

The Crux of the Cross

Mahikari's Core Symbol

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This article discusses the cross as a central symbol in the two sects of Mahikari—Sūkyō Mahikari and Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyōdan. An analysis of the use of this symbol leads to a discussion of other aspects of Mahikari's cosmology, particularly its emphasis on Japan's role in the plan of salvation. Okada Kōtama, recognized as founder by both groups, offers an explanation of the faith based on the special significance of certain sounds and numbers, and the esoteric relationship of concepts based on the Japanese idea of kotodama. Mahikari's doctrine, as explained by Okada, presents a critique of modern materialism and promises a transformation to a spiritual age, a transformation in which Japan will presumably play a central role.

IT WOULD RAISE FEW EYEBROWS to point out that the symbol of the cross is neither a Christian invention nor a Christian monopoly. Most Christians, nevertheless, would probably feel rather ambivalent if they encountered in the main sanctuary of a Japanese New Religion not only the cross but other familiar symbols, such as the Star of David and the swastika. This quite natural reaction says much about how deeply we associate certain symbols with certain interpretations. No interpretation, however, can so appropriate a particular symbol—not even the cross—to the extent that it renders all other interpretations spurious.

One way to view the New Religions' use of the symbols of other religions is as yet another example of syncretism. The New Religions, however, might respond by asking, "Whose syncretism?" From their perspective the original interpretation of the symbols could well be theirs, and that of the other religions syncretistic. Fascinating (and

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revealing) though it would be to investigate the reasons for such a response, it is beyond the scope of this paper. Here I would like to concentrate on the symbols themselves—in this case the cross symbol in Mahikari—in an attempt to show the unexpected interpretations sometimes given to symbols familiar to us.

Klaus-Peter KOEPPING, who years ago conducted a series of conversations with Okada Kōtama, Mahikari's founder,¹ recalls Okada's comment that "the triangle is a symbol used in many religions, so that, for instance, the Star of David must be understood as a double triangle" (1974, p. 86). Okada's statement may seem at first to be nothing more than an offhand observation about the widespread symbolic use of the triangle, but a closer look at Mahikari thought reveals that the comment is actually based on a worldview that asserts, among other things, the existence of an ancient "historical" connection between the two regions of Japan and the Middle East. Many ideas of a similar type emerge when one looks into Mahikari's use of the cross.

There can be no doubt of the cross's importance in Mahikari's symbology. Since my attempt to understand the use and meanings of this symbol is based primarily on the explanations of Okada himself, it is important to keep a few points in mind regarding his interpretation of religious matters.² By way of introduction let me cite a few passages from a speech delivered by the leader of the team of architects on the occasion of the *jōtōshiki* 上棟式 (the ceremony marking completion of the basic structural work) for Sūkyō Mahikari's World Grand Shrine in Takayama City. Though spoken by a third party, the text reveals much about Okada's approach.

¹ Koepping quotes Okada's given name as Kōgyoku, a name the latter reportedly received in a revelation on 27 February 1959. In the *Goseigen* 御聖言 [The holy words] presently used by Mahikari, however, the name bestowed on Okada is written 光玉, and read in the old-fashioned manner as "Kautama." This is the name by which he is generally referred to when the title Sukuinushisama, "Redeemer," is not used.

After Okada's death the religion went through a drawn-out succession dispute that eventually split the movement into two groups: Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyōdan (the group that has kept the original name), headquartered in the town of Nakaizu, Shizuoka Prefecture, and Sūkyō Mahikari, headquartered in the city of Takayama, Gifu Prefecture. Since the interpretations used in this article are all based on Okada's teachings as found in certain of his texts, I will for the sake of simplicity use the term Mahikari for both groups.

² Two types of text were referred to in writing the present study. One is the *Goseigen*, a collection of revelations Okada is said to have received directly from Su God over a number of years, usually during the night. These revelations were written down as they were given. Since these are often difficult to understand, Okada undertook to explain them in sermons and articles in Mahikari's journal. These sermons are generally called *kyōji* 教示 (teachings). It is possible to detect in them a certain development of thought over time, although I will not elaborate on this point here. I have not utilized a third type of text, the textbooks used during Mahikari training sessions, since they are not supposed to be made public.

Today we celebrate completion of the sanctuary's structural work. The building features a specially curved roof with a ridgepole of unprecedented size, crowned with an enormous sphere.

The large roof has a concave cross section that, when the lines of the eaves are infinitely extended, endlessly embraces everything that comes below. The ridgepole, in contrast, displays an elliptic curve that endlessly embraces whatever is above.

All of these things—the ridgepole, the ridge-sphere, and the large roof itself—are based on the element eighteen, or rather, on the elements five and eighteen. Looking back, we see that the cornerstone was laid in the year Shōwa 55, on the fifth day in the fifth month. Today's ceremony is being held on the eighteenth of the month. Is this just chance, or is it some unforeseen coincidence? Personally, I cannot help feeling the presence in this of something that transcends human artifice.

