

THE NICHIREN SHOSHU IN GHANA

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INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Ghana, located in West Africa, is normally associated with three major religious traditions as is most of Africa. These are Traditional Religions, Christianity and Islam. In recent times, however, especially within the last two decades, there has been a steady growth in sects of Oriental origin in the country. The most notable of these are the Sri Sathya Sai: The International Society for Krishna Consciousness, ISKCON (popularly known as the Hare Krishna Movement); The Divine Light Society, (also known as the African Hindu Monastery); Ananda Marga Ghana; and the Nichiren Shoshu among many other. Reinhard Hummel noting this strong presence of the New Religious Movements in Ghana warns Westerners that this is something which "should alert us against overrating the significance of Western shortcomings and Western demand for Oriental spirituality, and against underestimating the significance of the sense of mission newly awakened within the religions of the East as a result of the revival of the last century."¹

The growth of these sects may be attributed to several factors. Though Oriental faiths have only emerged from obscurity in recent years in Ghana, some of them date to the 1960s but have only in recent times been registered on the consciousness of the Nations as 'respectable' options to spirituality with organised schools and sects. In the past, exposure to Oriental religiosity has mainly been associated with India and with magic. As a people who traditionally resort to magico-religious means to attain certain ends in life, psychic powers associated with Indian religiosity held much attraction to Ghanaians, and certain individuals who claimed to have been trained in India and acquired certain mystical powers offered their services to the public especially in the area of psychic healing. In contrast, there is currently an acute awareness of Oriental spirituality through these various sects and their activities not only in terms of immediate soteriological goals but as viable options to comprehensive salvation.

The current presence of Oriental religions within organizational framework of schools, sects and cults may be attributed first and foremost to the vast improvement in international transport and communication which has shrunk the world into what is often dubbed a "global village". Ghanaians travel more frequently now to the original source of these faiths and become acquainted and converted. Moreover, the sense of internationalization that has swept most of these Oriental religions with missionary zeal has engendered concerted effort towards growth world-wide. In Ghana, religious, psychological and social factors have contributed to the growth of these groups. The vast majority of adherents of the Oriental faiths were won over from the Christian fold and this reflects, the fact that the Church may have a problem in serving and satisfying the needs of some of its members. Orthodox Christianity in the form of the missionary established churches has undergone a crises since the post War period due to this problem. In Christianity itself, the situation led to the emergence of Independent African Churches which broke away from the 'Mainline' (missionary established) churches or emerged independent of them. In the last decade in particular, this 'break away' tendency has been stemmed with the tolerance of Charismatic movements within these mainline churches coupled with attempts to open up to African culture through various modes of indigenization. For

some, however, the problem is not simply the lack of Charisma and the need to Africanize the church. There were also certain doctrinal questions which they felt Christianity had failed to answer for them.

The questions raised by most individuals who have now converted to Oriental religious movements are not new questions. The most popular one relates to the problem of suffering and evil in the world. Most of the Oriental faiths in Ghana have their roots in India and answer this question with the doctrine of Karma.² This is regarded as novel by many adherents. What is important, however, is not the explanation it offers for the problems of life, but the stress that the doctrine lays on taking one's life into one's own hand and making it purposeful, aimed at concrete (immediate), and spiritual (ultimate) goals. All is not deferred to the future, and when mentioned, the future is seen as the culminating point of all attainments and not an afterlife attainment. The spiritual potency generated through the purposeful control of one's life through techniques of concentration have their own attractions as well. Such spiritual potency generated also helps the person build up self-confidence which is very important especially within the context of the social anomie from which some of these schools lift their members.

On doctrinal issues, these Oriental New Religious Movement (NRMs) also often argue that their teachings are more in tune with indigenous African religious African beliefs than Christianity. Somehow, similarities are found between such doctrines as 'Reincarnation' and 'Transmigration': destiny and Karma, etc. Oriental notions of soteriology are also another point of attraction for the converts who mostly have a Christian background. The rigid Christian teaching of heaven and hell which is always literally and vividly painted in many a sermon of hell and brimstone, degenerating a Gospel of love and mercy into that of fear of eternal damnation, has had the adverse effect of driving some people away. Hell and brimstone damnation is alien to African traditional thought. Though the Oriental religions do not exclude hell from man's sojourns through Samsara (ie. the rounds of rebirth), the transience of all things and worlds deprives even hell of eternal endurance and gives the hope that suffering is not eternal unless man himself decides to linger on in it. Resolved, man can attain to peace, tranquility, enlightenment and freedom. It is only salvation that is eternal in Oriental spirituality, so ultimately the odds are stacked up in favour of man.

