



## The pattern of gender in the 'New religion' of Japan

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### Abstract

There is a threefold pattern of gender based on the analysis of worshippers. These patterns can be divided into Sex Complementarity, Sex Polarity, and Sex Unity. The behaviour of each religion is different regarding the place of women in society, which in turn reflects the pattern of women in these Religious groups. So, the purpose of this paper is to identify the dominating pattern of gender in New Religions of Japan, based on the evaluation of the pattern of gender and famous Religions' notions regarding women.

**Keywords:** pattern of gender, sex polarity, religions of Japan

### Introduction

Religious classification of a "New Religion" is not an easy task because it has different characteristics and different social phenomena. From the 1970s onwards, many scholars tried to distinguish the "New religion" and "New-New religions". The followers of "New religions" were poor, sick and came from broken homes. Once they became a follower, they formed a community engaged in the relation to mutual aid. An example includes *Tenrikyo*, *Konkoko*, *Omoto*, *Reiyukai*, *Seicho no Ie*, *Soka Gakkai*, *Sekai Kyuseikyō*, *Rissho Koseikai*, and *Myochikai* <sup>[1]</sup>. The followers of "New-new religions" were related to the common concern, futility (*Menasha*). "New religion" focused on laity while "New-new religion" focused on idealization and placed a high value on the spiritual world. "New-new religions" includes *Shinnoye*, *Sukyo Mahikari*, *Cosmomate*, and *Aum Shinrikyo*, as well as foreign religions such as the Unification Church and Jehovah's Witnesses <sup>[2]</sup>. These Religions not only vary in term of their general tenants but also a term of gender equality and their attitude towards the place of women in society.

### Main Text

#### Gender in "New Religion"

The emergence of a "New Religion" marks a very different religious background, and it is the collection of various groups which are of different sizes. So, the attitude of the different religious groups is different towards women. There are few religious organization that considers men and women equal and rejects sexual differences, another hand, there are also a few religions which consider men and women to be different from each other and these differences are both qualitative and quantitative. There are a few religions, which are termed jako (evil heresies), because of their history of being persecuted and criticized. Few religions are receiving criticism from society, even in now a day. For example, "Unification Church for its fraudulent business practices, Ho No Hana Sanpogyo for swindling people by practising solitary ("foot reading) and Aum Shinrikyo for perpetrating the sarin gas attack in the Tokyo subway" <sup>[3]</sup>. As far as the issue of gender is concerned, it is interesting to note that the mass media deliberately include an element of sexual scandals as their subject of criticism. <sup>[4]</sup>

For example, from the beginning, Tenrikyo was tied to sexual scandals as their subject of criticism. However, the founder of Tenrikyo, Nakayama Miki preached about gender equality. New religious teachings have introduced new and reformed concepts of being men and women so the concept of gender has been changed. General Public did not accept this reformed concept of gender. "Gender in New Religion has constituted an opportunity to question the common perception of gender" <sup>[5]</sup>.

#### Patterns of Gender in Religious Organizations

There is a threefold pattern of gender based on the analysis of worshippers. These patterns can be divided into Sex Complementarity, Sex Polarity, and Sex Unity. Sex complementarity believes that men and women are different, but they are complementary to each other. It rejects the hierarchical order between men and women and believes that they both possess a different quality so they are complementary to each other. When they are together becoming whole as a husband and wife. This pattern gives importance to the household system. They perform different roles, but they are equal and religious organization is spearheaded by the male figure. Sex polarity pattern believes that men and women possess bipolar natures. This pattern believes in a clear distinction between men and women and claims a superior authority of men over women. Such a religious group upholds that "women are defiled" and they are strongly inclined to claim that it is more difficult for women to achieve salvation. This pattern will be valued in an androcentric society while it will be considered as a negative in a society which is governed by the norms of gender equality. Examples of the society where religious polarity patterns prevail are the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and the movement of Osho. The third pattern, that is 'sex unity', is defined as a pattern in which men and women differ on the surface, but on a spiritual level, they are very much the same. Various religious groups fall under this category which gives more importance to the spiritual world. These religious groups did not believe in the marriage, household, or family system, present in this world. That is why, mostly they are unacceptable by many societies, even though they believe in gender equality.

“Dual leadership is the basic characteristic of the ‘New Religious’ movements of Japan. One is an expressive leader, who performs the shamanistic role, and another is an instrumental leader who consolidates the organization.”<sup>[6]</sup> It is common for these groups to accept Buddhism and focus on the importance of the family.

