

## TRANSCULTURAL POSSESSIONS IN/OF MAHIKARI: RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM IN MARTINIQUE

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### Overview

Since World War II, Japan has emerged as a global economic and political power. One relatively unrecognized feature of this globalization is the spread of Japanese “new religions” or *shin shukyo* throughout the world.<sup>1</sup> These Japanese new religions began to emerge in the nineteenth century as a response to dramatic social changes. Newer still are the “new new religions” (*shin shinshûkyô*), of which Mahikari is a leading example, having been adopted in many parts of the world, including the Caribbean, Africa, Latin America, Australia, Asia, Europe, and the United States. In Mahikari we see Japanese religious and cultural ideas and values are becoming important aspects of foreign religious landscapes.<sup>2</sup> The main

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<sup>1</sup> *Shin shûkyô* refers to new religions and *shin shin shûkyô* to new, new religions while *shinkô shûkyô* refers to newly emerging religion. *Shin shûkyô* has become the more widely used term referring to the “more established” of the new religions. See Peter B. Clarke and Jeffrey Somers, “Japanese ‘New’ and ‘New, New’ Religions: An Introduction,” in *Japanese New Religions In The West*. Peter B. Clarke and Jeffrey Somers, eds. (Sandgate, U.K.: Japan Library, 1994), pp. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Estimates of Mahikari’s demographics indicate the following numbers of Japanese members: Sekai Mahikari (Bunmei Kyôdan) branch—97,838; and the Sûkyô Mahikari branch—501,328; this totals almost 600,000 members. While mainly an urban religion, the movement does have some rural followers in certain countries; mainly in Japan, with substantial followers in Brazil, Belgium, France, Italy, Switzerland, Morocco, and the United States. Sûkyô Mahikari maintains its world headquarters in Takayama City, Japan, and has regional offices in North America, Europe, Australia, Asia and Latin America. SMBK maintains its headquarters in Shizuoka, Japan and has centers in France, Germany, the Philippines, Indonesia, Uruguay and the United States.

Overall, Mahikari’s main constituency is women who are in their forties to fifties and have moderate incomes. There is, however, a strong youth movement in the group called the Mahikaritai. There are social and

appeal for many people is the physical and emotional healing achieved through *okiyome*. Mahikari doctrine asserts that most daily problems are the result of improper relations with the spirit realm; this belief allows for emotional relief through externalization of problems and provides explanations for why things happen as they do.

This paper focuses on syncretism in Mahikari to explain these and other reasons behind its cross-cultural popularity, with especial focus on the movement in Martinique and reflections on my fieldwork there. Among other issues, I explain how Mahikari continues to syncretize as it spreads throughout the world, with emphasis on regional variations that spring from indigenous ecstatic and/or esoteric practices in both the sending and host country, such as Japan and Brazil, respectively. In regions such as Europe and North America, divergence from patterns of syncretism in Japan and Brazil are due in large part to the longstanding monotheistic stronghold in Western religious cultures. Being something of a combination of these two currents, Martinique is unique in that the main influence is French Catholicism, but there is also a legacy of Vodou. Since historical analysis suggests that Mahikari's success is due to its emphasis on spirit possession and exorcistic and healing rites, the wearing of amulets, the prominence of miracles, and the popular religious needs to which these forms of religious practice/expression respond, these forms of belief and practice are given careful attention in this essay.

The present consideration of syncretism refers to *Gestalt* psychology,<sup>3</sup> which suggests that as a religion spreads, certain practices become foregrounded and/or backgrounded, depending on the new cultural contexts. Since spirit possession/purification forms the core religious practice of the group, I examine how spirit possession is transformed in various contexts. Prior to its globalization, in Japan, as with virtually all religions there, Mahikari already exhibited an impressive degree of

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economic benefits in joining the group, but these are only gained through "networking." For further discussion on Mahikari's demographics see Winston Davis, *Dojo: Magic and Exorcism in Japan*, (Stanford, CA: University of California Press, 1980) pp. 7-8, 228, 256-257.

<sup>3</sup> See Nathan Katz, "Understanding Religion in Diaspora: The Case of the Jews of Cochin," *Religious Studies and Theology*, 15/1 (1996) pp. 5-17. In this article Katz uses this methodology to further explain the role of the Jews of Cochin, India.

syncretism, thus predisposing the movement to adapt abroad in syncretistic ways key to its survival and growth. Since syncretism is not unidirectional, I also discuss how the religion affects the new culture's religious landscape as well.

