# Transnationalism and Belief: Cultural Identity and Conversion to Japanese New Religions in Singapore

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The study of conversion has played a central role in the sociology of religion for very understandable reasons. Conversion implies not only the subjective embracing of an alternative set of beliefs, but is also likely to involve the transformation of personal practices — in diet, dress, social and cultural networks, time schedules to name some of the more conspicuous instances — as well as potentially major political ones. Imagine for a moment the changes in lifestyle attendant on the decision of a Malaysian Chinese to embrace Islam, of a middle class Westerner's determination to adopt Buddhism, Sufism or one of the Japanese "New Religions" now spreading far beyond their geographical homeland or of a local persons decision to convert to Christianity in much of the contemporary Middle East, or even in India for that matter. Such movements of religious affiliation, conventionally called "conversion," while they may or may not be marked by any geographical relocation or transformation of class position, are most certainly accompanied by substantial shifts in subjective identity, cognitive and affective orientations and even ethnicity. These shifts will slowly or more rapidly be encoded into everyday practices and political affiliations and will become very visible in the subsequent socialization of the next generation.

While sociologists of religion have been forced to recognize the multiple social consequences of religious conversion, they have often responded to this widespread phenomenon in terms of a rather conventional set of sociological categories — the social backgrounds of convertees and the presence of "crises" in the lives of converts that might precipitate such major shifts in identity — being amongst the most favoured ones. Theological perspectives have similarly been informed by a particularistic agenda — often one very similar to that of the sociologists, but with the additional twist of the active desire to promote such identity shifts — but naturally in particular directions only. In this essay an attempt will be made to extend these limited agendas in four directions. The first of these is to incorporate a more anthropological perspective — one that concerns itself with transformations of cultural meaning and material, spatial and temporal practice. The second is to examine an Asian case as opposed to the Western and African perspectives that have empirically dominated the field and to explore what difference this might make to more general theories of conversion. The third is to examine a situation where the direction of conversion is not from a local or indigenized world religion to Chrtistianity — the subject of the bulk of convesrion studies to date — but rather of movement between non-Western religions. The fourth is to incorporate as an integral part of anthropological analysis the political dimension of conversion, since in multiethnic societies in particular (such as those found throughout

Southeast Asia) I will argue that religious transformation always carries with it political implications. The fact that the significance of changing patterns of religious affiliation is of profound interest to the modern state, an interest paralleled only by the concern with structurally similar secular identity transformations (for example to or from some form of socialism), clearly signals this political sensitivity of shifts in belief systems, particularly if they begin to involve large numbers of people rather than only isolated individuals.

If the question of the politics of religious transformations is and has long been of particular interest to the state in Southeast Asia ,[1] the concern with identities has become of particular interest to anthropologists. This concern, while it certainly involves ethnicity, does not confine itself to it, but extends to transformations of subjectivity of a much greater range and consequently incorporates themes as diverse as gender, multiculturalism, individualism versus corporate identities, changing notions of relationship and intimacy and the very notion of the self as a foundational category.[2] Very important although it is, what very little of this literature acknowledges is that one of the most significant sources for the decentering and destabilization of essentialist notions of identity and selfhood is religion. This can take several forms — the decline of formal religious affiliation and with it the collapse of any identity rooted in such categories and values (that is to say, secularization) being one, but the resacralizing of the world (signalled not only by the rise of fundamentalisms, but also by orientations to the spiritual contained within the "New Age" movement) being a quite opposite one. Both however are contained within a bigger context — that of globalization.

While globalization is often understood as a primarily economic process of integration it is worth noting that it first emerged out of the work of scholars in the sociology of religion such as Roland Robertson [3] and has remained an important notion in recent and contemporary studies of religion, whether framed in terms of modernization [4] or in relation to the original idea of globalization as a cultural process.[5] In all cases what remains central is the fact that religions travel: they migrate well beyond their points of origin and in doing so offer a range of religious choices to people who would once have had few if any cultural options in terms of their religious identity. In areas such as Southeast Asia, where cultural flows and global influences have been the norm rather than the exception not only in the recent past but over long stretches of the region's history, religions have profoundly influenced each other (Indonesian Muslims incorporating large amounts of mystical material from non-Muslim Javanese and Hindu sources and Malaysian ones from pre-Islamic animist belief systems, Theravada Buddhists in Singapore adopting Christian organizational patterns and forms of worship such as hymnals and so on in myriad forms of syncretism and borrowing). Religious pluralism equally offer possibilities to the individual or even to whole communities (such as the Malaysian Orang Asli Temiar people, whole villages of whom have converted from indigenous animism not to the more obvious options of Islam or Christianity, but to Baha'i) for the self creation of identity along religious lines.

Southeast Asia has throughout its history been subject to waves of successive religious influences which have had a profound effect on its cultures and ontologies. Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity have all in succession swept across the region leaving layers of belief, symbolism, social order, languages, architectures and values, all of

which still exist in endless permutations and are constantly refreshed by new ideas, theologies and practices spreading from the Middle East, India, China and, in the case of Christianity, from North America rather than Europe. Numerically smaller religions — Judaism and Baha'i for example have in turn interacted with and fertilized these larger world religions. Others such as Subud and strands of Javanese mysticism (*Kebatinan*), the spirit cults (*Nats*) of Burma and the forms of "animism" that characterize the hill peoples of Thailand and the native peoples of Sarawak and Sabah are wholly indigenous in inspiration.

