Bodies in Place: The Transformative Atmospherics of Lightscapes in Mahikari

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Practice centers (dojos) in the Japanese new religion Mahikari are perceived to be spaces suffused with divine light. This article examines this understanding in terms of the enactment of a particular kind of atmosphere – a lightscape – which is deemed to be capable of automatically producing transformative effects. As a key ethnographic example of this idea of atmospheric effects, I consider the case of the primary training course, participation in which is the means of entry into Mahikari. Although the course itself appears to be didactic in design, I suggest that, as an event, a different dynamic is at work, in which the major aim is less about the transmission of information than it is about the elicitation of transformation, a change which is understood to be largely a consequence of the atmospheric conditions in the dojo.

Keywords: Mahikari, atmosphere, transformation, religion, conversion

Introduction

If, as Le Corbusier (1995, 83) famously remarked, a house is a "machine for living," then a Mahikari dojo is a machine for purification. The dojo, in the Japanese new religion, Sūkyō Mahikari, is the main space of training and devotional action (Davis 1980, 1); it is also the most regular and formal setting for the performance of *okiyome* ("purification"), which constitutes Mahikari's main practice. But if the dojo is a site of purifying practice, it is more than a mere material *mise-en-scène*, for it is *itself* credited as a space capable of engendering purifying effects. In this article, I consider the Mahikari dojo in this sense, as an autonomous space of transformation, especially in terms of the particular "atmospheric technics" that it enables and enacts (see Sloterdijk 2016). As we will see, the key feature of Mahikari atmospherics concerns the agency and effects of divine light – the name of the organisation, "Mahikari," after all, does just mean "true light." Not only does the practice of *okiyome*, like the similar practice of *reiki*, involve the radiation of purifying light from the open hand, but the dojo itself is understood to be a space saturated with transformative light. As such, the Mahikari dojo would appear to be a quintessential instance of what Bille and Sørensen have brilliantly christened a "lightscape," that is, a material and social space of luminosity within which "light is practised and inhabited" (Bille and Sørensen 2007, 266). Except, as I shall suggest, the luminous atmosphere of the dojo directs attention to a quality that is less evident in Bille and Sørensen's otherwise illuminating discussion: the notion of light as generative, transformative force.

As an ethnographic study of the climactic conditions which a particular religion enacts, this article can be understood as a minor contribution to the anthropology of atmospheres and affective spaces (Stewart 2011; Navaro-Yashin 2012; Daniels 2015;

Espírito Santo 2019; Ojani 2020). My main ethnographic entryway to elucidating the idea of the dojo as an autonomous, transformative atmosphere will be by means of an analysis of the Mahikari "primary training course" (*shokyū kenshū*), attendance at which allows the participant to become a member of Mahikari. Thus, one can also situate this article within the anthropological province of "learning religion," as Berliner and Sarró (2007) have styled it.

In response to what David Parkin has called the abiding anthropological "assumption that religion just happens to people" (quoted in Berliner and Sarró 2007, 6), Berliner and Sarró argue cogently, to the contrary, that it is people that make religion "happen" through sustained and diverse practices of transmission and pedagogical effort. The point is well taken. But in the case of the Mahikari primary training course, what one often encounters is precisely the assumption that transformation – or, if you will, "religion" – is exactly something that does just *happen to people*, and this is so simply by virtue of their physical presence in the dojo. My analysis will therefore be carried out in the light of this assumption; trained, as it were, on the *assumption of light* that it entails.

From the fact that the only requirement for admission into Mahikari is attendance at the "training course" (*kenshū*, in short), regardless of whether or not one pays attention to the knowledge being communicated, I suggest that Mahikari *kenshū* is conceived as less pedagogical – in terms of the transmission of ideas – than as ontological, in terms of the transformation of persons, and relatedly, that this transition is enacted and consecrated by means of a physical and lateral shift of position, a rotation which correlates with a change of position which is both spiritual and vertical. Such a movement, I will argue, is entirely intelligible within a system in which the personal is deemed to be intimately associated with the cosmological.[1]

The Mahikari Dojo – purity, verticality, laterality

Sūkyō Mahikari ("True Light Supra-Religion") is a Japanese new religious organization, consisting of roughly half a million members, originally founded in Tokyo in 1959 by Okada Kōtama.[2] It ultimately derives from the new religion Ōmoto ("Great Origin"), an influential organization that spawned numerous other groups. As with its antecedent, Mahikari is much concerned with pollution and the effects of spirits on everyday existence. Mahikari's principal means of dealing with these problems is the purificatory technique of *okiyome*, a practice most often performed in pairs, where one person transmits divine light (from the hand) to the body of their partner, and the Mahikari dojo is the main place where this is done.