The initial research on Mahikari in Martinique, conducted ten to fifteen years ago, is trenchant yet either questionable or dated on the central question of the movement's appeal there. Laennec Hurbon has asserted that Mahikari's focus on the spirit realm, healing, and exorcism functioned well in the Caribbean since it helped members to connect with the spirit realm and "provides new legitimation for the legacy of the ancestral spirits from African and slave societies."<sup>4</sup> As will be demonstrated below, Hurbon's explanation is only a partial one since it largely overlooks the role of popular Catholicism in Mahikari's success in Martinique.

### **Origins, Belief, and Rituals of Mahikari**

Sūkyō Mahikari was founded by Okada Yoshikazu in 1960 and was called the "Lucky and Healthy Sunshine Children" and later "Church of the World True-Light Civilization." Born in Tokyo in 1901, Okada joined the military as a young man and was injured during the Pacific War. When doctors found that he had tuberculosis of the spine, he was given only three years to live, and so he vowed to serve God and mankind. Toward this end, Okada invested in several Tokyo factories that were later firebombed, leaving him financially ruined. Destitute, he turned to religion and became a staunch supporter of the Church of World Messianity, another of the Japanese "new religions."

The teachings of Messianity clearly played an important role in Okada's new religion. He received a vision in 1959 while unconscious from a fever, which was later interpreted as an omen of his mission to aid in the spiritual cleansing of humanity. This vision, and the ensuing experiences, led Okada to found Mahikari. "Five days after the vision, on his birthday, Okada was awakened at five o'clock by a divine voice, saying 'Get up. Change your name to Kōtama (Jewel of Light). Raise your hand. Trials and Tribulations are coming!'"<sup>5</sup> Thus was Mahikari born.

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<sup>4</sup> Laennec Hurbon, "New Religious Movements in the Caribbean," in *New Religious Movements and Rapid Social Change*, James A. Beckford, ed. (London: Sage, 1986), p. 158.

<sup>5</sup> Davis, *Dojo*, pp. 4-5.

The possession/healing experience is arguably the most important aspect of Mahikari. The Lord Savior, Okada, asserted that up to eighty percent of the problems that one experiences in his/her life are due to malevolent spirits. A great deal of the *mioshe* focuses on possession, its elimination, and the pantheon of spirits. When an individual enters Mahikari she/he learns that she/he is defiled and thus requires purification. This purification process is known as *okiyome* (purification), *mahikari no waza* (the Mahikari Technique) or *tekazashi* (raising of the hand). Ancestral and deceased human spirits account for most possession experiences; however, according to Davis' research twenty-six percent were possessed "by the spirits of foxes, cats, badgers, bears and other animals."<sup>6</sup> Animal spirits have gained a reputation for being more violent in their possessions than their human counterparts. Davis noted that the animal spirits mainly possessed younger members, thus it is possible that the vigor of youth causes the more violent reactions.<sup>7</sup> Possession by a warrior is also common. Such possessions provide a sense of status and feeling of power that the individual may not have within his/her everyday life. On the contrary, it is understood that one's ancestors, especially those with power, were likely corrupt, thus explaining their liminal state. In any case, spirit possession and its negotiation, along with miracles—which are reported by the majority of members—form the backbone of Mahikari practice.

Kotama spread his message locally and gained converts, but the real expansion of the religion came after he had demonstrated his purification technique on a television show, the "Afternoon Show," in November 1968. From then on the movement grew so rapidly that he was forced to allow some of his followers to oversee the initiation of newcomers, who came to view him as a living god. Kôtama died in July 1974 of natural causes, provoking a period of schism and struggle in the movement, but not to the detriment of the rich mythology that would develop around him.

Much earlier Mahikari mythology is attributed to the *Kojiki*, *Records of Ancient Matters*, which was written circa 712 CE. Though the *Kojiki* is a depository of Shinto myths, it is well known to scholars as a "late compilation in which political considerations and specifically Chinese

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<sup>6</sup> Davis, *Dojo*, p. 121.

<sup>7</sup> Davis, *Dojo*, p. 124.

conceptions intrude themselves almost everywhere.”<sup>8</sup> Mahikari utilizes many of the mythological deities found in the *Kojiki* but focuses on the Su-god who personally chose Okada as his savior. Eschatologically Mahikari seeks to overcome cosmic imbalance through *mahikari no waza* (the Mahikari Treatment) in an attempt to stave off a “Baptism of Fire,” or the Su-God’s incineration of the world.<sup>9</sup> The purification ritual directly aids this social change in this realm, in addition to restoring the spirits to their correct places in the astral realm. *Okiyome*, Mahikari’s central exorcistic rite, is regularly performed toward this rebalancing by members on physical objects, food, and the world at large.