In their lands of origins, some of these Oriental NRMs arose in times of social upheaval and change to provide new values and social structures to cater for the worse affected in society.³ This is not generally the case in Ghana. It is true that social anomie of city life (where most of the movements are located), is a contributory factor to the growth of some of the movements in Ghana. Yet some of them such as the Sri Sathya Sai, Ananda Marga and Transcendental Meditation actually attract the elite in Ghanaian Society. However, most of their adherents blame the Christian churches they previously belonged to for failing to cater for them socially. Clearly, after supplanting the indigenous religions of the people, traditional systems such as ancestral belief which formed the spiritual foundations of social structure and moral life were weakened. Christianity did provide an alternative structure for the first generation of Christians in the form of firm commitment to the faith and sanctions for breaking its values. This, however was not to be the case with subsequent generations 'born' into the faith. Moreover, the Church fossilized within its short span of existence into a stratified structure within which the vast majority of ordinary members who do not belong to its unit organizations such as the Choir, Youth Movements, Women Bible Class, Singing Band, etc. suffered social anomie within the Church. With the lack of pastoral care especially in the cities, the social aspect of the notion of the body of Christ increasingly faded. Set adrift, many people came to anchor their faith in the new movements which have a world wide reputation for the well-being they generate. It is against this general background that we now proceed to look at the Nichiren Shoshu in Ghana.

II. THE BEGINNINGS OF THE NICHIREN SHOSHU IN GHANA

The Nichiren Shoshu in Ghana at its inception was wholly a branch of the Soka Gakkai International (SGI). The SGI is a Buddhist lay movement founded in Japan in 1937. It is affiliated to the Nichiren Shoshu, a Buddhist sect founded in Japan in the 13th century by Nichiren Daishonin. The movement was introduced to Ghana by Mr. Joseph Asomani. Born in 1943, in 1964 Mr. Asomani won a Japan Overseas Cooperation Agency Award to train as a weaving instructor in Japan for a period of six months. While in Japan, he met one Mr. Fujimoto who was later posted to work in Ghana. It was when Mr. Fujimoto came to work in Ghana that he introduced Mr. Asomani to Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism on October 12, 1965. Prior to becoming a Buddhist, Mr. Asomani explains that though born of Christian parents and educated in schools in Christian religious education formed part of the curriculum, "...I was completely indifferent as far as my early religious life is concerned".⁴ He attributed his sudden interest in religion to the delighting effects of the "Mystic Law", the sincerity and commitment of his mentor Mr. Fujimoto and the 'convincing, pragmatic and virtually indisputable' things the latter told him about Buddhism.⁵

Mr. Asomani is credited with the expansion of the Movement in Ghana. In August 1968, he made his first pilgrimage to the Head Temple of the Nichiren Shoshu at Taisekiji and was introduced to the President of the Soka Gakkai International, Dr. Daisaku Ikeda. Encouraged by the offer of Dr. Ikeda to pray for him and the growth of the Nichiren Shoshu in Ghana, he returned to Ghana with renewed zeal. He visited Japan again in 1972 to witness the opening of the *Sho-Hondo*, i.e. the Main Temple at Taisekiji. On this occasion, Dr. Ikeda charged him to work hard so as to become the father of Buddhism in Africa within the coming 30 years, Ghana being the first African Branch of the Nichiren Shoshu.⁶

With such encouragement, Mr. Asomani fostered the growth of the movement in Ghana with the membership placed around 9500 in 1990 and a Headquarters/Temple located in the Capital city of Accra. The Movement in 1990 claimed to have over 50 branches, spread mainly over the southern sector of the Country. Indeed, apart from a handful of members introduced to the Soka Gakkai outside the country, Mr. Asomani may be credited with establishing the chain of transmission that has led to the numerical growth of the Movement in Ghana. He was often offered guidance from the International Headquarters of the Soka Gakkai and for a period of ten years, Mr. Tidashi Minai (now African Secretary of the SGI) was attached to the fledgling movement called the Nichiren Shoshu of Ghana (NSG) from 1974 to 1984 to guide it through its infancy.

The early steady growth of the NSG may be attributed to the dedication of its leadership and members as well as to its organizational structure inherited from the SGI. The basic unit of organization is the Block. Membership is based on a vertical relationship of conversion ties. That is to say a person initially belongs to the Block of the one instrumental in his conversion. A number of Blocks form a Chapter and each Chapter relates directly to the National Headquarters. There is also a parallel organization which is geographically based; starting with districts to Regions which are linked with the National Headquarters. Finally there are peer groups namely, the Men Division, the Women Division and the Youth Division. All these divisions have leaders at the various organizational levels and the Top leadership of the NSG was made out of the General Director, two vice-Directors and the National leaders of the various peer group divisions.

Organization gravitated around the leadership, but involved all members who were encouraged to study the teachings of the faith not simply with the view of acquiring knowledge, but applying that knowledge to their daily lives so as to orientate their lives to the goal of salvation.

The SGI has a Study Department which sets examinations for members at various levels starting from beginners courses to those of Professors. The NSG also runs a Study Department but logistic problems prevented it from presenting candidates annually for the international examination. The two most recent examinations were held in 1985 and 1989.

Members faced a problem of shortage of study material and were encouraged to make do with what they had even if that meant repetitively going over the same material. With regard to this problem the "Rising Sun", a magazine of the Movement was very instrumental in bridging the gap by reproducing the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin and other study material in addition to giving general information about the Nichiren Shoshu and relating the experiences of its members. The paper however also went out of circulation in the early 1980s due to the high cost of its production.