(SUKUINUSHISAMA 1983, pp. 252–53)

The editors add, “The Suza sanctuary's form is based on a mysterious design that teacher Seiō has repeatedly pondered, devoting to the task many years and all of his energy” (SUKUINUSHISAMA 1983, p. 253). This editorial comment brings up the first point we need to keep in mind when considering Okada's thought: his teachings were not pure revelation, but were often the result of long-continued efforts to understand (though, for all the importance certain of his writings have in Mahikari, he never produced anything close to a systematic exposition of his ideas).³

The second point to keep in mind is suggested by the architect's speech, with its mysterious references to the significance of the roof, certain numerical “elements,” and the dates of certain ceremonies. Here we can glimpse a very important aspect of Okada's religious thought, namely, that God made nothing without meaning. In this view everything in the world, including humanity, is a manifestation of the divine plan or spirit. Words and numbers, however, are of special significance. For Okada, words (particularly Japanese words) have a hidden meaning or spirit, known as *kotodama* 言霊, that reveals to the knowledgeable the will of the one at the source of this spirit: God, the

³ I exclude from this statement the textbooks mentioned in note 2. However, since we are told that these books cannot be understood without the explanations of a teacher, they cannot be considered systematic treatises in their own right. Among the *kyōji* the *Kamimuki sanji kaisetsu* (SEIŌ 1989) is regarded as the most authoritative exposition of Mahikari's fundamental teachings, although it is hardly very systematic. The Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyōdan informed me that it contains Okada's fundamental teachings.

ultimate being. The symbols used by Okada can therefore be seen as representing “tangible formulations of notions” or “extrinsic sources of information” for Mahikari followers (GEERTZ 1973, pp. 91–92), concepts and formulations to remind believers of the core of their religion.

Mahikari: Revelation of the “True Light”

When the name “Mahikari” is mentioned most Japanese immediately think of *tekazashi* 手かざし, the holding of a hand over a person or object. The purpose of this rite is to cleanse the recipient of any possible “clouding,” in particular the influence of troubling spirits, and thus help restore the recipient to his, her, or its proper position before Su God, Mahikari’s supreme deity. This simple ritual is the most visible and therefore the most widely known aspect of Mahikari praxis, although the philosophy behind it remains mostly unknown to the general public.

Though this is not the place to go into great detail, we need to know something of Mahikari’s basic tenets in order to understand and appreciate the value of its symbols, particularly the cross. To the extent that Mahikari preaches radical change, a baptism of fire, and the advent of a new age and civilization, it can be called an eschatological or millenarian religion. The very first revelation given to Okada Kōtama, as recorded in the *Goseigen*, already manifests this characteristic. In the final line it says:

Thou shall speak the innermost depth of the Divine Truth.
The Spirit of Truth has entered Thee. Thou shall speak what
Thou heareth. The time of Heaven has come. Rise. Thy name
shall be Kautama [Exercise the Art of Purification.] The world
shall enter severe times. (SEIŌ 1974, p. 24; 1982, p. 23)⁴

The turmoil that the world is to experience will be caused by a radical change in its orientation or government.

According to Okada, everything that exists was created, directly or indirectly, by Su God, who let all creatures, but especially humans, partake in his spirit. This supreme god, the ultimate ground of being,

⁴ All passages from the *Goseigen* are taken from the English translation (SEIŌ 1982), with the sometimes idiosyncratic phrasing and capitalization of the original retained; sections in square brackets are not in the Japanese text in my possession. The revelation above established Okada as God’s speaker, and marked the beginning of the new religious movement “at 5:00 AM on February 27, 1959” (SEIŌ 1974, p. 23; 1982, p. 12). The legal recognition of the movement as a religious corporation followed on 19 November 1963.

is the head of the gods in the line of the sun. There is another group of gods, endowed with less light, that comprise the line of the moon. At an early moment in history Su God and the other gods of the sun family retired, leaving the world to be ruled by the lesser gods of the moon family. With this the original spiritual orientation of the world was replaced by a more materialistic outlook characterized by competition, finite knowledge, and the sequence “Material-First, Mind-subordinate, Spirit-affixed, in which the soul and spirit is made light of” (SEIŌ 1974, p. 470; 1982, p. 283). Despite the resulting problems this state too was part of the divine plan, and was thus allowed to continue until such time as Su God would reveal himself and return the world to its pristine form, ushering in a new civilization of spirit characterized by health, peace, and prosperity. In order to prepare humankind for the advent of this radical change, Su God chose Okada Kōtama as the *Sakigake no meshia* 魁のメシア, the Harbinger Messiah of the new age who urges people to undergo the great “cleaning” and so become the *tanebito* 種人, the “seed people,” of the new civilization.⁵

The Cross and Its Transformations

The fundamental position held by the cross in Mahikari symbology is indicated by its presence as a basic component of the *shinmon* 神紋, the most revered symbol in both divisions of Mahikari, Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyōdan and Sūkyō Mahikari. Each group has its own characteristic form of the symbol. Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyōdan uses the one originally designed by Okada himself, displaying a sixteen-spoked wheel with the two horizontal spokes and the two vertical spokes standing out by their thickness and color. The horizontal spokes are blue and the vertical spokes are red; together they form a cross, the horizontal plane representing water (*mizu* 水) and the vertical plane representing fire (*hi* 火). Sūkyō Mahikari uses the same basic design but surrounds it with a frame in the shape of two interlaced triangles, the Star of David (see figure 1). This divine symbol appears promi-

⁵ That this point is very much on the mind of Mahikari leaders was demonstrated to me during a meeting with the late Oshienushi Sekiguchi Sakae of Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyōdan on 19 February 1989. He had my calling card in front of him, and suddenly, towards the end of the interview, he commented, “You need to add just a *chon* and you will be a *tanebito*.” A *chon* is a short stroke resembling a comma that is commonly used in Mahikari to represent God. My name, Knecht, written in *katakana* reads “Kunehito.” By adding a single small stroke in the first symbol the *ku* changes into a *ta* and so the name is transformed instantly by the “appearance of *chon*” into *tanebito*. Oshienushi’s remark is probably the shortest form into which one of the basic teachings of Mahikari can be brought.