The *omitama* is a sacred amulet that serves many functions within the group. One receives the *omitama* amulet upon completion of the Basic Seminar and thus it marks full initiation into the group. Receiving the *omitama* also allows one to do *okiyome* and perform miracles. The amulet itself contains a small piece of parchment on which is written the symbol *chon*, which symbolizes the Su-god. This amulet is said to protect members against evil and negative vibrations, allowing the “True Light” to reach them without harming them through its intensity, as well as empowering the member to perform *okiyome*.

*Okiyome* consists of two main parts: giving light to the primary soul for ten minutes, followed by thirty minutes (as needed) of giving light to the twenty-eight vital points located throughout the body. The ritual concludes with prayers thanking the Su-God, your partner for giving/receiving light, and an admonition to the spirits, “*Oshizumari!*” (Peace! Be still!).

### **Syncretism and Religious Needs in Mahikari’s Globalization**

In Japan and Brazil, most Mahikari members are Japanese, though many non-Japanese Brazilians have joined in recent years. There is a mix of Japanese and non-Japanese followers in California, Hawaii, and other places with significant Japanese immigrant populations. However, in Europe, Africa and the Caribbean, the majority of members are not of Japanese descent, and thus it is there that we find the greatest

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<sup>8</sup> William Theodore de Bary, ed., *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, Vol. 1 (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1958) p. 24.

<sup>9</sup> Young, “Magic and Morality,” p. 245. Some believers expected this apocalyptic event to occur in 2000.

syncretization. Clearly part of the allure for non-Japanese members is Mahikari's this-worldly focus, in addition to some degree of exoticism. However, I also argue that similarities between the Japanese and Catholic worldviews plays a dynamic role in Europe, Brazil and the Caribbean, with Catholic elements there becoming more foregrounded<sup>10</sup> than elsewhere in the Mahikari world. This paper argues that contrary to Hurbon's argument, which would place African spirituality at the background of the Gestalt model of understanding syncretism, it is actually Catholicism that overshadows ancestral African traditions in this case.

In its native form, Mahikari is a syncretic tradition that combines elements of Shinto, Buddhism, Christianity and New Age spirituality. It incorporates several Buddhist ideas, primarily that of *karma*, the ultimate, impersonal causal relationship of the universe; *avidya*, the perception that ignorance is the root of our suffering; and the importance of compassion. Shinto plays a dynamic role in Mahikari as well, providing the mythological basis as found in the *Kojiki* scripture.

The overarching theme in Mahikari East and West is purity.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately this concept of purity derives from the Shinto background of the religion. However, the notion of purity vs. impurity becomes syncretized with the Christian notion of evil in the West. "The concept of evil thus moves from the traditional Christian moral or spiritual notion of sin to a more or less physical or mechanistic notion of defilement."<sup>12</sup> This does not mean, however, that there is no retributive aspect: "[e]verything is perfectly arranged so that we reap our rewards and atone for our misdeeds. It is therefore important to express gratitude for all kinds of purification, pleasant or unpleasant, as they would not happen if they were not

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<sup>10</sup> No research has been published on Mahikari in Africa in English to my knowledge. I spoke with a member who practiced in Benin and asserted that "Mahikari was the same in Benin as Martinique" though their leaders were African, and the members were considerably poorer.

<sup>11</sup> See Brian McVeigh, "The Master Metaphor of Purity: The Symbolism of Authority And Power in Sukyo Mahikari," *Japanese Religions*, 17/1 (1992): 98-125. McVeigh argues that the "master metaphor" of purity is constantly being subliminally fed to members through constant, repetitious acts.

<sup>12</sup> Cornille, "The Phoenix Flies West," p. 275.

essential.”<sup>13</sup> All things of this universe follow a predictable cycle where they were once pure, became defiled, became enlightened and purified through *mahikari no waza*, and will be reintegrated into their proper place in the cosmos.<sup>14</sup>

Indisputably, health concerns constitute the single main reason why people join Mahikari. Kuniko Miyanaga’s research found that over seventy percent of those surveyed cited health issues as their motivation for joining Mahikari.<sup>15</sup> In Davis’ survey, over one half of the members surveyed said that they joined the group due to their own personal or family member’s illness.<sup>16</sup> My own research indicates that in Martinique members were more often attracted by the claims for psychological health as well as social benefits offered by the religion. Members in Miami emphasized the psychological benefits as well.

