

Japanese Divine Light in Kinshasa

Transcultural Resonance and Critique in the Religiously Multiple City

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Abstract

The Japanese “new religions” (*Shin Shūkyō*) active in Kinshasa (DR Congo) nearly all perform healing through the channeling of invisible divine light. In the case of Sekai Kyūseikyō (Church of World Messianity), the light of *Johrei* cannot be visually apprehended, but is worn as an invisible aura on the practitioner’s body. This article discusses the trans-cultural resonances between Japan and Central Africa regarding the ontology of spiritual force, regimes of subjectivity, and the gradual embodiment of *Johrei* divine light as a protection against (suspicions of) witchcraft. Meanwhile, I argue that religious multiplicity in urban Africa encourages cultural reflexivity about concepts of health and healing, self-responsibility, and Pentecostal suspicion-mongering of occult sciences. Thus, *Johrei* divine light not only feeds into a longstanding local tradition of spiritual healing; within the religiously multiple city, it is also a discursive space for, and an experience and performance of, emic critique.

Introduction

On a Friday in September 2013, I spent the morning hours in EMM’s *Johrei Center* of Lemba super, one of Kinshasa’s crowded popular neighborhoods. I entered what had initially been the living room of the Onyemba family, but now serves as the “prayer hall” (*salle de prière*) of the local branch of the Japanese “new religion” *Église Messianique Mondiale* (Jap. Sekai Kyūseikyō: Church of World Messianity, henceforth EMM), where the divine light healing technique called *Johrei* (Jap. purification of the spirit) is practiced. It is here that I met Angélique, who was waiting to receive *Johrei*, and who shared her story with me.

Angélique had been visiting EMM for one and a half months now, to receive *Johrei* for two to three hours each day. She had chosen EMM’s *Johrei Center* of Lemba because

it is close to where she lives. Before, she had been a member of the local born-again church *Armée de la Victoire* (Army of Victory). But by no means will she return:

I have been in a state of suffering for the past nineteen years! It all started with aches in the lower stomach, which continue till this day. The pastors, all they say is that it is *kindoki* (Lingala: witchcraft), and that somebody has sacrificed me. But really: all of this, no! When I arrived over here, they prescribed me 60 Johreis to begin with. I took all the medicaments I had been prescribed and threw them away. Instead, I just take light now. I had severe diarrhea at first, but continued with Johrei and had even more diarrhea. But now, in any case, I feel much better! I even brought my father over here, and he has also really liked it. [...]

The doctors and pastors all told me something else. That it was HIV-Aids, or *kindoki*, and so on, but here they say: "No! Don't listen to what they say over there!" Here, they started by telling me that there was no spiritual problem with my current family. They rather explain that the problem is really one of our ancestors, because of blood (Li. *makila*), because, well, there are ancestors who have not followed the path of Jesus, but have rather followed the customs from back then, practicing *fétiche*. The light of Johrei appeases them, and thus this has positive effects.

I have suffered for far too long! Nineteen years! In my mother's family, others say, people are into *sciences occultes* (occult sciences), and that they have sacrificed me. They have sacrificed my elder sister, they have killed my child, they have sacrificed many people, and they continue with me. We are totally ruined. Everything is gone [...]. But over here, I obtained powerful protection! My family in Europe, they had not called me for ages! I have two younger brothers, both are pastors, one in Germany, the other one in South Africa. And I have two little sisters in Belgium, who never called me. But thanks to Johrei, they have started calling me again! Yes, they started calling. Even if they are not sending any money, they are calling me [...]. I have been suffering too much, for nineteen years! I have visited so many churches, up to fifty, no joke, but nothing ever worked. [...] I have also been to hospitals. I have taken so many drugs. I took pills against tuberculosis, against HIV-Aids, I took drugs against any possible disease.

When it was Angélique's turn, she moved over to the stool in front of Maman Anto, who started channeling Johrei from her raised, cupped hand for about five minutes to Angélique's face, belly, and legs. Then Angélique turned and Anto continued channeling divine light onto her back. Given Johrei light is invisible, the primary sense at work when channeling is not vision but touch. The latter is merely suggested, however, and does not actually occur. Johrei only resembles the laying on of hands, as the channeling hand

reaches out to the receiver's body, but does not really reach it. This sense of interpersonal touch is couched in a wider affective atmosphere marked by silence and aesthetic minimalism.

The central argument of the present article is that the performance of the invisible light of Johrei entails a particular sensory attitude towards the urban social world outside the Johrei center, which results in an embodiment of critique. In the contemporary African city, religious multiplicity entails contrasting regimes of subjectivity, in which practitioners tend to either subject themselves to the external agency of religious leaders and capricious spirits, or, as in the case of EMM, attempt to undo and subject these external agencies by strengthening their own self-autonomy. Spiritual entities such as ancestors and the Holy Spirit are thus conditioning forces of somebody's subjectivity. Shifting from one such regime to another, as the case of Angélique shows, entails thorough questioning, which, by virtue of practicing Johrei, eventually becomes an embodied attitude exceeding the level of spoken discourse. In Kinshasa, or the Democratic Republic of Congo more generally, the concept of "religion" refers to the organizational and institutional dimension of scripted ritual and belief, which is locally often summarized by the concept of "church" (*église*), and which is known by the Catholic and Protestant mainline Churches, Pentecostal Charismatic Churches (PCC), and the Kimbanguist Church, and even employed by the EMM. By referring to "*religious multiplicity*," I thus hint at the denominational plurality that flourishes in Kinshasa, with affiliation and membership often changing but mostly consciously chosen. The concept moreover points to the relational and overlapping experience of different religious forms and formats in the urban everyday.ⁱⁱ