nently in the sanctuaries of both groups and is certain to be noticed by every visitor.⁶

One soon notices other crosses on display in the shrines. For example, the World Grand Shrine of the Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyōdan has a ground plan in the shape of a huge cross; inside the building the wide pillarless ceiling of the huge main hall is supported by crossed main beams and decorated with cross designs. The main hall of Sūkyō Mahikari does not display the cross

Figure 1

so profusely—it appears mainly in the *shinmon* over the main entrance and overlooking the main stage, and in the form of flower designs on the hall's glass doors and on the railings of the main steps leading to the building. The flowers, called “God's flower symbol,” have four petals that signify fire and water, time and space. These are the four main forces that make up the “kingdom of God”: fire and water represent the universe as well as its prime moving force, Su God, while time and space are regarded as the two divine creations first called into being by Su God as parts of himself (*bunshin* 分身; KNECHT 1987, p. 47).

There is another quite important, but less obvious, cross shape in the main shrines of both groups. This cross is part of the design of the main stage—the sanctum sanctorum so to speak. The stage is overlooked by a golden shrine situated on a high platform; immediately under the shrine platform and running the width of the stage is (in Takayama) a long aquarium containing a number of colorful carp, and (in Nakaizu) a blue ribbon that is eventually to be replaced by an aquarium. The cross in question is formed by the shape of the golden shrine in combination with the aquarium/ribbon (which represents the Isuzu River, the sacred river at Ise Shrine).

⁶ Both groups call their main sanctuary *Sekai sōhonzan* 世界総本山. That of Sūkyō Mahikari in Takayama was inaugurated in 1984. Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyōdan completed its sanctuary in Nakaizu in 1987.

Let us return to the cross formed by the horizontal (water, *mizu*) and vertical (fire, *hi*) spokes of the *shinmon*. As mentioned above, Okada identifies two groups of deities that appeared through Su God's activities: the deities of the sun, associated with fire, and the deities of the moon, associated with water (SEIÖ 1974, p. 392; 1982, p. 236).⁷ The respective qualities of these two divine lines are expressed in the *shinmon*'s spokes, the vertical ones representing fire, sun, yang, spirit, light, and the number five (the ideograms for which can all be read as *hi*), and the horizontal one representing water, moon, yin, the physical body, and darkness (or rather, weaker light).

The Japanese character for fire is read not only *hi* but *ka* as well; for this and other reasons Mahikari identifies the vertical beam as "HI and KA at the same time" (SEIÖ 1974, p. 74; 1982, p. 43). The horizontal beam, with its connection to water, is called *mi* (Okada's abbreviation for *mizu*). The joining of the two beams into a cross therefore combines *ka* and *mi* to form *kami*, "god." This combination generates the divine power that brings forth health, peace, and prosperity—the characteristics of the new civilization (SEIÖ 1973, p. 229). The cross, then, represents not just any *kami*, but *dynamic* *kami* filled with the power symbolized by the cross.

Before we consider the implications of this dynamism we must look still closer at the meaning of the cross, another aspect of which is indicated in one of Okada's revelations. There it says that God's Law is the fountainhead of all laws and so functions "through both the vertical three worlds of the Divine, the Astral and the Physical and the horizontal three worlds of the past, the present and the future" (SEIÖ 1974, p. 148; 1982, p. 90). The cross, in other words, represents a cosmology that combines the static structure of the universe (the vertical direction) with dynamic time (the horizontal direction). Since the human body is said to be modeled on the universe, with a divine, a spiritual, and a material component, it is only logical that those who follow divine law will be in tune with the structure of the universe. A person not yet so attuned needs to undergo a process of "cleaning,"

⁷ The English translation reads, "He created gods of the Positive (YAN) and the Negative (YIN) after that" (SEIÖ 1982, p. 236). I feel, however, that characterizing the deities as part of the sun or moon families better expresses the idea that both lines participate in divine light, though in differing degrees. It is the comparative weakness of this light that is responsible for the negative (yin) connotations of the era of water. But the yin, too, is necessary for the construction of a complete whole, as Okada explains in his discussion of the *kotodama* for the character *mei* of *bunmei* 文明, meaning "civilization." *Mei* is a combination of "sun" 日 and "moon" 月, indicating that the new civilization will arrive only when the two cooperate. This will be civilization of the cross, a paradise like that which existed during the era of the gods (*kamiyo* 神代; SEIÖ 1989, pp. 4–6).

okirome お浄め, a process that is linked to further forms of the cross.

In the first revelation recorded in the *Goseigen* we find the following lines: “‘EGO (GA) conceals GOD (KA) (clouding GOD [KA] with impurities).’ Therefore, it is called *ga*. ‘Ego and self-conceit’ made even gods experience failures” (SEIŌ 1974, p. 24; 1982, p. 13). The meaning of this rather enigmatic statement can be unraveled by examining the capitalized syllables. *Ga* is the Japanese word meaning “ego”; *ka*, as already mentioned, is another reading of the character for “fire,” which signifies the divine spirit. The voiced form of the syllable *ka* in Japanese is *ga*; this voiced form is indicated by adding a mark, called a *dakuonten* 濁音点, to the kana syllable for *ka*. But *daku* 濁 also means “to become muddy or cloudy.” Thus the word *ga*, ego, demonstrates the state of human beings in present times: they participate in the divine spirit, but “cloud” it through their ego.