IV. PROSELYTISING METHODS OF THE NSG

Propagation of the Nichiren Shoshu is an obligation on all members and the term used for this is *Shakubuku*.⁷ All members across the world are encouraged to *Shakubuku* as much as possible in the face of all odds and the humiliation of being rebuffed. The method for carrying this out had being well tested by the parent movement, the Soka Gakkai in Japan and their skills are passed on to the international branches.

Robbins, has noted that members of the Nichiren Shoshu are not successful at public proselytizing, so they concentrate on "recruiting primarily from existing social networks".⁸ This assessment is true of Ghana where there are not street campaigns and crusades. The aggressiveness associated with the early Soka Gakkai in Japan is absent as it had long subsided under the guidance of President Ikeda before the movement made its international debut. It was replaced by the quiet use of existing social network.

Generally, therefore, *Shakubuku* is now subtle, gentle as well as effective, following experimental and affectional motifs of conversion.⁹ The established routine is to mainly target friends, family members and work-mates. This makes it more intimate as those involved are in constant touch with each other so that the continuous flow of influence is ensured.

Our research in Ghana in late 1989, revealed the use of these affectional means in conversion as set out below in charts 1 and 2. Chart 1 shows the responses by a sample group of members relating to the question of the person who introduced them to the NSG. Chart 2 shows responses to a question regarding the main target of the *Shakubuku* efforts of members.

CHART 1	
<u>AGENT OF RECRUITMENT : PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS</u>	
Friends	64%
Family	29%
Workmates	12%

CHART 2	
<u>TARGET FOR RECRUITMENT : PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS</u>	
Friends	44%
Workmates	32%
Family	28%
Neighbours	7%
Strangers	4%

Clearly, the Concentration of recruitment efforts on friends is higher than on family (in the extended African sense). The reason for this may be that since most families may be established in a religious tradition (Christianity from the background of members), conflict over the member's own conversion may not augur well for immediate *shakubuku* of other family members. On the other hand, a convert on NSG is not likely to come into conflict with a friend over the issue of conversion. Where an entire nuclear family belonged to NSG it was realised that its head, normally the man must have exerted his authority. There are, however, instances where women attracted their husbands to the NSG after the latter had recognised some positive effects the faith had made on their spouse's lives.

It may, therefore, be said that recruitment patterns are 'affectional' and depend on intimacy with the prospective convert. This is an important factor in the scheme of the SGI because it is acknowledged that a person's attraction to Nichiren Shoshu may not be marked in the beginning by faith and conviction. Indeed, prospective converts are first recruited and invited to give the teachings and practices a trial. Trust in the person who introduced them therefore contributes to their continued practice while at the same time it enables that person through his intimate relationship with the novice to keep an eye on him.

Public meetings of the NSG such as the *Zandaika* (Discussion Meeting) are also to attract new recruits. They are organized so the members bring guests along to learn about the NSG.¹⁰ The membership present is expected to assume postures that encourage invitees to appreciate the NSG. They are required to welcome guests warmly; and during the talk to concentrate all attention on the speaker by "just sitting with a broad smile and your attention focused on the leader or whoever is talking at that point of the program." They must also abstain from asking for personal guidance during such sessions.¹¹ This reveals that an atmosphere is created which may psychologically effect the potential recruit.

Cultural activities such as traditional dance, poetry recital, and drama are also used as public relation tools aimed eventually at offering their teaching to the general public. Major displays were particularly held in the 1970's in some of the major cities of the country.

IV. RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF CONVERTS AND CONVERSION MOTIFS OF ADHERENTS.

The religious background of the majority of NSG members as already intimated is Christian. Of those surveyed in our 1989 research all claimed to be Christians prior to conversion to the Nichiren Shoshu. These belonged mostly to the mainline churches such as the Methodist Church, The Ghana Presbyterian and Evangelical Presbyterian Church rather than to the Independent or the Charismatic Churches. This suggests that the latter are able to hold on to their adherents more than the former probably because they serve the needs of their members. There were also hardly any Muslim converts. Only one person was once a Muslim, but he had converted to Christianity prior to joining the NSG. Moreover, there are very few branches of the Movement in the northern sector of the country where Islam has made considerable impact among some ethnic groups. This may suggest that adherents of Islam do not easily convert to other faiths.

It may also be noted that only four respondents claimed to have changed their religious denomination a number of times prior to joining the Nichiren Shoshu. This indicates that members were not necessarily people who had practically embarked on a spiritual quest and then came to find answers in Nichiren Buddhism.

Three main reasons were given for conversion to the NSG. The major reason given by most respondents (and stressed by letters of testimony in the *Rising Sun*) is a spiritual quest to understand the purpose and goal of life as a whole and not simply find solutions to its existential problems. 52% of respondents stressed this and some went further to register their dissatisfaction with Christianity and its inability to provide answers for their spiritual questions. Others simply stated that the teachings of the Nichiren Shoshu made sense to them.

