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Alien Astronauts, Underwater Civilizations, and Radioactive Volcanos

A Global Esoteric Business Imagines Japan

This article analyzes how the Modern Mystery School (MMS), a transnational business specializing in Western esotericism, has adapted to Japan's spiritual landscape over the past two decades. Specific beliefs, practices, and social structures have been dialectically constructed at the West/East interface. Secret teachings in the lineage of King Salomon and Jesus Christ, closely aligned with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the Theosophical Society, are now innovated in Tokyo and adapted to the Japanese marketplace of spiritual therapies. Although developed in Scandinavia and North America by the Icelandic founder Gudni Gudnason, the transnationalism of MMS calls into question the strict reification of Western esotericism. While MMS teachings promote a diffusionist model of Western esotericism as radiating to the East, the ethnographic picture is more complex. The innovations made by Founder Gudni to localize MMS cosmology in Japanese geography, and the agentive role of Japanese followers, are placed in the context of a group that is irreducibly both a for-profit business and a "spiritual path." MMS remains one of the largest and most stable spiritual seminar companies in Japan. This article draws on fieldwork conducted between 2021–2023 with the permission of MMS leaders and consent from all interviewees in accordance with ethical standards for qualitative research.

KEYWORDS: "Western" esotericism—spirituality—hermenutics—sacred geography—transnational diffusion

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THE Modern Mystery School (MMS) is a global business selling initiation into a three-thousand-year-old esoteric lineage of King Salomon that includes Western cultural luminaries such as Leonardo Di Vinci and David Bowie. The teachings and mytho-biographical claims of Icelandic Founder Gudni Gudanson are closely tied to Rosicrucianism, Theosophy, Golden Dawn, Universal Kabbalah, Nordic mythology, and diverse occultist ideas that have often been studied under the label of Western esotericism.¹ MMS's business model is adapted from multilevel marketing techniques developed in the USA in the early twentieth century: financialized oral transmission of teachings, copyright-protected credentializing of spiritual therapies, and the marketing of top-performing Guides² to encourage recruitment.

Generalizing about MMS is complicated by its global membership. There are four active headquarters in Toronto, London, Florianópolis (Brazil), and Tokyo; initiates come from dozens of countries; and those initiates who strive to earn income (called energy exchange) as Healers or Guides work in diverse cultural milieus. MMS social organization begins with the three men who constitute the Third Order: Founder Gudni, whose business savvy, spiritual opportunism, and playful non-linearity has been the driving force in the expansion of MMS from “the West” (including North America, some European countries, South Africa, and Brazil) to “the East” (including Japan and recently spreading to South Korea and possibly Vietnam); Sovereign Ipsissimus (SI) Hideto Nakagome, who has a background in Tibetan and Japanese tantric Buddhism and who is responsible for the daily operations and teachings in the Tokyo headquarters; and SI Dave Lanyon, the Canadian leader of the North American headquarters who mixes showmanship with hardboiled realism. Beneath the Third Order, with their

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1. This article maintains the emic terms of respect given to the Third Order (the main key holders of the lineage) and top leadership. Mr. Gudnason is most often referred to as Founder Gudni and, since May 2023, as Hierophant. Mr. Nakagome and Mr. Lanyon are referred to as Sovereign Ipsissimuses and top leaders have recently been awarded the title of Ipsissimus, which derives from the nineteenth-century British secret society the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

2. MMS is a “path of progression” that hierarchically categorizes Adepts, Healers, Ritual Masters, and Guides based on degree of esoteric credentials. For a chart, see: <https://modernmysteryschoolint.com/path-of-progression/> (accessed 20 July 2023).

specialized regional and theological expertise, is the “Council of 12” women, six from “the West” and six from “the East,” who “execute the directives of the Hierarchy of Light,” host equinox events and a Beauty Council related to sacred femininity, and are deeply involved with the daily operations of MMS.

Based on fieldwork with MMS in Tokyo (2021), London (2022), Huddersfield (2022), and Toronto (2023), this article explores the hermeneutic strategies of localizing MMS (as Western esotericism developed in Euro-America) in the cultural milieu of Japan. The analysis is limited to how MMS leadership, and especially Founder Gudni himself, reinscribes Japanese geography with esoteric sacrality. This includes Mount Kurama 鞍馬, Mount Aso 阿蘇, Yonaguni 与那国島, and Japan as the Third Eye Chakra with a unique eschatological mission.

In these examples, MMS extends the sacralizing practices of Japanese new religions. Mount Aso has been associated with sacrality since at least the ninth century AD, when it “manifested the anger of the kami” and was appeased by promoting the local deity’s court ranking by Imperial Decree (JAMES [1951] 2010, 22). More recently, it is revered by new religions such as the Christian group Makuya (“Tabernacle”), founded by Teshima Abraham Ikurō 手島アブラハム郁郎 after receiving divine communication while hiding from American Occupation Forces at Mount Aso (EARHART and MITA 1999, 402). Likewise, Mount Kurama is the site where Usui Mikao 臼井甕男 (1865–1926) acquired Reiki therapy and later began teaching it in nationwide branches of the Usui Association. Contemporary reiki practitioners and groups, often syncretically mixing elements of Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism, and Western esotericism, continue their pilgrimages to Mount Kurama (STEIN 2023, 200–201)—as do Founder Gudni and some MMS followers. And the new religion Mahikari (“True Light”), founded by Okada Yoshikazu 岡田良一 (1901–1974) in 1959 and with over a million converts, teaches advanced members that Yonaguni is the past remnant of Mu and reflects an imperial line much older than that recorded in the *Kojiki* 古事記 (Account of Ancient Matters) (WILKINSON 2018, 182). It is unclear, however, if the popularity of these sites in Japanese new religions directly influenced their elevation in Founder Gudni’s teachings or if he adapted them from popular culture.