The current human state is but one manifestation of the rule of the lesser gods, those associated with water and the moon. As Okada says, Su God has permitted their reign for some time, but the time has now come for him to reestablish the reign of the sun-line gods. Human beings must turn to God, cleansing themselves (i.e., bringing themselves into harmony with the vertical aspect of the universe) so that Su God’s spirit can take full effect in them. This is the nature of *shinkō*, faith, a term Okada says should be written not as 信仰, the usual way, but as 神向, meaning “to turn to God.”

The Cross of Triangles

The attitude of *shinkō* brings us to still another form of the cross, called by Okada “the cross of triangles” (*sankaku no jūji* 三角の十字) (SEIŌ 1973, p. 119). As mentioned above, the *shinmon* over the main entrance to Sūkyō Mahikari’s World Grand Shrine in Takayama is framed by a six-pointed star in the form of the Star of David. The Japanese name for this figure is *kagome shirushi*, where the term *kagome* is written in *kotodama* style as 神護目, “the eye of divine protection” (SEIŌ 1974, p. 463; 1982, p. 278).⁸

Basically the two triangles signify the mutually complementary activities of God and humans, and at the same time reveal the role of the Harbinger Messiah. The triangle standing on its apex represents

⁸ The term *kagome* is taken from a children’s song and game of the “ring around the rosy” type. In the center of the circle is a blindfolded child, known as the *oni*, the ogre. When the song stops the *oni* must guess who is standing behind him. In the song quoted by Okada the one in the middle, who represents Su God, is called not *oni* but *tori* 鳥, “bird” (cf. SEIŌ 1973, pp. 121–22).

the proper human attitude towards God, which is like that of a tree spreading its branches towards the light from above; people must accept God's working on them. In return God bestows his grace widely below, an activity represented by the triangle standing on its base. This divine role of attributing blessings to humans is God's *yo no miyaku* ヨのみ役, his "sacred role in the world."

This is the point at which the Harbinger Messiah makes his appearance. The Messiah's main mission is to fulfill the *yo no miyaku* as bestowed on him by Su God in the revelation of 15 May 1959: "Thy mission of YO is the role to give people, instead of God, on this earth the understanding of God's function of YO" (SEIŌ 1974, p. 44; 1982, p. 26). Okada directs people to aid this redemptive mission by rousing their efforts and pushing the Harbinger ever farther up, so that the effects of his mission might spread even farther and reach more people. For this purpose the two triangles have to come together to form the cross of triangles. Through the combined efforts of God, Messiah, and believers the new civilization of spirit will be brought about, a civilization Okada calls the *rittai bunmei* 立体文明, the "three-dimensional civilization" (SEIŌ 1989, p. 234).

When one climbs the steps to the main entrance of the World Grand Shrine in Takayama, about halfway up one passes two towers, one on each side of the steps. These are the *hikari no tō* 光の塔 (towers of light). Each is crowned with a metal structure showing two three-sided pyramids piercing each other in the same manner as the triangles of the *kagome* symbols; these represent the three-dimensional civilization. Okada explains the form and meaning of this civilization in terms of Mahikari's cosmology. The universe and humankind, we recall, are structured in three "layers," namely spiritual, astral, and material. The new civilization under the sun deities will be structured in a similar fashion, with the guiding spirit served by mind and followed by body or matter (cf. SEIŌ 1974, p. 470; 1982, p. 283). When God's Law permeates all three vertical layers of the universe the resulting totality will manifest the aspect of fire. To this will be added the somewhat weaker element of mind, corresponding to the aspect of water (the realm of the deities of weaker light), and finally that of matter, the earth aspect. Mind and matter are said to comprise the horizontal line. The coming together of all three forms what is called the *san jūji* 三十字 (triple cross). This will occur when the *miroku* principle comes into action, which is the sign that the new civilization is near (SEIŌ 1989, pp. 233–34).

Okada seems to think of this three-dimensional civilization in terms of two different geometric forms: a three-sided pyramid and a sphere (*kyūtai bunmei* 救体文明). The latter form, especially, signifies that this

civilization will be absolutely stable in itself (SEIŌ 1989, pp. 233-34). How is this to be achieved? In a nutshell, the appearance of Su God and his law will form the vertical axis of a cross whose horizontal element is made up of fire and water (which also comprise a cross of their own; SEIŌ 1989, p. 233). The appearance, or rather reappearance, of Su God signifies a new dynamic that first ushers in a period of turmoil, as foretold in the revelation of 13 December 1963, but then opens a new world (SEIŌ 1974, pp. 367-72; 1982, pp. 219-22). The cross, therefore, displays a dynamic aspect, announcing the appearance of Su God as the source of creative power (*ubusuna riki* 産土力), as he was in the beginning of the world (SEIŌ 1989, p. 4; 1974, pp. 292-93; 1982, p. 172).

The Dynamics of the Cross

The 1963 revelation signifies that Su God exists as the center of a cross, made of *ka* (fire) and *mi* (water), that reveals him as kami and as *chikara* 力 (power). The revelation orders Okada to revolve the figure of the cross so that, as a result of the movement, the cross's horizontal arm transforms into something resembling a key, forming the character 力, *chikara*, thereby revealing the working of spiritual power (*chi* 霊; SEIŌ 1974, p. 369; 1982, p. 220).