A Mahikari dojo is typically situated on the top floor of a building, or, in cases where the building is dedicated to the exclusive use of the Mahikari organisation, then the dojo proper will be located on the uppermost floor (see Louveau 2012, 231). There is a good reason for this: elevation is a function of purity, and altitude correlates with spiritual attitude. This is because the dojo acts as a container for a divine object known as a *goshintai* ("*kami* body"). As in Shinto shrines, the *goshintai* is a material support or repository for a divinity (*kami*) (see Grapard 2016, 85-86). It would thus be highly disrespectful to position this object in a place where people could walk above it. One evening at the main dojo in Osaka, noticing that a curtain had been drawn in front of the

goshintai, Suzuki-san, a *dōshi* (minister), explained to me that workmen had been on the roof and so the *goshintai* had temporarily been taken down, since it was not permitted for people to "be above the *kami.*"[3]

In the case of Mahikari, the principal *kami* in question is called *Su*, rendered present in the form of a comma-like mark (*chon*) in the middle of a golden disk, painted on a paper hanging scroll. It is the scroll itself which is the *goshintai*, and it hangs in a shrine against a golden background, brightly lit with electric lights. But the *goshintai* is regarded, in its own right, as a special kind of light-emitting device, since divine light (*mihikari*) is understood to stream down invisibly from the *chon*, saturating the whole dojo. Thus, when Mahikari members typically describe dojos as "bright" and "cheerful" (see McVeigh 1997, 114), they do not merely refer to the brightly-lit interiors of Mahikari dojos; they also implicate what Serres (1995) would call a "metaphorics," a particular affective and conceptual field of forces. As I shall expand on shortly, the metaphorics in this case are configured in terms of the atmospheric effects of luminosity, of luminous absorption and purification. Thus, the Mahikari dojo is said to be a "hot spring of light" (*hikari no onsen*), an "oasis of light" (*hikari no oashisu*) (see Yasaka 1997, 48). To the extent, then, that the dojo operates as a container for a particular kind of purifying atmosphere, it is an atmosphere in large measure understood to be autonomously generated by the physical presence of the *goshintai* itself, although it is important to add that the practice of *okiyome* can also be given to places as well as bodies, and likewise is credited with the capacity to transform atmospheres. Thus, a member of the Mahikari dojo in Akashi (western Japan) explained that she was given to visiting a Shinto shrine to the deity Inari, in order to give *okiyome* to it. Previously it was a "gloomy feeling sort of shrine" (*kurai kanji no jinja*), but with repeated applications of *okiyome* it had "become brighter."

I should note that my account here is by no means the first to treat Mahikari in terms of atmospheres. In what is probably the most well-known study of Mahikari, Winston Davis memorably characterized the dojo as a "hothouse of emotion," a self-contained "affective climate" (1980, 97). But Davis' book is not an account of Mahikari atmospheres as such. Rather, where Sperber (1985) once put forth the idea of an "epidemiology of representations," which would track the ways in which ideas are socially propagated, what Davis offered was more a kind of meteorology of credibility, an attempt to explicate the climactic conditions that would account for the collective production of conviction. In Davis's psycho-social approach, the apparatus of explanation was trained on the epistemic and affective mechanisms by means of which a religious world is generated and sustained. My own approach here is more avowedly anthropological, in that I want to stick to the descriptions of Mahikari members themselves.

Now, I do not disagree that a Mahikari dojo – and, especially, events like *kenshū*, which are held within it – can be understood to create the conditions for a certain kind of receptivity in persons, but I would argue that this receptivity is rather less usefully described or analyzed if it is framed in terms of the inculcation of beliefs. For one thing, such a position takes for granted the very thing that needs to be explained – namely, the

notion of "change" in play in this particular case. Divine light in Mahikari is deemed to be fundamentally transformative, but its effects are, I think, better understood to be ontological rather than epistemic; less a matter of changing minds than of changing persons. As a transformative lightscape, the Mahikari dojo discloses a particular conjunction of the imaginative and the material, an amalgam – in Navaro-Yashin's terms – of the "phantasmatic and the tangible" (2012, 5). As she persuasively argues, the phantasmatic *is* material, and, in the ethnographic case under consideration here, the particular form of phantasmatic atmospheres in Mahikari is *photic*; organized around the notion of the spiritual and material effects of light.

If, as we have so far seen, a vertical principle determines the position of the dojo, so too within the dojo itself, height is a relative indicator of the sacred and an affordance for reverence. The *goshintai*, hanging high up at the far end of the dojo, constitutes the central axis of practice, and as Louveau (2012, 178) notes, "the whole organisation of space revolves around it." Thus, at one of the regular "clean-up" days (*bikabi*) at the small dojo in Akashi, Shōji-san – a male Mahikari practitioner whom I got to know quite well – and I were tasked with wiping down the fluorescent strip lights that ran across the dojo's ceiling. But this necessitated my getting up onto a stepladder, and so passing higher than the light-emitting *chon*, the divine mark which punctuates the *goshintai*. Accordingly, Shōji-san advised that we should make prayers to apologize to the *kami*. Indeed, even the dispensation of cleaning cloths was determined by criteria of verticality and proximity vis-à-vis the *goshintai.* Cloths marked with a red tag were meant only for cleaning above what is called the *goshinzen* (the "space in front of the *kami*"); those with a blue tag for below; and for the space outside the *goshinzen*, green for above, and yellow for below.[4]