The data for this article was collected in the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kinshasa, between 2010 and 2014, during fieldwork for my PhD thesis on so-called "spiritual movements" (emic term) in urban Central Africa, among them Japanese "new religions." Given the burgeoning scholarly interest in Pentecostal Charismatic Churches (henceforth PCC), I had soon discovered that non-Christian alternative movements, who locally identify either as "religions" in their own right, or as "spiritual movements," were not only critical of PCCs, but also a largely understudied topic among

scholars of religion in Africa, and hence an important object of inquiry in its own right. Examples of locally successful spiritual movements include Sūkyō Mahikari, Eckankar, the Brahma Kumaris Spiritual University (alias Raja Yoga), the Grail Movement, Sokka Gakkai International, Sekai Kyūseikyō, etc. Even though among *Messianiques* (EMM's followers), I kept emphasizing my scholarly intentions, members of EMM wanted to initiate me. As a result, I was initiated into divine light transmission and could thus experience Johrei also from the "giver"-side for a short time.

The article pursues a threefold argument: Firstly, I explain Johrei's success in Kinshasa by pointing to important resonances with older Central African conceptions of spiritual healing as the transmission of invisible energy, or "divine force" (Lingala: *nguyá ya Nzambe*). On the one hand, this resonance is amplified by EMM's dualist stress on the ideal of purity rather than a focus on balance and harmony regarding opposing spiritual forces. On the other hand, there is a striking resonance between the vitalism proposed by Japanese new religions of the Ōmōtōkyō-lineage and the philosophical and healing traditions of Central Africa. Also here, invisible healing energy has been framed as light and fire for a long time. This historical legacy resurfaces also in times of the electricity-focused services of Pentecostal Charismatic Churches, whose pastors' authority relies heavily on the vehiculation, and indeed the amplification, of the Holy Spirit as *móto* (Lingala: fire, electricity, energy).

Secondly, the self-centered and individualizing notion of autonomous subjectivity that underlies Sekai Kyūseikyō's etiology entails a critical attitude towards hierarchical and centralized notions of religious authority known from Christianity, especially PCCs and their pastors. This goes hand in hand with a critical reflection concerning the question of eschatology and the Pentecostal rhetoric of rupture, i.e., its divisive politics of time, which centers around the "deliverance" of the individual from the capricious psycho-genealogical forces of the ancestral lineage, which in Central Africa is often associated with the village and its "pagan" African rituals. Johrei, instead, *Messianiques* (EMM's followers) explain, is presented as being based on a "scientific" notion of spiritual, or one may call it psycho-genealogical—healing that emphasizes the structural workings of the invisible world according to "spiritual laws" (*lois spirituelles*). Light, here, is of miraculous-

cum-scientific nature, thus allowing one to connect with the older ontology of energy. This “scientific” stance regarding the invisible spirit world is critical of the notion that the person is at the mercy of unpredictable and capricious possessive ancestral spirits, as is often promoted by PCCs. Instead, it emphasizes the self as the “enlightened” agent of free will, with light thus also serving as a metaphor for rational lucidity.

Thirdly, as mentioned above, on a deeper, more phenomenological level, Johrei involves the development of a more thorough, embodied, critical stance, especially vis-à-vis outsiders of the “church,” who categorically condemn this healing technique as “magic” or an “occult science” (which in the local ontology refers to a secret gathering of men who magically sacrifice their kin for their private, individual promotion). This particularity of the religiously polymorphic African city makes apparent that the very practice of Johrei is lived and experienced by *Messianiques* as an embodied form of critique, which knots together the two previously mentioned strings of argumentation.

The first part of this article offers ethnographic insight into the practice of Johrei divine light transmission in the Congolese capital Kinshasa and clarifies its Japanese origins. The second part discusses the abovementioned resonances regarding purity and health-related vitalism, before emphasizing the role of the autonomous subject as advocated by Johrei healing, which places agency in the individual practitioner rather than in those surrounding him/her. This section (“scientific light”) stresses EMM’s “scientific” understanding of spiritual processes and the “technological” imagination that underlies them. The third part addresses the consequences this has within the wider discursive landscape of Kinshasa, where suspicion of witchcraft and sacrifice for illicit private benefit is ripe. *Messianiques* face this suspicion in their social vicinities, which makes apparent how religious multiplicity in the African city affords not just discursive, but also embodied forms of critique.

Healing light: Afro-Japanese resonances

Johrei in Kinshasa

That Angélique does not have any reliable diagnosis of her illness points to the dramatic state of the local public health system. This has to be considered when thinking

about the nexus of health, prayer, and spiritual healing in urban Central Africa. The quest for health and ameliorative efficacy continues to be a primary reason for adhering to religious movements, as was true also for the first generations of Japanese new religions (Offner and van Straelen 1963, 159; Stein 2012, 116). Initiated members of EMM praise Johrei as the therapeutic method that has rescued them out of an intense social, economic, and mostly also corporal health crisis, after all other alternatives did not work.