The geography of religion in Southeast Asia has consequently always been complex, a complexity deepened and animated by the historical wholesale conversion of peoples (the Malay peoples to Islam, the Thai to Theravada Buddhism for example) and the innumerable crossings of religious boundaries by individuals for reasons of conviction, intermarriage, conquest or advantage, and the not infrequent crossing back again. The most recent of these waves of influence has been Japanese. Japan has been a major actor in Southeast Asia since at least the 1930s when Japanese businesses, farmers, dentists and prostitutes began to appear in sizeable numbers. In the 1940s most of the region was occupied by the Japanese and the subsequent post-war economic growth of Japan has ensured that the country has become and remained a massive economic presence. With the export of Japanese capital have come Japanese expatriates to manage that capital, their families to accompany them, schools to educate their children and Japanese food, fashion and culture to keep them happy. With them also came religion, inconspicuously practiced until the advent of the so-called "New Religions" (*shin shukyo*) initially as missions to the growing Japanese expatriate communities and then spreading, with other elements of Japanese culture, into the host societies. The Japanese economic presence has brought with it a parallel cultural rather than directly political presence in the region, and a significant element of that cultural presence has proved to be religion.[6]

The New Religions and their latter day off-shoots or successors the "new new religions" (*shin shin shukyo*) have become major actors on the Japanese religious, cultural and social scenes, particularly since the ending of the war. Some, such as Soka Gakkai with its affiliated political party (*Komeito*) have become direct political actors. Others, such as Aum Shinrikyo, have become notorious for their violent tactics or deceptive advertising of the efficacy of their spiritual or physical cures. Originally confined to Japan and practiced by nobody except the Japanese, a number of them such as the aforementioned Soka Gakkai (a Buddhist-based movement), Tenrikyo (a Shinto-based one) or Mahikari (a syncretic movement) have spread overseas, along with some of the smaller sects such as Omotokyo, Seicho-no-Ie and most recently Sekai Kyusei Kyo which has attracted members in Thailand,[7] PL Kyodan and the Kofuku no Kagaku, often known in English as the "Institute for Research in Human Happiness," initially to Japanese expatriate communities, either ones of recent origin such as the business community in Singapore, or long established ones such as the large Japanese populations of Brazil and Peru and then again beyond these into the local "native" communities where they are increasingly taking root and in some cases establishing themselves as amongst the fastest growing in the veritable supermarket of religions now available to seekers around the globe.[8] In many parts of South East Asia they have proved to be a

great success attracting numerous converts from the local populations and competing very effectively against their major rivals and in particular Christianity and modernized forms of Buddhism. While some of the more general aspects of their presence has been explored [9] the particular question of what motivates conversion to this latest in a long history of religious innovations in the region has not yet been systematically explored, and this I will endeavour to do here.

The "traditional" religious scene in much of Southeast Asia has been transformed post-war by a number of major forces. Some of these are external religious forces, either ones entirely new to the region (the Japanese New Religions for example) or radically revitalized and socially accessible forms of older ones — Pentecostal forms of Christianity, the Dakwah movement amongst Muslims, and neo-Hindu movements such as that of Sai Baba to name some conspicuous examples. In some cases quite traditional and conservative forms of religion have been changed substantially by theological trends originating elsewhere — the impact of Latin American liberation theology on Philippine Catholicism for instance, or the recent debates within Islam about economic responsibility and the possibility of an Islamic economics. In some cases a debate within one religion — such as liberation theology — has spread into others, in Southeast Asia and internationally into Buddhism where attempts to find the basis for a socially and politically relevant and ecologically responsible Buddhism have been stimulated largely by earlier and parallel debates within the Catholic Christian community. In yet others global movements such as feminism have impacted all religions in various ways with local movements such as the Sisters of Islam springing up in Malaysia to challenge the patriarchal biases of the historical religion. Quite traditional religions have as a result modernized their practices, liturgies, buildings, social outreach and language, often with profound effects such as the revival of Mahayana Buddhism in Malaysia and in Singapore, a spiritual path that a couple of decades ago some commentators were writing off as in irreversible decline. This has both made the traditional options more attractive to many people and in a pluralistic social context has legitimized newer options often no longer tied to their cultural and ethnic sources. Hence Chinese in Malaysia flock to Sai Baba meetings, Indians make up a substantial proportion of Pentecostal congregations in Singapore and Subud which began in central Java now has probably more Caucasian than Indonesian members, both Sufism and Buddhism have founded Western orders culturally adapted to Europe and North America and Theravada temples in Singapore are staffed by English speaking Thai and Sri Lankan monks to cater to their ethnically Chinese but English speaking middle-class clients.

But these forces and the patterns of syncretism which they provoke are certainly not the only ones, and changes within religion cannot be explained by internal factors alone. Again pre-war and with accelerating speed the whole region has been transformed by the secular forces of nationalism, capitalism, globalization and in some areas socialism. The identity politics formed around older patterns of ethnicity, gender and caste and traditional patterns of social stratification have been largely destroyed and remade under the pressures of revolutions, nation-building and consumerism. To understand conversion at all adequately it is necessary to situate it in the context of these secular forces as much or even more so than it is to situate it in terms of religious ones as it is

in the interplay of the sacred and the secular that the reformulation of identies appears.

**Japanese New Religions and Japanese Cultural Presence**

Japan is not noted as a society that has either effectively assimilated its own ethnic minorities into its social fabric or which has desired to export itself culturally in quite the ways that other former colonial powers in the region have done. Despite this, Japan has become am immense cultural power in the region — its fashions are worn, foods increasingly eaten, TV dramas avidly watched, comics read in ever larger numbers, its cars fill the roads and its electronic gadgets fill the homes of Southeast Asians. It is essentially as a consumer power that it is visible. Most Southeast Asians know little in detail about Japanese culture or history and even less about its politics. While the language is widely learnt, this is primarily for pragmatic reasons — to deal with the tourist trade and to do business — rather than from any real love of Japan. While hordes of Southeast Asians have adopted Japanese material objects they have not for the most part adopted Japanese values or world views. And a major reason for this in the past has been the absence of any kind of conversion-oriented religion that might act as a mechanism for assimilating non-Japanese to a Japanese ethos. Japan is often compared with Thailand as two societies that began their process of modernization at the same time and to the relative exclusion of foreign influences [10] and they do indeed possess certain remarkable parallels. But in one very important respect they differ fundamentally: Thailand has for the most part very successfully assimilated its ethnic minorities — and most notably its large Chinese population — by means of religion. While certainly legal and civic mechanisms have also long been in place, Theravada Buddhism has provided both a key element in Thai identity and a profound force for incorporating groups and individuals who would otherwise have remained outside of the national fold as potentially destabilizing forces from the state's point of view. It has even become a modest export product, and Thai temples now dot the Malaysian and Singaporean landscapes bringing with them many elements of Thai religious and aesthetic culture. Japan however has never until recently had a religious tradition that easily assimilates the outsider. Shinto has remained a largely nationalistic and particularistic religion despite recent attempts to make it look contemporary and ecology-friendly [11] and in the past was a tool for the expansion of the imperial vision rather than a benign means of incorporating the Other into Japanese culture. Japanese Buddhism has fared little better as it has developed a variety of Mahayana schools very different from the forms of Buddhism found in Southeast Asia some of which (Zen for example) are closely associated with very nationalistic and even militaristic aspects of Japanese culture.