The spiritual power (*hi riki*) of Su God has been at work even during the reign of the water and moon deities, but, as we learn from the very last revelation in the *Goseigen*, it has been hidden by the power of water (*mi riki*). Since it is the power of God that turns the cross, and since a spinning cross forms a swastika, the two forms of the swastika (i.e., right-handed and left-handed) form expressions of the two types of spiritual power, namely *hiriki* and *miriki*. In the *miriki* swastika 卍力 the cross turns to the right (*migi*), i.e., clockwise, while in the *hiriki* swastika 卐力 it turns to the left (*hidari*) (SEIŌ 1974, pp. 470-71; 1982,

Figure 2

p. 283) (see figure 2). The swastika (*manji*) of Buddhism is the lesser *miriki* symbol, associated with water; according to Okada this demonstrates that Buddhism belongs to the era of the moon-family deities and is therefore transitory. According to Su God's revelations, only the combination of both kinds of divine power symbolized by the swastikas can produce the cross called the "true *manji tomoe*" (SEIŌ 1974, p. 470; translated as "the true symbol of yin and yang" in SEIŌ 1982, p. 283).⁹

Looking back, we see that the cross and its various transformations are invariably related to the very core of Okada's message: that Su God is about to reappear, and that the world is therefore to undergo radical change. For this reason Su God sent his Messiah, Okada, to tell the people to repent so that they might become *tanebito* for the coming spiritual civilization. The cross thus emerges as a core or "dominant" symbol, to use Turner's term, a prominently displayed symbol that constantly reminds the believer of Mahikari's fundamental teaching, and that, on the practical side, justifies and directs the believers' personal efforts. In a Geertzian sense, it forms an image of the basic structure of the universe and at the same time urges people to tune their lives in such a way that they can become part of this universe.

The Cross and Japan's Mission

Mahikari's use of the cross extends still farther, however, to indicate the Mahikari's view of its role and place in the world. Okada Keishu, the present Oshienushi (Head of the Teaching), describes Okada Kōtama's early proselytization activities as having started in a small house in Tokyo, then spread from Ise to the Japan Sea and later from Kyushu to Hokkaido. His missionary activity thus covered Japan in the form of a cross (SUKUINUSHISAMA 1987, p. 17). This statement reveals the presence in Mahikari of a geographical dimension to this symbol. We see this also in a pamphlet Sūkyō Mahikari distributes to visitors: following a brief explanation of the religion is a map of its global network, with Japan marked by a big cross, its arms pointing in the four cardinal directions.

⁹ In an earlier article (KNECHT 1993, pp. 42–43) I stressed the mechanical aspect of Okada's swastika explanation, assuming that Su God acted like the axle of a wheel. After reexamining the relevant texts I must retract this statement, insofar as Okada compares Su God's role to that of a core that emanates power. On the other hand, it can be said that many of Okada's explanations exhibit a certain penchant for the mechanical or technical. It is this aspect, I believe, that gives Okada's otherwise esoteric explanations the "scientific" slant that (I was told by a Sūkyō Mahikari leader) appeals to technicians or engineers.

Maps tend to emphasize the geographical position of their producer in such a way that this position appears to be the natural center of the world. In this respect Sūkyō Mahikari is no different from many other mapmakers. However, it seems to me that this simple mark on a small map quite aptly reflects Mahikari's view of Japan's place in the actual world. Su God, Mahikari proclaims, is the ultimate ground of everything; the return to Su God preached by Mahikari is thus a return to the ultimate core of the universe, the true paradise (*tengoku* 天国). Though Okada makes efforts to portray this *tengoku* as something spiritual, he is ambiguous at best and on occasions makes statements that suggest *tengoku* is actually Japan (SEIŌ 1989, p. 124).

The return to the source preached by Mahikari is seen to transcend all religions and sects, which cannot be anything than subordinate to the ultimate world of Su God. Thus Mahikari does not identify itself as a religion in the ordinary sense of the word; because it transcends (particular) religion (*shūkyō* 宗教) it is a "Supra-Religion" (*sūkyō* 崇教) (cf. CORNILLE 1994, p. 91). Okada insists that "all religions are basically one, belief is basically one, mankind is basically one, and the earth is originally one" (SEIŌ 1989, p. 285), but adds that the importance of the historical religions lies only in their function as "breaks" to prevent mankind's total deviation from God's plan. They will be superseded in due time by the *sūkyō*, Mahikari (SEIŌ 1989, pp. 90-91).

The claim to religious centrality for Mahikari appears connected with a claim to centrality for Japan as the country where Su God acted at the beginning of time and where he will reveal himself anew. To understand the reasons for and implications of this claim we need to look once more at Mahikari's main symbol, the *shinmon*. The golden sphere at its center is surrounded by a white field and, further out, by a green ring dotted with sixteen smaller golden spheres. These spheres are linked with the center by the symbol's spokes. The *shinmon* can be viewed either as a two-dimensional symbol, in which case it represents the cross of fire and water with Su God in the center, or as a three-dimensional symbol, in which case it represents the three-layered structure of the universe, with the spirit world shown by the central sphere, the astral world by the white field, and the material or present world by the green ring. Viewed in this way, the emblem represents a cone with Su God at its top and forms an image of the world and of what Okada called its "real history."¹⁰

¹⁰ For Okada, history as taught in the textbooks is nothing but a "pack of lies" (*uso happyaku* ウソ八百), intended to mislead humankind about its true origin and purpose (SEIŌ 1989, pp. 80-88). "Real" history is regarded as going back millions of years and revealing Japan's true position in and significance for the world.

In this image of “real history,” the golden center or top symbolizes Sumeramikoto, the incarnation of Su God in this world, i.e., the emperor and his people who live in the country at the source of the sun (*Hi no mototsu kuni* 日の元つ国). The sixteen smaller spheres in the outer ring (or at the foot of the cone) represent Sumeramikoto’s sixteen imperial children, whose descendants populate the world. Sumeramikoto is another name for the emperor of Japan, but it is probably going too far to assume that Okada simply thought of Sumeramikoto as representing the living emperor. As we will see later, he is rather ambiguous on this point.