As *Messianiques* in Kinshasa generally ignore the complex historical and conceptual entanglements of “spiritual healing,” “medicine,” and “religion” in Japan (see Josephson 2012), what *Messianiques* understand to be the “Japanese” conception of health—embracing economic, social, and physical components—is strikingly tantamount to the longstanding Central African notion of the healthy person, where these three dimensions are known to mutually entail each other. *Messianiques* in Kinshasa celebrate this conception as a theoretical confirmation “from Japan” of the “African” spiritual principles they inherited from their ancestors (see Lambertz 2020). EMM’s “Japanese” foundations, however, are more likely to originate in late 19th century US American New Thought, which EMM’s founder Okada Mokichi and other key figures of the Ōmōtōkyō-lineage of Japanese new religions actively perceived at the beginning of the twentieth century. Regardless of this ignorance, EMM’s pragmatic-cum-intellectualist approach to health and the workings of healing occasions a reflexive attitude vis-à-vis the etiological tradition Kinois (Kinshasa’s inhabitants) and Congolese more generally identify as “African.” The trans-cultural encounter at work in the religiously multiple city generates and encourages a sense of critical self-reflexivity. This critical mindset finds expression in the notion of *chercheur* (seeker), as *Messianiques* and followers of spiritual movements more generally in Kinshasa call themselves. Importantly, *chercheur* also means “researcher,” through which spiritualists make themselves comparable with those who work and study at the university.

As Angélique’s trajectory of healing endeavors shows, in Kinshasa religious pluralism is to a large extent driven by an ardent quest for health and therapy, also of highly frequent everyday ailments such as hemorrhoids, high blood pressure, or rheumatism among the elderly. This quest is enhanced by a miserable, if not for many parts of the city

absent public health infrastructure. The disease locally known as *mbasu* is particularly sensitive to these structural shortcomings. Less ordinary and one of the most dramatic forms of a *mpasi ya kowbwakela* (Lingala: “a misfortune that is cast” by someone onto someone else), *mbasu* is part of the leprosy and tuberculosis family and known by the World Health Organisation as *Buruli ulcer* (microbacterium ulcerans infection). The best standard biomedical procedure found so far involves eight weeks of disciplined antibiotic treatment, which requires an extraordinary intake discipline by patients. As the microbacterium causing *mbasu* attacks foremost human skin, the contraction of secondary infections is nearly inevitable in the unspeakable hygienic conditions of Kinshasa’s *cités* (the city’s popular neighborhoods, as opposed to the political center referred to as *la ville*). As a result, along with sickle-cell anemia and psychic diseases, *mbasu* is locally known to be irresponsive to “modern medicine” and curable only through spiritual or divine healing. Only the latter is capable of attacking its “spiritual” causes that originate from ill-will in the family. Johrei intervenes here as a superior spiritual healing method, lending a strong hand to other spiritual healing techniques capable of tackling diseases of spiritual origin.

Japanese origins

The reason for Johrei being the transmission of “light” (Li.: *mwínda*, Fr.: *lumière*) and not just of “force” (*nguyá*), “energy” (*móto*), or “spirit” (*molímo*) is linked to the inspiration its Japanese inceptor took in the Shinto goddess of the sun, Amaterasu Omikami. In Kinshasa, though *Messianiques* also use these other terms when discussing Johrei, it being divine *light* (Li. *mwínda ya Nzambe*) has two decisive consequences: Firstly, it ties in with the symbolism of light in Christian theology as being the light that shows the way, in the sense of hope, promise, and direction. The latter is especially known from the Catholic youth movement *Bilènge ya Mwínda* (youth of light).ⁱⁱⁱ Secondly, the association with the light of the sun (*mói*) ties in with the understanding of Johrei being an energetic purifying fire (*móto*), an idiom *Messianiques*, most of whom were or continue to be Christians, identify with the “baptism of fire” (Fr. *baptême du feu*) as propagated in PCCs. These symbolic coincidences and points of attachment are openly celebrated by EMM and were intended by its founder’s Japanese eclecticism. Thus, in

April 2011 an e-mail was circulated by EMM's secretary containing a document entitled "The act I performed under the name of Johrei constitutes what is called Baptism of Fire," in which Okada explains that "Water is material, and fire is spiritual. For this reason, what we are currently achieving - the purification of the spiritual through the spirit—is none other than the baptism of fire. As the spirit is reflected in the matter, the influence that this baptism will have on the matter will have to produce an extraordinary change."^{iv}

In Kinshasa, the perceived superiority of Johrei in the range of available spiritual treatments is also linked to secrecy perceived by outsiders. This is based on rumors and suspicions of it being an "occult science" that gathers men to orchestrate the spiritual sacrifice of one's offspring for the sake of their private fortune. Before the delegitimization/demonization of secrecy by Christian missionary movements, Central Africa was host to various acephalous societies that relied on secrecy as a means to legitimize the power of their initiated elders (Nooter 1993). As elsewhere in post-colonial Africa (Cohen 1981), the theme of the political elite that is gathering in "secret societies" has been powerfully upscaled to the national level, as in Mobutu Sese Seko's Zaire (Lambertz 2018, 69–94). Thus, rather than provoking doubt and questioning its very existence, the light's inherent invisibility lends it an aura of secrecy and occult power and thus validates and amplifies its spiritual superiority. Somewhat paradoxically indeed, secrecy being an accepted currency for political legitimation, Johrei's invisibility confirms rather than questions its effective capacity.

