

***Soka Gakkai in Brazil: Buddhism, Recruitment or Marketing?*, by Suzana R. Coutinho Bornholdt (Ph.D. candidate, Department of Religious Studies, Lancaster University, United Kingdom).**

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Introduction

This paper discusses the articulation between religion and the third sector that goes beyond the provision of certain services to address sectors of society neglected by the state. It is based on a case study done in the Southern part of Brazil with Soka Gakkai International (BSGI; literally International “Society for the Creation of Value”), a lay Buddhist organization of *Nichiren Shoshu* that was founded in Japan in 1930 and is now considered one of the most successful Japanese religious movements – not only in Japan but also in non-Japanese communities overseas, with over 12 million members in 190 countries.

Based on anthropological fieldwork, this essay provides an ethnographically informed approach for understanding how Soka Gakkai creates innovative strategies of interpretation and accommodation in a specific religious field, presenting itself in Brazil primarily as an NGO and not as a religious group. The contradictory way in which BSGI uses the image and practice of an NGO responds to its own necessity: the recruitment and maintenance of membership. This article intends to show the ambiguities of a group that

tries to address some of the necessities of a country plagued by immense social inequalities but, at the same time, uses this process as a marketing strategy and as a plan of action to recruit new members.

Buddhism and Soka Gakkai in Brazil

Soka Gakkai International (SGI), the largest lay Buddhist organization in Japan, began in 1937 as a lay association of *Nichiren Shoshu*, one of several denominations tracing its origins to Nichiren (1222-1282). Although Nichiren Buddhism dates from the thirteenth century, Soka Gakkai is a contemporary religious group. The organization was founded in 1930 by a Japanese educator, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944), as part of a movement to reform Japan's educational system. After the Second World War, Soka Gakkai was reconstituted by Josei Toda, a disciple of Makiguchi who became its second president. Toda began an intense effort to spread *Nishiren Daishonin's* teachings to the lay population through *shakubuku* (literally, "break and subdue"). The current president, Daisaku Ikeda (1928-), succeeded Toda in 1960 as third president of Soka Gakkai. Under his leadership the movement has continued to expand. He began traveling abroad to bring encouragement to members dispersed in small numbers all over the world.

The first SGI district established outside Japan was inaugurated in the city of São Paulo, Brazil, on October 20, 1960. At that time the association had fewer than 150 members, all of them of Japanese ancestry. However, in recent decades, the Brazilian

Soka Gakkai branch has evolved into a Buddhist group with centres in almost every region of Brazil. According to official information from the Soka Gakkai International headquarters, today there are 160,000 Brazilian members, 90 percent of whom are of non-Japanese origin.

In Brazil, the history of Buddhism is mainly related to Asian, particularly Japanese, immigration. With the beginning of Japanese immigration in 1908, Buddhism came to Brazil. Clarke (2001:197) points out that although its presence in Brazil dates to the 1920s, it was not until the 1960s that the Japanese New Religious Movement began to make an impact beyond the boundaries of Japanese immigrant communities. Moreover, it was only in the 1980s, with the immigration of Chinese and Tibetan groups, that the number of different Buddhist groups increased and Buddhism became widespread in Brazilian society.

Buddhism is represented in Brazil by a large range of groups (Shoji 2004), and Soka Gakkai has competed and struggled to maintain its place in the religious “market” not only with other Buddhist groups but also with Protestants, Catholics, Spiritists and Afro-Brazilian religions. Although Gakkai can not be considered a numerically significant religion in Brazil, this group has drawn attention to itself for different reasons. Soka Gakkai has grown very rapidly in the last decades, even in states whose specific social-historic context does not include significant Japanese immigration. With this in mind, it is relevant to reflect about the actual situation of Soka Gakkai and to try to understand the politics it has developed and applied in order to attract new members and

to establish itself in the Brazilian religious market.