Elsewhere, I explore the role of Japanese initiates in co-creating MMS, and how MMS in Japan offers unique classes and hermeneutics that, in contrast to MMS in “the West” (here denoting both the Western Gate, described below, and those countries in Euro-America and including Brazil) emphasize individualization and self-branding, women’s economic independence, confidence, aesthetics, and showbusiness (CHRISTOPHER forthcoming). The adaptation (and innovation) of Western esotericism into Japan engages with 1990s debates about indigenization (*dochakuka* 土着化), Japanization, creolizing the West, and how intercultural knowledge emerges from amorphous negotiation and difference (BEFU 2003; BHABHA 1994). These scholarly debates emerged around the

same time as MMS spread from Utah (USA) to Tokyo in the late 1990s. Studies of esotericism are often grounded in textual analyses, Western provenance, and a focus on charismatic leadership—dynamics that can obscure the subaltern agency of practitioners from diverse backgrounds to shape the category of Western esotericism. While it is empirically accurate that esotericism primarily diffuses from Euro-America, it is also meaningfully constituted through “multilateral exchanges that are best grasped from a global perspective” (STRUBE 2021, 46). Long-term critical ethnographies of esoteric movements, especially ones like MMS that are transnational and have an evolving leadership, provide the best methodological tool for analyzing these complex social formations.

In the analysis that follows, we see how MMS is a “globally entangled subject” (STRUBE 2021, 47). Founder Gudni imagines Japan through an esoteric lens and his own mytho-biographical experiences and transmits such imaginings to ardent Japanese initiates as revelatory truth about Japan’s mission in the coming Shambhala.³ Spoken by a Westerner who fashions himself as an authentic Viking, MMS taps into a continued fetishization of foreign whiteness, especially Western men, which “functions in Japan as the transparent and free-floating signifier of upward mobility and assimilation in ‘world culture’; it is the primary sign of the modern, the universal subject, the ‘citizen of the world’” (KELSKY 2001, 421). Founder Gudni is aware of his status as a white *gaijin*; part of his perceived charisma is to consciously embody and affectively display the self-confidence, individuality, and cosmopolitanism that marks Western men in the Japanese cultural imaginary. The MMS’s esotericism that this article considers developed under specific sociocultural and historical factors, including whiteness.⁴

This esotericism simultaneously taps into a “collective formation” that constructs and affirms Japanese cultural homogeneity and vanished enchantment (IVY 1995, 20). It engages a modern preoccupation with disappearance, hiddenness, and enchantment in a world purportedly laid bare by scientific materialism (RAMASWAMY 2004). It recenters Japanese spiritual geographies within the capacious MMS narrative of alien astronauts living in a lost Shambhala that will be reclaimed through the exceptional spiritual character of the Japanese. It is an interesting tension that the imaginings of a Western spiritualist help Japanese initiates on their unspoken quest for an authentic, pre-Western past. Although not “core lineage teachings,” placing Japan in a framework of spiritual

3. Shambhala, a capacious MMS signifier meaning a future peace and a specific geographical locality, was officially anchored to Earth on 21 September 2021, although it remains an aspirational goal and not a fait accompli. For more about Shambhala’s role in MMS teachings, see CHRISTOPHER (2022).

4. See BAKKER (2021) for a discussion of whiteness in shaping Western esotericism studies and practices.

exceptionalism, practically speaking, helps to familiarize Japanese initiates with Western ideas (such as being part of the lineage of King Salomon) that otherwise weakly register in the cultural imaginary. It has given agency to Japanese initiates to put some localizing topspin (interpretive practices, hermeneutic emphases, and subversive one-upmanship) on Founder Gudni's often elliptical oral teachings, thereby increasing a sense of social belonging in an interpretive community that has taken "Western" esotericism and given it a local flavor. In some instances, Japanese interpretive practices have even ended up being informally circulated in Western MMS centers, shuffling the assumed unidirectional spread of Western occultism (BOGDAN and DJURDJEVIC 2014, 5). Where possible, I describe how Japanese initiates are not "merely carriers for the 'mutations' of Western ideas" but actively constructing MMS on a global stage (STRUBE 2021, 53).

The important but occasional symbiotic back-and-forth creation of esoteric beliefs and practices should not elide the central role of charismatic Western leadership in spreading MMS's brand of business esotericism into new cultural milieus. Undoubtedly, Founder Gudni's imaginative centering of Japan in MMS cosmology (itself rooted in Western esotericism) is the starting point for understanding how it is further shaped by Japanese leadership, many of whom are stakeholders in spiritual centers (*saron* サロン) that provide clients with MMS-copyrighted healing modalities. Because of space constraints, this article does not elaborate on how MMS localization practices factor into the business model, which sells spiritual initiation into an esoteric lineage.⁵

In the past decade, there has been a call for the critical study of esotericism to augment historical approaches with ethnography (ASPREM and GRANHOLM 2013). This recognizes that sociocultural analyses of the production and practice of contemporary esotericism does not necessarily need to be overly reductionist, devalue the subject, or rely on outmoded models of deviance and wastebasket knowledge. The authors caution against unfavorably pitting elite representations of intellectual esotericism of the past against contemporary expressions of everyday esotericism found in digital mediums, popular culture, and for-profit business models (ASPREM and GRANHOLM 2013, 4–5). In this sense, MMS represents an important test case. It has weathered sustained criticisms of being inauthentic and harmful in the mainstream and social media, from across the ideological spectrum, including VICE magazine and independent trusts which monitor cultism through public donations.⁶ However, presentations about MMS

5. See GAITANIDIS (2011) for an analysis of the MMS business model as it existed fifteen years ago.

6. For example: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/k78ay3/inside-the-bizarre-cult-whose-members-allege-sexual-and-financial-exploitation>; <https://dialogueireland.wordpress.com/?s=modern+mystery+school> (both accessed 17 August 2023).

in academic forums, including the 2023 Conference of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism at Malmö University, have been positively received as a new direction in the utilization of ethnographic methods to study highly financialized contemporary esotericism.