It is the pragmatic utility of invisible light healing that explains why, except for Soka Gakkai International (SGI),^v the Japanese new religions present in Kinshasa today are those of the Ōmōtōkyō-lineage offering healing through invisible light transmission. Ōmōtōkyō is among Japan's most influential first-generation "new religions" (Jap. *shin shūkyō*), which reshuffled Japan's Shinto and Buddhist traditions and made them fit for the challenges of rapid industrialization and urbanization. Among the most important offshoots of Ōmōtōkyō are Okada Mokichi's Sekai Kyūseikyō (EMM's Japanese *maison mère*), founded in 1935, and Okada Yoshikazu's Sūkyō Mahikari, which emerged out of Sekai Kyūseikyō in 1959. In Kinshasa, these two movements arrived in an inverse order: The first Japanese new religion to reach Congo in 1976 was Sūkyō Mahikari with its

Ōkyōme (Jap. *purification*) light channeling technique. In 1983, seceding Congolese Mahikari members imported the Mokichi Okada Association International (MOA) from Brussels, after it had been founded in Washington D.C. as a Japanese “cultural” organization offering “alternative medicine” rather than spiritual healing by means of a performative prayer. Thus, MOA is another, more recent, Sekai Kyūseikyō offshoot practicing light transmission as “Okada Purificatory Treatment” (OPT) or as Japanese “biofield therapy.” In Kinshasa, treatment takes place in MOA’s two private “hospitals” in the neighborhoods of Limete and Yolo, where especially “patients” with sickle-cell anemia and HIV-Aids are treated.

It should be stressed that, also because of the blood-related character of these diseases, and blood (Li.: *makila*) being considered the seat of the ancestors (as has been “confirmed,” *Messianiques* claim, by the discovery of the DNA), de facto neither patients nor MOA’s *therapeutes* actually distinguish between TPO’s more “scientific” and EMM’s or Sūkyō Mahikari’s more “religious” explanations of invisible light healing. The only time this distinction appeared to be of importance was when two of MOA’s local administrators filled me in on the origins of the MOA movement, and how it officially differed from EMM, so as to legitimize the schism. Both administrators would not stop, however, repeating how difficult it had been, and continues to be, to explain to the local followers that MOA’s TPO differed from *Johrei*, which many know from EMM, and from Mahikari’s *Okyome*, because it was “medicine” and not a “prayer in action.” There has even been a common refusal of TPO being a “medical” version of *Johrei*, to the extent that in 2001 a group of young followers opposed MOA’s purely “medical” character in favor of *Johrei* being a “prayer in action.” Thus, it was former MOA members, who in 2001 imported the *Église Messianique Mondiale* (EMM) from Angola, which is connected to Japan via the *Igreja Messianica Mundial do Brasil*. Though now happening at a spatial scale of global entanglement, this succession of local schisms and renewal perpetuates a longstanding local pattern (De Craemer, Fox, and Vansina 1976; Janzen 1977).

Also today, both EMM’s and MOA’s followers are convinced that the transmission of invisible light is a superior form of divine or spiritual healing, as they know it from other Central African healing traditions (Tonda 2002). As a result, MOA’s leaders have

abandoned the effort to emphasize the conceptual difference between “medicine” and “prayer,” which they have learned to drown in ambiguity, a strategy that is locally well known as a means to prevent cognitive dissonance. As anthropologists Filip De Boeck (2004, 2013) and Achille Mbembe (1997) have importantly pointed out, repeated and long-lasting social and economic crises have entailed a highly unstable and unreliable relationship between the visible and the invisible, between signifiers and their signified, making conceptual ambiguity, ambivalence, and mockery, or, to speak with Edward Glissant ([1990] 1997), conceptual “opacity,” the predominant linguistic ideology. That *Messianiques*’ celebrate Johrei as a “scientific” spiritual healing practice (see below), which is, however, not “medical,” shows well how freely the binary conceptual dichotomies of spiritual vs. material, and of science vs. religion, are locally recalibrated in a seemingly playful manner.

Unknown to most *Messianiques* in Kinshasa, “Johrei” is the oldest version of Japanese invisible light healing. SKK’s founder Okada Mokichi (alias Meishu Sama: “Master of Light”) conceived it in the 1930s, under the influence of Ōmōtōkyō’s founder Deguchi Onisaburo (1871–1948), who had introduced a healing practice called *miteshiro otoritsugi* (Jap. “transfer through a hand substitute”). The latter can be considered the prototype of *Johrei*, in which the hand was substituted by a rice ladle to direct divine spirit into, and disease and evil spirits out of, the recipient’s body (Stein 2012, 126). The latter technique resulted from Ōmōtōkyō’s earlier mediumistic practice of *chinkon kishin* (“settling spirits and returning to the kami”), which had provided Okada Mokichi with his first experiences of healing powers (Staemmler 2009, 261).

Typical for the inceptors of Japan’s new religions, Okada’s own life was marked by hardship and deception. This resonates with the hardships the “modern Kongo prophets” of the *ngunza* tradition in Lower Congo (today Congo Central) had encountered under Belgian colonialism, such as Simon Kimbangu or Simon Mpadi (MacGaffey 1983), and which makes these founders important icons of national identification for their posthumous followers. In EMM, the identification with the church’s “messiah” Meishu Sama is particularly strong because of the importance it attaches to the healing powers of lay members, most of whom have gone, or are going, through similar trajectories as

their Japanese master. In the DRC, by 2014, the EMM and TMAJ movements had about 2500 regular followers, mainly in urban centers. While in the 1980s, spiritual movements such as EMM and TMAJ attracted the Zairian political and neo-Bourgeois elite, EMM and TMAJ soon stood out through their attempts to popularize and democratize the movements' messages by addressing Kinshasa's large popular classes in Lingala and not French.