Gakkai, the world and Brazil

Since its beginning – and especially under Ikeda’s leadership - Soka Gakkai has struggled to relate its image to the ideal of an international organization committed to social causes. In 1963, the movement was legally recognized in the United States as a non-profit organization – the first Japanese organization ever to receive such recognition outside Japan. Soka Gakkai International (SGI) was organized in 1975, and Ikeda became its president. SGI was registered as a non-governmental organization with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and the Department of Public Information in 1981; additionally, in 1983, it was registered with the UN’s Economic and Social Council. “Ikeda regularly meets with world leaders, including politicians, scientists, and artists, with whom he discusses solutions to world problems. They discuss peace, demilitarization, human rights, the promotion of culture, education and related issues.” (Dobbelaere 1998, 08).

Soka Gakkai uses different strategies in different countries, and its work to spread and legitimize itself presents different characteristics depending on the degree of emphasis given to specific aspects of its activities. In France, for example, SGI established the Victor Hugo Museum in 1991. In the United States, the Soka University inaugurated a branch in Los Angeles in 1987, and founded the Boston Research Center for the 21st Century in 1993. In Brazil, as in other branches around the world, Soka Gakkai tries to create the image of an institution engaged in activities to promote peace,

culture and education based on Buddhism, clearly following the tendencies of national politics.

The rapid growth of the Brazilian branch of Soka Gakkai drew Daisaku Ikeda's attention; as a result, he visited Brazil in 1960 and again in 1966. Although preparations were made for a third visit in 1974, the military dictatorship of the 1960s and 1970s had placed nationwide restrictions on religious groups and movements that attracted public involvement or large crowds. As a result of these policies, Ikeda was denied a visa to enter the country in 1974. This apparent setback provided the impetus for Soka Gakkai to reevaluate how BSGI's image was being presented within Brazil. Until this time, all efforts had been concentrated on the Japanese community and the immigrants established in the country. After this incident, Soka Gakkai started to invest in optimizing its image in the broader community, and promoting its ideals widely within different spheres of Brazilian society as a whole.

Political liberalization and the declining world economy contributed to Brazil's economic and social problems in the early 1980s. Brazil's own economic crisis (e.g., an annual inflation rate of 239% in 1983) led to the mobilization of class organizations and unions, and between 1978 and 1980 huge strikes took place in the industrial sector in major cities. As a response to this social reality, in the early 1980s BSGI began work which has proven successful in contributing to education in Brazil. In addition, in connection with the "Rio 92" worldwide conference on the rainforest and other environmental issues, Soka Gakkai founded the Amazon Ecological Research Centre –

AERC (port. *Centro de Projetos e Estudos Ambientais da Amazônia - CEPEAM*) in Manaus. Both projects, the AERC and the Education Department, may be considered the most important marketing strategies of SGI within Brazil and in the world at large (Pereira 2001). At the same time that these programs promote BSGI on the world stage, they also promote the institution to possible new members inside the country. I will have more to say about each below.

NGOs and their success in Brazil

Scholars attempting to describe non-profit organizations in Brazil have encountered several difficulties. Landim (1997, 332) has pointed out several of these: first, the term “non-profit sector” itself has not yet gained currency in sociological and economic literature; second, research on the topic is rare compared to what has been done in other countries. Beyond its legal definition, the term “non-profit sector” denotes primarily membership organizations, representing a broad variety of forms and activities; in Brazil, the term suggests organized civil society in contrast to the State. Landim groups existing terms in five descriptive categories which are not mutually exclusive: a) civil societies or non-profit organisations; b) associations; c) philanthropic or charitable organizations; d) non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and e) foundations. Although the classification of BSGI as an NGO according to this model may be inaccurate, for analytical purposes I will focus the discussion in this direction based on the fact that BSGI categorizes itself as an NGO.