I view my role as an anthropologist to render the experiences of MMS initiates with humane fidelity, respect the secrecy of esoteric knowledge, and re-describe and analyze from a scholarly perspective. Fieldwork was conducted with the full consent of the Third Order and all interviews with initiates were granted with an understanding of my outsider status as an anthropologist. I attended fourteen MMS seminars and events, and interviewed Founder Gudni for eighteen hours over six sessions. I completed the full Empower Thyself seminar for first-step initiation but did not participate in or witness the final initiation ceremony. Similarly, I attended parts of the Healer's Academy without paying the course fees, receiving the energy transfer, or witnessing the final second-step initiation. Based on an agreement with Founder Gudni, I have never paid for a seminar at the Tokyo headquarters, although I have paid individual Guides and Life Activation Practitioners for spiritual services. This allowed me to maintain the necessary distance during participant observation; according to MMS teachings about value exchange, it also meant that I did not receive the energy transfer paying clients received. While below I analyze several aspects of MMS in Japan that have never received scholarly or media attention, my hope is that it does not reveal esoteric knowledge safeguarded by lineage practitioners.

Eastern Destiny

At the directive of the Hierarchy of Light,⁷ Founder Gudni first visited Japan in 1997 and permanently resettled in 2005—one of several Western mediums competing with domestic spirituality companies.⁸

He originally initiated ten people in four adept classes staggered within a month. During the past twenty-four years, three cohorts of Japanese initiates have been foundational to MMS expansion. In the early years, the initiates were more New Age curiosity seekers dabbling in marketplace spirituality. After si Nakagome took a formal leadership role in 2000, MMS began hosting Healing Fairs (*iyashi fes* 癒しフェス) in Ebisu, Tokyo. These events, called Visak

7. The Hierarchy of Light includes En-Sof and the entire pantheon of deities, angels, and intergalactic beings that humans can call upon for support in their mission.

8. For a discussion about Western mediums in Japan, which includes an interview with Founder Gundi, see Alec Jordan, 25 November 2015 (updated 26 April 2021), How Big Are Western Mediums in Japan?, *Tokyo Weekender*. https://www.tokyoweekender.com/art_and_culture/how-big-are-western-mediums-in-japan/ (accessed 22 July 2023).

Festivals, attracted primarily women who were explicitly seeking self-transformation through spiritual healing.

The second wave of initiates added celebrities (including a famous movie director and the emperor's granddaughter, according to Founder Gudni). These two cohorts grew in tandem throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century and into the early 2010s. MMS advertising from this time emphasized healing and encouraged initiates who felt broken by Japanese work culture, social pressures, personal addiction, or abusive family dynamics to join. Events were more playful and socially transgressive, including cosplay, hippie attire, and temple constructions about music, beauty, and eroticism.⁹ This culminated with a series of Shambhala Tribal Community celebrations until they were unexpectedly dissolved by MMS leadership in 2011.¹⁰

The third wave began around 2016. It signaled a change in recruitment strategy toward mainstream high achievers, often highly educated or beautiful, who described feeling spiritually vacuous despite normative success.¹¹ Recruitment videos, both in English and Japanese, began to emphasize stories of winners (having won the genetic lottery, working at top companies, making it in Hollywood, becoming rich entrepreneurs) who felt a nagging sense of incompleteness. This is evident in marketing strategies and the fusion with parallel entertainment ventures such as *NEW LIFE Magazine*, *Eiko's World*, and *Aurora Borealis Entertainment, Inc.*, which strive to produce lifestyle content, bespoke fashion branding, and television entertainment that integrates MMS teachings with popular consumption. Founder Gudni described to me how using popular entertainment to promote spiritual progression *is* the mission.¹²

While the first initiates have mostly left, the more recent cohorts remain foundational to the MMS community in Japan. These different subcommunities of initiates were encouraged by incremental changes to the recruitment model toward an image of mainstream popularization. This was probably the result of several factors, including Founder Gudni's long-standing passion for showbusiness (extending back to his role of *Slaver* in the 1984 Icelandic film

9. For a clip from a 2010 cosplay dance party that typified the jubilant Shambhala Tribal Community events, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_5hs-N2XPP4; and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQk1Oye3vMw> (both accessed 22 July 2023).

10. For the defunct Shambhala Tribal Community Japan website, see: <http://www.shamballahjapan.com/>.

11. The MaiLove duo, who graduated from top universities and boast normative success in industry and personal physical beauty, are emblematic of the shift within MMS circa 2016. For their personal interviews, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xd_V55u6Kes (accessed 22 July 2023).

12. After receiving consent to publish research articles, I interviewed Founder Gudni six times, totaling eighteen hours, between May and November 2021.

When the Raven Flies) and an adaptive business model that revolves around the changing demographics of clientele.¹³ Tracking the changing cultural ethos of MMS in Japan, from attracting emotionally-broken social misfits to highlighting paragons of normative success, provides a unique ethnographic lens into ongoing scholarly debates. To what extent is contemporary esotericism a marginalized critique of the mainstream *and* a “desired commodity” because of the cultural desirability of the *verboten* (HANEGRAAFF 2012, 360)? To what extent are contemporary esoteric groups struggling to find effective business models and in gradual decline, such as the Theosophical Society (RUDBØG 2013, 55) *and* positioning themselves in a niche marketing around spiritual alternativity locating “small, profitable homogeneous market segments... ignored or neglected by others” (DALGIC and LEEUW 1994, 42)?

