiriyaama and the Āgamas together provide such a means. The very vibration he felt signifies recognition of this theme, and Kiriyaama himself, in words directed to the Buddha, speaks of the message that “I received from you” (*watakushi wa anata kara moratte . . .*), espousing both the link and familiarity with Buddha that, presumably, only a chosen one can take.

The underlying message of the film is that some form of transmission occurred which, coupled with the manifestation of holy figures at the Hoshi Matsuri, serves to make the Yamashina site into a special, holy ground, the new Sahet Mahet of this age. It is the “revived holy land of Buddha” (*budda no yomigaetta seichi*) in Japan. Indeed, Japan is portrayed as the new center from which, via Agonshū, Buddhism will spread out to and save the world. The film ends with the statement that Buddha has come from India to Japan, thanks to Kiriyaama, and through this the world can escape the doom predicted by Nostradamus (AGONSHŪ video, 1981).

There is a growing messianism here, with the criticism of established religions expanding into claims of supremacy and developing into the view

that only Kiriya and Agonshū can save the world. If one looks at the development of Agonshū in recent years one sees an increasingly powerful emphasis on its own centrality and on the charismatic power of its leader as chosen successor to the Buddha in this day and age. The apparitions and events that Agonshū sees as occurring to it all work towards confirming the position it has claimed as a true return to Buddhism. These, in turn, have enabled it to become more aggressively self-confident in its actions, from its high powered advertising to stringent attacks on established Buddhism. It is little wonder, then, that the acquisition (under whatever terms) of the relic from Sri Lanka has been widely interpreted as recognition and legitimation of these claims, and that Agonshū has undergone yet another shift and transformation.

With the *bushhari*, Agonshū claims that the way to spiritual alleviation of the suffering of the ancestors, which in turn leads to liberation from all problems in this world, has been made easier and more direct. In Agonshū, and earlier in the Kannon Jikeikai, two complementary ways were established to turn afflicted spirits into benevolent ones. The first was the performance of the esoteric *goma* rites by Kiriya himself, and the second was a practice known as the *senzagyō* 千坐行, a practice in which believers chanted Buddhist texts before an image of Juntei Kannon. Performed over a period of a thousand days, this was believed to remove all karmic hindrances from one's family, oneself, and lastly from one's descendants (KIRIYAMA 1981, pp. 113–118).

The acquisition of the *bushhari*, however, with its immense power to transform the spirits of the dead and to liberate personal wishes in this world, has meant that the *senzagyō* is no longer necessary. On 28 September 1986, Kiriya announced that due to guidance received from the Buddha, in future Agonshū members would do a practice involving the worship of the relic, which was an eternal transmission of the powers and merits of Buddha. Henceforth, all Agonshū members need do is to worship before the relic and receive its power (MURŌ 1987, pp. 221–225). This practice would be more efficacious, leading to swifter transformation of ancestral spirits into realized Buddhas, with increased personal confidence and happiness for the living. Agonshū declares its way to be superior to all other religions because:

- First, the main focus of worship is not a grain or rice or stone, but is a true Buddha relic;
- Second, it uses the method of making spirits into realized Buddhas (*jōbutsuhō* 成仏法) based on the Āgama sūtras

which are the true teaching of Buddha;
 Third, the teacher has learnt the way to make spirits into realized Buddhas due to the teachings received directly from the Buddha (AGONSHŪ 1986, pp. 26–27).

This clear statement of confidence represents the culmination of a process of growth during which the religion has provided for itself a series of images which serve to give it credence and to give it claims to truth. To what extent this expansion (Agonshū certainly aims to have one million members by 1990 and to have built the “new Sahet Mahet” by this time) and its concomitant messianism will continue is hard to predict at present. What has been said so far, however, should give the reader some idea of the processes at work behind this expansion and of the dynamics that are fueling it.

Themes in Agonshū: An Interpretation

In the previous sections of this article I have described major and highly advertised Agonshū rituals and events that are open to the general public and aimed at furthering the religion’s membership along with seminal events in Agonshū’s development. The purpose of the previous sections was to outline how Agonshū has come to its present posture of assertiveness, in which it and its leader alone are claimed to understand the truth of Buddhism and to be able to provide spiritual leadership for the world, and to illustrate how its major rituals function to affirm these beliefs and to create a positive sense in the membership.

It should be clear that this has been an evolving process: as the movement has grown, so have the symbols and events that have provided validation of its growing assertions. These in turn fuel the growth of confidence in the movement itself and in its membership. As Kiriya has discovered the truth as encapsulated in the Āgama sūtras, and as his teachings have been approved by the visitations and contacts from Buddha figures, the membership has increasingly been told how special it is. Followers no longer need to perform austerities or even the long process involved in the *senzagyō*. All they need is to receive the power of the relic and to feel assured that this is giving them the ability to succeed in all they do. This naturally leads to the overt displays of a personal desire to win that I have described earlier in this article.

Winston Davis, in his detailed examination of Mahikari, comments on the apparent discrepancies between the magical healing techniques of Mahikari and the contemporary society in which they have flourished.