This may be seen to contradict our assertion above that the majority of members did not embark on a spiritual quest prior to being recruited into the Nichiren Shoshu. In our opinion, however, as converts did not approach the Nichiren Shoshu, but were rather recruited by the Movement, from within the Christian fold, it may be suggested that even if they had spiritual questions they were not stimulated until they came in touch with NSG members who most probably raised such questions polemically for them. This situation also reveals one of the problems of methodology highlighted by Robbins. That is the problem of retroactive accounts by converts because "Such accounts are fundamentally interpretative and are influenced by the respondent's present situations, particularly with respect to involvement in an ideological group in which members learn a new interpretative framework of 'vocabulary of motive' which patterns their accounts."¹²

The second main motive for conversion was the hope of finding solutions to existential and mundane problems such as sickness, hunger, poverty, etc. Thirdly some respondents claimed that they joined initially out of curiosity or were attracted by the neat appearance of membership of the movement.

Having joined the Nichiren Shoshu, all respondents claimed to have found fulfillment in various ways through the power of the Movement's object of worship, known as the *Gohonzon*.¹³ These may be arranged in descending order of importance and subscription as follows; All claimed to have a better understanding of life and this goes for those who claimed they joined initially to solve mundane problems of life. The next most important claim is the attainment of confidence and self-discipline. Many members claim that they had uprooted shyness and inculcated realistic attitudes towards life and proper handling personal problems. Such realistic attitudes towards life involves not blaming others for one's problems (a typical traditional African attitude) and taking seriously the doctrine of Karma. Members also stressed improvement in their human relations. This last claim must not be seen simply in terms of becoming nicer to other people and becoming more tolerant of them. Overcoming these tendencies, which are mentioned frequently in the "*Rising Sun*" reveals that the members have imbibed the fundamental teachings of the Nichiren Shoshu. A move away from what are known as the four evil paths of hell, hunger, anger and animality which affect human relationships is regarded as a positive movement towards the attainment of Buddhahood.

A small percentage of respondents, 4% also claimed that through their practice of the ideal of the Nichiren Shoshu they have overcome the fear of death.

Mundane claims were also made to cures and improvement in health, removal of poverty, career and educational achievement or at least progress in the latter direction. Such claims are however, considered secondary to spiritual claims as the NSG does not present itself as a source of magical and effortless cures for members' maladies. In fact, it is stressed that a member may encounter serious setbacks after joining up. These stumbling blocks to faith are known as *Sanzo Shima*.¹⁴

Steadfastness is required in the face of such problems with an understanding that ultimately they are not uncontrollable and intense chanting of the *Daimoku* would solve them.¹⁵ Senior members also offer guidance, consolation and personal advice with much empathy for those who face such problems. Often, suitable writings of Nichiren Daishonin (known as *Gosho*)

which deal with existential problems of his lifetime followers are used to offer practical advice in such situations. Thus the Nichiren Shoshu while offering solutions to problems at the same time harnesses expectations with the doctrine of Sancho Shima, so that new members do not turn their backs on the faith simply because their expectations are not immediately met.

V. NSG AND GHANAIAN CULTURE

One feature of Buddhism as it spread through Asia was its tolerance of the religious and cultural traditions of the areas to which it spread from India. There is nowhere that this is more evident than Japan and of all Japanese schools of Buddhism, the Nichiren Shoshu may be said to be the most indigenously bred. Yet it is the school considered to be the most intolerant in Japan. Having attained to international following from the efforts of the Soka Gakkai under the direction of Dr. Ikeda, it is of interest to see how it copes with the various cultures it now finds itself in. The SGI, the main avenue for the spread of Nichiren Shoshu stresses that its branches must operate within their own cultures and create avenues for their cultures to express the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin and as the vehicle for expressing its ideals. Dr. Ikeda is cited in the Rising Sun thus:

Different countries have different ideologies, but there is no changing the fact that we are all human beings. Nichiren Buddhism calls for faith in the supreme law and contributing to peace and culture of one's country as well as working compassionately for the benefit of people.

The Nichiren Shoshu Soka Gakkai International is a religious organisation having faith in and practicing and studying the principles of Nichiren Buddhism. The organisation is composed of members who respect the laws, customs and social norms of their respected by people of those countries.¹⁶

In Ghana, the NSG in response to this ideal followed the example of the mother organization in Japan and established a Cultural Department to promote its activities. Cultural festivals were regularly held at its centres of activity including two major National Youth Peace Cultural Festivals held at Kumasi in December 1985 and at the Accra Arts Centre on 16th August 1986. These festivals normally consist of drama, dance and poetry recital. The aim is said to be two fold. First, to deepen the members' understanding of their environment. Preparation for, and performance enable members to identify with each other in a spirit of harmony as well as arouses the truths portrayed within members. Secondly, the festivals are meant to propagate the power of the Gohonzon

Themes portrayed in the cultural displays are aimed at revealing how Nichiren Buddhism can be used to respond to life in general and particularly within the Ghanaian context. Values portrayed deal with truth, joy, sorrow, good fortune, peace, sincerity, courage determination, etc. For example, in dance certain traditional dances are used to portray these values. Dance associated with traditional Ghanaian festivals is used to reflect joy and good fortune; ceremonial dances such as Adowa of the Akan to portray the beauty of life; war dances such as the Kpanlogo of the Western Region and Atsagbekor (of the Anlo) to show courage and confidence; the vigorous Aghadza of the Anlo to reflect the vitality of life and strong determination. Performances therefore do not simply mark an opportunity for merry-making but publicly pro-

mote the positive values portrayed using the media of Ghanaian culture but stressing their essential identity with Nichiren Shoshu values and their full realisation through faith in Nichiren Buddhism.

