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Historicizing the (Oc)cultic Milieu: Mikkyō in 1970s Japan

The term “cultic milieu,” first proposed by British sociologist Colin Campbell in 1972, has become established in the European and American academic study of religion to refer to culturally “underground” groups or systems of “deviant” beliefs. The concept, however, has also faced criticism throughout the years for its overemphasis on dichotomies like orthodox versus unorthodox, or mainstream versus underground, an issue that Campbell himself has more recently acknowledged. In order to contribute to this discussion this article focuses on Mikkyō (esoteric Buddhism) discourses developed during the 1970s in Japan, a period when the purported “parapsychological” aspects of Mikkyō received positive attention from the Japanese public and media. By presenting the Mikkyō theories of three individuals with different backgrounds—Nakaoka Toshiya (1926–2001), Kiriyaama Seiyū (1921–2016), and Yamasaki Taikō (b. 1929)—this article problematizes the boundaries of “orthodoxy,” showing how their ideas intermingled and influenced each other, right in the middle of a heightened popular interest in “the occult.”

KEY WORDS: esoteric Buddhism—occult boom—Mikkyō boom—Nakaoka Toshiya—Kiriyaama Seiyū—Yamasaki Taikō

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THE TERM “cultic milieu” was first suggested by British sociologist Colin Campbell in a well-known article from 1972.¹ Drawing from the German theologian Ernst TROELTSCH’s tripartite division of religious phenomena into church religion, sect religion, and mysticism (1931), the term “cult” became established in scholarship—especially in American sociology—mainly to refer to relatively unstable groups closely associated with mysticism, as well as to deviant and heterodox beliefs.² By the time Campbell wrote his article, the influence of non-Christian religious ideas that could be categorized as “cultic beliefs” had been growing since the 1960s, especially among youth cultures in North America and the United Kingdom in the context of the so-called “New Age” (HAMMER 2006). This trend gave scholars the impression that “cultic beliefs like astrology and witchcraft have ‘hitched a ride’ on the developing counterculture and spread themselves more widely throughout society” (CAMPBELL 2002, 12). As a result, these beliefs began to attract scholarly interest.

Nevertheless, according to Campbell, “cults” still remained a sub-discipline of the sociology of religion despite their perceived importance. There was no appropriate theory in the field that could identify the highly ephemeral and fluctuating “cultic” groups that were behind the increased interest and popularization of such non-Christian religious ideas. From this point of view, he proposed the notion of “cultic milieu,” to provide a legitimate domain for “cultic” groups within the sociology of religion. By definition, “cultic milieu” is the “cultural underground of society” that includes “all deviant belief systems and their associated practices,” which implies what can be called “occult culture”: “the worlds of the occult and the magical, of spiritualism and psychic phenomena, of mysticism and new thought, of alien intelligences and lost civilisations, of faith healing and nature cure” (CAMPBELL 2002, 14). Whereas the term “cult” typically describes the emergence of deviant groups or individuals as transient

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1. Originally published in issue 5 of *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain*, Campbell’s “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization” was recently reprinted in KAPLAN and LÖÖW (2002).

2. As Campbell informs us, there are mainly two views on “cults.” While some scholars understand the distinctive characteristics of a “cult” in connection with the nature of mystical religion, others define it by a certain “deviant” position toward dominant culture. For more details, see CAMPBELL (2002, 12–13).

phenomena, the concept of the “cultic milieu” conceives of their existence (and the repeated process of the emergence and disappearance of such groups) as a persistent aspect of society.

The concept has been widely applied and developed by later scholars. For example, Jeffrey KAPLAN and Heléne LÖÖW’s edited volume (2002) revisited the concept and discussed it in relation to more recent anti-globalisation protests and associated ideas. At the same time, however, the concept raised questions about whether it is reasonable to assume a boundary between orthodoxy and unorthodoxy or between mainstream and underground culture. As a recent example, following Raymond Williams’s thesis that “culture is ordinary” (WILLIAMS, 1993) Christopher PARTRIDGE criticized the concept for its implication of deviancy and marginality while suggesting the new scholarly term “Occulture” (2013). While focusing on the role of media and popular culture, he claimed that “something more ubiquitous, ordinary, and less oppositional is happening” (PARTRIDGE 2013, 119) in the realm of what has been categorized as the “cultic milieu.” Moreover, even Campbell himself mentioned the limitations of the “cultic milieu” in another article titled “The Cultic Milieu Revisited,” based on a lecture he gave at the University of Leipzig in 2012, about forty years after first coining the term. Although Campbell still seems to believe in the concept’s usefulness, he does agree that “identifying it relationally—that is as deviant or heterodox in relation to an established orthodox mainstream—runs into another set of problems, such as whether a single homogenous mainstream culture actually exists, and if it does whether its content could be said to qualify as orthodox” (CAMPBELL 2015, 35). The idea of a “cultic milieu” has therefore lived on even beyond the field of the sociology of religion, and despite numerous revisions—including, as we saw above, by its original proponent—continues to influence the field in many ways.