Besides illness, “bad luck” also drives people to Mahikari. In cultures like that of Martinique, where ancestral worship is prevalent, it is not uncommon to blame recurring relationship, health or financial problems on a family curse. Mahikari promises to heal the relationship with one’s ancestor and thus create harmony in one’s daily life. Upon receiving *mahikari no waza* or *tekazashi*, *kamikumite* may be healed, become harmonious with others, become better off financially, or stop being prone to traffic accidents.<sup>17</sup>

#### **The Nature, Scope, and Trajectory of Martinican Mahikari**

Mahikari was introduced to the Caribbean in 1975-76 and quickly gained many followers.<sup>18</sup> It is popular in Martinique and Guadeloupe, but can also be seen in smaller numbers in Puerto Rico, Haiti, Trinidad,

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<sup>13</sup> A.K. Tebecis, *Mahikari Truth at Last* (Tokyo: Yokoshi Shuppan, 1982), p. 201.

<sup>14</sup> McVeigh, “The Master Metaphor of Purity,” p. 116.

<sup>15</sup> Miyanaga, “Social Reproduction And Transcendence,” p. 303.

<sup>16</sup> Davis, *Dojo*, pp. 105-106.

<sup>17</sup> SMBK Pamphlet, pp. 14-15. Mahikari utilizes very aggressive proselytizing and advanced marketing tools. They have glossy booklets which shows people from many different countries giving their testimonials.

<sup>18</sup> Hurbon, “New Religious Movements in the Caribbean,” p. 157.

Jamaica, and the Dominican Republic.<sup>19</sup> Mahikari has made a considerable impact in the Caribbean. This case study is based on fieldwork conducted during October 1999, which included multiple visits to the main Sūkyō Mahikari *dojo* in Redoute, Ft. de France, Martinique, interviews with members on location and in separate locales, and participant observation.<sup>20</sup>

The island of Martinique is a French dependency in the Western Antilles. Colonized by France in 1635, it is today home to about 371,000 people, the vast majority of African descent. Local income is generated through tourism and exporting rum, sugar, and bananas, but the overall economy is subsidized by France. With limited employment opportunities, drug use has become an increasing problem for the island, which is exacerbated by the socialized living allowances that allow one to live comfortably with little effort. Historically, Catholicism has maintained a religious dominion over the island though some forms of Vodou and other African-based religions are practiced. Compared to other Caribbean islands, however, African-based religions like Vodou and Santeria play a relatively small role in Martinican religious life.

Hurbon asserts that Mahikari entered the Caribbean via France, where it spread among the immigrants from the Antilles, who then used their family relations to assure the implantation and expansion of the sect on the islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique.<sup>21</sup> Richard Fox Young's portrayal of the religion's spread to the Caribbean differs from Hurbon's: "French, Swiss, and Belgian missionaries first introduced Mahikari to the

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<sup>19</sup> Laennec Hurbon, "Mahikari in the Caribbean," in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 18/2-3 (1991), p. 244, and personal fieldwork notes.

<sup>20</sup> I interviewed with many initiates there, including several "*responsables*" and long term members. I also observed their monthly thanksgiving ritual and received *okiyome* several times. I was given a very positive reception and found the members to be very pleasant though they often avoided my direct questions until I obtained proper permission from the correct "responsible." I was told by a member that I contacted outside of the *dojo* that this was due to the "small island" mentality that everyone would know what they said and due to respect for the leader, rather than fear. Another member said, "I don't know if I am allowed." I came across a similar problem with the "*responsables*" when I asked to have my consent forms signed.

<sup>21</sup> Hurbon, "Mahikari in the Caribbean," p. 243.



Ivory Coast, the Congo, and Zaire, from which it spread to the French Caribbean Islands such as Martinique and Guadeloupe where African slave-culture and spiritism continue to flourish.”<sup>22</sup> Knowing which path the religion took is important for addressing the question of what external elements have been appropriated by Mahikari in various contexts. Based on my fieldwork, I would agree with Hurbon that Mahikari was brought to the island via France; contrary to Hurbon, however, I contend that the Euro-Catholic background is stronger than the indigenous African influence in the spirit of Martinican Mahikari.

