Summary of Dissertation

Soka Gakkai in Cuba:

Glocalization Modes and Religious Conversion Processes in a Japanese Religion

By

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Summary of Dissertation

Sōka Gakkai (創価学会, "Value Creation Society") is a religious organization

that was founded in Japan by Makiguchi Tsunesaburō (牧口常三郎) (1871-1944) in the

1930s. Starting as a lay movement inside the Buddhist sect Nichiren Shōshū (日蓮正宗),

Sōka Gakkai draws its doctrines and rituals on the religious thought of 13th century

Japanese priest Nichiren (日蓮), the founder of the Buddhist school that bears his name.

After WWII, Sōka Gakkai emerged as Japan's largest new religious movement under its

second president Toda Jōsei (戸田城聖) (1900-58) and began its global expansion since

the 1960s through its international arm Soka Gakkai International (SGI), founded by its

third president Ikeda Daisaku (池田大作) (1928-). Presently, SGI has spread into more

than 190 countries and claims a world following of 12 million individuals.

Alongside the propagation of its views on Nichiren Buddhism, Sōka Gakkai

carries out activities related to the promotion of values which foster peace, culture and

education. Registered as an NGO in the UN, SGI has supported several social and

environmental projects. It has founded some research institutes and has its own

educational system, which includes Soka University in Tokyo and Soka University of

America. Under the rubric of academic and cultural exchange, SGI-affiliates like Soka

University and the Min-On Concert Association have respectively brought international

students and artists to study and perform in Japan.

SGI found an organizational foothold in Cuba after the official visit of Daisaku

Ikeda in 1996. Starting from two small groups in Havana, the Soka Gakkai of the

Republic of Cuba (hereinafter, SGRC) attained juridical recognition in 2007, spreading throughout most provinces of the country and currently reaching a membership of 500 individuals and more sympathizers. None of them is of Japanese descent. Twice a day, Cuban adherents chant in front of their home Buddhist altar. They participate regularly in monthly group meetings to pray and to study Buddhist teachings. They appear quite committed to their organization and show great enthusiasm in doing *kōsen rūfu* (広宣流布, "wide proclamation")—or, in their own terms, the propagation of the "true Buddhism" to achieve happiness and world peace.

Background, Problem Statement and Objectives of the Study

Previous research on SGRC (Aguilar, 2007; Jiménez et al., 2005) associates the introduction of SGI into the Cuban religious field with the convergence of macro-level factors, such as the socio-economic crisis that impacted the country after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the diffusion of new religious modalities which have entered the local religious field, alongside the national religious resurgence taking place since the 1990s. My early exploratory study (Rodriguez Plasencia, 2011b) identified basic elements of some initial conversion motives among Cuban adherents, their experiences with the Buddhist practice and the persistence of their previous religious views. However, the question of *why Cubans join Sōka Gakkai* still requires a systematic understanding of the plurality of patterns they show, as well as the diverse factors that motivate their religious choice. Furthermore, none of these investigative efforts has clarified *how Cubans appropriate the teachings and*

rituals and further commit to the new religion. More importantly, these studies have failed to address the institutional dimension of the introduction of Sōka Gakkai to Cuba, that is, the *strategies* that the organization implements to develop in the island.

But the presence of Sōka Gakkai in Cuba cannot be taken as an isolated phenomenon, as attested by both SGI's global spread and the large body of research conducted on different aspects of the organization in most continents. Not surprisingly, references to SGI are to be found in the work of theorists who focus on the relation between religion and cultural globalization (Beckford, 2003; Beyer, 1994, 2006; Robertson, 1992). However, few studies have approached SGI from the globalization perspective.

Moreover, Sōka Gakkai's global spread occurs alongside the expansion of Japanese religions abroad, several of which have to varied degrees established overseas missions, while some Japanese religious elements like Zen meditation have even achieved considerable popularization abroad (see, for example, Clarke, 2000; Inoue, 1985; Nakamaki, 1986, 1990, 2003; Shimazono, 1991). For some observers, Japanese religions overseas can be regarded as an instance of "reverse" globalization (Clarke, 2000a), a view that questions assumptions of globalization as a unidirectional process of Westernization (Ritzer, 2000; Wallerstein, 1974). Likewise, this success could also be associated with the increasing diffusion of Asian religions in Europe and North America, which some authors present as evidence of the "Easternization of the West"(C. Campbell, 2007), while others even announce a predominance of this trend in the overall globalization process (Ritzer, 2010).