However, although the concept was for a long time used to frame discussions on “esoteric” and “occult” groups, in the past two decades, we have seen the emergence of additional terms. The most important and perhaps influential of these came from the study of Western esotericism and was coined by Wouter J. Hanegraaff, one of the most important names in the field. By defining “esotericism” as a conceptual wastebasket for “rejected knowledge” in Western culture since the period of the Enlightenment (HANEGRRAAFF 2012, 152), Hanegraaff developed a new approach to considering “heretical” or “deviant” religious ideas, insisting that the realm of “esotericism” was constructed through a history of polemics, and not simply derived from essential differences to “orthodox” religion. In other words, and despite the limitations pointed out by later scholars to his “rejected knowledge” thesis, the seemingly obvious suggestion by Hanegraaff to look at “esotericism” from a historical perspective did have important repercussions in the field, and even contributed to reframing the usability of “cultic

milieu” as an analytic concept. For instance, also inspired by HANEGRAAFF’s work on the New Age Movement (1996), Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal have, in their recent studies on “conspirituality,” emphasized the contribution of this perspective to current sociological approaches framed by Campbell’s idea:

The historical, diachronic study of Western esotericism tells us something about the specific content and thematic concerns of the (Western) cultic milieu, while Campbell’s theory helps us account for the *synchronic* aspects of how these “deviant” representations and practices tend to be produced, shared, and structured in small-scale groups, and how they relate to society at large. In short, the study of Western esotericism *historicises* the cultic milieu in the European history of religion. (ASPREM and DYRENDAL 2018, 209)³

The debate on the effectiveness of “cultic milieu” as a scholarly concept is by no means a simple one, as it reflects, ultimately, our present-day reconsideration of the boundaries between “religion” and “esotericism.” However, despite the copious use of the term “Western” by the authors above, this is obviously a discussion that goes far beyond the scope of European or North-American scholarship. As noted in the introduction to this special issue of *Religious Studies in Japan*, the boundaries between categories such as “new religions” and “spirituality” have also been problematized, sometimes in ways very similar to Euro-American discussions on “religion” and “esotericism.”

Informed by the approach proposed by Asprem and Dyrendal, this article is an exercise into the historicization of a stage in Japanese postwar religious history that Campbell-inspired scholars might have referred to as an example of “cultic milieu”: the so-called 1970s “occult boom.” What defines a “boom,” or whether such a phenomenon indeed took place, is, of course, up for debate; nevertheless, the term appears repeatedly in both contemporary media and scholarly works, revealing that, at least in terms of *discourse*, we can indeed speak about an “occult boom” having taken place in 1970s Japan (HAN 2021a).⁴ This article will focus on how ideas about Mikkyō 密教, or esoteric Buddhism, developed in such a context. More specifically, this article will compare works on Mikkyō published around the early 1970s by three individuals from very

3. This argument is also developed by the same authors in an earlier article. See ASPREM and DYRENDAL (2015).

4. Ioannis Gaitanidis has suggested in a personal communication that the popularity of the concept of “boom” in Japanese scholarly exegeses has perhaps rendered the adoption of the concept of “cultic milieu” to talk about religion in Japan unnecessary. Yoshinaga Shin’ichi has been one of the few scholars to employ the term and particularly the idea of a “milieu” (*karutoteki ba* カルトの場, *shūkyōteki ba* 宗教の場) in relation to the popularization of *seishin ryōhō* 精神療法 (spiritual therapies) in the late Meiji and Taishō eras (see YOSHINAGA 2010, 79, n. 1).

different backgrounds: Nakaoka Toshiya 中岡俊哉 (1926–2001),⁵ one of the most popular writers and “paranormal investigator” of postwar Japan; Kiriyaama Seiyū 桐山靖雄 (1921–2016), founder of Agonshū 阿含宗, one of the more successful post-1970s “new religions” of Japan; and Yamasaki Taikō 山崎泰廣 (b. 1929), a Buddhist priest and instructor at many important educational institutions connected to the Shingon sect, such as Shuchiin and Kōyasan universities.

As I will explain below, while Mikkyō is indeed connected to some of the most traditional forms of Japanese Buddhism, the 1970s saw the rise of many new—and sometimes competing—understandings of the term. By comparing the three individuals above, this article aims to both illustrate the entanglement of their ideas despite their different backgrounds and to emphasize that it is only by *historicizing* these ideas that we can ultimately achieve a more complete understanding of the shared context that led them to draft popular works on Mikkyō in the first place. Their experience reveals that, if a “cultic milieu” in 1970s Japan existed at all, it was not a realm secluded from more orthodox religious ideas but was rather constructed in relation to it.

Before the “Boom”: A Very Short History of Mikkyō in Modern Japan

Often translated into English as “Esoteric Buddhism,” the term “Mikkyō” has been defined in many ways: the recent *Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, a more scholarly resource, describes it as “the large body of texts, liturgies, implements, and rituals that were imported from China to Japan during the Heian Period;” the “[c]oncrete goals” of such esoteric practices including “maintaining power, attaining good fortune, warding off evil, and becoming a buddha in one’s very body” (BUSWELL and LOPEZ 2014, 540). Meanwhile *Wikipedia* emphasizes its aspect as a “lineage tradition,” which means that its practice requires “initiation empowerment-transmissions” from a master of the discipline.⁶

Both popular and more academic resources emphasize the *secrecy* aspect of Mikkyō, and its position vis-à-vis other more exoteric doctrines. Historically represented mostly—but not exclusively—by the Tendai and Shingon traditions, Mikkyō’s practices played a central role in premodern Japanese politics and culture. Especially in the case of Shingon, the incantations (*kaji kitō* 加持祈祷) and fire-burning ceremonies (*goma* 護摩) performed by its priests functioned to legitimate the ascension of many a premodern Japanese emperor to the throne.