“NGO” is not a juridical term, and although it has subtle political connotations, it is not linked with any particular political ideology. Rarely used in Brazil until the mid-1980s, the adoption of NGO as a category of self-identification for these new organizations indicates a process of the creation and recent recognition of a common identity (Landim 1988, 62). To the Brazilian context, non-governmental work means strengthening the capacity of the poor to gain access to governmental services to which they are entitled by law, but which in practice not only are insufficient, inadequate or non-existent but also could be done *by* the poor, *with* the poor and *on behalf* of the poor. The roots of this trend are in the “Centers of Popular Education” or “Centers for Consulting and Support to the Popular Movements.” “They were born and flourished at the height of the dictatorship, with their ‘backs to the State’ and ‘under the shadow of the Church.’” (Landim 1997, 339). They grouped together activists with a middle-class background (both religious and non-religious), intellectuals seeking alternatives to academia, and ex-militants from traditional leftist groups.

The more these organizations became secularized, the more they embarked on a process of institutionalization and professionalization, as a result of which many became NGOs. The widely diverse collection of priority issues chosen by recent social movements (women, blacks, the environment, AIDS, street children, etc.) demonstrates the NGOs’ organisational commitment to civil society, social movements, and social transformation. Their association with politics and citizenship makes clear their contrast to philanthropic associations – “and this is taken as a point of honour by the NGOs -

because they do not set out to exercise any type of charitable practice, the idea of which would be contrary to their aim of the construction of autonomy, equality, and participation among popular groups. The values of welfare and charity (*assistencialismo*) are rejected by the NGO community.” (Landim 1997, 340).

BSGI: Brazilian Context and Social Action

The beginning of the 1990s was a starting point for a different mode of conduct led by the Organization. It was clear during my interviews that the process of legitimization of Soka Gakkai in Brazil consisted of an effort to be accepted and recognized. There were no more campaigns of *shakabuku* on streets and neighborhoods, and the Organization was no longer evident in the media. What can be seen today is a well projected and deliberate strategy to conquer public spaces and to emphasize the participation of members.

The term “secular” has been used by different authors (Clarke 2005; Pereira 2001) to describe Soka Gakkai’s actions around the world. But it is necessary to consider that there is today in BSGI (and probably in different branches around the world as well) a dual discourse, part of it focused on presenting the movement to the external public, and part of it a quite different discourse addressed to the members. Externally, the emphasis is not on religious practice, but on activities identified with the secular world, emphasizing

BSGI's effectiveness as an NGO and aiming to create a positive public image. Internally, the organization remains interested in doctrine and in the practice of members. So today, the religious discourse belongs to the member's ambit, while the "secular" face of BSGI as an NGO is more prominent externally.

The social activity of Soka Gakkai in Brazil can be divided into different strategies aimed toward different ends, but all are strongly related to education and ecological issues. The "social face" is given through the Amazon Ecological Research Centre - AERC (port. *Centro de Projetos e Estudos Ambientais do Amazonas*) and the Education Department. The AERC is installed in the city of Manaus, state of Amazonas, and it represents a sector of the BSGI Education Department known as "Environmental Education." The Education Department has invested in two main projects in Brazil: the Makiguchi Project in Action (port. *Projeto Makiguti em Ação*) and the Literacy Poles.

Makiguchi Project in Action

The Makiguchi Project in Action is based on the principles of *Soka Kyoikugaku Taikei* (The System of Value-Creating Pedagogy), a work published in 1930 by Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, the founding president of Soka Gakkai. Makiguchi's thesis places great emphasis on the sensory, emotional, and cognitive development of the student: above all, the student must enjoy school. Participants in the Makiguchi Project in Action are educators who have volunteered their time without financial remuneration. More than five hundred volunteers have participated in the BSGI Education Department

over the years. This division is subdivided into three groups: the Makiguchi in Action Project, the Literacy Department for Youth and Adults, and the Science of Education Research and Development Department.