The debate about how esotericism can be contextually mainstream or alternative, dominant or subaltern, is mirrored in MMS’s crisscrossing currents of spiritual libertarianism and institutional victimization. Like most spiritual alternativity, MMS critiques dominant paradigms and scientific expertise while shrouding their pronouncements in alchemical formulations. As CROCKFORD (2021, 211–12) aptly phrased it, the power of esoteric knowledge is “in claiming that most other people do not know it, and are therefore inferior because of this lack of knowledge.” Likewise, MMS cultivates and monetizes affective membership in a taboo, suppressed lineage, one which is superior to but censured by the deluded mainstream (who live in the Matrix). Founder Gudni clearly made this point at a seminar in Las Vegas when he described how the secret teaching he was publicly revealing had caused the death of heretical Mystery School initiates during the Catholic Inquisition. This subversive framework is belied, however, by their corporate panache that highlights financial winners and spotlights inspirational initiates—an outcome of placing the hierarchical gradients of spiritual knowledge in Golden Dawn and Theosophy into a multilevel marketing framework that promises to transform secrecy into social and financial capital.

Clearly, MMS is not only teaching the “rejected knowledge” of occult science as often anathema (or even superior) to scientific rationalism and academic knowledge (HANEGRAAFF 2012, 221). MMS also leverages rejected status for financial gain. There is a tension between what is taught and how it is marketed. The Third Order strongly inculcates a sense of self-responsibility: how you think so it shall be, and the poor are enslaved to a victimization mindset. In Japan, normatively successful Guides, self-branded as showbusiness elites, medical doctors, and beauty counselors, are offered up as exemplars of wielders of magic and positive thinking. Meanwhile, the Third Order leans into being victimized

13. For Gudni’s IMDB page, see: https://www.imdb.com/name/nm1866102/?ref_=ttfc_fc_cl_t23 (accessed 20 July 2023).

by outside critics and beleaguered by ignorant outsiders clinging to the agenda of the uninitiated. While these dynamics are more pronounced in the West, and especially in the teachings of sr Dave Lanyon, Japanese initiates are similarly suspended in the unresolvable paradoxes facing similar esoteric groups: on the one hand, between internalizing (through alchemical self-transformation) and externalizing (through combative exchanges with ignorant outsiders) locus of control; and on the other hand, shouldering the responsibilities of protecting esoteric secrets while advertising the transformative effects of those very secrets in laudatory social media posts to attract clientele and activate the spiritual DNA of neophyte adepts.

East/West Dichotomy

Founder Gudni described to me how MMS strives toward universalism. “It’s very important to raise the teachings above it being hermetic or Western esoteric, so it’s just above it, and just teach the tools as they are.” In many contexts, this is a correct assessment. For example, Japanese initiates in the Ritual Master program use Tibetan phurba (an Indo-Tibetan ritual object of transformative power associated with the deity Vajrakīlaya) as apotropaic personal objects able to manipulate energy, largely untethered from the Tibetan ritual usage. It is taught to initiates not as a Tibetan tool but as a universal technology. However, at tension with this spiritual universalism are many teachings that emphasize dichotomous but complimentary directions, elements, gates, and watchtowers. An initiate gradually learns this system in seminars including Angelic/Enochian Magick, Wiccan/Druid Teachings, Universal Kabbalah, the Ritual Master program, Warriors of Light martial arts practice, and advanced seminars taught by Founder Gudni as Hierophant. Everything with physical density is part of this system and can be plotted on the Kabbalistic Tree of Life diagram and the Four Elements, similar to many Western esoteric currents, notably Golden Dawn and Aleister Crowley’s later innovations in Thelema (BOGDAN 2012).¹⁴ Each direction has nearly infinite spiritual hosts (angels, guardians, Bodhisattvas, teachers, and protectors).

The Four Gates, taken together, are a spiritual compass that guides self-awareness and life decisions. Integral to this system of complimentary directional Gates are the day-to-day operations of MMS as a global spiritual business. Canada (with a headquarters in Toronto’s west-end of Etobicoke) is the Northern Gate, representing Divine Masculinity and knowledge (embodied by the

14. To learn more about the ten-month “Ascension Program” in Universal Hermetic Ray Kabbalah, see: <https://modernmysteryschoolint.com/class/universal-kabbalah/> (accessed 20 July 2023).

martial artist Dave Lanyon, who frequently teaches about the modern assault on traditional masculinity); Brazil (established by Eric Thompson) is the Southern Gate, representing the unbridled passion of Divine Femininity; USA (and especially the West Coast) is the Western Gate, representing future and destiny; and Japan is the Eastern Gate, representing enlightenment. These representations closely correspond to stereotypes of national identity that circulate as global cultural power, such as passionate Brazilians (REZENDE 2008), Manifest Destiny Americans, and otherworldly Japanese (WINFIELD and HEINE 2017, xvi).

MMS teaches that all Four Gates must be strong and held in the light so that humans can make enlightened choices. The distinct character of each directional gate has guided the evolution of human and human-like sentient beings on earth and explains perceived cultural differences. For example, initiates who complete the Channeling School (only available in Japan) will discover their “channeling contract” with a specific deity that often overlaps with their cultural background (Amaterasu, Susanoo, Miroku Bostatsu, and Fudō Myōō are popular among Japanese initiates, for example, but are largely unknown among initiates from other Gates). Moreover, initiates who complete the Ritual Master (RM) program will receive a secret name. The Third Order makes the determination and may select names befitting the initiate’s Gate (for example, Northern Gate initiates may receive Nordic and Viking names).