This religious insularity has changed however with the advent of the new religions all of which began as deeply rooted in Japanese society and religious cosmology, but a number of which have successfully internationalized themselves, attracting not only some members of Japan's own minorities at home (in particular Koreans and Chinese), but large numbers of foreign adherents as they have spread abroad. In Latin America and North America where there are large populations of people of Japanese descent, this perhaps makes more sense, but becomes sociologically even more interesting in Europe and Southeast Asia where there are quite substantial Japanese expatriate

populations of business people, diplomats or members of international organizations temporarily resident, but no assimilated Japanese communities of long standing. But since they have substantial local memberships, the interesting question arises of what, given the range of indigenous and newly imported religious options available to Southeast Asians, might motivate conversion and then sustain commitment to religions emanating from the erstwhile enemy and not fondly remembered occupying power? It is to this specific question that we will now turn.

The first classical issue in sociological studies of conversion is of course 'who converts'? And the short answer here is — Chinese. The New Religions have made almost no inroads at all amongst the Muslim populations of Southeast Asia and have had relatively little success amongst either ethnic Indians — who tend, if abandoning Hinduism at all, to migrate to Christianity or to a neo-Hindu movement (which keeps them effectively within Hinduism) and only rarely to Islam, except for occasional cases of conversion for facilitating religious intermarriage, or Buddhism (although large numbers of low caste Hindus and Untouchables have made precisely that move in India) — or amongst ethnic Thais who tend to remain loyal to the Theravada tradition. Eurasians in Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore tend to be and remain Roman Catholic. This creates an interesting ethnic pattern — it is the Chinese who are the great converters, followed by the Indians. Indians however tend to convert only to Christianity in any large numbers, a faith both well known to them from the colonial past and with its own ancient Indian representatives, such as the Mar Thoma and Syrian Orthodox Churches which date their origin to the first century of the common era. The Chinese however are prepared to convert in at least small numbers to most of the options now available — to Christianity in large numbers, to Islam in much smaller but still significant numbers, to neo-Hindu movements in small numbers, and most recently, to Japanese New Religions in very significant numbers. Two of these — Soka Gakkai and Tenrikyo, one a Nichiren Buddhist movement and the other a neo-Shinto one — as they have grown and operate in Singapore have been discussed in detail elsewhere.[12] Rather than repeat here that detailed ethnography, I will attempt to move to a more theoretical level, to ask the question of why it is in particular Chinese who are converting and sustaining these new religions in such numbers that they are ceasing in the region to be Japanese at all in majority membership, but are becoming truly local organizations.

To do this requires attention to several factors. Some of the more sociological ones were cited in the above mentioned papers and can be briefly summarized and extended here to a more general picture of the attractiveness of the Japanese new religions before we move on to consider other factors. Attractiveness in itself does not necessarily lead to conversion — a step that requires the re-figuring of identity and the sustaining of a commitment beyond an initial moment of enthusiasm — but we still need to briefly consider what that attractiveness is as it is certainly a necessary if not sufficient condition for conversion.

The Japanese new religions are from the point of view of Southeast Asians post-colonial (although in fact many existed pre-war and during the war and occupation years) and so on the one hand are not tainted with the long standing colonialism of the British, French, Dutch, Spanish or Portugese, and on the other are representative of post-war Japanese economic power and its cultural accompaniments in the region. They

allow in other words, an identification with the regional economic superpower while distancing that allegiance from any hints of colonial subservice. As such they allow Southeast Asians to simultaneously participate in an attractive form of internationalism while stressing the "Asian" identity currently politically in favour. One can see in particular how this might appeal to ethnic Chinese: the supreme networkers of the region have through membership in a JNR both a place in a new and international network different from but intersecting with their own economic one, and a tool for asserting their own identification with the region: it allows them to be simultaneously global and local.

Any choice of religion in Southeast Asia has political implications. Christianity is perhaps too linked to the former colonial powers. For a Chinese to become a Muslim is to "masok Melayu" — to enter Malaydom and for a Muslim to contemplate conversion to any other religion, even where it is legally possible, is to face expulsion from the community of origin. Every religious choice is consequently not just a theological one, but is fraught with political and sociological consequences, especially as ethnicity throughout the region is closely tied up with religious affiliation. A Filipino colleague who deliberately challenged these boundaries by declaring himself to be a "Catholic Malay" was not surprisingly met with considerable shock and disbelief that any such category (in fact technically possible) could possibly exist.

Until quite recently Christianity was indeed the religion of choice for most converts from another religion in Southeast Asia generally because (other than purely theological considerations) it is in principle non-ethnic (i.e universal), associated with modernity and linked to the possibilty of forms of individualism denied to the members of more communally based religions. While these characteristics are still present, they have been eroded both by increasing disenchantment with the Western model of modernity and with an awareness (embodied in much of the "Asian values" debate throughout the region) of the limits to individualism as a basis for either social order or personal happiness and fulfilment. The JNRs however offer both a religious identity that is modern but neither Western nor Christian and which allows new forms of individualization and self-expression within a supportive community. They are also attractive because of their almost universal peace message, they have roots in existing Asian cosmologies (especially the Buddhist-based ones), they are generally not puritanical with respect to material consumption, they are politically acceptable to local national governments, they are lay movements and are in many cases (Soka Gakkai being a good case in point) blue collar in class membership and stress the use of Chinese language, unlike Christianity which tends to be middle/upper middle class in membership and often to be English speaking or uses a local vernacular (Indonesian, Tagalog, Thai or even very local ethnic languages such as Sundanese in West Java). Most emphasis social action, often of a social work kind, without being overtly political, and most have distilled their teaching into clear and codified forms and organizational structures through which measurable progress can be made and which involve fairly simple daily religious practice. In Japan a key element in the expansion of the JNRs has been their emphasis on healing, something also highly attractive in Southeast Asia and amongst Chinese who participate extensively in healing activities at spirit-medium temples and in Charismatic Christian contexts, both Catholic and Protestant. That an extensive set of disposing

factors exist then is without doubt. The question is why specifically do individuals convert to the JNRs, given that to do so usually requires them to participate in a much more regimented and required regime of activities and performance than that expected in the traditional forms of religious observance, and may also precipitate conflict with family members and friends who may oppose the move or be fearful of its consequences on behaviour and/or of observation of the ancestral cult, marriage or burial expectations and other features of the traditional religious landscape which have significant social implications.