For Okada the syllable *su* in the name Sumeramikoto indicates the ruler’s direct relation to Su God, and thus his position as chief representative of the sun family. The sixteen imperial children are then logically also of the sun family. Sent into the world to serve as the ancestors of the world’s peoples (the *goshiki jinrui* 五色人類, “races of the five colors”) and the founders of the world’s culture(s). The five colors, which represent the five racial groups of humanity, are golden/yellow, red, white, blue, and black/purple. In Okada’s system of numerology based on *kazutama* 数霊 (number spirits), five belongs to the same line as sun, spirit, etc., since all can be read as *chi*; this is seen as further evidence that the peoples of the five colors are descendants of the sun line. In addition Okada claims to have found material proof of the races’ Japanese origin in five battered old wooden masks that faintly show the five colors; these were hidden away in a shrine of the Mt. Aso area in Kyushu.¹¹

Further detail is provided in a chapter where Okada explains the meaning of the name Hie Jinja 日枝神社 (Hie Shrine) in terms of both *kotodama* and “ancient history.”

How do we explain the meaning of the name Hie? “Hie” means a branch (*eda* 枝) of the sun (*hi* 日), that is, a branch deity of the sun god. One child of the imperial house of Su became the ancestress of the red people, another became the king of the people of Tenjiku [India], and another became Adameve, king of the people of Afugakafu. They were sent to the foreign countries [their descendants presently live in] to form branch families (*bunke*) [of the main sun-god line]. Since these deities are venerated as sun-branch (*hie*) deities we have the Hie Jinja. (SEIŌ 1989, p. 282)¹²

¹¹ See SAWAHATA 1986 (p. 25) for a color photograph of these masks. In this publication, as in HATANAKA 1987 (p. 34), one is left with the impression that there can be only one set of such masks, but Okada says that on his travels he found such masks in several locations, but he does not disclose the locations (SEIŌ 1989, pp. 154–55).

¹² The *e* of *hie* would ordinarily be read as *eda* 枝 (branch). The people called Afugakafu

In other words, the imperial princess and princes are of the same sun line as Su God, but they are to him like branch households (*bunke*) to the main household (*honke*).

This line of thought has several implications for the manner in which Okada understands the role of Japan. As we have seen, Okada regarded the land where Su God first revealed himself—"the country of the origin of the sun" (*hi no mototsu kuni*)—as the fountainhead of all races and all cultures. From this country, too, originated all languages and writing systems, the first script being the so-called *kamiyo moji* 神代文字, the writing of the divine age. Since all languages are thus descendants of the same tongue, *kotodama* interpretation is universally applicable. Although, in Okada's view, modern Japan may not be the original *hi no mototsu kuni* as such, it is that country's successor and thus the world's oldest civilization. Okada finds proof of this fact in, among other things, certain Japanese place names, such as Hida (the region where Takayama is located, the name of which, according to Okada, should really be read "Hidama" 日玉, or "globe of the sun.")

It is on this basis that Okada explains the role of the world's five great religions. Their founders descend from one or the other of the imperial children that originally populated the world; all came to Japan to undergo spiritual training, so that the religions they founded all have their roots in Japan's *kannagara no michi* 惟神の道, the way of Japan's ancient (sun family) gods (SEIŌ 1989, 84). Japan's spiritual position is thus that of "honke on the top of the world's Fuji" (SEIŌ 1989, p. 381).¹³

The pivotal significance of Japan means that if Japan deviates from the spiritual position that is the foundation of her mission, according to Su God's plan, its deviation leads to deviation and turmoil for the rest of the world. Since neither religions nor science seem to understand this fundamental responsibility, it is the mission of Mahikari and the Harbinger Messiah to arouse the world's conscience and rebuild

and the king Adameve, both appear in the Takenouchi Documents as the descendants of an imperial princess named Yoiropa Adamuibuhi Akabito Meso, who was the ancestress of the peoples in Mesopotamia or western Asia (ŌUCHI annot. 1984, p. 40). For a short description of the Takenouchi documents see page 336 below.

¹³ Fuji here signifies less the actual mountain than the world and its hierarchical structure as imagined by Okada. It is the three-dimensional aspect of the *shinmon*. However, the real Mt. Fuji is a volcano and so lends itself to be used as a symbol of fire (*hi*). As such it is interpreted by Mahikari as being part of a pair of symbolic geographical features where the other pole is represented by the famous whirlpools in the Naruto Straits. Together the two make for another form of the cross, combining water and fire, although in this combination more emphasis is laid on Fuji's serene quietness against the activity of the whirlpools, a symbol of the unsteadiness of the era of water (See SEIŌ 1974, pp. 390-94; 1982, pp. 235-38).

“spiritual Japan” (SEIŌ 1989, p. 387).¹⁴

In this view the return to the origin preached by Okada means more than just a return to Su God—also involved is an acknowledgement of Japan’s role in the salvation of the world. While Okada and others stress that this is a primarily spiritual matter, their arguments to that effect are sometimes a bit forced. For example, in the revelation of 5 February 1966 (recorded under the title “Mankind, make your spiritual origin clear” [SEIŌ 1974, p. 452; 1982, p. 272]) a distinction is made within the group of yellow (*ki* 黄) people between the *ōbito* (the golden people 黄人 or kingly people 王人) and the *kibito* (黄人 the yellow people), the latter being distinguished from the former as a *bunke* is from its *honke*.