This has three points of importance. First, the scholarly debate about non-Western esotericism is interestingly complicated by MMS’s emic distinctions between Eastern and Western Gates. As we will see, the Eastern Gate is both the symbol of personal enlightenment and is the frontline of a cosmic struggle for liberating Tibet. Second, MMS leadership incorporates esoteric directions into a broader narrative of global expansion that fits the multilevel marketing ethos of projecting constant growth. The success of any one Gate is energetically predicated on the balanced spread of MMS around the world. This both reflects cosmological views of raising the vibration of humanity 3 percent to usher in Shambhala and is a marketing-driven technique to encourage recruitment. Last, the perceived cultural and theological differences between the Eastern and Western Gates are emphasized as part of a patchwork of emotional and energetic differences that are the product of cultural evolution. By appealing to the *longue durée* of cultural evolution shaping Japanese spiritual exceptionalism, Founder Gudni’s imaginings may synchronize with the desire of Japanese followers to discover wonderment about themselves as Japanese and their homeland that is perceived as part of the vanished past (pre-Westernization, post-Meiji Restoration, or pre-economic bubble affluence). In these ways, the East/West dichotomy is a central emic discourse that is grounded in specific teachings, contributes to Japanese uniqueness, and advances a business narrative of global expansion.

It also suffuses specific teachings about the sacred geography of Japan and outlying areas. I focus on four examples: Mount Kurama as Japan's Mystery School, Mount Aso as the first landing spot of the alien Adamic Seed,¹⁵ Yonaguni as the first Shambhala, and Japan as the liberators of Tibet. Western initiates take an introductory seminar called "The Seven Mystery Schools" that provide an overview of the seven earthly schools (Tibet, Japan, England, North America, Australia, Romania, Africa) and their associated magical and energetical components. In this class, they learn about Mount Kurama as the location of Japan's secret Mystery School. However, Japanese initiates will have likely absorbed deeper teachings about their own Mystery School directly through the imaginings of Founder Gudni. Teachings about Yonaguni and Mount Aso (with its associated healing modality that is only practiced by Japanese) arguably increase Japanese familiarity with concepts rooted in Western esotericism.

Mount Kurama

Mount Kurama is to the north of Kyoto and known to many Japanese as the birthplace of Reiki and home of Sōjōbō, the Goblin King. It is a popular getaway spot for tourists to hike the 3.9 km trail uphill past Kuramadera 鞍馬寺 and take a bath in idyllic hot springs. What is largely unknown to the public, however, is that Mount Kurama is the physical location of the secret Japanese Mystery School. Founder Gudni, who was not invited to Japan via the Japanese Mystery School, has nevertheless been "called" several times to Mount Kurama by officials. His description to me closely followed a written account he posted in the comments section of Japan Today (18 March 2012), reproduced below:

Mount Kurama, outside Kyoto. Walking up the whole mountain takes a little bit of a hike but oh boy is it worth it. You can sometimes even see some real-life Ninjas in the trees, there is a Ninja school up there. It [touts] some of the most ancient iconic sculptures in Japan if you slip into the basement of the temple, that is half way up the mountain and slowly make your way, in the dark, behind all the urns with the remains of dead monks, then way in the back are three ancient statues and an old well coming straight out from the cliff. It is said that if the water is still running then the world is ok, so the monks go every day back there to check.¹⁶

15. This is common MMS terminology for proto-human form within the Cloud of Intelligence which had close contact with En-Sof and serves as a reminder to contemporary MMS followers of their Galactic natures, as especially taught in the Galactic Activation seminar series.

16. Founder Gudni has written many public responses to articles between 2012–2019, available here: <https://japantoday.com/member/gudni-gudnason> (accessed 20 July 2023).

Founder Gudni said to me in an interview that at Mount Kurama he described seeing “real life ninjas in the trees” and a reptiloid nature spirit (*kappa* 河童). In a Quora response to a question about unexplainable things seen in the forest while hunting, he wrote: “In Japan I was hiking in the mountains and I saw what they call a Kappa (look it up) and I thought I was looking at an ape but then it got closer and I realized it was not an ape. I collected ground samples of the feet, to make sure I was not imagining this, and I presented these to the local Fish & Wildlife for preservation and hopefully to make them aware of it but... they already knew!”¹⁷

Such visits to Mount Kurama, real or astral, alone or with small groups of students, contributed to Founder Gudni handing down an MMS seminar called Ensofic Reiki.TM It is advertised as the most authentic version of Mikao Usui’s reiki system as he discovered it through his twenty-one-day practice on Mount Kurama. In the West, it is taught as a three-part seminar series and in Japan it is branded as Ensofic Ray Healing ModalityTM and bundled into a six-day course for 352,000 yen (2,500 USD). There are thirty-nine Japanese Guides and Healers permitted to hand down the teaching modality, which “is source energy that awakens the ‘I am’ presence within you. It is the first ray of creation. Clients/patients feel more connected to the oneness of all that is.... The Ensofic Ray is the panacea (cure-all) of all illness that heals at root-cause levels. It is an excellent modality for those in need of physical, mental, or emotional healing and balance or those wanting to experience more passion for life...”¹⁸ Kimura Tsukiko, the indefatigable administrator of the Tokyo headquarters, is the chairperson of the Ensofic Ray Research Institute and her name joins the Third Order on printed certificates of completion from the Ensofic Ray Association.¹⁹

I spoke with some initiates who claimed to have established direct contact with Japan’s Mystery School. It is significant to note how Founder Gudni’s mytho-biographical experiences, often transmitted as oral teachings, are in some cases expanded upon by initiates. For example, this Top Performing Guide described to me taking personal initiation at Mount Kurama.

I have contact with the Mystery School in Kurama. I have never heard of other Guides [doing this]; it must be rare. I found the contact information to a master of the Mystery School by accident while checking out an old online BBS [bulletin board]. I followed the information and found the contact address. When I went to Kurama, I met a person who took me to a secret place to

17. See <https://www.quora.com/profile/Gudni-Gudnason>.

18. For a description of the Ensofic Ray Healing Modality,TM see: <https://www.lightyourway.center/ensofic-ray-healing-modality> (accessed 20 July 2023).

19. For a scanned copy of an Ensofic Reiki certification, see: <https://theandygrant.com/category/modern-mystery-school/> (accessed 20 July 2023).

explain and take initiation. It was in the basement of a Japanese temple. There was a statue of Sanat Kumara, not in his human shape, but his galactic shape with wings and a human face.

