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New Religions in a Japanese Mountain Village:

An Example from Wakayama

John Knight, University of Oxford

This paper focuses on new religions in rural Japan. Using recent fieldwork data, the scale and variety of new religions in a particular mountain village community is shown, and the reasons for their presence explored. A distinction is made between two types of local new religion, and each is illustrated with an example.

1. Introduction

Japanese new religions are usually seen as an essentially urban phenomenon. Modern urbanization represents a new scale of mobility which dissolves traditional ties to Shinto and Buddhism, and new religions are the expression of the spiritual needs of the growing urban population (see Hori et al 1972: 91-2; Earhart 1982: 188-9; Reader 1991: 198). While in broad sociological terms, the correlation between urbanization and the rise of the new religions cannot be disputed, the analytical focus on it has tended to divert attention from the fact that new religions also exist rural Japan.¹ This paper offers a brief overview of the place of new religions in a mountain village community in the late 1980s, and attempts to give a sense of the variation of such groups by focusing on two particular examples.

In Japan the distinction between new religions (shin shukyo or shinko shukyo) and 'established religions' (kisei shukyo) is generally made in terms of the emergence of new sects in the 19th century in contrast to the existing Buddhist sects formed in the early medieval period. Since this time, however, there have been other periods in which new religious groups have emerged such as in the post-Meiji era, in the post-war period, and again in the in the 1980s (the so-called 'new new religions', shinshinshukyo). As a result of this, the term 'new religion', while it is generally used in opposition to established religions such as parish Buddhism to distinguish an organization with a converted membership from one with an inherited membership, is actually a highly inclusive term which embraces organizations with second and third generation followers (see for example Hardacre 1986). As we shall see, some of the new religions dealt with below have a second generation membership, but for the most part the conventional distinction between new and established - as converted to inherited - holds. Nonetheless, this distinction within new

religions must be borne in mind in what follows. The two groups focused on both have first generation converted memberships, but one originates in the pre-war period and was effectively institutionalized by the late 1950s, while the other only emerged in the late 1970s and was still developing organizationally.

2. Rural Depopulation and Parish Buddhism

If the existence of new religions in rural Japan challenges the simplistic association of the sects with new migrants in a state of anomie induced by urbanization, in a larger sense urbanization could yet account for their existence. For urbanization is a process which, beyond a certain point, transforms rural areas no less than urban ones. This is certainly the case today in rural Wakayama, where I carried out ethnographic research in the late 1980s. In three decades the rural municipality of Hongu lost over half of its population through outmigration, and the resultant economic marginalization means that this trend is likely to continue, even to the point of calling into question the very existence of this mountain village community in the next century.

In local terms, the problem of rural depopulation manifests itself as a crisis in succession among Hongu families. Contemporary patterns of rural-urban migration are such that many families can no longer find, from among their children, an heir ready to stay behind in the village. A consequence of this trend is that many rural households contain only the parental couple or a single widowed parent, with all the children having left, leading to problems of coping in old age. As a result of outmigratory depopulation, a 'welfare problem' or *fukushi mondai* is officially recognized to exist in contemporary rural Japan.

Rural depopulation is more than a 'welfare problem' however. While aged parents in the villages are left behind to cope, a further dimension of rural depopulation is the prospective abandonment of the family ancestors. Continuity is a central value of the Japanese family, the *ie*, and descendants are responsible to earlier family generations for maintaining the family line. The wider social context of Japanese families has, of course, changed greatly in the post-war period; the *ie* was legally disestablished in its old form by the post-war constitution, and as the industrial economy has grown family occupation and family property have lost their power to shape the life chances of descendants.

The heirless state of many rural families today has implications for the wellbeing of the family ancestors who depend on the care of the descendants. Where descendants no longer reside locally, it is the aged parents who maintain the family graves, but upon the death of the parents, the graves often cease to be cared for at all. This situation of neglect is one with profound consequences for the posthumous wellbeing of the ancestral spirits. To understand this, it is important to appreciate the extent to which Buddhism in Japan is entwined with, and characteristically seen in terms of, ancestral beliefs.