The *ōbito* are identified as the world’s original race of human beings. Okada then speaks of where they dwell: “Those who are the original race of the five races in respect to the spiritual origin were called YAMATO” since they dwelt in Yamato 大和, the land of “great harmony.” Although Yamato is, of course, another name for Japan, Okada refrains from directly identifying it with Japan, preferring to characterize it at this point as a kind of Eden. Yet after he has indicated the pivotal position of the Yamato people in this manner he speaks of them in terms that can only identify them as Japanese. The “Yamato people” are warned not to assume an attitude of superiority but “become awakened to their spiritual origin as HITO born in the land of origin of the spiritual forms of the five races. You should not be a HITO in NIHON, who serves only for HINOMOTO,” but work for the next civilization (SEIŌ 1974, pp. 457–58; 1982, p. 275). “Nihon,” of course, is the Sino-Japanese name for Japan, while “Hinomoto” is the native Japanese reading of the same characters (日本).

Thus, although there appears to be an effort here to distinguish *Hi no mototsu kuni*, the spiritual country, from Hinomoto, the result is rather unconvincing. We see this, for example, in a phrase preceding the one cited above, where God addresses Okada, saying, “The land called HINOMOTO, *in which you are living* [emphasis mine] is the land of the Land of Spirit’s Origin (HINO MOTOTSU-KUNI)” (SEIŌ 1974, 457; 1982, 275). Similar doubts are raised by the way in which Okada’s writings continually refer to the supposedly spiritual *Hi no*

¹⁴ TEBÉCIS believes that this is not a sign of nationalism since “it is not Japan the modern country (as most people view it) that is significant, but Japan the land where spirituality originated. Our feelings for the present Japanese people have little to do with it.... In his teachings, *Sukuinushisama* himself actually indicated that the people of *Hi no Mototsu Kuni* are not only the Japanese” (1982, pp. 417–18). On the other hand he also claims to have found in spirit investigations that “many occidentals have been born as Japanese in previous lives” (1982, p. 418).

mototsu kuni in concrete geographical terms relating to Japan (such as Hida, mentioned above).¹⁵

Such doubts are increased by the kind of “scientific” proofs Okada offers in support of his arguments. Okada crisscrossed the country in search of evidence that would support his revelations and his interpretations of them (SUKUINUSHISAMA 1983, p. 18). In his explanatory work, especially *Kamimuki sanji kaisetsu* (SEIŌ 1989), Okada names historians and archeologists whose findings are in line with his teachings (though he does not, as far as I am aware, refer to any particular studies). Okada also relies on what he calls simply *kobunken* 古文獻, which means “ancient texts”; he is not specific about what kind of texts these might be and how ancient they are. He claims that these texts, originally written in the *kamiyo* script, demonstrate unmistakably that Japan’s history (its “real history,” that is) is much longer, even millions of years longer, than the opportunists in academia or government present it to be. The texts also prove that there is a vital connection between present Japan—Japan after Jinmu Tennō—and the age of the gods, which dates back to the time of creation itself.

As mentioned in note 2, above, there are two types of documents available for the study of Mahikari’s teachings: the revelations of Su God and the teachings of Okada himself. The *kobunken* are not mentioned in the revelations recorded in the *Goseigen*, as might be expected, since these revelations are supposed to be the direct and original pronouncements of Su God. Okada, however, cites them frequently in his *Kamimuki sanji kaisetsu*, where they form an important source for his explanations. But what are these “ancient documents”? According to Andis TEBÉCIS they are a set of records generally referred to as the “Takenouchi Documents” ([1982], pp. 391–92). The Takenouchi Documents are three texts on the ancient history of Japan that were allegedly discovered, together with such artifacts as the stones inscribed with the Ten Commandments, in the tombs of the Takenouchi family in Shinmei Village during 1893 or 1894 (OUCHI 1984, p. 14). The Takenouchis, priests of a shrine called Kōso Kōtai Jingū 皇祖皇太神宮 (Imperial ancestors grand shrine), are said to have hand-

¹⁵ Such views may be one of the things that has made Mahikari rather popular among Japanese politicians and business leaders of a conservative stripe. At Sūkyō Mahikari festivals I have seen large groups of politicians from all levels of the Liberal Democratic Party. If such politicians really consider *Hi no mototsu kuni* to be a purely spiritual concept, why would a prime minister of Japan bother to send a large flower decoration for the festival under his official title?

No politicians were present at Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyōdan at the time of my visit, but a sizeable number of high-ranking bank officials and other economic leaders were there (see HATANAKA 1993, pp. 26–27, for a similar observation).

ed them down through the ages.¹⁶ Okada, Tebécis claims, “said that many historical facts concerning human development, religion, politics and other matters of vital importance to the world are recorded in the Takenouchi Archives or Takenouchi Documents” ([1982], p. 391). TAKEDA Sūgen, too, states that Okada, though he never explicitly declared his sources, “relied in important points directly on the Takenouchi Documents” (1988, p. 31).

The particular volume of the Takenouchi Documents that Okada refers to—though only indirectly and not by name—is the so-called *Ten no maki* 天之巻 [Volume of heaven], the first in the set of three (which also includes *Chi no maki* 地之巻 [earth] and *Jin no maki* 人之巻 [humanity]; ŌUCHI annot. 1984).¹⁷ The *Ten no maki* contains an account of the creation, which took place in several stages and was carried out by several generations of deities. Okada refers only to certain deities mentioned in the texts, at times adding *Su* to their names in order to stress their place in the direct line of Su God.