Scientific light: Reinforcing the self

Resonating vitalisms and the quest for purity

"When a man does somethings to help another, that person's sense of gratitude forms light, which is transmitted to the helpful one through the spiritual cord. This also increases both the worth and intensity of his aura. But when a person generates feelings of hatred, jealousy or envy in others because of his negative words or deeds, these create negative vibrations that reflect upon his spiritual body, causing his aura to dim and become narrow." (Okada [1984] 1999, 306)

The practice of transmitting Johrei is referred to as *kopesa/kozwa Johrei* (Lingala: to give/receive Johrei), *transmettre la lumière* (French: to transmit light) or *donner/recevoir le Johrei* (French: to give/receive Johrei). The "light" itself (Lingala: *mwínda*, French: *lumière*) is referred to as "power" or "force" (Li. *nguyá*, Fr. *puissance / pouvoir / force*) emitting "vibrations" (Li./Fr. *ba-/vibrations*). The reference to God and the light's divine origin is recurring, usually by calling it "divine light" (Li: *mwínda ya Nzambe*) or "divine force" (Li.: *nguyá ya Nzambe*). Especially the *nguyá* concept is something Kinis know from the mass-mediated services of Pentecostal Charismatic Churches. Here the Holy Spirit manifests itself as divine force (Li.: *nguyá ya Nzambe*) that can be felt in the atmosphere and the body, causing goose bumps as hymns are sung, for instance, or as a sensory evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence during ecstatic verbal prayer. Also, during moments of deliverance, when the Holy Spirit is made to enter one's body so as to overpower, combat, and cast out evil spirits and emotions, *nguyá ya Nzambe* is at work, which is mostly identified as *móto* (fire, heat, energy, power). Despite important differences (see below), *Messianiques* see an important similarity between Johrei and

Pentecostal deliverance practice, where energy is directed and channeled, albeit not by lay members as in EMM, but by the pastor and his assistants.

The connection between Johrei, the *nguyá* concept and the notion of “vital force” was first explained to me by Mr. Jacques, one of EMM’s senior members. Jacques was a trained lawyer before he decided to dedicate his life to Meishu Sama and his teachings. Having been initiated into Messianic teaching as a young member of MOA at the time of his studies in the late 1980s, it was always clear to him that Johrei was an amplified version of what he had learned in his African philosophy class at the faculty as Placide Tempels’ understanding of *force vitale*. Tempels (1906-1977), a Flemish missionary, who had worked as a Catholic missionary among the Luba in Belgian Congo, had become known for his influential *Bantu Philosophy*, which continues to be taught to students in Congo’s social and human sciences faculties and is a foundational text of ethnophilosophy. Unaware of, and somewhat unconcerned by the many critics the book has received for being imbued with a paternalistic bias (see Mudimbe 1988, 137-145), to Jacques Okada, Mokichi’s Japanese theories were confirmations of Tempels’ findings about the Bantu, lending him a sense of cultural belonging and pride. By invoking the idea that one’s amount of light (or “radiation”) can be more or less intense, and especially by translating this into the seemingly scientific notion of a dynamic “aura,” Okada appears to offer confirmation to the theme of vital force and Tempels’ dynamic understanding of the Bantu ontology, in which a being exists, at any given moment, only as the amount of force it has acquired.

Justin Stein (2012), who has contrasted the Japanese light healing techniques of Johrei and Ōkyōme with those of yogic healing, *qigong*, and Reiki, convincingly argues that the notion of life force as an invisible energy, which Okada conceived as “spiritual radiation,” encourages a conception of health that is bound up between the extremes of purity and pollution. This makes the new religions of the Ōmōtōkyō-lineage indeed connive with Tempels’s ([1945] 1959, 55) dynamic ontology, in which “all force can be strengthened or enfeebled. That is to say, all being can become stronger or weaker,” where a person exists *de facto* only as the amount of force it manages to acquire. Johrei and Ōkyōme, as they are practiced in Kinshasa, are steered to increase one’s personal

light level, or aura, to a maximum, with a view to “burning” and expelling impurities and to enlarge one’s own “radiation.” Very much in line with Tempels’s dynamic ontology, this contrasts with the healing techniques focused on achieving balance and harmony pursued by *quigong*, Reiki, and yogic healing. Stein suggests that Okada’s notion of spiritual radiation as a pervading force that can purify the body was influenced by Bergson’s concept of *élan vital*, whom Okada references in his work (Okada[1984] 1999, 319-322). Just like Tempels’ *force vitale*, this energy is necessary to sustain life, or to frame it with Tempels’s (1959, 51) own ontological spin: “Force is the nature of being, force is being, being is force.”

Unlocking the Sim

The appropriation of Johrei light transmission in contemporary Africa reminds us of the historical appropriations of Western technical media and electricity in colonial Africa, which also occurred against the backdrop of pre-existing notions of power and force. Heike Behrend writes about the appropriation of electricity in urban Cameroon: “Its introduction was identified and connected with the already existing concepts of power and force used for healing and harming. It confirmed and reinforced more than it questioned the local discourse on power” (2010, 190). Behrend’s inquiries have led her to study situations of first-hand contact between electricity and “existing concepts of power and force.” This is obviously different today, where the “local discourse on power” with its “existing concepts of power and force” is replete with concepts from electronics and communication technology. In a reunion with EMM missionaries in 2010, Freddy, who was presiding the reunion, explained to us that the human soul is like a SIM card: it happens to be blocked and has to be properly unlocked in order to be able to communicate and flow again. This unlocking is what EMM and Johrei is all about.

While spiritual blockage and the necessity to undo it is a common notion also among Kinshasa’s Christians, the role the concerned individual plays in the “unlocking”-process differs. This is as much due to differing etiologies as to the concrete role of the practitioner during the healing process.