In the organization of dojo space, the lateral principle is also important, in addition to the vertical, again, oriented according to the position of the *goshintai*.[5] In praying, as well as in receiving *okiyome*, one faces towards the *goshintai*; in giving *okiyome* one faces away from it. In the latter case, the person receiving light during *okiyome* sits facing the *goshintai*, while the person giving light is required to sit with their back to it. This orientation, I will argue, takes on particular significance when we come to consider the training course. The light-giver takes up this position because divine light radiates from the *chon*, into the light-giver's back, and so out through the palm of their hand.[6] When a number of people are engaged in *okiyome*, the practicing pairs will form up in rows on the *tatami* mats that span the space of the dojo, and care is taken, when moving around this space, not to walk between pairs of *okiyome* practitioners, or otherwise cross sideways, between the light-emitting *goshintai* and the back of a person giving *okiyome*, for to do so is to cut across the invisible light rays.[7]

The direction and radial distribution of divine light is further made evident in the following case. When Shōji-san would insist on giving *okiyome* to me in my apartment, he would take up a particular position on the floor – with his back facing towards the north-east – which, he explained, was in the direction of Suza, the Mahikari main shrine in Takayama, almost two-hundred miles away, in Gifu prefecture. Again, the overall importance of the orientation of the body in Mahikari practice is underlined by Okada Kōya, the then Acting Master of Teachings (*Oshienushisama-odairi*). In a sermon on the

determinations of direction in prayer, he emphasizes how essential it is to establish proper directivity (*hōkōsei*) towards divinities. To pray in the wrong direction is to risk attracting the attention of "false gods and spirits" (*jashin jarei*).

Thus, in orienting oneself in the space of the dojo – as well as in the orientation of dojo-space itself – ritual attention is paid both to verticality and laterality. Where verticality correlates with purity (i.e., the height of the dojo; the correct positioning of the *goshintai*), laterality is identified with purification (that is, the position of the body during the practice of *okiyome*). It would be easy to multiply examples. Indeed, this concern with the vertical and lateral axial dimensions in ritual operates according to something like a fractal principle in Mahikari, since it recapitulates across scales, and is reproduced across different contexts, from the installation of the *goshintai* and the protocols of behavior with respect to it, to the standard operating procedures for handling an object called the *omitama* ("honourable spirit"). This is an object, resembling a small golden locket, that one receives at the end of the Mahikari training course, which enables the capacity for Mahikari members to transmit divine light from the hand. The *omitama* is to be worn on the body at all times, and it comprises a further example of how light in Mahikari is mediated by certain material objects. Indeed, the *omitama* can be interpreted as a kind of portable, wearable version of the *goshintai*, since it is understood to be a miniature transmitter, a conductor of divine light (see McVeigh 1997, 52, 83-84). As a transmitter, the *omitama* has a front (*omote*) and a back (*ura*) and Mahikari members are cautioned not to wear it the wrong way around. Neither should it be allowed to hang below the waist, and for these reasons, it is pinned inside a special pocket sewn into one's underwear. In exceptional circumstances, when the *omitama* must be taken off (for example, when taking a shower or a bath, when swimming or having sex, or when one undergoes an X-ray), it should be carefully deposited in a place – purified in advance by means of *okiyome* – which should be above waist height.

Taken together, then, these correlations disclose a cosmology in which purity and position are cardinal concerns: purity – to invert Mary Douglas' celebrated formulation on pollution (Douglas 1966) – being very much a question of matter in its *right* place. But the significance of position in relation to purity has further cosmological and ontological implications.[8]

As Shōji-san explained to me on a number of occasions, purification is a "cosmic function" (*uchū no hataraki*). As such, human beings have been given only two "methods of purifying" (*kiyomeru hōhō*) their bodies. One is through the dispensation of divine light; the other is through the cleansing that comes with illness and affliction. Mahikari members are able to transmit purifying light because they are equipped with an *omitama*. Since they have been gifted with this ability, they are "able to choose," but non-members of Mahikari cannot. Not possessing an *omitama*, non-members are unable to make a choice in how the cosmic function of purification will affect them. They are confined to a passive position – cosmologically and spiritually "stuck" – since, as Shōji-san put it, they are only capable of "movement sideways", and so they "cannot rise upwards." Mahikari members, on the other hand, are able to purify themselves and so raise their "spiritual level" (*reisō*).

Endowed with powers of ritual intervention, Mahikari members are, in effect, capable of ascension, of vertical movement along an axis of increasing purity. However, any increase is incremental since it is attendant on continual practice, and the accumulation of pollution remains a constant (see Louveau 2012, 196). Equally, even for a Mahikari member, upwards movement is relative. Shōji-san was rather a desperate case in point, since, as he said to me somewhat despairingly, he had taken the primary *kenshū* some seventeen years previously, and had yet to advance to a higher level. Vertical movement in this sense, into the higher levels of membership, is conditional on bringing others into Mahikari by persuading them to take the primary course. Above this, there are two further levels, with corresponding courses: the intermediate (*chūkyū kenshū*), and the advanced courses (*jōkyū kenshū*). For the intermediate course, the entry requirement is that a member brings two people into Mahikari, and for the advanced course, five (see Okada 1993: 118).[9] The advanced course is only held in Japan, but lower levels of *kenshū* regularly take place in Mahikari dojos around the world, with the primary course generally taking place once a month.