*“Many religious groups try to correct their state of mind, domesticate their teachings, and prioritize first and foremost the harmonization of the household. Further, their worldview holds that by making many households happy, it becomes possible to diffuse and impregnate places such as the working place, regional community, the state, and the world with harmony and peace”. (Terada 2014, 147-48)<sup>[7]</sup>*

Okada Mokichi, the founder of the church of world messianism, advocated for “the discourse of intertwined rights for men and women”, according to which men and women have different qualities, but join hands in supporting a male-centred worldview. Tenrikyo, Reiyukai, Myochikai, and Kankokyo assign different roles to men and women. As far as the gender pattern is concerned, all of these groups fall under the category of Sex Complimentary. On the other hand, many new religions originated from Japan’s religious traditions. Their concept of gender is also influenced by older religious traditions. This religious group believes that men and women are different to each other and spiritual level of women is inferior to their male counterparts. As we can see in the ‘five obstacles’ of Buddhism and the Shinto idea of the keg (defilement)<sup>[8]</sup>. This type of thinking aligns with the Sex Polarity pattern of gender. The category of Sex unity is associated with the reformed concept of gender that is different from the traditional gender category in Japan. However, it is inappropriate to mention the pattern of Sex Unity as a characteristic of New Religion, since many of these religions’ activities are centred on the household, such as the emphasis on ancestral worship and the division of labour by gender.

So, we can see the New Religions are influenced by the concept of ‘misogyny’ and ‘folkways’ of traditional religion. They give importance to the ancestral memorials and the family, and they affirm the gender roles of men and women. In most cases the pattern of gender equality remains between two patterns of gender, that is a pattern of Sex Polarity and a pattern of Sex Complementarity. Rejection in the hierarchy between men and women is an appreciable reform introduced by New Religions. However, even though the teachings reject gender hierarchy, by emphasizing the different qualities between men and women as well as a gendered division of labour, religious groups that possess a substantially androcentric structure and activities continue to flourish. We can also say that although they emphasized for gender equality the notion that men can be saved more than their female counterparts, is deeply entrenched. There are so many cases in that men are considered superior to women and take a leading role. These things can only be described as the Sex Polarity model, not by using the Sex Complementarity model.

### 1. Soka Gakkai and Gender Model

We can easily associate *Soka Gakkai* with the Sex Complementarity model. It is a huge religious movement, and the number of its members is around 8 million

households. This group has its political party, *Komeito*. It originates in 1930, with the establishment of a Nichiren sect movement by Makiguchi Tsunesaburo. This movement was associated with the lay worshippers, known as Soka Kyoiku Gakkai. All of its leaders along with President Makiguchi were imprisoned during World War II on the charges of lese-majeste. Soon after this, the group was disbanded. Toda Josei again reconstructed the group after the War and became the second president. Toda gave a slogan to the group, which is “*shakubuku daikoshin*” (the great shakubuku march). Under this slogan, the movement not only gained attention but also engaged in intense proselytizing. Ikeda became the third president of the movement and he gave a more peaceful path to the movement. Ikeda’s speeches and teachings are published by the official publication of the group, *Seikyo shinbun*.

*“Men have a path of men, women have a path of women. Both parties extend their special characteristics, and when combining forces and helping each other, one is presented with the form of the original human society. I have no desire to object to the social progress of women. On the contrary, I agree with it..... I even think that women will have hegemony in the country and the whole world, and it will bring forth a period of world peace. However, shouldn’t wives persistently fulfil their duties as wives?”*<sup>[9]</sup>

He also says that the “husband is an arrow and the wife is bow”. In Soka Gakkai, men are distinguished by their age (below 40 or above 40) while women are distinguished by their marital status (married or unmarried). Young man’s division is called *danshibu*, and men’s division is called *sonenbu*. The young women’s division is called *joshibu* and the women’s division is called *fujinbu*. Unmarried women, after completing the age of 40, are also called *fujinbu*. The teachings of Soka Gakkai acknowledge the diversity of women and their ways of life and promote gender equality by assuming that men and women possess fundamentally different qualities and roles. So, this group falls under the category of the Sex Complementarity pattern.

Soka Gakkai’s activities are based on the structural division of gender, age, and marriage. It encourages women to proactively participate in its activity. Although it provides women with opportunities and social status, higher leadership is never given to women. Women can serve only in the leading position marked by the female gender, such as the “Head of the Prefectural Women’s Division” and “Head of the Prefectural Young Women’s Division”. In Soka Gakkai, there is a marriage retirement for women. It is believed that women have to perform household duties and if they cannot perform this duty sufficiently, then there will be tension within the household. Ikeda always encouraged women and announced that “the twenty-first century is the century of women” and “I place the importance on the Men’s division and Women’s division equally”.