Okada Mokichi conceived of his “Messianic faith” as a coherent cosmological system. His teachings about the meaning and role of suffering can be granted the status of an

actual theodicy: be it through poverty, illness, or conflict, misfortune is seen as a sign of purification that makes the world gradually shift from its state of the night to the state of the day. Light works here both as a structural metaphor, but also as an active empirical force of change. Very much similar to Central African world views, the world consists of a spiritual word and a material world, which are connected to one another through a law of tacit correspondence (Bekaert 2004). Given that the spiritual world temporally precedes the material one, the latter is considered the reflection and resulting outcome of preceding psychic activity, which lends the picture strong Platonic overtones (Stein 2012, 122).

Messianic etiology is equally systematic and of “scientific” appeal. While among Pentecostal Christians and the adepts of Sūkyō Mahikari, sins are seen as open doors for evil spirits to enter and act with their own independent agency, *Messianiques* consider that bad behavior generates spiritual clouds (Fr. *nuages spirituels*) of impurities (Li. *mbindo*, Fr. *impuretés*) around one’s “aura” (emic term), which are imagined to be of dust-like matter. The arbitrariness of capricious evil spirits is here supplanted by the notion of a cloud, which, just like the divine light itself, is invisible, but not immaterial and hence submitted to stable, physical laws, in rather Aristotelean fashion.

The same is true regarding psycho-genealogical dependencies, which urbanites across Africa often perceive as haunting forces from their home village, who prevent them from achieving the state of freedom they had hoped for when coming to the city. While Pentecostal pastors tend to empower their followers with the help of the Holy Spirit to stand up to their ancestors by interrupting their ties with them and “make a complete break with the past”—which de facto, however, leads to a demonization of, i.e., a problematic reentanglement with, the past (Meyer 1998)—*Messianiques* proffer reconciliation with one’s ancestors. This sounds conservative at first, but an analysis of who actually qualifies as “ancestors” on the handwritten ancestor lists made for the weekly “prayer for the elevation of ancestral souls” has revealed a number of important nuances: firstly, what *Messianiques* call an “ancestor” has little to do with the gender, lineage, and status imperatives of African ancestor worship studied by classical anthropology (Fortes 1965; Goody 1962), but rather refers to the updated version from

Japan (Smith 1974; Komoto 1991). Not only one's kin-related elders, but also friends, neighbors, colleagues, and especially even one's children can become ancestors. What's more, the selection is made by the practitioner him-/herself, who thus sees him-/herself on the commanding end of the reconciliation process (see Lambertz 2018, 240-251).

Messianiques emphasize that everyone is him-/herself responsible for his/her fate. Rather than being at the mercy of capricious anthropomorphic spirits at work in the impervious spaces of the city, each and everyone's trajectory results from one's own individual *karma*. The latter is the cumulation of one's own and one's ancestors' actions. But just like invisible light or the spiritual clouds, *karma* is not just a metaphor, but finds expression through an accumulation of so-called "toxins" in one's body. These can be neutralized and undone through the inpouring of divine light (Stein 2012).

Such a "scientific" understanding of psychic, invisible processes is underscored by the importance given to a number of material mediators of divine light that act as spiritual technologies. Upon initiation, novel members receive an amulet called *Ohikari* (Jap.: *light*), believed to channel divine light from Japan and thus effectuate the healing process. This use of material things not only authenticates the light transmission as a mechanical process (just like the authentication through reference to modern communication media as the locked sim-card); it also inscribes it into a longstanding Central African use of religious materiality for the purpose of spiritual mediation. The *minkisi*-statues of the Lower Congo (nowadays Congo Central) are perhaps among the most well-known examples. The mirror on their belly, which covers a cavity containing activating herbal compounds, works as the mediating device between the visible and the invisible (MacGaffey 1988). Other spiritual technologies used by *Messianiques* include holy scrolls, Japanese mantras, portrait photographs of Meishu Sama, written ancestor lists, and Ikebana flowers arrangements, which are locally used as "spiritual thermometers" (see Lambertz 2018, 107-109).

Another feat that makes Johrei appear as "scientific" is that, unlike the Holy Spirit, it is supposed to also "work" if you do not "believe" in it. Also in Japan, this technological understanding of invisible processes accounts for its attractiveness (Stein 2012, 166). Just as for Reiki, the "scientific" quality of Johrei's divine light is meant to dispel accusations of

magic, which is reinforced by systematically seeking confirmation of Johrei's efficacy from bio-medical experts (see Lambertz 2018, 157–161). That in Kinshasa the accusation of “magic” is also dispelled by referring to Johrei as a “miracle” shows how flexible and pragmatic the use and choice of concepts is in this “city built of words” (De Boeck 2006). During an initiation session in November 2012, the new initiates were welcomed as new “miracle factories,” thus combining machine-like industrial rationality with the legitimate Christian form of beneficial magic: the miracle.

The seemingly mechanical behavior of these spiritual processes supports the emergence of the Johrei practitioner as the active protagonist of his own healing process, who is not exposed to the capricious agency of others. This contrasts with the longstanding Central African tradition of collective therapy management (Janzen 1987), but also with those traditions in which religious experts play a central role. In Japan, the role of laity in the healing process is a well-known feature of new religions; they have significantly narrowed the gap between leaders and followers (Hardacre 1984). In Kinshasa, the empowerment of lay practitioners—all initiated members of EMM are considered “missionaries”—encourages *Messianiques* to voice outright criticism against Pentecostal pastors and their centralizing authority. As an older Messianique shared with me at a *Point de Lumière* (Fr. Point of light) at the outskirts of Kinshasa: “over there it is only the pastor who has the power to heal, but here it’s a little child, an old one, women and men, all have the power to heal.”^{vi}