With regard to beliefs of members, the majority of members have a background of Christian influence though as Ghanaians they may still retain some traditional African beliefs. Certain questions were posed in our questionnaire to determine current belief of members in order to see how much they have imbibed Nichiren Shoshu teaching and moved away from previous beliefs. Given a range of spiritual powers, none of the respondents acknowledged belief in God except one. This shows a clear departure from traditional and Christian belief and is in tune with Buddhist belief. On the other hand, contrary to Christian belief but conforming to traditional belief, a majority of respondents (80%) acknowledged belief in the existence of gods, but stressed that they only believed in Buddhist gods thus disassociating themselves from traditional gods, none of which is counted as Buddhist. 60% of respondents acknowledged belief in ancestors but stressed that they do not believe that they in anyway influence their lives as is the case with traditional belief. Respondents stressed that this is an important point of conflict with traditional belief as it is contrary to the doctrine of Karma. An insignificant number subscribed to belief in witches and dwarfs.

Further, with regard to matters of belief, members felt that African concepts of life death and reincarnation are quite similar to the Buddhist doctrine of transmigration (*Samsara*). Many also stressed strong resemblances between the traditional concepts of cause and effect and destiny, and the doctrine of Karma. The regularity with which this comparisons are made suggests that part of the format of the presentation of Nichiren Buddhist to the membership stresses its affinity with African thought. In spite of this stress on the similarity between African and Buddhist ideas of post-mortem existence, some aspects of African thought linked with afterlife beliefs and reincarnation, such as the traditional power and influence ancestors wield over the living are denied.

That the membership itself also may seek 'inculturation' of Nichiren belief may be found in the rare case of one respondent who made an interesting comment of the Buddhist Ultimate reality and the concept of Ultimate reality among his own ethnic group, the Ewe. Responding to the question: "Do you think there are aspects of traditional Ghanaian culture which are similar to true Buddhism?", this respondent answered:

The concept of Law (*Se* among the Ewe ethnic group) is similar to the concept of *Dharma* (Law). According to a research I made among some traditional priests, the law was there before God. When the Law creates, it entrusts it into the hands of God to look after. In Buddhism, the Law was there without beginning and continues eternally.

The comment is deemed interesting because of the respondent's individual attempt to understand the teachings of Nichiren Shoshu in terms of his own culture. In doing so he found grounds to equate the concept of *dharma* to that of *Se* in Ewe thought. *Se* does mean law and is essentially a term that covers the Ewe understanding of origination, the essence and destiny of beings.

Time does not permit us to delve into details of the conceptual similarities yet greater contextual differences exist between African and Buddhist thought. What can be said here is that there is a clear effort to make Buddhist teaching appealing and acceptable to the Ghanaian by stressing that it is not completely alien to his own traditional beliefs.

With regard to traditional taboos, a majority of members responded that they do not observe personal or family taboos, either because their Christian background had earlier on alienated them from such traditional taboos or because they themselves consider them to be outmoded. Social taboos (such as not working on certain days, whistling at night etc.) are observed (especially in rural communities) for the sake of social conformity and harmony rather than out of fear or belief in the potency of such taboos.

Social conformity also makes members participate in traditional ceremonies like outdoorings, marriage, festivals, funerals etc. In fact as far as rites of passage are concerned, members themselves are unable to hold fully Buddhist rituals due to the absence of priests in the country. Thus, on such occasions they only meet to chant the *Daimoku* in front of *Gohonzon*.

All those surveyed believed that Ghanaian moral ideals especially respect for leaders, character training for the youth, the urge to preserve the prestige of one's family name, friendliness, hospitality, chastity, affinity with nature and respect for the dignity of life etc. were well in tune with Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism.

Generally, it may be said that since the Soka Gakkai is a lay movement, it may be more amenable to the indigenization of its ideals. The assumption is that, were the priesthood involved in the missionary efforts of the movement in various countries, they being conservators of tradition would have resisted such contextualization of the teachings of the founder, Nichiren Daishonin.

In spite of such efforts at culturally identifying Nichiren Shoshu with traditional ideals, many Japanese terms and usages are retained by the Movement and have not been given vernacular or English equivalents. The membership however prefers to retain such terms because they may lose their essence and meaning in translation as well as their universal rhythm. They justify this attitude with the view that it is generally acknowledged that there is linguistic difficulty in having words with exact meaning in different languages and the Oriental thought behind some of the terms lack exact equivalents. These terms can be explained more successfully than replaced. The use of the original terms, it is also argued would enable the original mind of the founder to prevail and preserve international usage. This in any case adds a mystical dimension to them which has its own attractions to the faithful.