### 2. Reiyukai and Gender Model

Reiyukai originated in 1920. The leader of this group was Kubo Kakutaro, and the spiritual leader was Kotani Kimi. After some time, this group gave birth few new religious denominations including *Rissho Koseikai*, *Myochikai*, and *Bussho Gonekai*. Its official publication, *Shukyo Nenkan*, claimed in 2015 that this group has about 1.3 million

followers. It is a lay worship based on the 'Lotus Sutra' that includes rituals for the bilateral line of ancestors. This means this group not only follows the patrilineal line but, in this line, both husband and wife are connected. Because of this thing, one might say that this group falls under the category of the Sex Complementarity pattern. As Hibino (2003) claimed that patriarchy in modern Japan is the "total of relations and patterns in which power is distributed to male superiority based on sex, and fixed roles are allocated to its members". Kotani Kimi was the wife of Kubo Kakutaro and 15 years his junior. Kubo Kakutaro was a disciple of Kotani Aki. His brother's marriage was suffering because of poverty and illness. Buddhist practice was carried out because of the order of Kubo to Kimi. Kakutaro and Aki told to Kimi that the "karmic hindrance of (*goshō*) of women is deep", which reveals their androcentric approach. So, they try to reform her as a good wife and wise mother by keeping her in the patriarchy. They forced Kimi to kneel, first, she resisted but later on, she publicly accepted that the men are heads of the household and women assist their husbands as housewives.

It is argued by the Hibino that the starting point of the religious customs and conduct of the Reiyukai is found in the couple's practice of "deferring to one's husband", establishing a gender division of labour whereby women perform feminine behaviour, which allows for the social legitimization of women, and in the strategy of establishing privileges within the patriarchal system<sup>[10]</sup>.

Reiyukai believes in wartime regimes in terms of the gender division of labour and aligns itself with the demands of the state. This thing served as a "bridge building" which introduced drastic and long-term changes into society. In the words of Watanabe (2007, p. 206) "Reiyukai nurtured the exemplary people during the state-controlled wartime era". So, this religious movement emphasized on "self-sacrificing and devoted mothers should bear a loyal and brave child that is useful for the state."<sup>[1]</sup> To be such a mother one has to conquer the "evil disposition of women" and has to manage the household in such a way that it can be useful for the state. So, we can say that "women's ways of being during the wartime was tied to Reiyukai's frame of mind."

<sup>[1]</sup> Due to its belief that "the karmic hindrances of women is deep", the teachings of Reiyukai were completely based on the gender division of labour and create the structure of its organization in such a way where women were supernatural and thus served as a propagator, whereas men followed the principle of law and as such was aligned with the organization<sup>[11]</sup>.

So, it is clear that, although the Reiyukai preached for equality and ancestral veneration of both the husband and wife's families, by pushing the view of "the karmic hindrance of women is deep" they reflect a Sex Polarity construction of gender. It has "extreme alignment" with the state during the wartime era and which persists even today.

### 3. Nippon Kaigi

Nippon Kaigi is famous because of its affiliation with the LDP leaders. After winning the election of LDP leader Shinzo Abe, the president of Nippon Kaigi that it is "one of the great achievements of our movement." About three hundred diet members belong to this group (42% of the whole parliament), so, we can see the group's influence on governmental policies. According to the official website of the Nippon Kaigi, its goals are followed-

- a) The national character of a beautiful tradition for Japan's tomorrow.
- b) A new constitution benefits the new era.
- c) Politics protects the reputation of the country and the lives of the people.
- d) Creating education that fosters a sense of Japaneseness.
- e) Contributing to world peace by strengthening the security of the country.
- f) Friendship with the world is bound by a spirit of coexistence and mutual prosperity.

Moreover, their slogan during the election was take-back Japan. This take-back refers to the Japan of the Showa period, the Japan of the prewar and wartime era. It was a time when the state was considered above the individual and their rights. The constitutional amendment proposed by the LDP for Article 13 of the constitution is notable in this regard. Article 13 says "All of the people shall be respected as individuals" while the proposed constitution was for omitting the word "individual" and used simply 'people'. This will ultimately put the will of the state above the will of individuals. And there will be, in future, the case rejection of basic human rights.

As far as the issue of gender is concerned, the issue comes under the category of human rights. During the wartime era, there was no such a concept of gender equality as it is in modern times. So, based on the proposed constitutional amendment and putting the state's will above the individual's will, which is a reflection of Nippon Kaigi, we can say that the intention of Nippon Kaigi does not seem to be positive for gender equality. Nippon Kaigi is directly related to some gender issues. "They are against the husband wives' selective retaining of their family names for the sake of protecting "family bond" and they are against the sex education"<sup>[1]</sup>. Nippon Kaigi also denies Japan's historical involvement in wartime sexual slavery.