Whereas this challenges notions of the hegemony of Westernization/Americanization, it still stresses the idea of globalization as homogenization, thereby neglecting the simultaneity of homogenizing and heterogenizing tendencies (Robertson, 1995), as well as the multidirectional interactions involved in the current age of accelerated flows of media, people, finance, technology and ideas (Appadurai, 1990). Through these pervasive interconnections, globalization—which Robertson (1992, p. 8) defines as "the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole"—stimulates the formation of new interpretations, adaptations and the construction of new identities, processes referred to with different focus as "creolization" (Hannerz, 1987), "glocalization" (Robertson, 1995), or "hybridization" (Nederveen Pieterse, 1995).

In this circumstance, Japanese religions display varied, yet common types of global involvement (Dessì, 2013), which should be taken into account when considering SGI's global presence. In this respect, the general question that occupies my attention here entails placing the development of SGRC in the perspective of the globalization of this Japanese religion, in as much as the patterns observed in the Cuban case may reflect strategies and practices implemented by the organization at the global level.

Yet, the Cuban sociocultural setting presents a combination of several peculiarities that may require the search for specific ways of accommodation. Similar to other Latin American countries, the Cuban religious field has long been shaped by influences (and syncretism) of Roman Catholicism, Spiritism,

Afro-American religions and Protestantism (Ramírez Calzadilla, 1990). Many of the features of the syncretistic, non-institutional Cuban religiosity contrast sharply with the tenets of Sōka Gakkai, especially in the latter's emphasis on study and correct interpretation of Buddhist doctrines, regular observance of individual and collective religious rituals, proselytizing practices and exclusive religious affiliation. Furthermore, unlike several SGI chapters in Latin America, SGI's development in Cuba is not related to the local Japanese community, which implies that generally Cuban converts are not familiar with the particularistic Japanese religio-cultural elements contained in the new religion. In addition, SGI's mission to Cuba would also need acknowledging the ideological forces that inform the political life of the country, especially after the Socialist Revolution that triumphed in 1959, and which are largely responsible for the island's peculiar relations with the world.

In this manner, SGI's efforts to come to terms with Cuban particularism necessarily entail a process of glocalization, by which the message and identity that this Japanese religion seeks to globalize are negotiated with reference to the features of the local setting. The *general research question* of this study is, therefore, *how does Sōka Gakkai achieve its glocalization in Cuba?* This question entails looking at both the organization's strategies of glocalization and the process by which Cuban individuals convert to SGI. Hence, the *specific research questions* that this dissertation seeks to investigate are: *What are the main glocalization modes that Sōka Gakkai implements in Cuba? Why do Cubans join Sōka Gakkai? How does the religious conversion process occur in Cuban adherents?*

To address these questions, I seek to accomplish the following *research objectives*:

1)   Identify, describe and explain the main glocalization modes of Sōka Gakkai in Cuba.

2)   Identify, describe and explain affiliation patterns in Sōka Gakkai in Cuba.

3)   Describe and explain the passage from affiliation to conversion level in Sōka Gakkai in Cuba.

The Project

Despite its recent introduction and full non-Japanese constituency in Cuba, Sōka Gakkai has attracted a modest yet significant following, which makes it currently the largest 'Eastern' religious movement in the Caribbean island. Although Sōka Gakkai is still a minority religion in the local religious field, the *significance of the study* of the Cuban case lies in the understanding it may offer on the ways in which this Japanese religion develops in new environments in which the religious culture considerably differs from the original Japanese context. Sōka Gakkai is one of the Japanese religions with the largest following abroad. It is also the largest Buddhist organization in most non-Asian countries. In this respect, shedding light on the process of religious conversion becomes a key issue when accounting for affiliation and commitment to Sōka Gakkai and Buddhism in general, not only in the changing Cuban religious scene, but also in the many countries where SGI is developing. At the general level, religious adaptations and conversion processes are

increasingly relevant in the current dynamics of globalization, in which religious landscapes experience new configurations, as religions find new locations beyond their traditional enclaves and as more individuals in the receiving societies turn to new religious options.

With reference to the Latin American context, the study may provide further insights into the glocalization of Japanese religions in this socio-cultural setting, particularly in the interactions with the syncretic, pluralistic Latin American religiosity. More specifically, given the influence of atheism and secularism in the Cuban spiritual field, which is exceptional in Latin America, the study of the Cuban case may elucidate unique aspects of the glocalization of Sōka Gakkai and Japanese religions in the region. The study can also be relevant for the understanding of the interaction between SGI and secularizing discourses which prevail in global society (cf. Beyer, 1994), especially in terms of the concrete modes in which Japanese religions negotiate their religious identity in their repositioning with dominant global subsystems (see Dessì, 2013). Regarding individual religious change, the Cuban case may offer additional material on conversion from non-religious backgrounds, which can be significant for further comparisons with societies that have population segments identified with non-religious and atheist worldviews, particularly in (Western) Europe and North America.