VI. CONFLICT AND SCHISM.

During our initial research into the Nichiren Shoshu in Ghana in 1989, the NSG presented a united thriving face but behind this veneer there was much turmoil that was to lead to a schism in the Movement in Ghana.

At the conclusion of the initial research one was inclined to argue that the Movement had a positive future because of the strong will and determination of its members as well as openness and tolerance by the Ghanaian society and political authorities. Contact with members revealed a people who radiated confidence and sincerity about their beliefs and were full of determination and the willingness to spread the faith. These themselves were attitudes that reassured and recommended the faith to potential converts. The movement was also propelled in its determination by the short term aim of playing host to Dr. Daisaku Ikeda (president of the Soka Gakkai), in Ghana. Its main objective according to written responses from Mr. Asomani was to build a harmonious organization and to increase its following to give the International President a befitting welcome.

But there was an even more important long term goal for the Movement in Ghana. This was to fulfil President Ikeda's prediction that the Twenty-First century belongs to Africa. Dr. Ikeda made his prediction about the future of Africa on many occasions. For instance, in July 1989 he

made the predictions to Dr. Christ Wanjala, Chairman of the Kenya Oral Literature Association (KOLA) and in September and July of 1989 to the Nigerian Ambassador to Japan, General Dongo Yaro.¹⁷

As Mr. Asomani explained:

The essence of Sensei's prediction is that, Africa will be the focus of world attention in the 21st century. This is because, the continent is still in its infancy in the era of technological development and free from Major ideological conflicts resulting from major military blocks. Moreover, it is the only continent that has not got any established philosophy. It is therefore a fertile ground for a new type of Philosophies - Nichiren Daishonin Buddhism which teaches about humanism and the need to maintain harmonious balance between mankind and nature, Africa can create a model society. This can serve both as an inspiration to and an example to the already developed societies which are currently experiencing a state in development.¹⁸

Mr. Yukio Yamaguchi also offers the following explanation in the Rising Sun:

Sometime ago, President Ikeda remarked that when we look at the History of African people we see that they have constantly been exploited by Europeans. Africans have never enjoyed fully the fruits of their labour. Therefore when we say that the Twenty-first century is for Africa it means that by that century, Africans would have established their dignity and be living for themselves. In other words, Africans should endeavour to create a society in which they can fully enjoy the fruits of their labour.

Saying the Twenty-first century is for Africa does not mean that whatever be the case the century is for Africans. Rather it is a target which we have to work hard to achieve.

Therefore when President Ikeda says the Twenty-first century belongs to Africa he really means this determination to fight hard to help make the century one for the African people.¹⁹

The Ghana branch claiming to have the largest number of Nichiren Buddhist in Africa and being the first country the movement came to on the Continent considered it her responsibility to make this prediction a reality. Its main plan was to train the Youth Corps to be the vanguard of the movement in Africa since the youth are heirs to the 21st century. Thus the vision of growth was not limited to the country but extended to the entire continent.²⁰

In respect of social acceptability and tolerance by the wider society, Ghana entertains religious freedom and is a country in which religious conflicts are rare. When the NSG started establishing itself in the country they were humorously referred to as "the bees" because of the

humming sound of their chants. Now that Christian charismatic churches and societies make much more unearthly sounds, the sonorous sound of mantra chanting no longer attracts much attention. Moreover, the confidence of members; the fact that they retain their names, manner of dress and good public habits and they pursue a subtle and quiet mode of proselytization gave little room for conflict with the wider society.²¹

One particular factor that enhanced the image of the NSG in the years before schism was public exposure through the news media especially television. Religious programmes previously dominated by Christianity have since the beginning of 1989 opened

up to other faiths with representatives of these faiths being given the opportunity to discuss their faiths and dialogue with people of other faiths on radio and television. One such program was the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation Television programme "Contemplation". Through such public media the awareness of many Ghanaians have been aroused to the teachings of the NSG and other Eastern faiths. Generally, this has dispelled some prejudiced opinions and provided friendly grounds for growth.

In addition, the fact that the movement originated from Japan had its own attractions. The economic might of Japan has elevated her in world opinion and various Japanese products (besides electronic items and automobiles) have come into vogue world-wide. Thus while Japan herself imbibes and buys Western culture, her own culture is gaining currency across the world. For the Nichiren Shoshu in Ghana this must have been and may remain an advantage in attracting new members. The economic success of Japan has led to a positive appraisal of its culture in recent time, and of the determinants of culture, religion is foremost. In Ghana, Nichiren Buddhism represents Japanese culture and the movement was in a position to benefit from the influence that Japan wields in the world today.