The rural parish priest will stress to parishioners the importance of ethical conduct in life and its relation to attaining Buddha status (*jobutsu*) after death. But for the most part,

jobutsu is seen in terms of the relationship between ancestors and descendants. Jobutsu is a gradual process that takes place over a number of decades after death and is often represented as a long, hard journey made by the deceased in which the support offered by the descendants - in the form of food and water, sacred words, encouragement and consolation - plays a crucial role. Without this support, this most arduous of journeys would never be completed and the state of full ancestorhood and Buddha status never attained.

It is in the context of this complex of beliefs that the neglect of the ancestors by migrant descendants must be viewed. The neglected spirit of the dead, the muenbotoke, is one who is condemned to a state of limbo, unable to join the collectivity of family ancestors and abandoned to the wretched fate of eternal loneliness. Such a spirit will tend to become vengeful towards the world of the living, and is prone to attach itself to anyone who comes into proximity of it, with possibly fatal consequences. Hence the dangerous character of old graveyards. The proper thing to do when one does encounter old, abandoned graves is to make offerings in order to propitiate the spirits and relieve their state of suffering. The central place of the ceremony for such spirits in the annual midsummer festival is a further testament to the importance of this theme in Japanese religious thinking (see Smith 1974: 41-50).

The parish temple is the religious institution which mediates the relationship between ancestors and descendants. Village families support a temple priest who is responsible for the routine ritual care of parish ancestors. However, such parishes have been greatly affected by rural depopulation. The decline in household numbers and the low income of elderly households often means that the parish temple becomes unable to support a resident priest. In some cases, the existing parish ceases to be viable at all, and is merged with a neighbouring parish in order to be able to support a resident priest between them.

3. Types of New Religion

The scale of new religious activity in Hongu can be seen from my survey findings on the new religious affiliations of household members (Table I).²

Table I (see attached sheet)

In around 60 per cent of households one or more household members are currently affiliated to or related with one of the eleven new religions active in the area. The precise relationship varies; while there is card-carrying membership, attendance of regular gatherings, and participation in militant evangelistic activity on behalf of the sect, there is also the regular procurement of services of the new religious body in other ways (e.g. purchasing of protective charms) without actual membership. Some villagers who associate

with a sect strongly deny having entered it or even that they support it. Thus in a majority of village households there are people who have bypassed, or at least supplemented, the institutions of established religion.

As Table I shows, Tenrikyo is the new religion with the greatest number of followers. Tenrikyo, the 'Religion of Heavenly Truth', is a Shinto-based sect which was formed in the 19th century. As one of the older new religions, it has many second generation adherents. Its local support is largely concentrated in one of the four villages of the survey. It also has a large informal membership: that is, people who, while not bona fide members of the organization, regularly purchase the sect's charms and even participate in sect pilgrimages. The pre-eminence of the sect in this village is attributed to the key role in its of one of the wealthier local families, and to the respect accorded to the old widow of the family, the sole family member left in the village. Many of those who associate with the sect do so out of duty (*giri*) to the family, and courtesy to this woman; and it is generally stressed locally that the Tenrikyo group in this village is not at all like other new religions that cause such 'bother' (*meiwaku*) to other villagers.

The new religions of Table I can be distinguished on the basis of their orientation to the ancestral religiosity we have looked at. While most accept ancestralism and co-exist, to varying extents, with the parish, one in particular, Soka Gakkai, is anti-ancestral and starkly opposed to the parish. In what follows I focus on two particular local sects: the Compassion Society, an example of what I will call an ancestral sect, and Soka Gakkai.

4. The Compassion Society

These sects acquire a following among people who no longer believe that the rural parish system functions adequately. Where there is no resident priest, such groups are able to operate unchallenged. They can be seen as a sort of critique of the parish system, offering a corrective to the ancestral care it has traditionally supplied. In the name of ancestral wellbeing, villagers are encouraged to learn to recite new sutras, to perform new ritual acts (such as walking in the mountains, waterfall austerities), and to renovate the family graves.