## Cultures of Conversion

Indeed I would argue that there is a complex sociological basis to conversion based essentially (amongst Chinese) in class and resulting, after conversion, in a retrospective narrative of justification. Let me set this out in a series of moves. Evidence from the field suggests that predisposition to conversion can be envisaged as a series of concentric circles. The outermost one consists of the broadest sociological, economic and political contextualizing factors, which include the intense urbanization, industrialization and commodification associated with the "development" process and the personal and social disruptions and recoalescings, the ecological and environmental degredation and the sense of living increasingly in an over-complex "risk society" that characterize late modernity. The second consists of the class cultures from which converts come and the effects of this on "conversion style" — the predisposing causes, the event itself and the subsequent rationalizations and life-style adjustments that are made. Highly significant here is the educational background of converts with there being a continuum from the least educated who tend to find the healing and ancestral emphasis of the JNRs most attractive to the most educated who tend to experience "intellectual conversion" in which attraction to doctrines is predominant. The former are also more likely to visit Japan as pilgrims or as package-tourists, the latter as business people, scholars or on professional visits. The degree of knowledge of Japanese culture and history also varies with the latter having the greater formal knowledge, but with the former being more likely to have actually learnt at least some Japanese language. The JNRs themselves provide avenues of social mobility to the potentially upwardly mobile and are thus most attractive to those not already at the top of the social totem-pole. Mobility within the religious hierarchy and organization, the possibility of subsidized trips to Japan on pilgrimage or for study and the seeking for educational credentials by way of the internal theological training possibilities are also strong attractions.

The third circle is cultural and can primarily be thought of in terms of the structural parallels between the JNRs and the various forms of Chinese religion available in the region. Some of these are directly religious in nature and suggest why Buddhist-based JNRs tend to fare better in Southeast Asia than Shinto based ones, as the transition to another variety of Buddhism is easier than the transition to a totally different cosmological system. Others are concerned with similarities in emphasis, especially health, exorcism of spirits and material success. A third, and I would argue a centrally important one, is the JNRs concern with the ancestors and the management of the spirits of the dead, a core element in all forms of Chinese religion. The syncretic and inclusive nature of the belief systems of almost all JNRs (Soka Gakkai being perhaps

the main exception) is also an attraction to most adherents of Chinese religions, almost all of which are themselves highly syncretic.

The fourth circle is that of involvement. While most traditional Chinese religious practices are highly individualistic and there is little congregational life outside of monastic settings, the JNRs move in the opposite direction. They are communal, provide hierarchies of groups and activities — religious, social and educational — in which members are expected to participate and converts often comment on their warmth, level of support and caring and the extent to which an entire social life and a new life-style can be formulated around the activities provided by the JNR, which create in effect an entire alternative social network in the case of the larger and better established ones. But again there is a class difference here. Working and lower-middle class Chinese tended to be more fully incorporated into the social networks of JNRs than professionals and business people who tended to maintain extensive social contact outside of the particular religious group to which they belonged. The fifth and final circle is, as with all studies of religious conversion, that which lies beyond sociological analysis, notably personal conviction. Whatever predisposing and contextual factors may be present, there is still the actual decision made by the individual convert, often knowingly a momentous one given the social implications and the changes in lifestyle and subjectivity that will inevitably flow from it.

To highlight this very general model of conversion to the JNRs however three additional factors must be introduced. The first of these is simply to note that while Southeast Asians may indeed join JNRs for the same reasons that Japanese do, there may also be substantial or even fundamental differences. For example, a number of commentators writing about the expansion of JNRs in the West have noted that many of these religions see Japan as the centre of world peace and future spiritual development and the Japanese as the real chosen people, elements that are very much played down in seeking (foreign) converts and which may not even be revealed at all to non-Japanese members until they reach quite advanced stages of study and assimilation, by which time they are presumably too thoroughly socialized into the movement to particularly care about these nationalistic revelations. The position of JNRs within Japanese society itself, the social position of converts (for example Japanese housewives situated themselves within a particular set of social roles and gender expectations) and the particular and peculiar social problems that Japan faces are obviously not simply reproduced in Southeast Asia which as a region is culturally very different from Japan, and which has substantial variation within itself, sociologically and politically.

The second is to compare conversion to JNRs with what I would see as being their closest rival, notably Christianity. While some of the same factors appear to apply in the two cases, and while there are some similar patterns of class-specific affiliation in Christianity in Southeast Asia, there are also some significant differences. I will shortly return to some of these as they highlight both parallels and important divergences. The third is to more fully locate the process of conversion to JNRs in the specific cultural and sociological settings within which it occurs in Southeast Asia and the particular nexus of historical and political forces that are in play and have been in the past in forming cultural complexes and religious geographies in the region.