5. Japanese personal names have been ordered according to the Japanese convention of placing the surname before the first name.

6. Mikkyō (English version). <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikkyō> (accessed 30 March 2023).

However, these more traditional aspects—secret transmission, emphasis on incantations, and so on—ended up clashing with mainstream Buddhist discourses after the imperial restoration of 1868. During the early years of the Meiji 明治 period (1868–1912), the new government strove to end the amalgamation between Shinto and Buddhism that had defined the mainstream of Japanese religion thus far; in 1873, it also ultimately lifted the ban on the practice of Christianity that had been in place since the early seventeenth century. Even before that, however, the presence of foreign missionaries was already impacting the ways people in the archipelago understood their own religious practices. In fact, *shūkyō* 宗教, the very Japanese term now used to translate “religion,” was coined precisely during this time, amid attempts to appropriate new discursive frameworks.

In this context, as recent scholarship in both Japanese and English has described in detail, the new discourse on “religion” was informed largely by Euro-American Protestant currents that prioritized the role of aspects such as “doctrine” and “faith” over other ritual practices that sometimes found no base in scripture.⁷ Japanese Buddhist sects thus entered a significant process of “Protestantization” (ŌTANI 2013) that involved the establishment of a unified Buddhist canon; Buddhism had to become “rational,” “civilized,” and “scientific,” which included, of course, also the creation of a strong anti-superstition movement. Here, the position of the heavily ritualistic Mikkyō became quite problematic: note, for instance, the role of Inoue Enryō 井上円了 (1858–1919), one of the most representative leaders of the Buddhist modernization campaigns who well into the Taishō 大正 period (1912–1926) associated Shingon’s prayer rituals with “superstition” (JOSEPHSON 2006, 154).

As pointed out by ŌMI Toshihiro, while Jōdo Shinshū 浄土真宗 became regarded as the sect that most perfectly represented this Buddhist struggle for modernization, Mikkyō-related schools such as Shingon were faced, despite exceptions, with a negative image of their main practices as “superstitions” (2020, 105–10). For example, the Meiji government, which promoted the importation of modern medical science from the West, issued several notices prohibiting the disruption of medical care by the performance of religious prayers (*kaji kitō*) (ŌMI 2020, 107). Also, the failure of the healing rituals conducted in front of the Imperial Palace bridge in 1912 aimed at saving Mutsuhito from illness led more people to talk about the perceived “irrationality” of such routines (ŌMI 2020, 109–10). In addition to the abovementioned work by Inoue Enryō,

7. For works in Japanese, see for instance HOSHINO (2012) and KLAUTAU (2014); in English, see JOSEPHSON (2012), ISOMAE (2014), MAXEY (2014), and KRÄMER (2015). Although these works focus mainly on the Meiji period, GAITANIDIS (2022) shows the compelling ways in which the concept of religion in Japan continues to shift today.

these cases explicitly show that a negative discourse on prayer and incantations was widespread in early twentieth-century Japan. Of course, this does not directly mean that Shingon or Mikkyō-related schools themselves simply became “superstition” in the general sense. However, although further research is needed, it seems obvious that the modern way of understanding “religion,” which is less tolerant of “magic” and more focused on inner-worldly asceticism, was not one favorable to Mikkyō.

In addition to Ōmi, other scholars have also explored this attitude toward Mikkyō in detail. For example, in a recent monograph, KAMEYAMA Mitsuhiro examines how Shingon priest Shaku Unshō 釈雲照 (1827–1909) developed reformist ideas. These ideas emerged partly as a reaction to younger scholars who viewed him as representative of a form of an “Old Buddhism” that needed to be transcended (2022, 188–214). Kameyama’s argument suggests that Unshō’s Mikkyō-inspired ideas were as much an expression of modernity as those of his counterparts in the “New Buddhist” movement. In fact, this type of reaction seems to have been quite common throughout twentieth-century Shingon history, even into the postwar era. For instance, in the early 1950s, the Shingon school commissioned Hirai Tatsumi 平井巽 (1903–1989), a lay Buddhist scholar, to create a work that explained the efficacy of prayer in contemporary “scientific” terms. This was prompted by the emergence of new religious groups that promoted prayer rituals similar to those of Mikkyō. Consequently, members of the Shingon school found themselves in a position where they had to actively emphasize the “orthodoxy” of their practices (HAN 2021b). This unfavorable perception of Mikkyō continued well into the later Shōwa years. In a 1968 volume that significantly contributed to the postwar trend of reevaluating Kūkai, one of the editors, the renowned Umehara Takeshi 梅原猛 (1925–2019), justified his focus on the founder by stating that, up to that point, Shingon had been regarded as nothing more than a prayer-centered form of Buddhism (*tan naru kitō no Bukkyō* 単なる祈祷の仏教) (UMEHARA 2014, 12). These examples demonstrate that modern attempts to (re)position Shingon within the broader Japanese religious context were largely shaped by a negative perception of the school.