The Mahikari Primary Training Course

Admission to Mahikari requires only that one takes the primary *kenshū*, which consists of three days of lectures given by the head of the dojo (*dōjōchō*). The course does not end with any examination; those attending it are not required to show how much of the doctrine they have taken in, as is the case with some of the newer "new religions" in Japan (see Hardacre 1996, 202). In Kōfuku no Kagaku (Science of Happiness), for example, passing an entrance examination was, once upon a time, a prerequisite for membership (Fukui 2004, 134-135),[10] and the neo-Buddhist movement Sōka Gakkai holds exams which test the candidates' knowledge of Nichiren doctrine (McLaughlin 2010, 11). But Mahikari's primary course is distinct from this in that it involves no assessment at all; indeed, the only criterion for passing the course is to attend it. Even if attendees fall asleep during the course, they will still receive the *omitama* at the end of it. This is not to say that nobody pays attention, or that teaching or the transmission of knowledge plays no part. If anything, what is striking about the Mahikari primary course is that it involves the transmission of *too much* information; as Okada Hiroki remarks in a report on a *kenshū* he attended at a dojo in Hiroshima, "It just does not seem possible to understand within the time of the lectures themselves" (1987, 99).

For the duration of the *kenshū*, the dojo is temporarily transformed. What is usually an open expanse of *tatami* mats is laid out with lines of desks, chairs and *zabuton* cushions, all facing the *goshintai*, while the head of the dojo delivers the lectures with the *goshintai* behind him, a positioning which, I want to emphasize, is structurally equivalent to the positions of light-giver and light-receiver. The lectures themselves are delivered at a rapid clip, with no time for questions, and the difficulty in understanding them is chiefly due to their style and substance as a fast, unfolding series of revelations. When I took the course at a dojo in Osaka, the *dōjōchō* often stood at the blackboard, writing out *kanji* in a quick flow of strokes. Then, after a fast-paced, earnest exposition of the concepts on the

board, unfolding the ideas through parables and analogies and little anecdotes, he would swiftly move on to the next topic.

At the beginning of each day, there was an earnest atmosphere, a feeling of serious study as most people sat with pens in hand, listening attentively and taking notes. But as the day wore on, attention spans began to flag, and I noticed some people bent over, asleep at their desks. None of the Mahikari staff or the members of the Youth Corps who were stood around the dojo throughout the lectures, seemed at all concerned by this.

In his own ethnographic report, Okada catches the mood very nicely. At first, he says, everyone tries to concentrate on the lectures, but soon "the words start going over their heads and begin to slip away. Soon, one comes to feel that this discourse stands out only in the midst of a sort of dream" (Okada 1987: 99). Most people, he observes, are not able to take notes quickly enough, and, while the majority appear earnest, some look at the lecturer quite blankly. During the lunch-break, Okada asks an elderly couple how they feel about the course. "This is our first time," the husband replies. "I don't understand it much" (Okada 1987, 100). I had a very similar experience. During a break on the second day, I went outside into the carpark. Two young men were smoking nearby, hardly speaking. But then one said to the other in an exasperated tone, "I'm really sleepy." "It's harsh, isn't it," his friend responded. This little exchange, I think, puts the experience of doing the course in a nutshell. The three days of lectures tax both energy and understanding. Looking back on the lectures, Okada himself reflects that it would be difficult to summarise the substance of the course, and he adds that only certain words and parables are left over in one's memory (1987, 99).

In the abstract, the *dōjōchō* would introduce a particular principle of order – a divine law that governs the functions of the universe – and would instruct us in a right mode of behavior that we ought to follow in accordance with that principle. Commonly, this was taught through stories of transgression and recovery; stories of lives led at first backwards, in opposition to divine principles, in which suffering and ill luck were constant obstacles. But these lives would subsequently straighten out with the turn to Mahikari. We were given many examples of people who had put the divine principles into action, and who had been blessed with health, harmony and prosperity as a consequence. In actuality, however, these laws and lessons were accompanied by frequent excursions into more complex territory: divine etymology, astrophysics, and Buddhist metaphysics. At one point, during a dense discussion of the upper atmosphere,[11] the *dōjōchō* filled the blackboard with scribbled diagrams and *kanji*. Between the blue arc of the ionosphere and the white-chalk earth, a stream of red dashes depicted a flow of high-energy particles. Above and all around, plus and minus signs in various combinations were said to illustrate the charged elements of electrons and mesons.

To consider the lectures as a whole, one could make the broadly Bakhtinian point that the lectures as language were alive with two opposing kinds of force, one centripetal, the other centrifugal (see Bakhtin 1981, 270-272). As an example of the former, a tendency that pulled the discourse together at certain points, giving a certain coherence to the spread of the lectures, were a series of key concepts relating to ethics and the self that are common currency in the Japanese worlds of work and of sport, and are especially

prominent in the new religions (see Rohlen 1974, 194, 207-211; Hardacre 1986, 17-36; Moeran 1989, 55-74; Kondo 1990, 76-109). These concepts are organised according to what Harpham (1987) has christened an "ascetic imperative," in which a moral person is constituted through hard work, through selfless devotion to a practice or a task as a means of perfecting the self. Self-cultivation is a project of "polishing" (*migaku*) the self. In addition, the ethical self radiates "gratitude" (*kansha*) and acts towards others and in all things "sincerely" (*makoto ni*).