Mount Aso

Mount Aso is the largest volcano in Japan and one of the largest in the world. MMS teaches in the Galactic Activation (GA) seminar series that when the first alien species came to Earth, the spaceship landed on Mount Aso in Kyushu and turned the mountain radioactive. The aim of GA 1 is to take the Adam Kadmon initiation, which increases initiates' capacity to hold light and to communicate with the Galactic Federation (loosely derived from Jewish Kabbalah). The GA techniques were created on other planets, tested by other alien races, and brought to Founder Gudni on Earth on 5 May 1998. The spiritual objective is to advance "human evolution" by activating our forgotten divinity. Despite this aim of backwards evolution, MMS is forward looking. Initiates progress through a hierarchically ranked syllabus of esoteric initiations that are spiritually teleological and correspond to the ever-expanding model of multilevel marketing. GA initiates are taught esoteric tools to undertake the multiyear "Great Work" of unifying body and spirit and to become "God Humans."

This project is the combined result of developments in the USA and Japan. It rests on the imaginative fusion of spaceships, Theosophy, and Tibet that harks back to George Adamski's ufology (BENNETT 2008) and toward more contemporary phenomena (ROTH 2005). First, Founder Gudni was contacted by the Nathor alien tribe at Bear Lake, on the border of Utah and Idaho. Bear Lake has a long association with monsters due to the repackaging of Native American lore by Joseph Rich, a local who wanted to attract tourism (DUNNING 2007, 72–73). From this encounter, Founder Gudni learned the DNA Activation technique, first created by King Salomon some three thousand years ago, that has become the foundational ritual for MMS recruitment. The GA seminar, originally called Adam Kadmon (AK), taught alien edicts (about nutrition, biorhythm, and spatial design, among others) that help initiates gain mastery over our illusory human bodies and develop superhuman physical abilities (the Jewish idea of Kefitzat Haderech probably funneled through Frank Herbert's *Dune* to describe the coming messiah). The Nathor instructions for "adapting to new Galactic energy" are essentially a combination of self-help tips, business strategies, dietary changes, and relationship advice that would be equally well-received in a California New Age seminar on self-transformation. Second, due to the "ritual work" done by Japanese initiates on Mount Aso, which confirmed that humans (as aliens) originally touched down on Earth in Japan, the GA syllabus

was expanded. The GA seminar series was again expanded after Founder Gudni contacted aliens at the Museum of Alien Studies in Taichung (Taiwan).

When I asked Founder Gudni about this teaching, he explained that while spaceships have landed in various places on Earth, and will land in other places in the future, Japanese initiates are transfixed by the idea of the first alien landing in Kyushu.

The thing is that Japanese are not interested in dry facts. They get bored. They want to know structure, lineage and the history they like. They don't want to go into deep details about why things are the way they are. Like when I talk about the beginning, five million years ago, when we came in spaceships and the first one landed on Mount Aso. It's an amazing place, proven to be the first landing. That mountain is radioactive, so a spaceship landed there for sure. [I ask if this narrative appeals to Japanese initiates] Absolutely. I must always be careful. In my online class the other day, there were also people from Vietnam and Korea. I can't be too Japan focused. But the interesting thing is that I tell Japanese people the story—here lies the spaceship on the mountain, and then then they landed in other places as well. But this was the first landing. They don't ask where they landed in other places.

Based on the ritual work done on Mount Aso, a seminar was developed to credentialize initiates in the Mount Aso Point Healing Modality.²⁰ This modality reenergizes passion by exposing clients to the energy of the Adamic Seed when we first landed on Earth on Mount Aso. It is available in select Japanese salons but unheard of among Western initiates. This Japanese innovation, and the appeal it has to a Japanese clientele, may be rooted in the popular imagining of Mount Aso. The five mountain peaks of Aso attract nature enthusiasts, those seeking energy emanating from power spots (*pawāsupotto* パワースポット) (CARTER 2018), and “dark tourists” with a fascination for deadly volcanic eruption sites (SKINNER 2018, 132). It is also the fictional home of the monster Rodan in the Godzilla franchise, the site of the final battle in the *shōjo* 少女 manga *Magical Girl Spec-Ops Asuka* and the inspiration for Mt. Chimney in *Pokémon*, where challenges and trainers do battle. Very much on point, a 2021 Kumamoto tourism TV advertisement showed an alien affectionately named *Aliasō* (a portmanteau of “alien” and “Aso”) crash landing on top of a simmering Mount Aso.²¹

20. To learn more about the Mount Aso Point Healing Modality, which is only offered in Japan, see: <https://celestialbride-en.jimdofree.com/healing-sessions/mt-aso-point-healing-modality/> (accessed 20 July 2023).

21. To watch the TV advertisement, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqFQmX3vLpM> (accessed 20 July 2023).

Yonaguni

In *MMS* cosmology, humans left the Cloud of Intelligence as disembodied perfected spirits and gathered density as we ventured into the universe. Slowly we took human-like forms and traveled intergalactically on spaceships. To achieve our goal of joining Ein Sof (the Kabbalistic “infinity”), we roamed space having adventurous trials to upgrade our spiritual and physical form. Founder Gudni often uses sci-fi language to teach these concepts: “A long time ago” (Star Wars) we left the Cloud of Intelligence, aboard spaceships we “boldly went where no man has gone before” (Star Trek). Five million years ago, Ein Sof explained that Earth would be our final trial before we “graduate” and join it. An Earth was created in seven days that matched the requirements of our alien bodies.