While during the Taishō period the founder of Shin Buddhism was at the center of a cultural phenomenon now referred to by scholars as the “Shinran boom” (ŌSAWA 2019, 147–83), and Nichiren became the axis of one of the most popular Buddhist movements between the Meiji and early Shōwa days (ŌTANI 2019), interest in the Shingon founder was limited due mostly to the above circumstances. Although this situation continued for some time into the postwar days, in the early 1970s, it slowly began to shift. For instance, the 1994 *Encyclopedia of Popular Culture* describes a “Mikkyō boom” taking place at that time. According to this, the “boom” was mostly connected to the activities of Kiriyama

Seiyū (TSUSHIMA 1994), who I will be focusing on in one of the following sections.

Nevertheless, as explained by Erica BAFELLI and Ian READER, “whether Kiriyama really did start this ‘boom’ is neither clear nor the point; in Agonshū’s narrative,” however, “he did and this forms part of its image construction of Kiriyama as someone who shaped the religious culture of the age” (2019, 48–49). That is, while the narrative of Kiriyama as the center of the 1970s “Mikkyō boom” seems to inform most of our understanding of the phenomenon today, contemporary sources tell us a different story: from the late 1960s, there appears to be a renewed interest in the figure of the Shingon founder, which culminates with the publication, from 1973, of Shiba Ryōtarō’s 司馬遼太郎 (1923–1996) best-selling novel *The Landscape of Kūkai* (*Kūkai no fūkei* 空海の風景). At the same time, one also observes orthodox Shingon scholars discussing the meaning of this “boom” in Kōyasan 高野山 official publications (HAN 2021a, 14–16), which indicates that, in contemporary historical terms at least, the phenomenon was spread far beyond the scope of Kiriyama’s activities.

Whereas the term “Mikkyō boom” as it appeared in the 1970s deserves further consideration (HAN 2023), the case studies below may already be enough to illustrate that the term was used rather ambiguously; still, it reveals, as we will see, a significant amount about 1970s expectations toward both science and religion, much more than it does, perhaps, about some essential aspect of the ideas of Saichō or Kūkai. In other words, this article provides some answers to the questions of what made people in the 1970s so attracted to Mikkyō and what Mikkyō, in turn, had to offer to such audiences.

Mikkyō and Psychic Powers: Nakaoka Toshiya

One of the main aspects of the rise of interest in Mikkyō was the popularity of “psychic powers.” Although people often refer to 1974—the year of Uri Geller’s visit to Japan—as the most significant moment in the popularization of this aspect (YOSHIDA 2006), this interest had been gradually increasing in Japanese society long before this.

In 1961, a translation of the American novel *Man from Tomorrow* (1954) by Wilson Tucker was published in Japan. This book is a science fiction novel about Paul Breen, an individual with “extrasensory perception” (ESP), a term coined by American psychologist Joseph Banks Rhine (1895–1980) in 1934 to describe the psychic abilities of human beings. The Japanese version was titled *Chōnōryoku ējento* 超能力エージェント (The Supernatural-Power Agent), and it appears that, from around this time, *chōnōryoku* started to become further

established as a term referring to abilities such as telepathy and psychokinesis.⁸ The spread of the term itself denotes the increasing attention, especially from the mid-1960s, given to psychic powers within the context of popular culture.

At first, these themes became popular among young adults. For instance, an article in the September 1964 issue of the magazine *King of Adventures* (*Bōken-ō* 冒険王) explained the meaning of *chōnōryoku* while introducing the story of Dr. Thompson, a magician who was allegedly able to levitate microphones on stage and summon the spirit of President John F. Kennedy (1917–1963) (MAKI and MAEMURA 1964). Alongside such cases, many SF novels, manga, and animated films started dealing with the themes of telepathy and other psychic abilities. However, the popularity of these topics extended beyond teenage cultures. Soon, books on psychic powers were published for adults as well, offering more detailed “scientific” explanations (HATSUMI 2012, 110–11). Nakaoka Toshiya’s 1971 *Introduction to Telepathy* (*Terepashī nyūmon* テレパシー入門) is a representative example that cannot be overlooked in terms of its impact. Hatsumi Ken’ichi 初見健一, a popular writer and researcher of 1970s children’s culture, asserts as follows:

Perhaps *Introduction to Telepathy*... was the first bestseller on the topic of psychic powers in the history of Japanese publishing. Although it appeared before Uri Geller was even a topic of conversation [in Japan], the book had, in less than a year [after first being published], already been reprinted twelve times.

(HATSUMI 2012, 147)

While referring to Western parapsychology, Nakaoka’s *Introduction to Telepathy* insists that psychic powers can be examined and explained in a scientific way. It also claims that everyone can be a psychic, and that one can develop this ability through training. Although similar motifs have appeared

8. At this point, we can recall the famous Fukurai affair (or “clairvoyance affair,” Senrigan Jiken) that took place in the late Meiji period. There was a sensational controversy surrounding the (self-proclaimed) clairvoyants Mifune Chizuko 御船千鶴子 (1886–1911) and Nagao Ikuko 長尾郁子 (1871–1911), and their supporter Fukurai Tomokichi 福来友吉 (1869–1952). Fukurai was an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Tokyo who believed in the psychic abilities of Mifune and Nagao, and attempted to prove them through experiments. However, while not completely denying the existence of parapsychological abilities, many other scholars were critical of Fukurai’s approach. Eventually, with the deaths of Mifune and Nagao in 1911, Fukurai’s experiments came to an end, leading to Fukurai’s resignation from the university; for more information about the Fukurai affair, see ICHIYANAGI 1994 and TAKASUNA 2012). As can be seen by the Fukurai affair, similar concepts such as clairvoyance, thoughtography, and prophecy had already been discussed. However, the term *chōnōryoku* itself, as a broad concept encompassing these abilities, seems to have gained popularity in the context of popular culture around the 1960s.

in other books,⁹ it was with the publication of *Introduction to Telepathy* that such discourses on psychic powers gained recognition among a wider audience; it is, furthermore, under these circumstances that several works on Mikkyō in connection with the notion of psychic powers were published. For example, Nakaoka himself went on to publish *Introduction to the Psychokinesis of Esoteric Buddhism* (*Mikkyō nenriki nyūmon* 密教念力入門) in 1972.