At the same time, the sense of the lectures was being unravelled and spun apart by a contrary tendency: by the frequent interpolation of technical languages – from physics, medicine, and Buddhism. As Okada remarks (1987, 99), "special terms, such as scientific terminologies, fly about." In addition to this, there was the lecturer's particular use of word-play: of *kotodama* ("word spirits"), an important conception in Mahikari and other Japanese new religions, according to which words (Japanese words in particular) are vehicles or containers of spiritual truth, whose operations can be revealed by means of occult etymological procedures. In this way, words that would be familiar to the audience were shown – through the substitution of alternative *kanji* or *kana* characters – to mean something often altogether different. To take an example, we were told that the notion of being "obedient" or "receptive" (*sunao*) actually has the spiritual meaning of "being straight with the *kami* Su" (*su-nao*). These recalibrations of language are an intensified and spiritualized form of word play which is, in fact, quite common in Japanese language games – often deployed, for example, in advertising (see Nakabayashi 1993: 64-68) – but their usage in the lectures does nothing to ease their intelligibility.

And yet, I suggest that the analysis of language and doctrinal content will only take us so far in terms of trying to understand the production of effects that the Mahikari *kenshū* as an event is deemed to engender.

To be sure, *kenshū* would appear, at first glance, to be primarily a kind of instruction. It mainly involves, after all, three days of lectures, and we have seen above the sort of schoolroom atmosphere that the dojo takes on: the audience dug in at their desks, taking notes and trying to keep up with the pace of the talks. In her own study of Mahikari, Miyanaga regards *kenshū* as being concerned with "the assimilation of doctrine" (Miyanaga 1983, 132) and it is certainly the case that *kenshū* has a certain kind of didactic function since fully-fledged members of Mahikari are encouraged to take the primary training course again (an activity called *saichōkō*, lit., "re-auditing") – in fact, to retake it as many times as possible. When I took *kenshū*, one Mahikari member advised that I leave gaps in my notebook, for the next time. One comes to understand the divine teachings differently each time, he told me. I estimate that out of around a hundred people who took the course when I did, about thirty were doing *saichōkō*.

But to assume that the primary purpose of Mahikari *kenshū* is the assimilation of information is to overstate the extent to which that information is comprehensible in the first place. From the fact that the primary course involves no examination, and that participants are not even required to pay attention to the contents of the lectures, I argue that *kenshū*, as an event, is not, in the first instance, about the transmission of knowledge. It is not so much doctrinal assimilation as atmospheric absorption that is at issue.

Davis (1980), as we saw above, stressed the importance of atmospherics, where his model of the "hothouse" was designed to show how the Mahikari dojo is characterized by a kind of mesmeric air-conditioning that facilitates the creation of "collective illusions" (1980, 14). *Kenshū*, according to this model, operates within a space of persuasion: the high temperature of affectivity generated during the training course aids in the formation of suggestible subjects (see Davis 1980, 138). But if Davis and Miyanaga differ in their respective analytical emphases, their approaches agree in settling on the question of how Mahikari, as a specific system of beliefs, is made absolutely persuasive. As such, the dojo is less a machine for purification than it is a machine for belief, an engine for the generation of credibility.

What Luhrmann (1989, 6) says of her inquiry into neo-Pagan practitioners in London could well characterise the concerns of these studies: that they aim to investigate the "process that allows people to accept outlandish, apparently irrational beliefs." But in the course of accounting for the machinery of persuasion – at work in events such as *kenshū* – these accounts assume a far-too-rigid architectonics of "belief building," as if the dojo, as ideological apparatus, exerts an almost irresistible force on the subjects that enter inside it. And yet, *kenshū*, and Mahikari practices more generally, are by no means so inexorably compelling. Eileen Barker observed that workshops held by the Unification Church (better known as the Moonies) had a high rate of attendees who did *not* go on to join the church, in spite of taking the courses. "If the social context is so persuasive," Barker asked, "why did they not become Moonies?" (Barker 1984, 144). Similarly, in Mahikari, it has been estimated that only twenty to thirty percent of those who take the primary course subsequently stay in the organization (see Okada 1993, 115; cf. Davis 1980, 229). In other words, joining Mahikari is fairly easy, but to remain as a diligent member is to commit oneself to regime of daily life practice. As Louveau remarks, "If it's easy to raise the hand [in performing *okiyome*], maintaining the effectiveness of the sacred is conditional on rigorous practice" (2012, 196).

Event-effects and the enactment of atmospheres

To configure *kenshū* in terms of the transmission or assimilation of beliefs is, I think, to misrepresent what the event is, in terms of its effects. *Kenshū*, along with the lightscaping operations of the dojo disclose what Don Handelman, in his anthropology of events and event-effects, calls a "logic of organisation" (1998); in other words, a particular way in which an event is said to work. From this perspective, I suggest that the logic of *kenshū* as event corresponds closely to Aristotle's description of the mysteries at Eleusis: that those who underwent them were expected not to learn (*mathein*), but to experience (*pathein*) (Aristotle 1955, 84); it is, in other words, more therapeutic than didactic in design. Okada Hiroki (1987, 100) importantly gestures at this idea when he remarks that *kenshū* seems to be more about "attendance," being in the dojo, than about "learning." That is to say, the training course is something more undergone than attended to.