According to Hurbon, by 1986, ten years into its development, there were 10,000 followers (or *kumites*) and 7,000 members in Guadeloupe.<sup>23</sup> There was “constant growth in the movement on the islands between 1976 and 1980,” with members in Martinique and Guadeloupe mainly comprised of the *petits bourgeois* (i.e., teachers, minor functionaries).<sup>24</sup> My own fieldwork indicates that the group in Martinique peaked during the mid-1980s with 5,000 to 7,000 initiates, but maintains 800 to 1,000 active members today, with approximately the same number in Guadeloupe. Young does not give exact figures in his research but asserts that Mahikari is embraced by many people,

who see themselves as victims of colonial ideologies, who in private adhere to the beliefs and practices of African primal religions but in public profess abhorrence of them in order to secure educational and occupational privileges....<sup>25</sup>

In my fieldwork, I was told in no uncertain terms that although there is an anti-colonial movement on the island, Mahikari is not it. Martinique maintains more of a French cultural habitus than African, and Vodou is discussed as a thing of the past. Most of the island is Catholic and many of the Mahikari members still consider themselves to be Catholic. When asked when he left the church for Mahikari one member of fourteen years asserted that he “didn’t leave the church.” However, not all Catholics accept Mahikari, and I was told that there was significant opposition from the Catholic Church especially after Mahikari’s initial explosion on the

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<sup>22</sup> Young, “Magic and Morality,” p. 254.

<sup>23</sup> Hurbon, “New Religious Movements in the Caribbean,” p. 157.

<sup>24</sup> Hurbon, “Mahikari in the Caribbean,” p. 243.

<sup>25</sup> Young, “Magic and Morality,” p. 254.

island, and some opposition from the French government. Mahikari views itself as a universal teaching beyond religion and accepts people of all classes and races, “but especially all religions.” Accordingly, members believe the style of Martinican Mahikari to be the same as in Japan or anywhere else, although during the Thanksgiving ritual part of the liturgy is embellished “in the style of the Martinique *dojo*.”

In Martinique there are similarities between Mahikari and Catholicism. Members routinely perform particular rituals, e.g., bowing, and praying in front of the altar. As in Catholicism, exorcisms are performed (through *okiyome*), and Mahikari’s understanding of the spirit realm resembles Catholic ideas on purgatory. Furthermore, only Mahikari officials can conduct “spirit investigations,” which resonates with Catholic doctrine’s limit of the performance of exorcisms to high-ranking bishops. The miraculous healing that can occur in Mahikari is achieved through purification. The sacred treatment of the *omitama* in many ways mirrors the popular use of the rosary as a protective amulet. Recitation of prayers in a foreign tongue bears resemblance to pre-Vatican II Catholicism, where members understood little of the Latin liturgy. This form of religious practice adds an element of mystery for individuals who are predisposed to esoteria. Thus the Catholic environment of Martinique provides the background against which these particular elements of Mahikari become foregrounded.

One particularly Caribbean element that I observed in Martinique was an emphasis on song. The Thanksgiving ritual included a very impressive choir led by a popular Caribbean singer. These songs were sung in French and expressed the joys of having Mahikari in one’s life. They were very exuberant and distinctively Caribbean in rhythm and style. When members recited the Japanese prayers they did so in a very melodic fashion, and some members sang Japanese hymns while giving *okiyome*.

I found the members to be very particular and fastidious in their actions, evoking a Japanese atmosphere. After signing in, members take off their shoes and either enter the sacred space barefoot or in socks; approximately one half of the members wore special knit socks.<sup>26</sup> The threshold of sacred space was clearly marked by a Chinese runner rug,

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<sup>26</sup> When I inquired about these socks and where I could purchase them, I was informed that they were made by members and given as gifts but were not sold anywhere and were not “official” garments.

which was positioned sideways to arrest one's attention. Members walk up to the rug and take off their shoes on the rug, being careful not to traverse into either realm without the proper foot covering. There was a large shoe room with shelves where members stored their footwear for longer stays at the *dojo*. Inside the *dojo*, a wide strip of mauve carpeting ran directly to the main altar while the rest was covered in teal carpet. Walking any style was permitted on the teal carpet, but while in front of the altar on the mauve carpet walking sideways or even backwards was demanded "out of respect to the creator God." Even when members would open the drapes covering the altar they would meticulously fold them into place. Though the mood was less than solemn while performing these tasks, members were joyous overall and maintained humor even during serious moments. For example, members often talked amongst themselves while performing *okiyome*.