In 1996 Brazil's Federal Law Number 9394 – called the “Law of Guidelines and Foundation of National Education” - put into place numerous components relevant to the desired quality of education. In its specification of the National Curriculum Parameters (port. *Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais*) by which this law would be implemented, the Ministry of Education encouraged school initiatives in the formulation of educational projects and recognised “the fact that responsibility for the entire educative process rests with all those involved in educating” (Silva 2000). In a country where the responsibility for implementation of educational directives rests primarily with school teachers - who frequently lack support from higher-ups for any changes they do implement - there is a huge demand for innovative approaches both to obtain support and to achieve the desired results in schools. Based on this demand, the BSGI Educators Division decided to apply Tsunesaburo Makiguchi's theory in the Brazilian educational setting. According to the Division, “the program was conceived as a response to the local and regional school needs for education professionals and teaching tools that would give rise to innovative teaching practices, the higher achievement of educational objectives, and the placement of emphasis on student creativity and happiness.” (Silva 2000, 67).

The Portuguese translation of Makiguchi's book “The System of Value-Creating Pedagogy,” published in the country in April 1994, was a remarkable moment for the

people involved with the Education Department. It was in September of the same year that the Makiguchi Project in Action was initiated at Caetano de Campos (a public elementary and junior high school) as the “Spring Programme,” and was offered to second-year students at the elementary level. Among its activities, “the program offered workshops in gardening and arts and crafts (paper flowers, wrapping packages, etc.) for students and parents. The program concluded in December 1994 with an Ecology Luncheon that served vegetables grown by the students. As part of the three-month Spring Programme, students researched the nutritional values of foods. They also wrote and performed a play in which the characters were vegetables. Through these activities, students and their friends learned in a very practical and creative way the importance of diet.” (Silva 2000, 68).

In 1995 the BSGI subdivision “science of education research” devised a plan for the Makiguchi Education Project which would tailor the project “to the unique educational circumstances and needs in Brazil.” The science of education research group joined the Education Department and their participation soared to approximately 1,500 students in 41 classes. By May of 2000, the Makiguchi Project in Action had been offered in the classrooms of 55 municipal and state public schools in the state of São Paulo and one school in Curitiba, in the state of Paraná. Participation up to that time included 1,103 teachers and 34,015 students.

Literacy Poles

Although the nation has achieved greater economic and industrial development in the last twenty years, Brazil still faces a high level of illiteracy. According to the definition provided by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), an individual over fifteen years old who cannot read or write is considered illiterate. The 1996 National Research of Sample in Residences (PNAD), 15.5 million people, or 14.7% of the population, in Brazil meet this definition (Silva 2000). Specialists believe that social exclusion is one of the primary results of illiteracy, which is found more frequently within the elderly segment of the population and in poor and/or urban areas. Another aspect that must be considered in terms of this analysis is that more than one-third of the Brazilian adult population is considered to be functionally illiterate – unable to use reading and writing in daily activities.

After five years of experimentation (1983-1987), the Literacy Department for Youth and Adults was created within the BSGI Education Department. The program consists of 40-hour courses for each fundamental level primary grade, for a total of 160 hours. Initially, the objective was to teach reading and writing to adults who were considered functionally illiterate, aiming to support BSGI members with poor reading skills in their study of Nichiren Buddhism and the proclamations of president Ikeda. As the programme expanded, BSGI started to offer courses equivalent to formal schooling.

Each 40-hour course is organized in one meeting per week, which usually takes place on Saturday morning and lasts for four hours. Students who complete all the lessons are eligible to obtain a certificate of the fourth-grade level in public school. A

certified staff – teachers, monitors and assistants - are all volunteers and members of BSGI. According to official information, between August 1987 and the first semester of 2000, 884 students completed their studies and qualified to take the public examinations. “Despite the short duration of the courses, the students acquire the essential requirements to pursue further schooling.” (Silva 2000).