As an example of an interpretation of Mikkyō by someone not affiliated with any specific religious organization, this section delves into Nakaoka Toshiya's understanding of the term, focusing mainly on his abovementioned work from 1972. Originally named Okamoto Toshio, Nakaoka was born in 1926. In 1942, he moved to Manchuria where he started working at a steel factory the following year. After the end of World War II, he decided not to return to Japan, but remained in China and joined the pro-Communist Eighth Route Army. In 1951, he started working at a broadcasting station as an announcer in Beijing. However, he returned to Japan in 1958 and from 1962, began his career as a writer under the pen name Nakaoka Toshiya (OKAMOTO and TSUJIDŌ 2017, 21–56).

Soon, he became a popular writer of boys' and girls' magazines. The main theme he dealt with was ghost stories and supernatural phenomena he had gathered from articles around the world and his own travels.¹⁰ As an extension of his interest in supernatural phenomena, he became enthused with mystic religious rites. It is also important to point out that he considered himself a nonfiction writer since he only introduced stories that he claimed to have seen or heard. While dealing with supernatural phenomena, he developed a strong interest in psychic powers and related theories such as parapsychology. Thus, he also considered himself a “researcher” of psychic phenomena (OKAMOTO and TSUJIDŌ 2017, 74–76).

It is evident, therefore, that Nakaoka's publication on esoteric Buddhism is part of his exploration into psychic phenomena. His 1972 *Introduction to the Psychokinesis of Esoteric Buddhism* is a sequel to his bestselling work published in the previous year. In the introduction, Nakaoka raises the question of whether or not the supranormal faculties (*jintsūriki* 神通力) spoken of in

9. Similar discourses on psychic powers can be found in several books for an adult audience authored by Hashimoto Ken, including *Introduction to Psychic Abilities: You Too Can Become a Psychic* (HASHIMOTO 1968) and *Introduction to ESP: Easy Methods for Developing Psychic Powers* (HASHIMOTO and MOTOYAMA 1972)

10. At first, he mainly introduced Chinese folklore and ghost stories that he gathered during his stay in China, but soon thereafter he broadened his interests to include other countries such as his native Japan as well as Brazil and other areas of Latin America, where he traveled to collect materials. For more details, see OKAMOTO and TSUJIDŌ (2017, 56–66).

Mikkyō contexts are nonscientific, stating that, with this book, he aims at providing a proper explanation for this (NAKAOKA 1972, 5–7).

To achieve this goal, Nakaoka discusses the principles and rituals of Mikkyō in relation to parapsychology. He employs “Mikkyō” as a broader concept that includes not only Shugendō 修験道, but also Ōdōkyō 黄道教, which is, according to him, a Taoism-derived Chinese “esoteric religion” (*himitsu shūkyō* 秘密宗教). However, Nakaoka primarily focuses on Japanese Shingon: he links the magical abilities of Mikkyō monks with the secular concept of psychic powers, explicitly stating that the supranormal faculties exhibited by esoteric monks are a type of psychic phenomenon.

More specifically, Nakaoka reinterpreted the Buddhist notion of *sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成仏, which emphasizes that even ordinary people can attain Buddhahood in their very body. While highlighting the significance of Mikkyō in contemporary society, Nakaoka expressed his views as follows: “Other Buddhist sects have preached that not every person can become a Buddha because the nature of ordinary people is inherently discriminatory. However, Shingon Mikkyō preaches that even ordinary people can attain Buddhahood in their lifetime if they practice hard (NAKAOKA 1972, 53).”¹¹

Based on this perspective, he drew parallels between this Buddhist teaching of *sokushin jōbutsu* and the contemporary idea that anyone can develop psychic abilities by nurturing their latent talents. Nakaoka directly refers to the founder of Japanese Shingon as a psychic: he emphasizes Kūkai as “the founder of a system dedicated to developing esoteric supernatural powers” (*mikkyō chōnōryoku* 密教超能力), claiming that he “was not only a pioneer” in this area, “but also a remarkable psychic himself” (NAKAOKA 1972, 47). In other words, Nakaoka equated Mikkyō’s ultimate doctrinal goals with the acquisition of psychic powers. For example, he described the supranormal abilities of esoteric monks in terms of the type of psychic skills discussed in parapsychological theories:

The difference in the effects of psychic abilities when utilized by practitioners of esoteric Buddhism and ESP users lies in the variation of the energy used for psychic powers. While many ESP users rely on their innate talent, the distinction arises from the fact that practitioners of esoteric Buddhism consistently cultivate and develop their psychic powers through training and discipline.

(NAKAOKA 1972, 178)

11. Although Nakaoka focuses on Shingon, the Buddhist notion of *sokushin jōbutsu* is not a concept exclusive to this sect. For instance, similar teachings are found in the equally esoteric-inspired Tendai, and in Nichiren Buddhism. See, for instance, NISHIKATA (1983) and KAMEYAMA (2013).