**The Subject of Conversion**

The standard battery of explanations for the rise of the JNRs in Japan itself usually involve a set of basically functionalist considerations — defeat in the war, the subsequent social and demographic dislocations followed by a period of rapid social and economic change, the inability of the established religions to anticipate, address or cope with the existential stresses resulting from these profound shifts and the alienation of the sick, the poor, the lonely and the socially marginalized which the JNRs very succesfully spoke to. All of these are correct up to a point, although as Winston Davis points out in his seminal study of Sukyo Mahikari, one of the major NRs in Japan and one which has subsequently spread abroad, the key question is how members construct what he calls their "world-of-meaning" in a social and cultural context in which to adhere to a JNR is an act of "cognitive deviance." [13] In generalizing from his particular case study two important factors can be derived. The first is that the immediately pre-war and post-war conditions of Japan differ substantially from those of Southeast Asia during the same period. The pre-war years were ones of relative stability, with few except local activists anticipating the forthcoming and rapid collapse of western colonialism throughout the region. The post-war ones, while, as with Japan, marked by profound and rapid social change, were of a very different character — marked by decolonization, nationalist and revolutionary struggles, the creation of a number of quite distinct political, social and economic formations, largely socialist in Indo-China, capitalist in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and Indonesia (in each case in a unique configuration derived from the local political culture, ethnic patterns, role of the military, social structure and 'development' level) and with special cases in Brunei (Royalist Islamic) and in Burma (a form of populist Buddhist nationalism succeeded by military rule) on the periphery. In each particular case existential responses to these immense changes (compounded in some instances by rapid urbanization and internal migration) were naturally filtered through the dominant local cosmologies — Muslim, Buddhist, animist or Christian. In only a few cases did local new religions arise in response to these tensions — Subud in Indonesia, Baitiangong in Malaysia or more conspicuously the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao syncretist movements in Vietnam — for example. This is partly because Southeast Asian religious traditions have always tended to syncretism and so adaptations of existing local traditions are easily made, and partly because the major traditions, which are all world religions or branches thereof, have moved with larger international tendencies in their parent faiths and have as a result been always more or less "up to date" (Pentecostalism amongst Christians, Dakwah amongst Muslims, the various forms of "protestant Buddhism" amongst Buddhists and Chinese Religionists all being instances of this). But into this situation have come the JNRs which have drawn away substantial numbers of adherents to the older religions. How can this be explained?

Some of the factors have been enumerated above (the attraction of Japan as the major economic power in the region etc). Others parallel the Japanese situation — the presence of sickness and social alienation and marginalization amongst those whose labour has contributed to the construction of modernity and its artefacts, but who have not necessarily been included in its fruits. In some cases adherence to a JNR does not,

at least in the mind of the new member, imply separation from the prior religion, but is seen as an extension of it, a fulfilment of it or as a useful alternative in a religiously plural cultural situation. A popular explanation of JNRs within Japan is that they are essentially anti-modernist movements — reactions on the part of the powerless and marginalized to a social system which has excluded them. Given the power and visibility of some of the larger JNRs (Soka Gakkai, Rissho Kosei-kai for example) this not entirely an easy argument to sustain, although it may have ben true in the immediate post-war years when JNRs were rapidly growing and it may still be true of some movements such as Mahikari, the subject of Davis' detailed ethnography. But does it work in Southeast Asia?

Keeping in mind the background explanations noted above, I would suggest that the answer is "no" — that JNRs in Southeast Asia are not responses to modernity, but rather attempts to appropriate it. We have noted the class stratification of religious affiliation and this again needs to be stressed: the JNRs tend to attract people of lower and working class Chinese ethnicity in the greatest numbers. This is partly because they have successfully targeted such people and have organized their activities, language and structures to suit them while providing an avenue for upward social and educational mobility. It is partly because of the association of the JNRs with modernity itself — with Japan, with the encouragement of material success and with simple and updated ritual requirements. And it is partly because of the relative failure of the established religions (especially Christianity) to meet the needs of this large social sector. But even as I write this there is evidence that the established faiths are striking back: Pentecostal Christianity has spread throughout the region and has penetrated much further into the excluded classes than its more wordy Evangelical forms, Therevada Buddhism has been self-consciously modernizing itself (and borrowing many forms from Chritsianity as it does so) in an attempt to appeal to the Chinese, Sinhalese and Indian middle classes, and perhaps most conspicuously of all Mahayana Buddhism which has undergone tremendous revival with massive temple extension and building programmes, a large increase in the number of worshippers and a rapid extension of its ancilliary activities (old people's homes, free clinics, educational activities) and which has its social base in precisely the same groups from which the JNRs have been drawing. The modernity of the JNRs is consequently being forced to compete with the updated expression of the traditional religions and the fact that, for Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, for Sinhalese and some Indians and for all Thais Therevada Buddhism and for most Eurasians Roman Catholicism are the culturally faniliar religious options, which the JNRs are not. (Muslims being almost entirely immune to their attractions).

Given then that there is no "need" to convert to a JNR — there are numerous competing altenatives and all of the spiritual services provided by JNRs (healing and exorcism being amongst the most conspicuous) are available through other channels, we must obviously look elsewhere for a fuller explanation. Here I will briefly sketch an alternative model. For Davis in his study of Mahikari, possibly the most "magical" of all the JNRs, the persistence of this magic is a problem to be explained — in the context that is of an otherwise industrialized and thoroughly modernized society. To a Southeast Asianist it is rather less of a problem as magic continues to pervade cultural life, even in the largest cities. Exorcism, healing, spirit-mediumship, amulets, special

practitioners such as pawang and bomohs, spirit cults, widespread belief in demons, omens, belief in ancestral spirits and the paraphernalia of spiritual protection are commonplace and are in a sense even present in their absence — Christian converts who destroy 'non-Christian' pictures and artefacts believed to harbour such spiritual entities for instance. The problem is not the persistance of magic, but the fact that whereas in the past it was modernity that had to protect itself from magic, it is now magic that has to protect itself from modernity. Paradoxically, while secularization, in the sense of loss of religious affiliation, has most certainly not taken place, Weber's "disenchantment of the world" is proceeding at the cognitive level. The rationalization and scientism of modernity threatens the viability of the spiritual real as an autonomous zone. What the JNRs uniquely offer is a "magical" system married to modernity: the perfect blend of the spiritual and the material, of consumption here and now with salvation hereafter. It is this blend that enables them, in Davis' terms, to the situation in which "Far from contradicting the practical achievement-orientation of industrial Japan, the practices of Mahikari seem to increase the capacity of its lower-class members for responsibility, self-denial and toil." [14]