Support

In 1994, a group of psychologists within the Education Department began to participate in the Makiguchi Project in Action by offering lectures to parents and teachers in the Caetano de Campos School. In 1998 the group named itself the Psycho-Pedagogical Research and Development Nucleus and expanded its objectives and research to the teaching of learning. When the Educational Department was formed, the nucleus became the Science of Education Research and Development Department (port. *Departamento de Pesquisa e Desenvolvimento das Ciências da Educação, DEPEDUC*). Its function is to support the activities of both the Makiguchi Project in Action and Literacy Poles by providing research on the foundations of education, supplemental resources, suggestions, courses, lectures and workshops; and, most importantly, by offering the BSGI Educational Department a more scientific face.

AERC (Amazon Ecological Research Centre)

The Amazonian rainforest extends for some 6.5 million square kilometers over

nine different countries. It constitutes two-fifths of the entire South American continent and represents 34 percent of the surviving rainforests on Earth. It is currently the world's largest remaining natural resource, and its disappearance at an alarming rate during recent years has been addressed by numerous different institutions with different purposes in mind. The relevance and impact of the Amazon rainforest is one of the major arguments used by Soka Gakkai in Brazil for the conception and the creation of the AERC. The United Nations Special Conference on the Environment in Rio de Janeiro in June of 1992 was held to emphasize the need for humanity's harmonious coexistence with the natural world. One of its most important results, however, was that it drew attention to the value of the Amazon rainforest.

Inspired by Ikeda's essay "A New Strategy for Environmental Protection"- which he wrote in response to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro – in 1992 BSGI officially initiated activities which subsequently became the AERC. The centre has 52.6 hectares of land in the middle reaches of the Amazon, on the outskirts of Manaus, and is located in a very privileged tourist area where it is possible to observe "the meeting of waters" (port. *encontro das águas*), where the Rio Negro and Rio Solimões rivers join but do not mix due to differences in velocity, density and temperature. The confluence of these two rivers results in the formation of the Amazon River, one of the largest rivers in the world.

In November 1993 BSGI, the Soka University Ecological Centre, and the State of Amazonas Secretariat of Environment, Science and Technology (SEMACT) signed an accord to dedicate the centre for ecological research. The main aims of the project are to:

1) create a bank of seeds and be a forest seeds supplier; 2) be a model of reforestation and education environment and 3) be a refuge for forest animals.

In June of 1994, after the inauguration of the administrative local branch, the AERC started a reforestation program in its immediate area. This project has succeeded in planting some 20,000 seedlings of 34 different tropical tree species for eventual transplantation on the centre's land.

Based on the same project of tree-planting and transplantation done in its own area, in 1996 the AERC implemented a similar project in the city (*município*) of Novo Aripuanã, a small and very poor city located around 300 km from Manaus. According to one of the leaders of the AERC, the process of tree-planting can generate great economic value as well as benefiting the environment. The project to revitalize the rainforest does not focus only on conservation of the forest, but “serves also as an experiment to promote sustainable development that is economically viable and contributes to the betterment of the lives of the local people”, as one of the local leaders informed the author in an interview at the local branch in the city of Manaus on 27 June, 2006.

Beginning in 1997, the AERC came to be administered exclusively by BSGI and received autonomy from Soka Gakkai International to create its own structure and actions, working more closely with local communities. In 2001 AERC started construction of the building and installations for the laboratory named Daisaku Ikeda. That same year they opened the place to visitors, and through a partnership with the local government in the project “Environmental Itinerant School” (*Escola Itinerante de Meio*

Ambiente) they started to receive visitors from local schools.

Soka Gakkai today in Brazil: Ambiguities and Challenges

As we have seen, Soka Gakkai promotes several social projects. Nevertheless, one thing that struck me during fieldwork was the unbalanced proportion between the relatively small number of individuals benefited by these projects and the huge investment of Soka Gakkai in Brazil on the marketing and promotion of these activities. Accessing the institution's website for the first time, my attention was caught by its self-definition as an "NGO with Buddhist principles," with extensive advertising of its "extremely relevant" social activity "spread nation-wide." The reality of what I encountered in the field, however, was considerably different. Notwithstanding its importance in the lives of many individuals and its reach in terms of absolute numbers, Soka Gakkai's educational project results are relatively minimal in a city such as São Paulo, the largest capital city in South America, with more than 10 million inhabitants. Even more interestingly, during an interview in the institution's branch in São Paulo I found out through my informants that the adult literacy project, known in certain circles worldwide as one of BSGI's most relevant projects, draws a majority of its participants from among Soka Gakkai members, with only a few non-members enrolled in its classes.