From this perspective, Nakaoka paid attention to the developmental effects of the Mikkyō training system. As one example, he briefly introduced the use of mudras—a series of symbolic hand gestures employed in Buddhism as well as other Indian religious traditions—as one way to cultivate one’s psychic abilities. According to his book, reciting the Heart Sutra (Jp. *Hannya shingyō* 般若心經) while performing symbolic signs would help develop one’s latent skills. In this way, Nakaoka, who played a significant role in popularizing the parapsychological notion of *chōnōryoku*, recontextualised Mikkyō’s supranormal faculties within the framework of psychicism.

“Kiryama Mikkyō” and Popular Trends

Nakaoka’s *Introduction to the Psychokinesis of Esoteric Buddhism* reflects mostly his personal interpretation of Mikkyō. However, it is important to note that similar ideas can also be found in the writings of Kiriyama Seiyū, who a few years later would found Agonshū.

Kiryama was born in Yokohama in 1921. In search of a way to cure his own illness, he explored various shrines and temples but found no satisfaction. In 1954, he established a group named Kannon Jiekai 観音慈恵会, thus beginning his activities as a religious leader. From around this time, he undertook various ascetic practices, including those of Shingon Buddhism and Shugendō, while searching for his own path, eventually founding his own Agonshū group in 1978 (BAFFELLI and READER 2019, 45–51).

However, even before the founding of Agonshū, he had already achieved a certain level of popularity. It was, in fact, with the release in 1971 of his *The Principle of Transformation: Esoteric Buddhism and its Secret Supranormal Powers* (KIRIYAMA 1971) that he began to receive attention. While positioning Mikkyō as not merely a religion but also a great training system based on scientific principles, Kiriyama asserted in this work that anyone could develop their psychic abilities through proper Mikkyō-based training. According to his explanation, only the practices of Mikkyō could influence the depths of the human mind, specifically the “deep subconscious,” and activate the inherent transcendent power within the human body and mind. He claimed that this activation leads to the state of *sokushin jōbutsu*, enabling individuals to become psychics.

Kiryama then published *Esoteric Buddhism: The Secret of Psychic Powers* (KIRIYAMA 1972). In this work, he basically reiterated the ideas found in his previous work, namely that practising esoteric techniques is the most effective way to become a psychic. However, by adopting the apocalyptic perspective popular among the Japanese public at the time (HATSUMI 2012, 22–23), he presented further radical claims. In *Esoteric Buddhism* he asserted that the power of science had already surpassed that of human beings. For instance, he mentions

the infamous insecticide DDT as a cause of serious illness in contemporary society. According to his explanation, DDT harms people's brains and nervous system, causing cancers and other unexplained ailments such as mental problems and bodily pain. Subsequently, he warned that DDT is not the only problem, as there are many other unknown poisonous substances threatening our lives. In other words, due to people's inability to properly address the consequences of scientific progress, as evidenced by numerous instances of disastrous pollution issues, human beings were now in danger (KIRIYAMA 1972, 62–92). Based on this idea, he argued that to survive human extinction, people must evolve into superior beings. For him, psychics formed a superior human species called "Homo excellens" (*chō-hito* 超・ヒト). Normal individuals, or *Homo sapiens*, could evolve into *Homo excellens* through Kiriyaama's recommended training program (KIRIYAMA 1972, 130–90).

In this regard, he paid special attention to yoga practices. In *Esoteric Buddhism*, he offered detailed information about kundalini and chakras, famous yoga-related terms that refer to latent energies embedded in the human body. Using medical knowledge, he explained that yoga practices effectively awaken these latent energies by influencing the autonomic nervous system, helping to cure serious illnesses caused by disruptions of the nervous system. He even claimed that it could lead to changes in one's DNA. As a result, practitioners could attain a state superior to that of normal people, and acquire psychic powers. With this perspective, he attempted to establish a connection between the Shingon Esoteric tradition and yoga, thereby expanding the scope of his Mikkyō theories (KIRIYAMA 1972, 282–346).

Kiriyaama insisted that his theory on Mikkyō, which is a mixture of yoga practices and Shingon Buddhism, is unique and offers better techniques for cultivating abilities compared to traditional Shingon Buddhism. However, it is interesting to note that Yamasaki Taikō, the Shingon priest I focus on in the next section, responded to Kiriyaama's book with an article titled "Is Kiriyaama's Mikkyō Truly Original?" (YAMASAKI 1972b). Here, he pointed out the similarities between Kiriyaama's theories and his own, alluding to the possibility that Kiriyaama may have copied ideas previously presented by him in a 1971 article titled "The Position and Function of Mental Concentration: A Comparison between Mikkyō, yoga, and Modern Medicine":

[Kiriyaama's *Esoteric Buddhism*] quotes from various sources and (a) its main idea lies in the fact that Shingon esoteric Buddhism will only be revived when it accepts yoga, one of its original sources, and (b) its contents are developed within the framework of the triad Mikkyō, yoga, and Medicine.... However, I had already in a previous paper discussed these ideas and framework in detail.