Hurbon asserts that Mahikari came to the islands during a critical period when people were ripe for a new social paradigm. Sickness is still the main route by which most members enter the religion. Here people are primed to accept that the root of their illness, both individually and socially, is poor relations with the ancestors and other spirits. "'Social Evil' is not a product of an economic system of exploitation; it has its roots in the forgetting of the spiritual world."<sup>27</sup> But many members understand their social problems to be in part due to increased contact between Martinique and other countries and blame foreign countries as the source of the island's recent crack cocaine epidemic. As with Mahikari in other contexts, however, the evil or problems do not fall squarely on the victim's shoulders either. The religion walks a fine line between maintaining responsibility, accountability and control, while simultaneously externalizing guilt.

It seems as though the Caribbean members have more money than European initiates do (or at least are willing to contribute more). In Europe donations run the *dojo*; however, major expenditures such as new buildings are funded from Japan, while in the Caribbean members have funded the building of several large *dojos*.<sup>28</sup> In fact, it was made clear to me that the Redoute *dojo* was created solely with Martinican money and labor. Members seemed to be of the upper and upper middle class in general.

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<sup>27</sup> Hurbon, "Mahikari in the Caribbean," p. 255.

<sup>28</sup> *Dojos* can be found in Fort-de-France, Pointe-a-Pitre, Basse-Terre, LeMoule Saint Martin, and Marie-Galante. Hurbon, "Mahikari in the Caribbean," pp. 242-243.

They were better dressed than the average person and many own cars, which are significantly more expensive in the Caribbean than in the US. Although I was told that there was no “real” poverty in Martinique due to socialized living allowances for those who do not work, I found the members to be significantly better off than the masses of Fort-de-France and its outlying areas.<sup>29</sup> Receiving *okiyome* is always free; however, the initiation costs about \$125.00 and members understand their donations to be material manifestations of their gratitude to the divine Su-God and thus give freely, although the monthly donation is usually only around 20FF (\$4).

Despite the scorn of some local Catholics, one long-term member asserted that there were certain social privileges to be gained through membership in Mahikari. Initiates “network” and often help one another socially and financially. This can occur because many of the initiates maintain steady employment, often in civil jobs, which provide opportunities to help other members. Still, the main reason people joined Mahikari was emotional and physical health, as well as both curiosity about the teachings and desire for the ability to give light.

Like many of its European counterparts, the *dojo* in Martinique is also headed by a Japanese leader; however, the regional director of the French Antilles is Martinican, though he is married to a Japanese woman. In Martinique, members are mainly people of color and vary in age, with slightly more women than men in my observation. During the weekdays many older women could be found at the *dojo* giving and receiving light, but during the monthly festival the ratio balanced out, with men and women of all ages.

While doing my fieldwork I was able to observe the initiation of the Mahikaritari, or the youth group of Mahikari. They were paraded on the stage and there received a certificate (which was written in Japanese) and a pin. These youths, from sixteen to thirty-five years old, asserted their desire to obey their parents and were very neatly dressed in all white with rust-colored ties, an image which created an interesting juxtaposition to the ordinary youth of the island, who were often disheveled and interested in American fads such as Nike. For many of Mahikari youths, the religion

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<sup>29</sup> Martinique’s unemployment rate is extremely high, causing many other social problems including drug addiction.

functions as a way out of the emotional and mental poverty found on the island due to lack of job opportunity or even a work ethic.<sup>30</sup>

The millenarian aspects play an important role in the Caribbean context as well as in Japan. The ideas of the fall and the coming paradise are key here:

A new frame of reference is offered to the social challenge: the framework of millenarianism, the promise of a paradise on earth...The doctrine of Mahikari speaks precisely of a garden of Eden that is very near, and this permits the believer to put up with the present social problems, as if these problems lose all consistency and disappear before this phantasm of a reconciled and harmonious world in the near future.<sup>31</sup>

Members believe they will play an exalted role in the future society and are partly responsible for its creation. "According to Revelations received by the founder, after the time of purification mankind will enter an age when, through the combination of Divine Power and human effort, a great and holy civilization will be established." Having people initiated and "giving light" is deemed as more important than whether they subscribe to all the doctrines of Mahikari; in fact, members here and abroad expressed their own theories on different phenomena and even expressed their skepticisms openly. *Kamikumite* plays a critical role in the coming paradise, since it is they who can administer the light needed to purify the world of humans as well as spirits. Towards the end of the monthly ceremony, approximately 1,000 members recited in unison the prayers in Japanese while giving light to the four directions. Giving light, nonetheless, carries an enormous amount of responsibility, and some ex-members complain that the teachings made them into neurotics obsessed with purifying everyone and everything, feeling extraordinary guilt and responsibility when bad things occurred, believing that they somehow had not purified enough. It is understandable that these apocalyptic tendencies would be foregrounded in an environment rife with natural disasters due to tornadoes, volcanoes, and hurricanes.<sup>32</sup> In

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<sup>30</sup> One teacher told me that some of her young students refused to take their schooling seriously since they could make more money with odd jobs and the social living allowance than with a career.