Seeking to understand how such religious groups with magically based cosmologies and theories “can possibly exist in a *modern* society” (his italics) (1980, p. 11), he goes on to suggest that they (and the magic they use) might actually reinforce the values of industrial society (p. 11). As such, he argues that the use of themes, techniques, and ideas founded in the folk tradition actually work to help solve the problems of people in need, who are drawn towards such movements.

Thus Mahikari’s

magical apprehension of the world makes the world more manageable. By getting cleaned up, as they put it, followers of Mahikari seem to be able to perform better and achieve more . . . it indisputably helps them to cope with an industrial society as they see it—a world filled with evil spirits and ghosts (1980, p. 16).

Later, in his conclusion, he suggests that religions such as Mahikari

infuse the faithful with energy and self-confidence. Thanks to the democratization of magic, modern believers can face the challenges of life with the courage of the primitive shaman and wizard (1980, p. 302).

One can recognize many parallels with Agonshū here. It instills confidence in its members while providing a structure of belief (ancestral causation) to explain problems and show a way out of those problems. The methods (*goma* rituals and veneration of a relic) available to Agonshū members can be seen in much the same way as the *okiyome* お浄め spiritual cleaning methods of Mahikari, as expressions of magic in the control of ordinary members. Kiriya, too, has democratized magic for he has unlocked the “iron doors of the esoteric sects” and brought esoteric practices directly to the public.

Yet I feel that this channel of analysis, which virtually sees the religion as offering solutions that enable people to do little more than cope with contemporary life through the use of past ideas, is not quite complete enough to provide an understanding of what Agonshū (and other of the “new New Religions”) is doing or what it proffers to potential followers. The motifs found in Agonshū, its traditional symbols and modern techniques, its Japanese focus and its universal claims, when taken as a whole together, show more than just a means of coping with the present, or even of facing life with courage. Rather, they suggest a means and way, through the espousal of universalism, whereby its followers are able to transcend

the particularization of their situation while remaining comfortably ensconced in, and protected by, it. Further, they imply not just a way of dealing with contemporary society through a use of past motifs, but also a means of encountering and dealing with the past itself so as to make it understandable from a contemporary context. The overt internationalism of the peace motif and the implicit universalism contained within the idea of a return to true Buddhism, intrinsic parts in the legitimation process within Agonshū, should be seen in tandem with its more explicitly Japanese, folk and traditional elements. In dealing with issues of peace and internationalism Michael Pye has discussed the peace related activities of another Japanese “new” new religious movement Byakkō Shinkōkai in terms of “the search for identity beyond natural, i.e. clan or national boundaries” (1986, p. 238). Pye argues that:

one of the basic problems in Japanese consciousness, however articulated, is how to deal with the outside, abroad, the world (p. 240).

In his discussion of Byakkō Shinkōkai’s activities he shows how it incorporates many traditional Japanese religious features along with universalist peace prayers in such a way that:

the wish for peace as an expression of the need for world identity is being ritually integrated into a context which provides reassuringly Japanese religious features (p. 240).

Agonshū, too, acts similarly: its peace movement uses ancestral memorial services and *goma* rituals, in other words, traditional Japanese religious actions, as its medium of action. Furthermore, just as the prayers of Byakkō Shinkōkai place a central emphasis on Japan and see peace as spreading from Japan to the rest of the world (PYE, p. 239), so too, as we have seen, does Agonshū portray itself as the bringer of world peace. Thus Japan as an important world entity is affirmed through the actions of the *goma*. As members participate in it they can feel themselves not just acting for their own personal wishes of success but also working for the salvation of the entire world. Equally, when Agonshū members see photographs of their leader with the Pope, talking about peace, they can simultaneously relate to the importance of their movement and its truly international position. They can also translate this international importance into their own lives and see messages in it for themselves. Kiriyama, after all, once was just like anybody else, a failure, beset by bad karma; but he triumphed over it and now can appear on the world stage.

At the same time, by equating its practice with the true and original Buddhism of Sākyamuni, something intrinsically universal, Agonshū is universalizing traditional Japanese practices. It is neither important nor relevant, in such a context, to discuss whether traditional Buddhist causation really did revolve around ancestral spirits. Such questions as whether the Buddha’s message included a way of transforming the spirits of the dead into Buddhas are, in this context, irrelevant, as are questions of what the Āgamas do or do not say. They merely act as symbols of legitimation which enable Japanese ideas and practices to be placed in a universalist framework. By calling them original and true Buddhism, Kiriya and Agonshū provide, for their Japanese members, a vehicle by which to keep in touch with the beliefs of their own culture whilst projecting them onto an international screen. Agonshū thus enables its members to simultaneously carry out rites and practices deeply set in their own culture and, at the same time, feel that they are transcending the limits of that culture and becoming international. They can thus balance two important totems of modern Japanese society, the issues of Japanese identity (which is encapsulated in the whole *nihonjinron* 日本人論 area of discussion) and of “internationalization” (*kokusaika* 国際化). Within one framework, one can evoke the nationalistic images of *yamatodamashii* and the cause of universalism.