(YAMASAKI 1972b, 2)

Kiriyama was certainly aware of Yamasaki's article, which is in fact briefly mentioned in *Esoteric Buddhism* (KIRIYAMA 1972, 357). However, since he did not clearly mention any influence from Yamasaki's article on his ideas presented in the book, it is uncertain to what extent Kiriyama was directly influenced by it. Regardless of who inspired whom, the similarity of their ideas, despite their different positions, implies their theories were developed within the context of a larger milieu where works connecting Mikkyō and science gained popularity. Furthermore, as mentioned by YAMASAKI (1972b, 3), his and Kiriyama's theories also overlapped in terms of references. For example, they both quote from the famous yoga practitioner and postwar theosophist Miura Sekizō 三浦関造 (1883–1960), and refer to the scholar of Indian religion, Sahoda Tsuruji 佐保田鶴治 (1899–1986) and his yoga theories. This implies the existence of a broader cultural context that was shared beyond the boundaries of “orthodoxy” and “deviancy.” Although it is interesting to see how this manifested in the Japanese archipelago, this was, in fact, not a trend limited to Japan: from the twentieth century, topics such as yoga (and tantra) were reevaluated by scholars of religion such as Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), Heinrich Zimmer (1890–1943), and Joseph Campbell (1904–1987), becoming fashionable in western popular culture especially from the 1960s onward (URBAN 2003, 203). It is, nevertheless, still compelling to see how people such as Kiriyama and Yamasaki, who considered themselves practitioners of a religion traditionally connected to yoga, appropriated and reproduced this trend to non-Western audiences. With that in mind, in the following section, I will examine Yamasaki's ideas.

Reforming “Orthodox” Mikkyō: Yamasaki Taikō

Yamasaki Taikō was born in 1929 in Kobe, Hyōgo Prefecture. He entered Kōyasan University in 1947 and, after graduating in 1952, he continued into the university's postgraduate program. From the 1960s he held various academic positions, including assistant professor at Shingon-affiliated institutions such as Shuchiin—where he became a full professor in 1972—and Kōyasan University. He retired from teaching in 2000, and despite his advanced age, he is still resident priest at Jōkōin 常光院 temple in his hometown of Kobe. During his career, he held important roles in organizations such as the Association of Japanese Esoteric Buddhism (Nihon Mikkyō Gakkai 日本密教学会), Shuchiin University's Research Institute for Materials on Esoteric Buddhism (Mikkyō Shiryō Kenkyūjo 密教資料研究所), and at the International Exchange Center of Kōyasan Shingon (Kōyasan Shingonshū Kokusai Kōryū Sentā 高野山真言宗国際交流センター) (YTR 1998, 7–10). In 1990 he was awarded the prestigious Mikkyō Gakugei Prize 密教学芸賞, and in 1999 rose to the highest rank of Daisōzu 大僧都 in the Kōyasan branch of the Shingon sect—his personal and academic lives

were, therefore, spent most exclusively in the context of what one would call proper Mikkyō orthodoxy.

As I explained in the first section of this article, Mikkyō, and Shingon Buddhism in particular, was long excluded from the mainstream modern discourse on religion in Japan. As early as the late Meiji period, Shingon scholars attempted to react to that, which meant, among other things, a discussion of the “secret” aspect of their doctrines (YAMANO 2000). This process of the “modernization” of Shingon practices continued into the early postwar days (HAN 2021b), and as we can see from the example of Yamasaki, developed further in the context of 1970s Japan. A very active priest, Yamasaki devoted himself to this undertaking, and conducted broad research on Mikkyō in connection to philosophy, psychology, physiology, and other fields, aiming to apply this knowledge to the advancement of a contemporary understanding of esoteric Buddhism. The rediscovery and reinterpretation of the *ajikan* 阿字觀 meditation tradition of Shingon can be considered one of his significant achievements. He has published several works on Mikkyō meditation, some of which have been translated into English, Korean, German, and French.¹²

Despite a prolific career, *Secret Meditation Techniques of Esoteric Buddhism* is one of his most representative books. This book is primarily based on three articles published between 1970 and 1972: “Visiting the Origins of Esoteric Buddhism: Report on Returning Home” (YAMASAKI 1970), “The Position and Function of Mental Concentration: A Comparison between Esoteric Buddhism, yoga, and Modern Medicine” (YAMASAKI 1971), and “Esoteric *ajikan* for Modern Individuals” (YAMASAKI 1972a). It also incorporates previously unpublished content, including the “Structure of Meditation Techniques,” summaries of magazines and lectures, as well as photographs and illustrations. Yamazaki describes the meaning of this work thusly:

Up until now, the faith of lay Shingon believers has mainly focused on, so to speak, other-power belief in [entities such as] Kannon, Fudō [Myōō], and [Kōbō] Daishi. However, considering the present-day rise in the intellectual level and increase in the human-centered desire for self-power (*jirikiteki yokkyū* 自力の欲求), and the growing interest by Westerners in Buddhism as a means of salvation, shouldn't the most urgent matter for contemporary Shingon Buddhism be to go through [its] system of practical methods and, finding those [practices] deemed appropriate, partly open them in modern form, thus

12. For example, his 1981 work *Mikkyō meisō to shinsō shinri* 密教冥想と深層心理 was translated into Korean in 1983. *Shingon: Japanese Esoteric Buddhism* (1988), perhaps the most popular English-language introduction to the topic, is a conflation of his *Mikkyō meisōhō* and *Mikkyō meisō to shinsō shinri*. This book was translated into German in 1990, and into French in 2015.

responding to the demands of people sincere about the true practice of meditation?
(YAMASAKI 1974, 5)

As evident from the quoted passage, he argues that in line with the contemporary public's desire for self improvement, Shingon Buddhism should disclose some of its secret practices to a wider audience. From this standpoint, Yamasaki especially emphasized the abovementioned practice of *ajikan* meditation. According to him, *Ajikan* was only rarely mentioned by traditional Shingon priests before the 1970s (YAMASAKI 1974, 65). However, he aimed at reviving this meditational practice, claiming it was an important method that could lead individuals to the world of harmony symbolized in esoteric mandalas. At the same time, Yamasaki also introduced *ajikan* as a simple yet fundamental practice that even lay beginners could engage in (YAMASAKI 1974, 58–80).