Indeed, evidence of the impact of Nichiren Shoshu in Ghana can be witnessed in the fact that recent times, Buddhism has been listed as the fourth major religion in Ghana in the *Inflight Magazine of the National Career*, Ghana Airways.²²

In spite of the favourable conditions awaiting for the growth of the Movement, internal dissension simmering for some years led to a schism in the Movement in 1990. This led to the formation for the Nichiren Shoshu Soka Gakkai of Ghana (NSSG) as distinct from the Nichiren Shoshu of Ghana (NSG).

For sometime, some leading members of the NSG had been displeased with the leadership of Mr. Asomani (who founded the movement in Ghana) due to several reasons which have not been clearly ascertained and therefore cannot be fully discussed here. But allegations and counter allegations centered mainly on the style of leadership and more importantly on financial matters especially gains to the leader as the NSG was partially dependent of Soka Gakkai International (SGI) for its income. The international office of the Soka Gakkai in Tokyo made several attempts to resolve the problem by inviting the leadership in Ghana to a number of meetings in Tokyo until eventually, Mr. Asomani consented to relinquish the post of Director General to Mr. Sirippi in April 1990 and to assume the position of an advisor to the NSG. The new Director General was to be assisted by four members of the old Executive and together they formed the core of a new leadership.²³

On their return from Tokyo, however, it came to light that the majority of members especially the youth who form the bulk of the movement were not in favour of the change and their reaction led to the closure of the National headquarters and temple (*Kaikuan*). The problem was aggravated by a new law in Ghana, PNDC law 221 which required all religious bodies to register with the National Commission for Culture. The NSG had sought registration and had been granted approval by the Religious Affairs Committee of the Commission. The new leadership however requested that the Commission suspend the application of the NSG until its

internal problems were resolved. A letter dated 7th August, 1990 from the Commission, suspended the activities of the NSG and closed down the main temple at Dansoman, a suburb of Accra, to preserve peace until the dispute was settled. Attempts to settle the dispute bore no fruits and seeing that the situation was irreconcilable the two factions were invited by the Commission to register separately, which they did. The faction under Mr. Asomani maintained the old name of Nichiren Shoshu of Ghana (NSG) while the faction under Mr. Sirippi registered as the Nichiren Shoshu Soka Gakkai, (NSSG).

While the Soka Gakkai International recognised the NSSG, the NSG sought to take advantage of the Nationalist spirit soaring in the country by advancing the argument that the changes made to Tokyo amounted to a colonial attempt to stifle a democratic selection of a leader by Ghanaian members. This is a key accusation of the Asomani faction, that the new leaders were appointed and imposed upon them without consultation. The NSSG on the other hand maintains the while the SGI does not impose leaders on its member countries, leadership is spiritual and has to be approved by the

Headquarters. Mr. Asomani himself was appointed from Tokyo. Though he had contributed to the growth of the NSG, his leadership was in doubt hence the change being affected with the full agreement of Mr. Asomani himself.

It is clear that considering the structure of the SGI the NSG can have no affiliation with the world-wide movement within the recognition of Tokyo. This may lead it to a dead end. It may chose to by-pass the SGI and affiliate directly to the Head temple of the Nichiren Shoshu at Taisekiji. In fact, in recent Advertiser's Announcements placed in the Ghanaian Newspaper, the NSG sought to undermine the legitimacy of the SGI itself by claiming that its leadership including President Ikeda had been excommunicated by the Head Temple.²⁴ However, considering the immense influence of the Soka Gakkai International their arguments hardly made an impact.

Since the problems begun some years ago and even prior to the schism, Ghana slipped from its place of prominence in Africa and Zambia definitely assumed that position. Moreover, since 1984, no priests have visited the NSG to perform the initiation ceremony for new members known as the *Gojukai* ceremony. Neither have *Gohonzons*, the object of worship been sent to new Ghanaian members of the NSG. Thus the NSG may not be able to provide members with the essential religious services and sacraments without links with Tokyo and financial support from them.

On the other hand, the NSSG recognized as the legitimate branch of the SGI in Ghana is faced with the task of building up its membership. This is because in the schism it formed the smaller faction in terms of numbers. In 1990 it claimed a membership of one thousand adherents with nineteen branches compared to NSG's claim to seven thousand members and 40 branches.²⁵ It is however gradually building up its numbers.

Also with the backing of the SGI the NSSG has gained public recognition as the legitimate branch. This is evidenced in the media coverage regarding its activities. In 1991, the Pan African Writers Association made a presentation to Dr. Ikeda which was received on his behalf by the African Secretary of the SGI flanked by the NSSG leadership. The NSSG has also made several book donations to the Ghana Education Service and various tertiary institutions on behalf of the SGI. It is also significant to note that on November 29, 1991 when heads of African Diplomatic Missions in Tokyo presented a certificate of appreciation to Dr. Ikeda for his contribution to humanity and world peace, it was the Ghanaian Ambassador, Mr. J.M.K. Amissah who made the presentation on behalf of his colleagues.

On May 24th, 1993 the keys to the main temple, closed since December 1990 were handed over to the NSSG after the Appeal Court ruled in their favour. Also in August 1993 the NSSG

hosted the West African Conference of the SGI. Thus one can foresee a rebuilding of the Nichiren Shoshu in Ghana under the NSSG with the help of the SGI.