But besides the intricacy of the globalization process, the scientific study of religious conversion requires approaching this phenomenon as a dynamic, multi-factorial process of individual religious change (Rambo, 1993). It also poses the methodological challenge of attempting to understand such a complex process based on the converts' accounts of their subjective "experience" (Beckford, 1978; Warburg,

2008), the interpretation of which may often be limited by the (non-) religious background of the researcher (see Bourdieu, 1987). Rather than assuming a theological position, I am inclined to approach these issues with the lenses of "methodological agnosticism" (McCutcheon, 1999; Smart, 1973; cf. Berger, 1967), which, while acknowledging the limitations of (social) scientific investigation in addressing the supernatural or metaempirical referent of religious truth claims, invites to direct the attention to the sociocultural dimension of religion.

I became acquainted with Sōka Gakkai in 2001 while studying at Soka University (Japan) for 10 months, thanks to a scholarship granted by the latter in the frame of an undergraduate exchange program with Havana University. From January to September 2011, I conducted qualitative fieldwork in the Cuban chapter, part of which resulted in an ethnography for my Master's thesis in Anthropology at Havana University (submitted in September 2011). As a continuation, my early typology of initial conversion patterns is expanded and explained here. Moreover, the present study offers the first explanation of the mechanism of conversion to SGRC, and examines the role of the organization's glocalization strategies. This dissertation also contributes to further integrating the perspective of cultural globalization and religious conversion theory, through a fresh combination of the conversion careers approach (Gooren, 2006b, 2007, 2010) and the model of the global field (Robertson, 1992), as specifically adapted to globalizing religious movements (Warburg, 2005).

As the findings and discussion in this dissertation suggest, the glocalization of Sōka Gakkai in Cuba entails complex interactions with diverse aspects of Cuban society, as well as different forces in the global scene. Sōka Gakkai achieves this by supplying simultaneously a utilitarian religious perspective, a non-theistic humanistic philosophy and an "Oriental" spirituality, which accounts for both continuities with and changes in converts' religious life. Yet, Sōka Gakkai is not merely a globalizing force that shapes the local culture. It also undergoes the relativization of its message and identity and facilitates to some extent the incorporation of Cuba into global flows, which in turn may add legitimation to its global religious involvement. Thus, Sōka Gakkai builds a multi-directional symbolic bridge that connects to local particularism, the "Mystic East", and the world.

Structure of the Thesis

Given the Japanese origin of Sōka Gakkai, I first provide an overview of aspects of the history, doctrine and rituals of the organization (Chapter 2), based on extant research. A review of the theories on cultural globalization and religion, and religious conversion follows in Chapter 3. The presentation of the two bodies of literature covers general aspects of globalization and religious conversion, as well as specific considerations about SGI. In the section of the theoretical framework, I propose a further integration of both theoretical bodies, by combining the global field model with the conversion careers approach. The methodology of the study is presented in Chapter 4, clarifying issues of qualitative research, case study design, research techniques, sampling and ethical considerations that are pertinent to the study.

The findings of the study are presented and discussed in three chapters, according to the three specific research questions indicated above. Chapter 5 first introduces the stages of glocalization of SGI in Cuba. Next, the main glocalization modes identified from the empirical data are described and explained in terms of their form and function, and with reference to the interactions involved in the global field. These are: the hybridization of SGI with the figure of José Martí; the discursive duality of SGI as both a "rational" humanistic philosophy and a practical religion; the appropriation of SGI's Japanese elements through a process of universalization of particularism; and SGI's threefold attitude toward the local religious culture.

The conversion process in SGRC is discussed in the two following chapters. The affiliation level in SGRC is presented in Chapter 6. First, the main affiliation patterns in SGRC are identified and described: the pursuit of practical benefits, spiritual quests, irreligious paths, and the social affiliation pattern. Next, I provide an explanation of these patterns by delving into the diverse factors influencing affiliation to SGRC at the micro, meso, and macro-levels. Chapter 7 deals with the conversion level in SGRC (conversion in the narrow sense of the conversion careers approach). I identify and describe post-affiliation patterns in SGRC, thereby providing a characterization of the conversion level. Through the analysis of the role of rituals, I offer an explanation of pattern reformulation that elucidates the mechanism by which Cuban converts appropriate the doctrines and practices of the new religion. In each level of the conversion process, I take into account the role of the glocalization modes previously discussed.

In the conclusions (Chapter 8), the initial research questions are addressed based on the findings. By considering both glocalization modes and conversion processes, I provide a complex, yet unified thesis that accounts for both the religious continuities and change involved in the case of SGRC. The chapter also points out the contributions and implications for the glocalization of Sōka Gakkai in Cuba, with some reference to Latin America and to the globalization of this religion in general. It also acknowledges the limitations of the research and makes recommendations for further study.

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