Similar to Kiriyama, Yamasaki also paid much attention to yoga theories and attempted to investigate the relationship between such practices and traditional Shingon Buddhism. For instance, claiming to approach the issue from a medical perspective, he compared the chakras with the points that get activated in the body when one conducts Shingon meditation and enters a stage of perfect concentration. He demonstrated that the position of these energy points largely coincide, and emphasized the profound connection between Mikkyō and yoga (YAMASAKI 1974, 108–35). In other words, he used yoga theories and physiological knowledge to explain the positive effects of Shingon as a self-cultivation system, establishing *ajikan* meditation as one of the most representative practices of his school.

However, he also argued that Shingon practice lacked an intensive physical training system capable of directly influencing the human subconscious, despite the founder Kūkai having preached the importance of the body alongside the mind. To remedy this, Yamasaki suggested that the effectiveness of *ajikan* meditation could be enhanced through the practice of Hatha yoga (YAMASAKI 1974, 136–55). Despite this being a somewhat progressive statement for an orthodox Kōyasan priest, Yamasaki's claims were not as radical as Kiriyama's—that is, he did not go as far as claiming, for instance, that Mikkyō-related practices could endow one with psychic powers.

Additionally, unlike Kiriyama, who actively attempted to merge certain practical elements of Mikkyō and yoga to develop a new system, Yamasaki maintained the framework of Shingon, while using the theories and practices of yoga as auxiliary tools for the modernization of his sectarian tradition. Also, it is important to understand that the relativization of the very *esoteric* aspect of Mikkyō is that which perhaps characterizes its development within the context of modernity: Yamasaki's attempt to reinterpret the *ajikan* tradition as a type of

self-improvement practice available to the wider lay public is yet another significant moment in the post-Meiji development of the Shingon sect.

Conclusion

Whether 1970s Japan indeed saw a type of “Mikkyō boom,” or whether this was closer to a fabrication in the media is a future topic for both sociologists and historians of religion. However, perhaps these two questions cannot ultimately be separated: contemporary publishers were reacting to what was then certainly perceived as a marketable topic. Even if we leave aside the issue of the existence of any “boom,” the examples above still show us that there was substantial concern on the more “practical” side of Mikkyō by the public, an interest that was addressed by individuals with very different backgrounds.

What, ultimately, can the ideas of Nakaoka Toshiya, Kiriya Seiyū, and Yamasaki Taikō teach us about the 1970s “cultic milieu”? First, contrary to Campbell’s claims in his 1972 article, the “worlds of the occult and the magical, of spiritualism and psychic phenomena” do not always belong exclusively to the “cultic milieu.” What we see in the case of 1970s Japanese discourses on “Mikkyō” is in fact a negotiation process where traditional religious currents appropriate what he would deem “cultic” discourses, bringing a shift to orthodoxy itself.

This type of dynamic is, however, no longer overlooked by Campbell. In his more recent “The Cultic Milieu Revisited,” he points out that “[i]t is quite remarkable how many of the beliefs and practices that, in 1972,” he “identified as hallmarks of cultic religious groups are today generally regarded as part of a pluralistic mainstream culture” (CAMPBELL 2015, 18). Despite this self-reflection, however, he still seems to depict things in terms of deviancy versus orthodoxy, and in this sense, it might be particularly complicated to use his ideas to explain the Shingon tradition. How do we apply his model when orthodoxy itself is, by definition, what he would have referred to as “cultic”? At the same time, when we look at the issue from a historical perspective, Campbell might have a point when we consider that it was specifically *because* of its perceived magical characteristics that Shingon became, from the Meiji period, a sort of outcast in the larger context of Japanese Buddhism. In this sense, perhaps the very place of Shingon in the 1970s “cultic milieu” can only be explained diachronically.

This brings us back to the approach suggested by Asprem and Dyrendal, and further, into the second aspect of this conclusion. If we do understand Shingon Mikkyō to have been part of a cultic milieu, this can only be explained through its proscription from the realm of “sound faith” during the Meiji period, and its subsequent struggle during the early Shōwa days to redefine itself in terms of religion and science. In the 1970s, however, it ultimately managed to reenter

the mainstream, with scholars from institutions like Kōyasan University now addressing the same issues as nonbelievers and “deviant” practitioners.

Reading the 1970s Japanese “cultic milieu” as but one chapter of this much larger narrative gives us insight not only into the period in question, but into the formation of what came to constitute, in the context of Japanese Buddhist history, “orthodoxy” itself. In other words, the entangled ideas of Nakaoka, Kiri-yama, and Yamasaki are part of a far more comprehensive narrative that obviously does not end with them but continues into the 1980s and 1990s and then further into the twenty-first century.

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