The connection of this problem with Japan's New religions can be understood by three arguments. First is that most of the great force of religion is supporting the Nippon Kaigi, with many organizations involved. Among the forty-seven of its representative officials, 18 are religious officials (38.3%)<sup>[13]</sup>. Second, many founding members of this group were influenced by the New Religion Seicho no Ie. Founder of Seicho no Ie, Taniguchi Mashaharu believes that Japan should return to the Meiji constitution. During wartime, he praised the supremacy of the Japanese people, the belief in the emperor system, and the significance of the Pacific War. He criticized the ideas such as democracy and individualism and others as being imposed by foreigners. He claimed the idea of the *Tensei* (emperor system) and the household system is Japanese in origin and reflects the soul of Japaneseness.<sup>[14]</sup> Finally, the third argument is that they believe that the redefining of gender will be attacked on traditional order and will cause the destruction of the "traditional order" of the family. Scholars claim that Nippon Kaigi and Prime Minister Abe do not use the term "gender equality".<sup>[15]</sup> People even fear that the movements of the groups like Nippon Kaigi will result in the revival of totalitarianism. Japan's new religion plays a major role in Nippon Kaigi (most of the New religions are the result of the Association of Shinto Shrine, which is deeply associated with this movement) which is related to gender.

## Conclusion

The fact is that the New Religion of Japan has many female founders who preach for gender equality and often advocated those notions also, that fall under the category of the reformed concept of gender. But their second generation gave more importance to the traditional values and in doing so, the “concept of reformed gender (was) ebbed.” Its result was that male domination in the group started taking place. Which somehow, eroded the concept of gender equality. Now some scholars share their view that the task of gender reformation is not easy “for New Religion even though they emphasize novelty.” Despite the fact of New Religions’ androcentric view, many female devotees engage in religious activity. As an interviewer asked a woman devotee of Jehovah’s Witness why she joined the group. She answered “Even if rear my children and do housework, nobody compliments me. But when I make progress in my research (doctrinal study) of Jehovah’s Witness everybody praises me.” “You’re remarkable!” “you’re doing great!” “When I work as a housewife I normally have a difficult time studying. However, Jehovah’s Witness came from afar and taught me all kinds of things for free and for that I am grateful.”<sup>[16]</sup> Although the situation in one group is different from the other group many of the women found the purpose of their life by participating zealously in New Religions. We can also say that society is unable to give them a purpose in life. On one side feminism is working towards rejecting the authority and power of the modern gender division of labour, and another side New Religion is trying to spread the concept of motherhood, and housewives through their teachings and practices. As Igeta has rightly pointed that housewives are “those who take the course of intensifying modern power structures and order structures.” One charming aspect of this new religion is that it gives women a place to carry out “activities without destroying modern power structure.”

Many New Religion considers women as inferior to men. In this term, Reiyukai’s logic is notable, which is “once you differ, you benefit”. This means when women differ from men they are benefited. The role of women is of being a housewife and a mother. If they will perform their duties, they will be receiving the honour of the family’s prestige and care of the husband, so the husband will. It will be beneficial for both of them. It will also provide stability to the family and the family will be more prosperous. This strategy of “differ” is not only used by Reiyukai but many New Religions are using this strategy. For example, in Hito No Michi and Seicho no Ie, where the gender roles of women are thoroughly enforced<sup>[17]</sup>

As far as the pattern of gender is concerned, the Sex Polarity of the pattern can cause instability in the family. Because it considers men and women on different poles and recognizes the superiority of men. So, the men will try to suppress the will of women and in doing so they will make an environment of tension within the family which will ultimately lead the instability in the family. Further, which will make the marriage dysfunctional. To avoid such a situation most of the New Religions have adopted the Sex Complementarity model of gender. According to this both wife and husband are complacent with each other. They both possess different qualities and together they both can be complete. The husband will perform his duty by recognizing the importance of the duties of women and so the wife will.

## Keywords

Tenrikyo, Konkokyo, Omoto, Reiyukai, Seicho no Ie, Soka Gakkai, Sekai Kyuseikyō, Rissho Koseikai, Myochikai, Menasha, New religion, New-new religion, Shinnoye, Sukyo Mahikari, Cosmomate, and Aum Shinrikyo, Gender in “New Religion”, Jako, Ho No Hana Sanpogyo, Patterns of Gender in Religious Organizations, Myochikai, Kankokyo, Soka Gakkai and Gender Model, Reiyukai and Gender Model, Nippon Kaigi

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