<sup>31</sup> Hurbon, "Mahikari in the Caribbean," p. 255.

<sup>32</sup> Hurbon, "Mahikari in the Caribbean," p. 261.

fact, Martinique faces the same types of island disasters that often plague Japan. One difference is that Japanese Mahikari maintains more elements of nationalism than does Martinican Mahikari. However, in general, the group aims at helping all nations become purified and even in the Caribbean context there were definite subtle commands for group members to clean up society. During the Thanksgiving ritual, for example, a message was read from the master Oshienushisama, who contextualized the recent earthquake disasters in Greece, Turkey, Mexico, et al., for the members by asserting that these were indeed signs and warnings of the spiritual ebb that global society is facing and that the Earth was purifying herself of man's spiritual ineptitude.

At the same time that these disasters are viewed as warnings from Su-God, they are sometimes interpreted as signs of purification; just as the body releases various fluids and toxins so does the earth in response to the mass purification being conducted by *kamikumite*.<sup>33</sup> Natural disasters are viewed as changes in the earth, which occur due to the *okiyome* done by initiates. Each nation has its own social structures and environmental policies, which help to create their collective karma. Nations that are most respectful of nature and natural laws with strong environmental movements are believed to fare better due to their purity.<sup>34</sup>

Hurbon argues that "Mahikari, is a way of renewing links with the traditional cultural heritage: at the same time it is an instrument for criticizing modernity, and it can rid the individual of his inferiority complexes. It also provides a reassuring explanation of all the global problems and conflicts."<sup>35</sup> In other words, Mahikari serves as an important link between those who view themselves as modern and still desire to maintain a link with their African spiritual heritage in the guise of Mahikari's ancestor cult, without suffering from the kind of social stigmatization that Vodou does. While there are indications that at its peak in the mid-1980s the movement in Martinique counted 5,000 to 7,000 initiates, today there are only 800 to 1,000 active members. I was told that when the movement first came to the island people joined to try something new, especially since the few other spiritual alternatives were

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<sup>33</sup> McVeigh, "The Master Metaphor of Purity," p. 117.

<sup>34</sup> This can be traced back to the group's belief that only nature fully obeys Su-God in our current time.

<sup>35</sup> Hurbon, "New Religious Movements in the Caribbean," pp. 158-159.

predominantly Christian. In the early days, there were many more possessions or “spirit movements,” but now the “spirits are more cunning and resist moving so as not to be discovered.” As in Europe, it is only the *dojochō* who has the authority to speak with the spirits, since it is he who knows the *mioshe* well enough to tell whether the spirits are lying or not.<sup>36</sup>

Many Caribbean members admit that prior to their involvement with Mahikari they had little concrete understanding and control over their spirit world. Becoming connected and having proper relations with one’s ancestors is crucial in countries where since the era of plantation slavery many members of the underclasses have died young. Caribbean *kamikumite* understand that their ancestors have good reasons to be stuck in the liminal realms and thus the possession experience becomes understood in a negative way, which is contradictory to the traditional African view [but similar to the Catholic view].<sup>37</sup> One member told Hurbon, “the problem is that people do not respect the world of the spirits. Here in the Antilles, because of all the dead in slavery, there are all kinds of spirits that come to disturb us.”<sup>38</sup> *Mahikari no waza* provides a way to purify not only the individual but the society as well, giving the spirits their due and healing the rift between the realm of the living and the realm of the dead.

Many believe *okiyome* to be more powerful than other forms of exorcism precisely because of its healing effect. Whereas other forms of exorcism cast out the malevolent spirit, allowing it to harm again, *okiyome* heals the spirit, sending it to its proper realm. I also suggest that the Mahikari-based belief system in Martinique is much subtler than generally described. Much that has been written about the group continues to portray it with a high degree of sensationalism, despite its recent tendency to background the more violent forms of spirit possession. As in Europe, in Martinique Mahikari members are warned against openly giving light in public, even though this was the norm during the early years in Martinique and is still the norm in Japan. Simply put, the mundane realm is a manifestation of the spiritual realm and all spiritual dis-ease trickles down into our daily lives and must be purified through *mahikari no waza*. Long-

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<sup>36</sup> This point was elucidated by a story where a member in France was conned by a spirit into digging multiple holes in his living room floor in search of treasure.