This latter prescription is now widely followed in local villages. Thus in one village, a third of local families decided, upon the advice of a spiritualist, to move their graves to a new location and erect new gravestones. The old graveyard had ceased to be a place in which the ancestral dead could repose peacefully. As the village depopulated, the number of abandoned graves increased. Many of the gravestones were cracked and moss-covered, their inscriptions no longer readable, and the plots overgrown with vegetation. Moreover, as the graveyard had become engulfed by the encroaching cedar forest, its graves had become subject to the intrusive attentions of moisture-seeking tree-roots. In some cases, these had penetrated the skull of the corpse through the eye socket, something which, the spiritualist pointed out, greatly perturbed the dead. Moreover, the graveyard, now virtually

reclaimed by the forest, was almost permanently in the shade and had become an unpleasant, even frightening place to visit.

The families decided that under these conditions they could no longer maintain their ancestral graves properly. By contrast, the new graveyard was located further downhill, protected from the forest by a concrete border, better exposed to sunlight, and much more easily accessible for visits from villagers. The new graves were deemed much more comfortable for the dead and much easier to maintain for the living. Yet this was opposed by other villagers and the priest on the grounds that graves as such should not be moved. As one man, a retired forester, put it, 'buried people should not be woken up. When dead people are not left to their sleep, terrible things can happen.'

The initial impetus for moving the graves lay in the debilitating injuries that two village men were suffering from that could be neither satisfactorily explained nor healed by doctors. It was a spiritualist who told them that their injuries - a severe back problem and a heart problem - were related to the wellbeing of family ancestors and, in particular, the condition of the family graves, and that relief could be had through renovating the graves. Eventually the other families too were persuaded of the benefits of this course of action.

In the years following the grave relocation, the spiritualist's following hardened into a group, the Semuikai or Compassion Society, which gathered once a month to perform austerities in the mountains on behalf of family ancestors. The group formally developed basic principles that the followers should adopt as their guide to everyday conduct. Centering on the importance of the ie family, they focused on the special place of the family graves. Followers should treat the family graves as even more important than the family house, for the graves are the all-important 'roots' of the family which, if properly cared for, will ensure the vitality and continuity of the family long into the future. Neglect of the graves, on the other hand, would eventually spell the end of the family - just as (in a favourite image) cut flowers (ikebana), though beautiful, will soon wither.

The group also established officers and collected monthly contributions from followers. It had over one hundred members, most of whom were from the nearby regional city; its Hongu members were confined to the grave-moving families. Other groups, similarly focused on ancestral care through maintenance or renovation of graves, could be found in other villages. Different spiritualists are associated with different villages.

5. The Value Creation Scholarly Society

In contrast to the grave sects, other new religions are more exclusive, and oppose the parish system as such. The most prominent example of this is Soka Gakkai, literally 'The Value Creation Scholarly Society'. Those who join it replace the domestic ancestral altar with an altar containing a scriptural mandala, which henceforth becomes the object of religious devotions. Members also secede from the temple parish and discontinue participation in village Shinto rituals. This new religion tends to create a deep division within villages; the

Gakkai families are ritually, and often to a considerable extent socially, apart from other village families. The children of Gakkai families tend to inter-marry with other Gakkai families.

Chanting is the central activity of members of the sect. The scriptural mandala bears the words *namumyohorengkyo*, a liturgical verse meaning 'Praise to the Sutra of the Lotus of the Wondrous Law', and it is this which is regularly chanted at different times of the day. Most local members chant for around two hours a day, although some do much more. One member characterized chanting as like 'saving' (*chokkin*): the more one chants the greater the benefits (*kudoku*). Practical considerations aside, one can never chant too much. Chanting is a form of petition to *Gohonzonsama*, the mandala deity, for this-worldly assistance, and the requests (often written down on a piece of paper and placed before the mandala) include the protection of the family in general, finding a healthy young bride for a son, the recovery of sick family members, neighbours etc., and the maintenance of world peace (*sekai heiwa*). Sometimes urgent requests require extra hours of chanting. Gakkai followers are said to chant for many hours at a time before elections to secure the success of candidates affiliated to the sect.