In at least one case, however, the actual sources for Okada’s ideas appear a bit clearer. In a collection of his sermons we find a chapter entitled “Light from the East,” which explains that the founders of the world’s great religions realized their teachings could not reveal the ultimate truth, and knew that such the truth would eventually come from the East. He further says that Moses and Jesus, among others, came to Japan to undergo spiritual training in preparation for their missions, and that they later died in Japan. For him their careers are further proof that their teachings are only transient and that ultimate salvation will come from the East, that is to say from Mahikari and/or Japan (SEIŌ 1973, pp. 82–106). Such ideas are not related in the Takenouchi Documents; although they list Śākyamuni (Shaka Nyorai) as a descendant of the sun-deity line, they do not go into detail about his activities nor mention other religious personalities.

Where one *does* find stories of this type, detailing how the teachers of the world’s great religions trained in Japan and eventually returned there to die, is in a book entitled *Hikari wa tōhō yori* [Light from the

¹⁶ The shrine, the headquarters of Amatsukyō 天津教, was formerly located in the Shinmei Village’s hamlet Kugo in the country of Etchū (present Toyama Prefecture), but now it is found in Isohara, Ibaraki Prefecture (SAJI 1979, p. 3). See TAKEDA 1988 for a description of the role these documents played in certain New Religions.

¹⁷ The *Volume of Heaven* relates a history that supposedly predates Jinmu Tennō for millions of years, but ends its account with the demise of the generation preceding this emperor. It is on the whole an account of how the divine emperors ruled and traveled the whole world but it also makes it clear that these emperors are different from the ones that appear in history as it is taught. The central message of this “history” is that Japan is the beginning of everything on this earth and is the earth’s spiritual, and thus political, center (SAJI 1979, pp. 3–10).

East] (YAMANE 1988), first published in 1937. In the postscript to the latest edition the author's son mentions that parts of this book were republished in a journal that functioned as the more or less official journal of an organization called the Taiko Kenkyūkai 太古研究会 (Group for the study of the ancient past). One of the contributors to this journal was none other than Sekiguchi Sakae, Okada's close companion for many years and his successor as Oshienushi (and who later served as head of the Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyōdan following the separation from Sūkyō Mahikari). Under these circumstances there can be little doubt as to what Okada's real sources were, at least for certain parts of his teachings.

It would indeed be quite interesting to trace Okada's sources in more detail, but that is beyond the scope of this paper. In light of what I have tried to show in this article, however, two final remarks seem appropriate. First, in order to understand the significance of Mahikari's aspirations to be a "Supra-Religion" it is necessary to examine not only the group's teachings but also their possible sources, as well as the time and circumstances of the sources' "discovery." Some of the texts that most likely informed Okada's thought were published during the militaristic period earlier this century, so we need not be overly surprised if they attempt to prove that Japan is the land of the gods and therefore has a legitimate claim to rule the world (though peacefully, as, for example, SAKAI would insist [1930]).¹⁸ We should also take into consideration the fact that Okada himself was born into a family with a respectable tradition of military service, that he underwent military training, and that he served as a member of the Imperial Guard during the years when books like Yamane's were being published (HATANAKA 1993, p. 10).

On a quite different plane, we must also remember that Okada was influenced by ideas about the lost continent of Mu. According to Okada, Japan forms the last surviving portion of this continent, once the home of a superb, sun-worshipping culture. The people of this continent were builders of pyramids, a fact reflected in the activities of the lost continent's last survivors, the Mayas, Egyptians, and, of course, the Japanese.

We might thus conclude that Mahikari's teachings comprise a collection of esoteric knowledge of various origin, some from published

¹⁸ In his collection of comments on the *Volume of Heaven*, Okada says that Japan has a right to rule the world so that her activities in foreign countries (in 1930) are not to be compared with those of the Western Powers, namely, as invasion. The reason is that Japan, being the country of the sun people, naturally rules over the all the others, who are to the sun like the moon, namely, of only derivative importance (SAKAI 1930, pp. 24-28, 25-60).

material and some from Okada's earlier experiences as leader in another religious group, the Sekai Kyūsei Kyō (World Messianic Movement), whose cosmology and rituals bear many resemblances to Mahikari's. If we are to arrive at a fuller interpretation of Okada's teachings, however, there is another element that cannot be overlooked: the point of view of his followers, the people who believe in the teachings of Mahikari.

In an interview with one of the leading personalities of Sūkyō Mahikari someone raised the question as to whether Okada was influenced by his experience as head of a local center of Sekai Kyūsei Kyō. The answer was quick and unequivocal: Such is the opinion of scholars, but it is not the truth. The truth is that Okada Kōtama received his teachings directly from Su God, and that such teachings therefore cannot be investigated or attributed to any other source than Su God. This point of view seems to suggest that a nonquestioning attitude toward the teachings and a refusal to entertain the possibility that certain, perhaps undivine, sources may be involved is extremely important to the believers, helping them preserve their claim to be the possessors of a unique religious tradition.

Conclusion

In drawing attention to the importance of the symbol of the cross in Mahikari I have attempted to show how it forms a quite concise representation of the religion's most central teachings concerning world salvation. As such it has something important to say about the fundamental relationship between God and believer and about the attitude the believer must adopt in order to achieve salvation. But, as a seemingly inobtrusive mark on a map reveals, the teachings on salvation also exhibit a definite link with the fate of a particular country and nation, namely Japan, even when efforts are made to make such teachings appear purely spiritual in nature. One might wonder why such ideas and beliefs thrive at a time like the present, when Japan as a nation struggles to redefine its position in the community of nations.

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