<sup>37</sup> Hurbon, “New Religious Movements in the Caribbean,” pp. 156-158.

<sup>38</sup> Hurbon, “Mahikari in the Caribbean,” p. 259.

time members “witness” in front of the group describing their spiritual evolution due to *okiyome* and Mahikari.<sup>39</sup>

As already noted, it has been asserted by Hurbon that the relatively widespread acceptance of spirit possession for Caribbean *kamikumite* is only possible due to the longstanding influence of African traditions and the fact that those born in the islands are intimately familiar with possession cults. However, there are many other social factors being played out here. One could assert that Mahikari gains power not only from reconfiguring traditional ideas about ancestors and spirits and crafting them into something new while also connecting to Japan’s economic and technological power. Membership also offers certain material and social benefits such as the establishment of useful contacts professional, political and social contacts. Nonetheless most members asserted that it was primarily health concerns (physical health in Japan, and emotional health in Martinique) that brought them into Mahikari. Because Mahikari is one of the few alternatives to Christianity on the island, people have responded positively to the hands-on healing practice, focus on gratitude and spirits, foreign chants, spiritual knowledge and the increased self-esteem found in Mahikari. Even though the religion is essentially a Japanese import, it has effectively acclimated itself to a predominantly Catholic religious culture. In fact, it seems to be the Catholic environment that provides the backdrop to Mahikari’s success.

### Conclusion

Clearly one key element that makes Mahikari prosper is its attitude of inclusiveness. One need not abandon his/her previous religious attachments to enjoy the fruits of Mahikari; s/he must only be able to justify it in regard to the other religion. The inclusive, non-judgmental (at least initially) nature of the group attracts people, especially those who have not been completely satisfied with their former religion. The beliefs allow members to externalize their problems while simultaneously maintaining some sense of control. Mahikari’s teachings also appeal to people who have difficulty feeling at ease in the industrialized modern society, by

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<sup>39</sup> These “testimonies” are read from carefully reviewed sheets by the individual when possible.



offering a magical worldview which provides explanations for experiences and phenomena that science cannot explain.

The nationalist elements do not disappear completely when Mahikari relocates but they do adjust to their new environment. The social ills of any region become understood as part of their collective karma and responsibility. Even though Mahikari claims to be a universal religion, Japan and Japanese culture play a dominant role, regardless of the locale. However, what it means to be Japanese changes. For example, many members believe that they lived in Japan in a former life, effectively tracing their “spiritual lineage” as Japanese. The terms “Japan” and “Japanese” become somewhat synonymous with “true” and “universal”; this is especially elucidated when we look at the *kotodama*. In short, “Japan” becomes symbolic, a metaphor rather than a literal place or people, allowing Mahikari members, whether they be African, European, Martinican, or other, to identify with the group’s ideology. Once this transformation has occurred, initiates can be fully involved with Mahikari, using the *mioshe* to help their own nation.

There is a global trend in Mahikari towards less violent spirit movements, which is theorized in various ways. Interestingly enough, not one of the members whom I interviewed credited the practice of giving *okiyome* as a reason for the decrease in spirit manifestations. From this one could surmise some sort of desire to keep the approaching golden age just out of reach from members, thereby legitimating the ideas and practices as necessary. For if the *mioshe* allowed other forms of purification and light healing to be as effective as *okiyome*, then certainly some members would opt to leave the group. Even though the African influences on Mahikari in Martinique have lessened, it will be interesting to see what will occur now that Mahikari has reached the shores of Haiti, where African spiritism and Vodou really flourish. Possibly the Vodou *lwas* will syncretize with the Japanese spirits, combining, for example, Ogun with the samurai spirit or Ezili Danto with a spurned mistress.<sup>40</sup> Or in another ten years we may find Japanese scrolls in Vodou shrines.

Thus far, it appears that Mahikari has become successful in regions where Catholicism has maintained a religious stronghold. This trend may

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<sup>40</sup> Sexual karma is probably the strongest link between the spirits and humans according to Mahikari since it creates the most powerful forms of attachment.

be attributed to the similarities in ritual and focus on the spirit realm. Even though Mahikari membership has decreased in Martinique, it is still possible that religion will become popular and continue to syncretize in other Catholic areas. Mahikari may attract Catholics who have never really accepted the changes in liturgy since Vatican II and desire to commune with the mysterious side of religion. On the other hand, in many cases Mahikari's initial growth spurt has plateaued, leaving many first-level initiates who may continue to perform *okiyome* for personal and practical reasons but who are no longer actively involved with the group.