Thus, the efficacy of the event is not explicitly correlated with a rhetoric of persuasion, nor is it associated with an idea of conversion as the production of conviction (see Harding 1999). Nor are the more cryptic aspects of the discourse intended as an effort

to produce what Fernandez has called "edification by puzzlement" (Fernandez 1986): the generation of perplexity by means of the creative juxtaposition of images, in order to engender deeper insight. I suggest that *kenshū* is none of these things because the forces understood to be operating during the event are not primarily illocutionary. To the extent that the event is held to be transformative, then the medium of transformation in *kenshū* is less linguistic than it is atmospheric; whatever *kenshū*-effects are said to occur are a consequence of the particular ways in which atmospheres are enacted in Mahikari.

At the training course I attended in Osaka, the *dōjōchō* made this quite clear at the very start when he remarked that some of us might begin to feel sick, to have headaches, or diarrhea. We should not be fearful of such experiences, he maintained, since these are the "effects" (*kōka*) of purification. The whole dojo is filled with divine light and we are bathing in it. If your head begins to hurt, or your nose starts to run, he told us, these are not the symptoms of a cold, but rather are proofs that our bodies are becoming purified.

Indeed, Mahikari members come to develop a kind of capacity for "atmospheric attunement" (Stewart 2011), developing a sensitivity to light, becoming receptive to its intensity and to differing distributions of radiation in different places. The light in the Osaka main dojo, according to Shōji-san, was "strong," which made for a "different atmosphere" (*fu'niki ga chigau*). Or again, light from Odairi-sama (the Acting Master of Teachings), radiated at the assembled members during the Grand Purification Ceremony (*ōharaesai*) in Autumn, is said to be "too strong."

As McVeigh has noted (1997, 82-104; see also Okada 1993, 133-134) this spectrum of intensities of light is correlated with orders of verticality, or with the hierarchical cosmopolitical infrastructure within Mahikari. There are relative and tangible differences in the degrees of light distributed through the system. The light within a "large" (*dai*) dojo will be greater than that within a "small" (*shō*) dojo, because the *goshintai* in the former is bigger in size. In the same way, a Mahikari member who has taken the advanced course (*jōkyū kenshū*) will, in principle, be capable of radiating a stronger light than someone who has only taken the primary *kenshū* because their *omitama* is larger. At the highest point in this vertical hierarchy of lightscapes, emitting the largest quantities of light, stands Suza (the Main World Shrine), and the "Master of Teachings," the leader of Mahikari.[12]

Hierarchy and verticality are undoubtedly important themes in Mahikari, as I have mentioned above, but in McVeigh's analysis, the transformative operations and varying intensities of divine light are interpreted in metaphorical terms as a veiled form of ideological projection: "a metaphoric means of establishing a discourse about sociopolitical relations" (McVeigh 1997, 80). Light, in McVeigh's interpretation, becomes a mere epiphenomenon of ideological forces. But light in Mahikari is not merely a metaphor, as McVeigh himself acknowledges. According to Mahikari practitioners, it is "something concrete, felt, sometimes even seen" (McVeigh 1997, 82).[13] This is precisely how light is described, not as something believed in, but as something varying in intensity, tangible, proximate, and intimate. To be present in the dojo is to be "close to the *kami*," a sensibility I have seen enacted in the dojo, where to get nearer to divinity was literally to move one's *zabuton* (cushion) closer to the *goshintai*.[14]

It is this tangible apprehension of light, as a generative force which produces palpable effects, which Bille and Sørensen (2007) miss, in spite of their admirable stress on the sociality and materiality of luminosity. In a different way, examinations of the imagery and effects of light in differing traditions of religious practice have focused on the connection between transformation and the experience of inner illumination (see Eliade 1962; Kapstein 2004) but have likewise failed to treat light as a tactile experience. Light in Mahikari is a presence and experience which is not generally connected with interior radiance, but is instead apprehended as a force which produces transformations that are expressed on a body's surfaces.

In addition – and perhaps contrary to what one might expect, given the ubiquity of light as a theme in Mahikari discourse – few associations are made between ideas of light as a transformative force and "enlightenment" as knowledge. In so far as the divine light emitted from the "*kami* body" (*goshintai*) in the dojo, or from the open hand during *okiyome*, is a means of realizing the truth, then such truth, states a Mahikari text, is not apprehended "conceptually" (*gainen toshite de naku*) but through the body (*hadami de*) – literally, "through the skin."

With this notion that truth is a matter of palpable rather than purely intellectual effects, we can perceive a relation between the realization of truth and the receptivity of bodies that is neither explicitly associated with pedagogics nor with persuasion as a rhetorical expedient for the production of conviction. Rather, truth is more like something which is capable of being corporeally absorbed, something which is admitted into a receptive body.