In the late 1950s the sect grew rapidly both nationally and locally. The story of its sudden emergence in a particular village can serve to show how this national phenomenon nonetheless drew on particular features of mountain village society. Its first convert in the village was one of the most important villagers, a large forest landowner or *yamanushi* (lit. 'mountain owner'). This man's family had long employed the men of five other village families in the family forests. Once he joined the sect, these five families followed him, and a major schism arose in the village as the converts withdrew from the parish.

The opposition between the two sides ran deep: the converts set about replacing their ancestral altars and even changing the gravestone to one engraved with the sacred script. Other villagers saw the new sect as hostile to the family ancestors; in some cases bitter disputes arose between brothers over the custody of the ancestral altar, the family heir being deemed unworthy of succession because of his conversion to the sect. This nationwide struggle between Buddhist parishes and Soka Gakkai convert families came to be known as *bochi no senso* or 'the war of the graves' (see Yazawa 1980).

Soka Gakkai has on the whole been successful in retaining its converts and in developing a large second generation membership nationwide. But like other local new religions, it has also had its defections. Thus in this particular village, the 'war of the graves' ended no less suddenly than it had started when it lost all or its converts. The same man who started it all finished the affair when, after a rift with the sect authorities, he left the sect, taking his dependent families with him.

6. Conclusion

These two examples show the degree of variation in the content of the teachings of new religions in contemporary rural Japan. On the one hand, the preoccupation of the Compassion Society with ancestral care and descendant duty puts it squarely in the tradition of parish Buddhism with its focus on the stem family. It might well be seen as a religious expression of the threat to the stem family posed by the forces of modernization. Care of the family graves re-affirms a social order in the face of the large-scale disorder wreaked on rural areas by depopulation. By definition, a religious group such as the Compassion Society, with its focus on reviving the family line through care of the ancestral graves, will be found much less in urban Japan.

It appears starkly at odds with Soka Gakkai's concern to displace ancestors (along with other Buddhas and Shinto kami) as an object of ritual attention and institute instead the Gohonzonsama mandala as the sole sacred focus. Moreover, the exclusivistic character of Soka Gakkai meant that it produced a deep social cleavage that continues into the present; in some cases, the Gakkai households form a virtual social enclave within the village. There is nothing like the same degree of corporateness among the village families belonging to the grave renovating groups, who continue to be part of the parish and to participate in village events.

The animating concerns of the grave renovating groups can be clearly related to the conditions of depopulation. Graves are a central symbol of the family lines whose continuity is threatened by rural depopulation. The large-scale migration of recent decades has meant the displacement of a whole generation of people, including those who would otherwise have been the heirs to rural families, and this leads to a great deficit of care in the villages towards both ageing parents and the ancestral dead. While new religions direct themselves to both of these issues, this article has focused on the latter. It has shown how such groups can establish themselves with regard to areas of concern - such as ritual care of ancestors - formerly dominated by the parish temple.

Soka Gakkai, of course, displaces the parish temple - and indeed local religion generally - in a much more radical way in its attempt to establish a single, exclusive object of religious attention. But if the content of its teachings sets it apart from other forms of local religion, these teachings were not the sole basis of its recruitment of local followers. We saw in the above example how it also acquired followers by drawing on existing relations of dependency.

Notes

1. Two exceptions to this are Guthrie (1988) and Hardacre (1986) who offer examples of English language ethnographies of particular new religious groups in rural Japan.

2. This survey was of four adjacent villages varying in size from nine to forty-four households. Three of the villages belonged to the same (Soto Zen) parish. Face-to-face interviews were carried out in each household based on a questionnaire format. The highly sensitive nature of the topic of new religious affiliations is such that the data must be treated with a certain amount of caution; given the controversial character of some sects, it is likely that at least some respondents did not wish to divulge connections with a new sect. However, this problem of data accuracy is mitigated, to a certain extent, by the indirect knowledge of such connections that tends to derive from a protracted fieldwork presence.

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