This critique is usually joined with a Marxist emphasis of these pastors being thieves (Li.: *bayibi*) who exploit the crisis of their believers (see Fig. 1). On a deeper level, however, it revolves around the agency and self-responsibility of the autonomous subject vis-à-vis his/her own personal life and destiny. The theme is so prominent a topic of discussion among *Messianiques* that it has made it into a locally composed hymn, which openly criticizes the Pentecostal focus on external origins of evil. Its chorus goes: “Walk slowly in this world. If you walk too fast you will stumble child, and you’ll accuse a witch for it. But *ndoki se yo moko*: the witch is you, it is yourself!”^{vii}

Insert Fig. 1. here

Critical light: Suspicion and the embodiment of critique

Messianiques' emphasis on the autonomous self is not just doctrinal and discursive. The practice of Johrei light transmission itself is a ritual embodiment of personal autonomy, during which self and other are experienced, apprehended, and aesthetically shaped. As already mentioned, *Messianiques* explain that Johrei and *déliverance*, as it is practiced among born-again Christians, are comparable in terms of outcome, intent, and also the mobilization of divine force (Li: *nguyá ya Nzambe*). The sensory worlds of these two healing realms are strikingly dissimilar, however. On a very general note, in the several hour-long services that often culminate in rituals of deliverance, Congo's born-again Christians celebrate an aesthetic of diffusion, distortion, and a thinning, seemingly a dilution, of self-reflexivity in a cosmos of sensory, especially sonic, overdrive. Johrei, on the other hand, depends upon an atmosphere of sensory concentration (silence!), which encourages a thickening of self-pondering awareness.

Patrick is a hardworking journalist from Lumumbashi, who had moved with his wife and three children to Mbuji Mayi and then to Kinshasa, where he lives on a compound with other members of his family. He had come to know about Johrei after being offered a little *fleur de lumière* (flower of light) when passing the Johrei Center in the Huileries neighborhood. An EMM missionary had explained its usefulness to him, which is achieved through the same "light"-energy as Johrei.^{viii} Then some friends and colleagues, many of whom are also spiritual seekers, had confirmed the efficacy of Johrei. Soon Patrick started developing a liking not just for Johrei, but also for the overall intellectualist guise of the EMM church, where many members were moreover of his own Luba ethnic group. Johrei, he was convinced, could help him move on professionally, and improve his life situation.

That the EMM movement called itself an *Église* (church), which in Brazil is less controversial, given the more general mainstreaming of alternative spiritualities there (Carpenter 2004), was initially to Patrick's liking, because he knew about the overarching risk any non-Christian movement runs in Kinshasa to be associated with *sciences occultes* (occult sciences), especially when connected to the "orient." The "church" concept can thus act as an important disclaimer. In an urban context where rumors about sacrifice through magic abuse are ripe, however, EMM's self-depiction as an *Église* (Fr.: church) is

also problematic. Especially among ardent Pentecostals, it incites speculations of dissimulation, which is known to be the master-trick of the devil. In the local understanding *occultisme* or *sciences occultes* enable their initiates to spiritually sacrifice their kin for the sake of their own private fortune and advancement. A local form of “occult economies” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999), this notion is based on the Central African fortune-misfortune complex, in which life force can be transferred from one person to another, with the help of an initiated ritual specialist (De Craemer, Fox, and Vansina 1976). While in Western countries the threat that emanates from “sects” is generally associated with brain-washing and the ensuing loss of individual free will, in Central Africa the perceived danger that emanates from deviant non-Christian movements is associated with the sacrifice of family members for the sake of individual benefit. The theme is so widespread in Kinshasa as to oblige a colleague, who works as an assistant lecturer at the University of Kinshasa, for instance, and who is so successful in his career as to frequent international conferences in Europe and the United States, to remind his children before his departure that they should not fall ill during his absence. He fears that his children’s illness could be interpreted by neighbors, kin, or jealous colleagues, as an index of spiritual sacrifice by their “occultist” father.

Patrick was suspicious, at first, to follow EMM’s advice to openly announce his membership with EMM to his friends and family members. His aunt had somehow found out about it, and in light of his conviction that its intentions were solely positive, he embraced the initiative to inform his close ones about his new “church.” It was, after all, just yet another “church” among so many others. He knew it was important to explain very well EMM’s truly positive intentions and denounce the false accusations about it being an occult science practicing *magie*. In hindsight, however, Patrick explained: “They took it really badly. They thought that I was following ritual prescriptions now: a vegetable garden, for example, that I had set up [as encouraged by EMM], was seen as a provocation, even after I had explained to them EMM’s practice of nature farming. They stopped supporting me and requested that I stop with this movement. Johrei? They couldn’t stand it!”^{ix} From his preferred missionary at EMM, Papa Kasongo, Patrick had learned that all this opposition was in fact the confirmation that his aunt, who had started

a virtual war with Patrick and his wife, was in fact a witch (Fr. *sorcière*; Li. *ndoki*), who could not stand the positive aura he was accumulating through Johrei. “Over here in Kinshasa, I have learned to take these things seriously.” [...] “Thanks to EMM,” Patrick explains, “I have managed to realize that I was living in a world replete with witchcraft, and that the practices of this church have enabled me to get out of this world altogether.”^x

Soon after, his wife came home with the confirmation from a female prophet, who had divined that there was a witch on their compound. When Patrick would get home tired from work and the endless journeys back from his radio channel at the other part of the city, he would get very angry at his aunt. Both he and his wife suffered a lot from the constant fighting while on the compound. Thanks to Johrei, however, all of this started to change. As he continued practicing for several hours each week, which made his “aura” grow, he stopped reacting to her violence, as he proudly remembers, eventually responding to her attacks only with silence: “EMM has really helped me a lot! If I have been able to acquire some tranquility again; it is thanks to this church, and their prayer of Johrei”.^{xi}