The Adamic Seed’s first landing spot was atop Mount Aso, which was part of an earthly Shambhala, a geographic area designed by the angel Sanat Kumara. The location accommodated countless human-like forms, which organized into twelve tribes according to the energy they needed on planet Earth. We happily lived in Shambhala for two million years, without money and in full self-sufficiency, harnessing energy from a magnetic grid and absorbing light particles from the air. During that time, Earth was occupied by three other races, Lemurians, Atlanteans, and the people of Mu. When their missions ended, humans helped them to leave Earth. Their genetic traces are still observable among the Ainu, Maori, Aboriginal Australians, and Tamilians; but their civilizations were lost in the depths of the oceans. Only then humans “broke the walls of the First Shambhala” and colonized the Earth, gaining knowledge and the ability to choose evil akin to Adam and Eve’s ejection from the Garden of Eden. Each of the twelve tribes founded a Mystery School in a different region of the world (Tibet was first; Sumerians arrived later and founded the thirteenth Mystery School). Since 7 July 1997 *MMS* has provided teachings to usher in the New Shambhala of perfect peace, health, and compassion to restore what was lost in the First Shambhala. Eventually we too will return to intergalactic travel aboard spaceships.

Founder Gudni draws on alternative histories, urban legends, and minority views within marine geology that popularly circulate in the Japanese media to locate Shambhala in Japan itself. Accordingly, remnants of the earthly Shambhala are currently visible as an underwater ruin off the coast of Yonaguni, the most westernmost inhabited Japanese island. It is part of the Yaeyama Islands in Okinawa Prefecture, 108 kilometers from Taiwan and straddling the Pacific Ocean and East China Sea. The central temple of the first Shambhala—a rock monolith with terraced staircases, ninety-degree angles and flat surfaces—was discovered by divers in 1986. Dubbed the Yonaguni Monument, it received national attention after the marine biologist KIMURA Masaaki (2004) hypothesized that it is a human-made structure, perhaps part of the lost continent of Mu. He identified

a vast habitation of monolithic structures interlocked with crisscrossing roads.²² The new religion Happy Science (Kōfuku no Kagaku 幸福の科学) similarly imagines Yonaguni as central to their “ancient astronauts theory” of human existence (WINTER 2021). While theories of the artificial design of Yonaguni have some backers, they are largely considered pseudoscientific by marine geologists. However, they resonate widely with the cultural imagination of Japanese initiates, who expressed wonderment at the symbolic sacredness of Shambhala submerged off their coastline and speculated about in popular media.

Founder Gudni Imagines Japan

Among the thirteen Mystery Schools, Tibet is preeminent, the global Crown Chakra. Japanese initiates are taught that their mission as the Third Eye, sometimes called the Sixth Chakra, is to free Tibet. While Western initiates are taught that Japan is the Third Eye (in the Seven Mystery Schools seminar), most are unaware of their cosmic mission to free Tibet. However, Founder Gudni’s directive from the Hierarchy of Light was to open the Japanese spirit, to usher them into recognition of their eschatological responsibilities. “The main reason I am here in Japan is to bring a spiritual awakening to free Tibet,” he told me in an early interview. “Japan is a big part of the story. They will lead it.”

Accordingly, Japanese initiates are taught not only the sacrality of Mount Kurama, Mount Aso, and Yonaguni as integral to the original Shambhala but also that their spiritual purity is the key to freeing Tibet and manifesting the next Shambhala. It is important to note that si Hideto, Founder Gudni’s Japanese translator and the primary seminar instructor in the MMS headquarters in Tokyo, often *de-emphasizes* Founder Gudni’s tendency to exceptionalize the Japanese people. His role in mediating Founder Gudni’s teachings, as both translator and Sovereign Ipsissimus, cannot be overstated. On the whole, however, the process of reframing “Western esotericism” in a Japanese spiritual milieu is an adaptive strategy that heightened local familiarity with concepts that may appear foreign (such as imaginings about mesmerism, theosophy, and anthroposophy) but have been available in Japan since the late nineteenth century. Certainly, for followers at lower stages of initiation who try to culturally triangulate into MMS via patchy knowledge of Egyptian mythology, the Nordic pantheon, Mikkyō, and Tibetan Buddhism, Madame Blavatsky and Star Trek, teaching Japanese geographical and spiritual touchpoints amplified a feeling of familiarity—and expanded the seminar content.

22. “Scientists Say Yonaguni is Man-Made,” 12 September 2012. *Earth’s International Research Society*. <https://internationalresearchsociety.wordpress.com/2012/09/14/japanese-underwater-mega-structures/> (accessed 20 July 2023).

Let us consider some of Founder Gudni's orientalisms collected from eighteen hours of personal interviews, online research, and fieldwork observations. The information below is intentionally pastiche and decontextualized to reflect the way initiates sporadically engage with such ideas. While MMS teachings are formalized into a syllabus of seminars, Japanese initiates are likely to come across Founder Gudni's more impressionistic stylizations of Japanese spirituality and culture through post-seminar Q&As, his frequent social media posts, extensive posting on the Japan Today website, or through banter with each other during seminar breaks.

In a Facebook post from 3 August 2022, Founder Gudni's five thousand followers read how he is "getting closer to understanding these 'aliens' we call Japanese... lol... but in some seriousness, they are sometimes like aliens. Much like Jane Goodall observing the primates in Africa, I am here in Japan, married to a Japanese and I am observing, so look for future reports on my findings. I partially live in the floating world now, so if you can't reach me, well, you know where I am." Elsewhere, he described *ukiyo-e* 浮世絵 as the "mystical secret soul" of Japan that "is a dreaming world of wit, stylishness, and extravagance—with overtones of naughtiness, hedonism, and transgression but at the same time innocent and beautiful."

Such language permeated the 2010 celebration of United Nations Water Day, when MMS teamed up with the controversial "scientist" and businessman Emoto Masaru 江本勝 to spiritually clean Lake Biwa based on his theory that spoken prayers and human cognition (*kotodama* 言霊) transform water molecules. His conjecture evolved over the years, and his early work revolved around pseudo-scientific hypotheses that water could react to positive thoughts and words and that polluted water could be cleaned through prayer and positive visualization.