The magical/modern meaning systems of the JNRs, attractive as they are, are also supplemented by a variety of other sociological and cosmological factors. Buddhism, especially in its Sinicized varieties, is very much a salvation religion, and the salvic mechanisms of the JNRs parallel these and are familiar in their general form. Many of the JNRs (Mahikari and Tenrikyo for example) also stress karmic causality — that problems and illnesses in this life may have been caused by behaviour in previous ones — and so healing and wholeness must come from the undoing of or compensating for this karmic inheritance and clearing away the "dust" that accumulates on the soul because of sin and past experiences. Again this is a basically a familiar idea to anybody of Buddhist or Hindu background and is an idea that fits easily into many regional religious cosmologies. Dramatic healings and exorcisms interestingly are less commonly reported than more general feelings of membership of a community, social or political empowerment and renewed sense of purpose or an engagement, that may never have happened before, with bigger global issues such as peace. Upward religious mobility, indicated by increased skill in the performance of rituals, exhibitions of the "appropriate" behaviour in religious settings, and knowledge and training in the doctrines and practices of the JNR, is, in Southeast Asia as much as in Japan, a major attraction. Most new members join a JNR not because of reading pamphlets or other more "intellectual" means, but because they are introduced by a friend, a colleague or a family member who is already associated with the group. This is largely true of Christians in Southeast Asia too, suggesting that given the plethora of choices, a major precipitating factor in joining any particular group lies in the coming together of acceptable and culturally appropriate beliefs or experiences, and the introduction to a particular group by a member of the potential convert's own social network. The validation or legitimizing of the new affiliation is certainly related to the cogency of the particular belief system espoused, but it is also very much related to its efficiency in socializing new members into a social network. Whereas this almost certainly, involves, as in Davis' example, the socialization into the dominant values of the wider society, this latent function is not all that is at work. Together with the acceptability of the new cosmology goes

reinsertion into a concrete social order and the specific and very practical meeting of real needs — whether of health, relationships, business or spiritual protection. In the configuration of possibilities, it appears to be the JNRs which most effectively, whether through strategy or accident, meet this particular constellation of desiderata.

But at the same time it must be recognized that the broader context of conversion has changed; it has in a sense, like so many other aspects of culture, become "globalized," not in the slower sense in which older world religions spread to the region, but in faster, more electronic and communication oriented ways. If one steps back from the scene it is indeed remarkable to find Southeast Asians practicing the religion of their former enemies and using it in turn as a springboard to learning the Japanese language (Tenrikyo for example having active 'cultural centres' attached to or associated with its missions and which are in effect language schools) and often physically visiting Japan on pilgrimage or for religious-education related reasons. Rapid communication between Japan and Southeast Asia, the regular movement of missionaries, pilgrims, youth groups, drama troupes, the rapid translation of Japanese texts, scriptures, tracts and theological works into English, Chinese and national languages, all place the convert at the centre of a web of communicative forces which place him or her in a supranational context in which new subjectivities are moulded not only by the immediate religious community, but by communities which are themselves formed in this new postmodern setting. "Postmodern religion" need not only refer to the content of belief, but also to the forms in which it is transmitted and received.

So if conversion to a JNR is in a sense a "conversion to modernity," it is not, unlike most instances of conversion to Christianity, to be located in the "interplay between Europe and the colonized world," [15] but between Japan as the current economic superpower of the region and the former colonies of both itself (very briefly) and of the West. The relationship between Europe and its colonies (occupation, administrative and cultural domination and in some cases settlement) is structurally very different from Japan's current relationships with its partners and economic client states in Southeast Asia and the brief period of physical occupation which extended over little more than three years under war-time conditions, while it has left its scars, was too short to have had major or lasting cultural effects.

The current nature of the relationship between Japan and Southeast Asia is not one in which there is any obligation or immediate advantage in "subject" peoples adopting the religion of the conquerors. Local people in fact of course have both choice and agency: they are making choices not responding to either physical or ideological coercion. The ascription of agency has two consequences. Firstly it actually empowers the individual chooser who is free to perform what Van Der Veer calls "innovative practice": "Conversion is an innovative practice that partakes in the transformation of the social without being a mechanical result of it." [16] It is in other words both an expression of and a subsequent source of creativity in imagery, performance, the remaking of the self, the reinterpretation of history and the reformulation of social relationships. Secondly, and as a result of this creative character, it is subject to the imposition of local meanings. Just as a Christian convert in Chiangmai, one in Singapore and another in Java may all formally share the same religious affiliation but differ profoundly in the cultural mappings and social implications of their new faith, so do

converts to JNRs "read" differently the meaning and consequences of their action. This is particularly so at the level of the remaking of the self, a project inevitably involved in the transformations entailed by a sincere religious conversion. But even where conversion involves the making of a "modern self" as is often argued in respect of Christianity, modernities themselves differ and a good case can be made that Japanese modernity differs most.[17] The Singaporean who joins Soka Gakkai or the Indonesian who is attracted to Mahikari is not subscribing unwittingly to the Western project of modernity, but may be becoming "modern" in radically different ways that may even contradict, subvert or relativize that Western reading of history. Modernity for a start does not necesarily imply secularization, nor need it imply that the only model of political development is the nation-state in either its (fundamentally Western) democratic or totalitarian forms since there may be other possibilities that, as some argue Japan does, create social order on very different premises. Hence the ambiguous relationship between religion and the state throughout Southeast Asia: while religion is both a source of identity and a socializing agent to middle-class values of stability and labour, it is also the most powerful potential challenge to the state's ideological hegemony and its most cogent critic.