If we analyze Soka Gakkai's history in the country, we see that in the period after the military dictatorship (i.e., the beginning of the 1980s) there was a clear policy not only to modify the organization's public image in Brazil, but also to extend the target

public from Japanese immigrants to the national society at large. From the moment the institution opened its doors to Brazilian society, Soka Gakkai encountered a new reality which it had not previously faced. The beginning of the 1980s was marked as a period of political liberalization, and worldwide economic decline contributed to one of the biggest economic crises in Brazil. These economic hardships exacerbated the problem of the rural exodus, and important cities such as São Paulo received a great proportion of these displaced masses. The organization's national expansion policy was successful in terms of attracting new members. A considerable proportion of these belonged to strata of the population that reflected the social problems faced by the country. The challenge then became not only the creation of a discourse attractive enough to convert new members, but the maintenance of these new members in the organization as well. For this process to be considered efficient in the eyes of the institution, it was necessary for members to be able to read. Through reading, the new members would have access to the support material produced by Soka Gakkai as well as to the teachings of President Ikeda – seen by them as the “master of life.” Constant stimulation and involvement in this structure of support would, it was believed, diminish the likelihood of disengagement by recent converts to the new faith. This reveals that the educational project was created, first and foremost, as an internal necessity of the institution for the purpose of retaining new members.

The international political trend linked to the development of power alternative to the State, and the way in which this new context brought about hope for renewal within

the country, meant that the image of a “third sector” appealed to Brazilian public opinion and carried with it significant credibility. This new tendency in Brazil, which had “Eco 92” as its starting point, – was used by Soka Gakkai in a very important and carefully planned way. The new period within the country offered to the organization a unique opportunity in the elaboration of its public image and strategy of introduction into the Brazilian religious context. It was in this context that the AERC was created.

However, as with the educational projects, the gap between the gigantic investment of Soka Gakkai International in the promotion of AERC’s activities and the actual benefits to the local population and environment came as a surprise. During my fieldwork in 2006 I had the opportunity to visit the modern facility of AERC. The building is relatively small, and the staff involved in day to day activities appeared to be so as well. The scale of local activities does not appear congruent with the massive promotion given to the project. It is significant that, when designing and building the facilities for AERC, Soka Gakkai’s architects in Japan designed the largest space of the building to be the projection room, devoted to the screening of institutional videos. This space, serving the external public, is larger than the meeting room where AERC’s projects are discussed and, more importantly, significantly larger than the area reserved to the research labs. It is worthy of note that Soka Gakkai’s investment in the promotion of its research centre in the Amazon is so intense and with a marketing strategy so effective as to have in its discourse finding its way into academic texts of researchers specialized in the institution (as Seager 2006, 192).

In short, both projects reveal the efforts, conflicts, and ambiguities of Soka Gakkai in Brazil. BSGI's education and ecology projects must be considered as distinct projects with different purposes. The education project, established in São Paulo, was created partially but only secondarily to solve a specific social problem. The educational project aims to be not only the social response to the *kosen-rufu* prophecy but also the response to a new institutional target –prospective members. When BSGI offers literacy classes, it includes in the same “package” lessons on how to read and pronounce correctly the mantra *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*, and how to interpret the messages of President Ikeda. Through these lessons the new members learn more about the organization, its structure and its beliefs. And it is here that they begin to be involved in a new social network, partially responsible for strengthening their faith and maintaining cohesion within the group. Compared to the educational project, the EARC has a clearer political purpose. Nevertheless, notwithstanding their differences and internal ambiguities, both come together in Soka Gakkai's effort to carve a space inside Brazilian society.

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