Founder Gudni's constructions of Japan tend toward an "aesthetics of shadows" (*kage no bigaku* 影の美学) that suggestively amplifies the dark unseen to enhance spiritual mystery (MIYAO 2013). Mytho-biographical stories, both in personal and public dialogue, tend toward the mysterious fictionalization of this shadow world. In personal interviews, he described to me several such mytho-biographical events. I reproduce them here without having tried to verify them, which is arguably outside the scope of an anthropologist's role. He declined a multi-million-dollar donation from the sixth leader of the Yamaguchi-gumi, Japan's largest *yakuza* syndicate often portrayed in popular culture. At an *iyashi* festival, he was contacted by government security forces, blindfolded, and taken to a secure location where he taught Kabbalah to an eminent government leader (who remained behind a curtain). He has publicly described the emperor's secret society as an ancient fraternity of men who flout conventions, live by their own code, and exact violence on those who interfere with their objectives. In a personal interview, he described a secret underground empire under Osaka Castle

that is a “whole different underworld with an empress and a whole society that has nothing to do with this world.” This belief may come from a real locked tunnel on the grounds of the Sankō Shrine or from the anime *Princess Toyotomi*, which depicts a tunnel under the Osaka Castle that facilitated the continuation of the Toyotomi lineage.

Points of perceived symmetry between European and Japanese courtly culture are emphasized, which manifests as cultural refinement. He compared Iceland and Japan as both being island countries with intrinsic shyness to outside influence (*shimaguni konjō* 島国根性). “Japan has a far superior culture over so many countries and specially that of America.” He often gently ribbed my Yankee anti-royalism as antithetical to the critical importance of emphasizing courtly refinement as an aspect of divinity. A core teaching is to recognize one’s identity as eternal gods or goddesses and adopt a befitting royal lifestyle. To Western audiences, Founder Gudni is likely to praise the British monarchy (in a Facebook memorialization of Queen Elizabeth II from 8 September 2022 he wrote about meeting her on several occasions). In Japan, the focus is on emperor deification as aspirational embodiments of royalty. In a personal interview, Founder Gudni said:

I always [wish the emperor] hadn’t been forced to sign the Potsdam Declaration where he said: “I’m not a god; I’m a man.” That was huge. The soul of Japan died that day.... The emperor was forced by the Allied nations. It was very sad. We need a symbol for God in human form. The organized religions have some invisible force called God—Jesus was not a God; he was the son of God; his father Elohim is the God; but what is that? They show him with a beard on the cloud with a harp. It is an elusive image. Same with Allah. But in Shinto there is a man containing God. God is within this man and all of us can attain this. Living in the Shinto spirit and with the emperor means that you are reaching godliness. When he said: “I am not a God anymore” the whole system crashed.

Although Founder Gudni is largely apolitical while teaching, he has publicly doubted the death toll of the Nanjing massacre and Japanese wartime atrocities; lionized the emperor system (*tennō seido* 天皇制度) as reflecting a spiritual hierarchy to be harnessed and emulated as part of living royalty; and strongly criticized the Potsdam Declaration and the loss of imperial divinity. His forays into the political arena are often to boast about his social network or to link cultural innovations of the Genroku 元禄 period (1688–1704) and divine emperor worship with the imperative to “be royal” and materially upgrade through MMS techniques of channeling energy and manifesting wealth.

Conclusion

There have been many recent changes to MMS leadership. In May 2023, Founder Gudni retired from MMS administration and teaching lower-level courses. He

is now the Hierophant and will continue innovating new seminar material and teaching a small coterie of advanced students. Anthropology is not a predictive science, but with the reduced role of Founder Gudni at lower-level initiations, I expect si Hideto to continue de-emphasizing the teachings of Japanese spiritual exceptionalism; it simply does not suit his temperament or cosmopolitan life experiences. The same holds for si Dave in Toronto, who is eagerly relegating some of the above-described teachings about Japan and Shambhala to “Gudnisms” that are not “core lineage teachings.” Part of MMS’s organizational durability has been their ability to adapt their lineage teachings to the cultural zeitgeist of the moment, which manifests differently in Toronto, London, and Tokyo. While these adaptations are often top-down, efforts are made to cede power to Japanese leadership through monthly Guide Quorums, during which stakeholders can suggest or critique innovations (usually based on cultural appropriateness or financial value).

In this article, I analyzed the localizing strategies of MMS. I focused on Founder Gudni’s cultural innovations and esoteric imaginings about Japan and the Japanese people to highlight adaptive strategies of transnational diffusion. Such strategies have historical precedent in various Japanese new religions, although it remains unclear if the overlap is intentional or the byproduct of circulating pop cultural references being innovated upon. It is clear, however, that localizing strategies are central to generating revenue in a multilevel-marketing framework that combines commodified spirituality with status-signifying investment benchmarks. Based on one’s position on the “path of progression” through the MMS syllabus, a follower may be more or less attuned to these localizations. However, their strategic totality, sprinkled into paid seminars, social media posts, *saron* websites, guide blogs, promotional material, and personal interactions with leadership, helps MMS to maintain a profitable business for leadership that has retained cultural relevance over several decades. It also provides a matrix of spiritual entertainment that points toward the vanished, the shadowy unseen, the reenchanting orientalisms of an Icelander fusing “Western esotericism” with Japan-centric divine cosmologies and spiritual geographies. MMS’s tendency to reify “Western” and “Japanese” occult practices leans into cultural essentialisms that are destabilized by their own syncretistic seminar packages. Because teachings mix so many entangled strands of esoteric knowledge, their recombined totality is of greater lived importance for followers than teasing apart their supposedly discrete historical development. As such, MMS is an important case study for the ongoing debate about whether “Western esotericism” is being “mutated” through globalization or if it is an intrinsically globally-entangled field importantly constituted by non-Western practitioners and ideas.

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