The determinant circumstances for making the participants of *kenshū* "susceptible to knowing the truth" – as Foucault would call it (2000, 279) – are the climactic conditions of the dojo. *Kenshū* is defined by a metaphorics of immersion, of saturation: the dojo is a "hot spring" or "oasis" of luminosity; for those taking the course, their bodies are bathed in "a shower of light from the *kami*" (Yasaka 1997, 48). The implication of this is that those taking the primary course for the first time are not so much auditors (listening to the lectures) than they are absorbers (becoming saturated with light). They are patients rather than students since the divine light is the agency which permeates and purifies their bodies.

It is when Mahikari members take the course again that they come to participate in a more active sense. But at the beginning, as yet unequipped with an *omitama*, all the attendees have to do is to soak in the atmosphere, to become receptive in the purifying light of the dojo. A Mahikari minister quoted by Okada Hiroki (1987, 100) makes the point very concisely when he says to the audience at the start of the course: "It's alright if you don't understand this now. It is also OK if you fall asleep. It is enough just to have come here to receive the light of the *kamisama*." For those in this patient position, *kenshū* is expected to produce material, corporeal effects (Louveau 2012, 194). Among the "astonishing effects" of taking the course, Yasaka (1997, 48) mentions reports of stiff shoulders, stomach aches and constipation all being cured, while in a similarly hagiographic work on Mahikari, Tebêcis relates the case of an Indian man suffering from severe gastric problems, who had come over to Malaysia from Singapore to take *kenshū*

in English despite the fact that his grasp of English was poor. Following the course, his previously somber demeanor became bright and cheerful. Regarding this remarkable, visible and verifiable transformation ("I met him again," says Tebêcis, "later in Singapore and verified that the changes were stable"), Tebêcis determines that this was brought about by "the spiritual effects of kenshū" rather than "the knowledge conveyed by the lecturer," since the man could hardly have understood what the lecturer was saying (see Tebêcis 1988, 56-57). Even the feeling of becoming drowsy during the lectures is attributed to the effects of *kenshū* (Tebêcis 1988, 55).

Note that these *kenshū*-effects are automatic, concrete and immediate – the atmospheric consequences of being physically present in the dojo. This notion, that mere presence provides the condition for the production of effects, is not limited to Mahikari. Regarding the Rinzai Zen organization, Myōshinji, Borup (2008, 204) remarks – with reference to the Buddhist conception of merit generation – that "when people present at a dharma talk or a sermon do not actually listen to the contents, it is not only because of lack of interest but also because of the logic of gaining merit through mere participation." Similarly, in Mahikari, bodies are deemed to be affected regardless of the person's particular moods, their behavioral dispositions or propositional attitudes. In short, *kenshū* is deemed to produce transformative effects without reference to a subject's intentions or beliefs. All that really matters during *kenshū* is that their bodies are *in place*.

Conclusion

What I have argued above regarding the transformative capacity of atmospheres and event-effects in Mahikari has, I want to propose in closing, important analytical consequences if we want to understand what "conversion" might mean in this particular context: what it does, and what kind of conceptual economy it inhabits and articulates. The transformations – both micro and macro – taking place in and as a result of *kenshū*, if conceptualized as conversions, speak to a concept of change that is not predicated on the acquisition of "true" belief but is instead premised on presence ("being there") and position. This does not mean that attitude or commitment are of no consequence in Mahikari; committing oneself to "practice" (*jissen*) – the giving of *okiyome* and the application of the divine teachings to one's everyday life – is regarded as vital. But what it does indicate is that belief is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for conversions to take place. The premise is that conversions *happen* to persons, whether they believe in them or not.

Following the reception of the *omitama* on the final day of the course, the transition to the new status of Mahikari member is enacted by means of a fundamental and physical shift of position, when the newly ordained person turns around, and is able to give *okiyome* for the first time. Prior to this moment, the *kenshū* participants sit facing the *goshintai*, occupying an equivalent position to the person who receives light (the *jukōsha*) during *okiyome*, while the lecturer stands with his back to the *goshintai*, a posture that corresponds to the person giving light (*sekōsha*). But once endowed with the *omitama* and now empowered with the ability to perform *okiyome*, the new member faces away from the *goshintai*. This rotation of the body is, I suggest, an enactment of conversion in

its literal sense – namely, a "turning," or as Hadot defines it, "a change in orientation" (Hadot 2002, 223). This interpretation finds support in the Mahikari comprehension of the concept of "faith" (*shinkō* in ordinary Japanese). Following the logic of *kotodama*, this term is recalibrated to mean "turning towards the *kami*" (*shinkō* or *kamimuki*). To be sure, on the final day of *kenshū*, with the rotation away from the *goshintai*, it is as if one turns *to* the divinity by turning one's back on it, but the adoption of this position is the demonstration of the ability to give *okiyome*, a *kami*-given power of intervention. Furthermore, as Matsunaga points out, regarding Mahikari, since "back is related to front…as spiritual is to physical" (Matsunaga 2000, 208), we might further infer that this physical turnabout is the performative affirmation of the principle of the pre-eminence of the spiritual, codified in Mahikari according to the maxim of "spirit first, mind follows, body belongs" (*reishu shinjū taizoku*).[15] The spiritual may well come first, but the motions of the body are crucial to the movement of the spirit. As Kondo (1990, 108) notes of more general conceptual associations made in Japan, "Physical action can in fact be perceived as isomorphic with spiritual change."