CONCLUSION

The Nichiren Shoshu in Ghana is a case of the successful emergence of New Religious Movements of Oriental origin in Ghana. Its main recruits were Christians of nominal commitment. Yet its message was couched contextually in African traditional terms more than Christian ones. This was probably due to the fundamental difference between Buddhism and Christianity. But the approach was also intended to reach the cultural roots of the converts which many African Christians still hold even though early Christian missionary effort had ignored this cultural roots. Nevertheless, Nichiren Shoshu teachings however retained their distinctive Japanese identity and attractions. The means of proselytizing and organization of the Movement in Ghana also followed the well tested pattern of the SGI, proving the cross-cultural validity of such methods.

However, the Soka Gakkai has been a movement which inspire of levels of democratic principles built a lot of power and influence around its leaders, especially its international president Dr. Daisaku Ikeda. In Ghana there seem to have been a built up of the image and influence of the leader to a lesser degree. The local founder and leader, Mr. Asomani's image was presented in various issues of the "Rising Sun" as the "Black Star" of Africa, the father of African Buddhism. The main problem of strong leadership in New Religious Movements is schism as others may either attempt to assert their spiritual independence or may be attracted to, and desire to attain the lofty heights of leadership themselves.

The schism in Ghana reveals how these forces are inherent in New Religious Movements with the typology of a strong leadership. It also raise for international New Religious Movements, the problem of how to regulate and control the personal standing of the local founders of their branches in various countries.

NOTES

- 1) Reinhart Hummel, 1986 "Contemporary New Religious Movements in the West." in Brockway, A.R. and Rajashekar, J.P. *New Religious Movements and The Churches*, WCC, Geneva, p.21.
- 2) It may be noted that the word Karma having entered Western terminology is well known among Ghanaian literates and accepted as a quaint statement of the age that one reaps what one sows. Most converts to Eastern faiths therefore see the actualization of an accepted yet ignored principle in their lives through conversion.
- 3) For example, many pre-war New Religious Movements in Japan came into prominence in the ashes of the defeat of Japan in the second world war. Fritz Dunerumth, "Religion In Sociological Perspectives." *Contemporary Religion in Japan*, Vol. LX, No. 1-2, 1968; Allen Dator, "The Soka Gakkai: A Socio-Political Interpretation.", *Contemporary Religious in Japan*, Vol. IV, No.3 1965 give a good account of the social circumstances in which the Soka Gakkai, the parent body of the Nichiren Shoshu in Ghana rose to prominence.
- 4) *Rising Sun*, 1979, No. 14, pp.22-24.
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 6) *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 7) Two modes of conversion techniques are recognised in Buddhism, *Shoju* and *Shakubuku*. *Shoju* means to receive a humble convert in a tolerant spirit while *Shakubuku* means to bend and subdue or forcefully urge a person to convert. Hence *Shakubuku* is translated as "forced conversion". The Soka Gakkai in post war Japan was associated with very aggressive proselytizing techniques that put pressure on potential converts.
- 8) Robbins, Thomas 1988 *Cults, Converts and Charisma: The Sociology of New Religious Movements.*, London.
- 9) *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- 10) *Rising Sun*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
- 11) *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 12) Robbins, Thomas., *op. cit.*, p. 14.
- 13) The *Gohonzon* is the writing in the form of a Manadala of the Ultimate Law discovered by Nichiren Daishonin. This Law is the Mantra "Nam Myoho Renge Kyo" (Adoration to the Mystic Law of the Lotus Sutra) known when uttered as the *Daimoku*.
- 14) Three setbacks and four devils (*Sansho Shima*) are said to interfere with faith in the *Gohonzon*. The setbacks are mundane desires, opposition from spouse and children, and persecution by parents and people in social authority. The four devils are sickness, mundane desires,

untimely death of another believer and persecution by political authorities. Such set backs are viewed positively as the ripening of one's bad karma ahead of time in a greatly attenuated form thus the convert must remain steadfast.

15) For a definition of **Daimoku** see note 14 above.

16) **Rising Sun**, April 1978, p. 52.

17) cf **SGI Newsletter**, July 1989.

18) This was contained in a written response received from Mr. Asomani dated 11th February, 1990.

19) **Rising Sun**, August/September 1978, p. 25.

20) An African Leaders Conference was held in Ghana from December 1987 to January 1988 to discuss Dr. Ikeda's prediction and efforts African members should make towards its realization.

21) This is important as most people find the Hari Krishna Movement outwardly unattractive because of the Indian **doti** the men wear, their hair style, the Indian names converts have assume, etc. all of which seem to demand a complete cultural re-orientation.

22) cf. **Akwaaba, Inflight Magazine**, Ghana Airways, Autumn/Winter, 1992, p. 30

23) Mr. Sirippi died in 1992 and Mr. Bobson Godonu assumed the leadership of the Movement.

24) The latest of such advertisement appeared in **The Mirror**, Saturday, August 7, 1993, p. 7.

25) These figures are based on information submitted by both groups to the National Commission For Culture.