To convert then is to adopt a certain discourse as one's own. But the means by which this discourse is adopted is structured, and indeed without this structure the path to the new discourse in which one desires to be embedded and the new language of belief would be undiscoverable. The academic study of conversion narratives however has been dominated by Christian models in which radical "turnings" in which the past is rejected as evil and the new life as the redemptive reality. And indeed it is not uncommon to hear Christians in Southeast Asia describing their "conversion experience" in the language of St.Augustine or St Francis of Assissi. Such a model indeed implies that conversion is an "experience" and occludes the possibility that it is an evolution, a recognition, an adaptation or largely the reordering into a new configuration of already existing elements. Conversions to JNRs appear to fall into two broad categories depending on the type of religion to which the conversion takes place. Those attracted to the more "emotional" and spiritualist varieties (such as Mahikari) are likely to report a healing or an exorcism as the source of the new alliegence, while those attracted to the more "intellectual" or socially based ones (such as Soka Gakkai) tend to refer either to the validity of belief and/or practice or to the attractions of membership in a family-like community. In neither case is the sin-based model of Christianity emphasised, and where issues of sin do arise they are more likely to be understood in karmic terms (as in Mahikari and Tenrikyo) rather than in individual ones. The type of conversion narratives which "as a way of explaining personal change are deeply embedded in Western culture"[18] do not exist as a universal form and while equally profound transformations of identity occur, their mode of explanation in JNRs, both in Japan and in Southeast Asia, varies substantially from or makes no reference to the "classical" Christian model of conversion.

While conversion then is not just a social process, but may and often does involve radical reconfiguration of personal identity, as Gauri Viswanathan has been at pains to point out it is also a political act, and may in certain contexts be a highly subversive one of the expected social order (as with conversions to Christianity in Pakistan and

elsewhere in the Middle East or of conversions to Islam or Buddhism in India).[19] In refiguring personal identity a whole range of national, international, local and even gender allegiances may be formed with many cultural implications, provoking one to learn Japanese rather than a European language or another regional one, to take up the study of Arabic, to alter habits of diet, dress and leisure time activities. So while governments cannot necessarily control the rise and fall of NRMs, they rarely ignore them, either persecuting them or, as with the case of Soka Gakkai in Singapore, coopting them.

Conversion then is not simply the adoption of a new set of beliefs, but the opening up of a whole range of possibilities, alliances, new social networks and symbolic vocabulary. In most Southeast Asian societies, and certainly all states, one must have an identity, an identity partly at least conferred by reported religious allegiance. JNRs create a new possibility in this regard, especially for Chinese members who struggle constantly (except in Singapore with its overwhelming Chinese majority) with the question of their political loyalty and cultural location in Southeast Asian societies in which they are seen still in many cases as interlopers. JNRs are "modern" (or at least intimately associated with the most modern of Asian societies, but one that is attractively and most definately not Western), membership confers numerous possibilities of social advancement and community, they meet felt needs, are politically acceptable to local governments as they appear as positive socializing agencies, give members access to an international network and which confer a religious identity (very important in most societies in the region and vital in societies like Indonesia where atheism is equated with communism) while allowing ethnic minorities to both retain their ethnic identity while retaining a certain independence socially and politically by not having to identify with one of the local religions and hence with the particular dominant ethnic group associated with it (say Malays and Islam in Malaysia, Catholicism and the Filipinos in the Philippines, Buddhism and the Burmans in Burma and so on).

A JNR is socially acceptable to the surrounding majorities, is attractively international but post-colonial and allows the retention of ethnicity and most cultural practices. Furthermore they are pragmatic and problem-solving and even materialistic, all values dear to the overseas Chinese heart. Rationalization of society may not, contra Weber, necessarily lead to the disenchantment of the world, but it does certainly, at least in the case of the JNRs, lead to the magical being proferred in this-worldly packages. But that has never been a problem for most varieties of Chinese religion which share these characteristics while lacking the modernist orientation which the JNRs so abundantly possess. The conversion process itself — the formal mechanisms, learning of performative acts and reunderstandings of personal identity and relationship to the cosmos — is also generally shorter and easier than it is in many branches of Christianity.

## Conversion, Transformation or Multiple Identity?

Studies of social change in Southeast Asia have tended for the most part (with a few notable exceptions) [20] to ignore changing subjectivities. Modernization, "development," urbanization and globalization bring with them not only shifts in material conditions, but also in social relations, cultural configurations, epistemologies, ontologies and the organization of the emotions. New consumer cultures, the impact of media and the

transformation of communications have as profound effects in the religious sphere as they do in any other. In such conditions the creation and management of identities changes in fundamental ways. Even where the old categories (such as ethnicity or nationalism) still apply, they have become relativised, deconstructed and fluid. One response to this is to move away from such categorization altogether and to embrace instead the "self-religions" of the New Age movement. But interestingly while some of the superficial paraphernalia of the New Age has appeared in Southeast Asia (meditational CDs, books on communicating with dolphins; much of the rest — incense sticks for example — was already present!) the movement as a whole has had little success in the region. The search rather has been for new religious expressions which combine solutions to existential problems with a sense of community and of global or at least international identity, something that the JNRs so abundantly supply.

But there are also a number of broader theoretical implications for the sociology and anthropology of religion to the study of conversion to JNRs in Southeast Asia, implications which speak to more general theories of conversion. Here I will note just a few of these. Talal Asad in an interesting recent paper suggests that agency — the choosing to convert — has been overplayed in studies of conversion.[21] Rather, he argues, most people convert, just as they enter modernity, because of forces outside of their control. Here I have questioned this assumption and would rather suggest that, at least in the case of JNRs in Southeast Asia, conversion is chosen and the particular choice of new religion is made deliberately, partly because of the much greater range of choices available to the average Southeast Asian than to the average European, especially when classical theories of conversion were being formulated. Conversion to JNRs consequently suggests not lack of autonomy and irrationality, but rather a process of self-making and social mobility that is actually highly rational. Part of the confusion here arises from the fact that in European discourse and especially in the Christain world "conversion" is a common and relatively unproblematic term even although the process itself may signal major transformations.[22]