Parallel to this constant problem of relating to the outside while maintaining the identity of the inside is an issue that is highly problematic for many contemporary Japanese, that of the often fraught and precarious issue of relationship between what, for want of better terms, might be called tradition and modernity. This relationship in Japan is not infrequently seen largely in categorical terms of Japanese (tradition) and Western (modernity) with subliminal implications that the relationship between these aspects results in an erosion of the purities of tradition. I have discussed this issue previously, arguing that themes of modernity and tradition are parts of a whole and function together, the former facilitating the restatement of the latter, and the latter providing a means by which to validate and help assimilate the former (READER 1987, pp. 287–303, esp. pp. 300–301).

Here, too, Agonshū provides a structure through which the past may be presented in modern contexts and how the modern is itself validated by its relationship with tradition. The internal content of its teaching and cosmology relates very much (despite Agonshū’s claims to the contrary!) to Japanese tradition, while the means used to transmit them, their packaging as it were, is very much in tune with the ethos of technological moder-

nity.

Agonshū's cosmology itself allows for such two-dimensional interaction. On a psychological level the spirits of the dead and the ancestors serve as an explanation of contemporary problems in the world while simultaneously representing tradition, the Japanese cultural past. The problems of the present are interpreted as due to failures to correctly observe the traditions of the past. The failure to correctly deal with the ancestral spirits who have not been correctly venerated and who thus cause disturbances in the present could be seen as a more general criticism of the ways in which the past has been interpreted in Japan. By criticizing established Buddhism for having lost sight of the true methods of transforming ancestors into Buddhas, Agonshū is implying that problems occur when cultural traditions are not properly understood, observed, and respected. I feel that there is an underlying suggestion here that contemporary unease results from a failure to deal with and relate to the truths and validities of the past and that, as can be seen in the case of the Buddhist establishment, problems can derive from an inability to relate past tradition (the correct way to deal with ancestors) to present practice.

But if this appears to imply a signal of caution with regard to modern change, it should be noted that Agonshū's ancestral focus has intrinsically modern dimensions in line with contemporary social and individual thinking as well. By establishing that contemporary problems are caused by ancestors for whom the correct services had not been done in the past, the blame for such problems is effectively moved from the present into the past. Individuals thwarted in their ambitions find that the problem is not so much with themselves as it is in the inabilities of times past to deal with the dead correctly. Thus the burden of blame for such failure is shifted from the individual and from the present, leaving both free to pursue their goals without hindrance from the past.

Thus the Agonshū members can also shout out individualistic desires in line with the growing individualism of the age and with the growing influence of Western values amongst the young. *They* are not going to be restricted and hindered by old and outdated social ethics bound up with the traditional household related structure of Japanese society as symbolized by the ancestors! By using the past, through the vehicle of ancestral veneration, Agonshū helps to legitimate the growing individualism and personal, success-oriented attitudes of the younger generation. The past becomes a vehicle not just for facilitating an acceptance of the modern, but also a means by which to free oneself of attachments to the past. The individual in being freed from the pernicious influences of unsettled an-

cestral spirits from the past is liberated from the culturally stifling limitations of traditional value systems.

In other words, views of the past and of tradition are dualistic. They are important and vital in that they affirm Japanese identity and provide a sense of cultural pride and strength. Yet they are weak and limiting for they hamper progress and individual success in the present. Thus the past needs to be dealt with, as with the ancestors, in two ways. It needs to be reaffirmed as valid (hence the affirmation of folk cosmologies and the veneration of ancestors) and yet dispensed with. Cutting karma, after all, is removing the influence of the past and freeing oneself from it. One could, equally, say the same dualism applies to the theme of modernity, both welcomed as symbolic of advancement (the use of satellites) and yet fearfully foreign enough to require being tempered and mediated by the forces of tradition.

Conclusions

In this article I have particularly looked at Agonshū in its functional aspects, suggesting that it, and by extension, other new religious movements in Japan, operates by providing a nexus of identity and confidence to its followers through which they can deal with many of the major problems in Japan. There are many elements I have not had time and space to deal with, such as an analysis of Kiriyama as a charismatic leader figure and the potential development of extreme ethnocentric tendencies. These are areas that need to be researched more fully in the future. However, in seeking an understanding of how such movements flourish at the present time, I would suggest that the themes I have focused on here have to be given a great deal of consideration.

Throughout Agonshū one finds an underlying theme of unity. The *shinsei busshari* unites the liberation of the spirits of the dead with the achievement of personal wishes. These two, in turn, may be seen as caring for the cultural traditions of the past and working for success in the modern age. Kiriyama himself has drawn attention to the importance of combining different themes into a unity when he stated that there were those more spiritually advanced than he and there were those more advanced in the study of Buddhism than he, but that no one combined the two like he does (NUMATA 1988, p. 66). One sees this unity in his performance at the *tsuitachi* ritual, in the combining of user friendly techniques with ancient rituals and in the *yamabushi* with headphones. All this is underpinned by a growing process of self legitimation which provides the symbols whereby

many diverse elements may be welded together into one structure in which the local is universalized, the past is glorified, and those in the present are given a path by which to reap the benefits of the society they live in, fusing the best of tradition and the modern while freeing themselves of the negative aspects of both.

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