With the adoption of this new position, Mahikari members are henceforth capable of actively intervening in the world, by purifying others and themselves in turn, thereby raising their own "spiritual levels." Recall Shōji-san's remark to the effect that Mahikari members are capable of elevation, while non-members can only move sideways. Lateral transition in the dojo – the rotation of the body away from the *kami*-body, that makes the giving of *okiyome* possible – is both the precursor and precondition for spiritual improvement, and so vertical movement.

But the initial and underlying conditions for transformation are, in important respects, a consequence of Mahikari atmospherics. Here, transformation, as instantiated in the primary course, conforms with Victor Turner's famous verdict on rites of initiation, that they involve "not a mere acquisition of knowledge, but a change in being" (1967, 102). But perhaps more pertinently, Eliade, in his comparative study of the religious significance and experience of light, concurs with Turner in that spiritual light actuates transformations that are not merely epistemological, but ontological as well (Eliade 1962, 34). "The experience of light," he argued, "radically changes the ontological status of the subject" (1962, 109). For Eliade, the mystical lightscape is internal, a sudden and spontaneous revelation that irradiates the body from within. In Mahikari, to the contrary, light is apprehended as a tangible force that enters the body from outside, which is said to effect changes that are perhaps less radical or ultimately rupturing, but which are, for all that, no less ontological; the immersive, transformative effects of a particular kind of lightscape.

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Notes

[1] This article is based on fifteen months of fieldwork (in 2001-2002) in Sūkyō Mahikari dojos in western Japan, primarily in Osaka and Akashi (Hyōgō prefecture).

[2] Mahikari in fact refers to two organizations: Sūkyō Mahikari and Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyōdan ("Church of the World True Light Civilization"), but both groups are, in essence, the same in terms of their teachings and practices. For overviews, see Matsunaga (2011), Wilkinson (2018).

[3] A similar procedure applies to Shinto shrines. As the priest at Hitomaru Jinja (a.k.a. Kakinomoto Jinja) in Akashi explained to me, when repairs to the roof of the inner sanctuary (*honden*) are carried out, the *kami* is temporarily conveyed to another place (an operation known as *kari sengū*, "temporary shrine transfer"). The operation of moving the "*kami* body" when a Mahikari dojo relocates is known – as it also is in Shinto – as *senza* (lit., "transferring the seat").

[4] Okada (1993, 138) reports a more elaborate classification of cleaning materials during his fieldwork in Mahikari into twenty-eight types. Such a rigorous classification, as he says, is "less practical than it is religious." The division of cleaning cloths according to their use can, however, commonly be seen in other disciplinary contexts, however, such as the "cleaning time" performed by pupils in Japanese schools.

[5] On the organization of the dojo-space in Mahikari in general, see Miyanaga (1983, 95-103); Louveau (2012, 178-183, 231).

[6] Strictly speaking, the light is understood to be channelled into the person via an object called an *omitama*, as I later discuss.

[7] Regarding this code of dojo conduct – of not crossing between *okiyome* partners – Miyanaga (1983, 98) states that it is "strictly prohibited." This was not so in my experience, where it was rather more a prescription than a proscription. In any case, there are those who don't

follow the rules, such as young children. See Reinders (2015, 23) for an example of how children can be oblivious to the logic of practice associated with a "ritual topography."

[8] A comparable cosmological topography has been brilliantly documented by Grapard in the case of Shugendō, where equivalences "between altitude, cleanliness, morality and desire, and salvation" were established on Mount Hiko in Kyushu (Grapard 2016, 136).

[9] McVeigh (1997, 56) has the same information, but in a paper published a few years later, Smith gives figures of five for intermediate, and twenty for advanced *kenshū* (Smith 2002, 160), which suggests that the regulations were subsequently changed.

[10] Entrance exams have since been stopped in Kōfuku no Kagaku, but the group still holds voluntary exams internally, for members to improve themselves by testing their knowledge of doctrine. See Fukui (2004, 141).

[11] An anonymous reviewer asks an excellent question as to whether this disquisition on atmospheres was intended as a reference to the spiritual realm. In truth, the fact that the lecturer explicitly framed his remarks in terms of the ionosphere (*denrisō*), mesons (*chūkanshi*) and photons (*kōshi*) shows the difficult switching or subject-changing nature of the lectures, given that the lecturer's topic just prior to this had been the deleterious effects of spirits.

[12] The gradation of intensities of divine light is determined by the concept of *miizu*, a kind of force-field of prestige accorded to the relative rankings within the system (see Okada 1987, 105; 1993, 133-134; McVeigh 1997, 103-104). It is a term that Mahikari owes to Shinto.

[13] Compare Bernard-Mirtil (1998, 78): "La notion d''énergie spirituelle' ou 'lumière' n'a pas une connotation abstraite ou métaphysique."

[14] As Okada remarks (1993, 133), by giving *okiyome* in the dojo "it is possible to receive intense light because it is the source of light, and closer to the *kami.*"

[15] This Mahikari principle is an adapted and extended rendering of a doctrine of the Japanese new religion, Ōmoto. See Inoue (2003, 187).

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