This is not so however on the whole in Asia and in the case of new adherents to the JNRs it was rarely used. The Japanese term for conversion (*tenko*) is mostly used in the context of secular ideological conversion, for example historically switching from a Marxist to a nationalist position in immediately pre-war and wartime Japan.[23] In a cultural context in which multiple religious affiliation is the norm rather than the exception, moving between religious options for functional reasons is unproblematic, and to a lesser extent this attitude extends to Southeast Asia. The pressures there for an unambiguous religious affiliation come principally from Islam and Christianity, although even in these cases the situation is fluid. Southeast Asian Islam is in fact syncretic and contains many elements of pre or non Islamic origin and while Christianity polices its boundaries perhaps more strictly one still encounters cases such as those of Catholic priests who also adhere to a JNR arguing that there is no incompatibility between the two systems (to say nothing of a substantial number of Catholics, lay and clerical, who meditate and follow forms of Zen practice). Religious transitions and displacements certainly take place and with profound personal and social effects, but they are not necessarily perceived or expressed as "conversions." The European/Christian model in particular assumes that conversion is about a change in belief. Our evidence

here however suggests that it has just as much to do with the adoption of new forms of embodied practice and the contextualizing and performance of these in a new social nexus as it does with simply cognitive change. But whereas Christianity in particular has tended to stress the break with the past involved in conversion, the JNRs permit continuities, for example in ancestralism. Even those JNRs that in the past took a militant approach to conversion (Soka Gakkai in particular) have softened and modifed this, especially in their overseas manifestations.

A final point brings us back to the specific sociological characteristics of Southeast Asia, and in particular its multiethnicity and the association of particular major religions with specific ethnic groups, and through them, to a variety of political positions. As Ackerman and Lee point out in their study of non-Muslim forms of new religious movements in Malaysia,[24] such groups erode ethnic boundaries between their members (mainly Chinese, Indians and Eurasians) — while possibly intensifying class differences — while simultaneously contesting the religious hegemony of Islam and providing the politically disempowered with alternative sources of social action and meaning. This is true too of the JNRs, only just at the time of their research beginning to become visible in Malaysia. It is at the meeting point of ethnic identity, cultural continuities, empowerment/mobility and the creation of new communities of modernity that the JNRs emerge as real religious options for Southeast Asians. As such they are part of the creation of modernity rather than its subversion, and consequently welcomed by modernizing governments for whom non-politicized and (middle-class) value creating movements are very welcome, provided that they do not fundamentally upset the religious (or secular) balance of power. For this reason they are destined to be the religions of the ethnic minorities, and as such have two interesting futures — on the one hand as the focus of religious experimentation and syncretism within Southeast Asia, and on the other as a source of innovation within the JNRs in Japan itself as new ideas, conceptions of the world and organizational forms flow back to the source, underlining once again the protean nature of conversion and religious transformation especially in the context of globalization.[25]

**Notes:**

1)  F. R. Van der Mehden, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968); J. Haynes, *Religion in Third World Politics* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993).
2)  A. P. Cohen, Self-Consciousness: An Alternative Anthropology of Identity (London: Routledge, 1994); A. Giddens, Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age (Stanford; Stanford University Press, 1991).
3)  R. Robertson, "Globalization, Politics and Religion." In James A. Beckford and Thomas Luckmann, eds., *The Changing Face of Religion* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1989 ), 10-23.
4)  P. Berger, *Facing Up to Modernity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979).
5)  P. Beyer, *Religion and Globalization.* (London: Sage, 1997).
6)  E. Ben-Ari and J. Clammer, eds., *Japan in Singapore: Cultural Occurances and Cultural Flows.* (London: Curzon Press, 2000).
7)  E. Derrett, "Signs along a better way: The methods of evangelization of a Japanese New Religion in Brazil and Thailand." In P. Clarke, ed. *The New Evangelists: Recruitment, Methods and Aims of New Religious Movements* (London: Ethnographica, 1987), 95-112.
8)  On new religions in general see N. H. McFarland, *The Rush Hour of the Gods: A Study of New Religious Movements in Japan* (New York: Macmillan, 1967) and H. Thomsen, *The New Religions of Japan* (Rutland,

Vt. and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1963). On their spread abroad see the case studies in P. B. Clarke and J. Somers, eds., *Japanese New Religions in the West* (Folkestone: Japan Library, 1994).

9) J. Clammer, "The Happiness-Making Machine: Soka Gakkai and the Japanese Cultural Presence in Singapore." In E. Ben-Ari and J. Clammer eds. *Japan in Singapore: Cultural Occurances and Cultural Flows* (London: Curzon Press, 2000); T. Hamrin, "Tenrikyo in Singapore: Rerepresenting the Japanese Presence." In E. Ben-Ari and J. Clammer, eds. *Japan in Singapore: Cultural Occurances and Cultural Flows* (London: Curzon Press, 2000).

10) Kunio Yoshihara, ed. *Thai Perceptions of Japanese Modernization* (Kyoto: Centre for Southeast Studies and Kuala Lumpur: Falcon Press, 1989).

11) International Shinto Association, *Shinto and Japanese Culture* (Tokyo: International Shinto Association, 1995).

12) J. Clammer, "The Happiness-Making Machine: Soka Gakkai and the Japanese Cultural Presence in Singapore" and T. Hamrin, "Tenrikyo in Singapore: Rerepresenting the Japanese Presence."

13) W. Davis, *Dojo: Magic and Exorcism in Modern Japan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 9.

14) Ibid. 13.

15) P. Van der Veer, ed. *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 4.

16) Ibid. 7.

17) J. Clammer, *Difference and Modernity: Social Theory and Contemporary Japanese Society* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1995).

18) J. Pollmann, "A Different Road to God: The Protestant Experience of Conversion in the Sixteenth Century." In Peter van der Veer, ed,. *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 47.

19) G. Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

20) N. Mulder, *Inside Southeast Asia: Religion, Everyday Life, Cultural Change* (Kuala Lumpur and Amsterdam: The Pepin Press, 1996).

21) T. Asad, "Comments on Conversion." In Peter van der Veer, ed. *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 263-273.

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23) Midori Matsui, "The Implicit Return: Kobayashi Hideo's failure to achieve modernism and the problems concerning his ideological conversion (*tenko*)." In M. Lee and A.D. Syrokomla-Stefanowska eds. *Literary Intercrossings: East Asia and the West* (Sydney: Wild Peony, 1998), 91-103.

24) S.E. Ackerman and Raymond L.M. Lee, Heaven in Transition: Non-Muslim Religious Innovation and Ethnic Identity in Malaysia (Kuala Lumpur: Forum, 1990).

25) I. Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991).