The notion that Christianity is opposed to other forms of spiritual power that preceded its arrival on the African continent dates back to the early days of Christian mission in Africa. Today, it constitutes the building ground for Pentecostalism’s contemporary discourse of demonization (Hackett 2003). Thus, in the times of the early introduction of Christianity to Africa, local forms of spiritual power were demonized, not only by way of relating them to the concepts of “magic,” “witchcraft” and “sorcery” but also by opposing non-Christian forms of *magic* to the divinely sanctioned *miracle*. Additionally, the magical use of things was discredited with the concepts of “superstition,” “idolatry,” and the “fetish” implying a certain irrationality among the “primitive natives.”^{xii} A divide was opened between legitimate Christian “miracles” on the one hand, and illegitimate, diabolical/pagan “magic” on the other hand. Until today the concept of *magie* is popularly used in Kinshasa with this very normative stance: before the advent of Christian terminology, magic and witchcraft were locally referred to rather by the name of those who exercised it: the *nganga* (healer), the *mfumu* (chief), and the

ndoki (witch). Their powers were ambivalent, lending them the ability of the powerful to give life as much as to take it, to protect and fertilize as much as to threaten and kill (MacGaffey 1986, Nooter-Roberts 2001). This ambivalence was lost when Christian missionary discourse ascribed and connected them with the deeds and intentions of the devil, whose extraordinary success is due to the insertion of these terms into the bipolar dichotomy of the Christian worldview. As Birgit Meyer (1999) has shown for the Ewe in South Ghana, the devil thus became a key reference in the association of Christianity with modernity (see also Kalulambi Pongo 1993). Still today it is the devil, sometimes working with, or as, “evil” ancestral spirits, who may bar one’s access to the prosperity of a modern life. Also in Central Africa, conversion to Christianity has therefore been connected with the conversion to a new, urban lifestyle and identity. PCCs, but also movements like EMM, feed on, and into, imaginaries of cosmopolitan/global participation in ‘global modernity,’ thus co-constructing the attraction and imagination of the city (see De Boeck 2013). Especially in the city, the exclusivity of belonging to a Christian movement or church has therefore been strong since the missionary outset. Similarly, in Belgian colonial times, the qualities of being a Christian or not were categorically exclusive: “The entry into the tribe of the *Bena Christo* (Children of Christ) had to automatically abolish any kinship tie with the *Bena Diabolo* (Children of the Devil) and create links rather with their new tribe” (Jewsiewicki et al. 1995, 223-224, my translation).

This historical logic, which transcends traditional notions of ethnicity and is hence favorable to urbanity, is indeed also commonplace in Kinshasa and needs to be considered if we are to understand EMM’s complicated situation there. Here, before anything else, movements such as EMM are Christianity’s other, making them consciously apologetic about various features of Africa’s indigenous spirituality such as dreams, healing, the importance of the ancestors and the invisible world, a holistic concept of health, vitalism, etc.. While the conflict between Patrick and his wife’s aunt may very well result from micro-social rivalry or tension, both have experienced it as an expression of spiritual warfare based on this moral dualism.

Conclusion

Patrick is but one among many *Messianiques*, who have lived the effects of Johrei as a gradual acquisition of spiritual authority, which he experiences and articulates as an invisible “aura” of divine light. Coupled with the “scientific” discourse about the superior power of its invisible light, Johrei combines active purification with the gradual acquisition of spiritual strength by the autonomous person. Aesthetically speaking, it is through the interplay of silence, cleanliness, one-to-one visual inter-fixation, and a ritual bathing in the heterotopic atmosphere of EMM’s and TMAJ’s Johrei centers that Johrei leads to a gradual embodiment of difference.

Whereas Johrei indeed tunes this feeling of difference as a sensory software onto *Messianiques’* bodies, in Patrick’s case it has radically altered his approach to his religious and social others. Taking seriously Thomas Csordas’ conception of the embodiment of alterity as the phenomenological kernel of religion (Csordas 2004: 163), Johrei thus finds itself at the heart of what is religion in the African city. Far from encouraging a truly rationalizing or Marxist attitude to religion, Johrei gradually repositions its practitioners’ experience of themselves with regard to their own agency, and vis-à-vis contrasting regimes of subjectivity at work in the African city. Johrei can hence be seen as an embodied form of critique that determines and structures the ways in which spiritual selves and others are perceived and performed.

Coupled with the experience of being submitted to the violence of suspicion and condemnation, the practice of Johrei has taught Patrick to become critical of the general popular opinion about occult sciences: “The big problem in Kinshasa is that people say it is occult, they say it is magic, but nobody can actually prove this. This is what I have been concluding for myself. There is no real, trustworthy information.”^{xiii}

The same critical opinion can be attributed to Angélique, whom we encountered at the beginning of this article. If we are to understand religious multiplicity in the African city, the general climate of suspicion regarding witchcraft and illicit accumulation based on sacrifice has to be taken seriously. *Messianiques* face this in their everyday lives, but often manage to do so thanks to the embodiment of divine light as a widening of personal aura. Johrei enables one to confront, but eventually also to question suspicion altogether.

Johrei's light is invisible and is meant to be embodied, visceralized, and performed as an aura, a radiation, an energy, and a spiritual force. As an embodiment of difference and simultaneously an invisible connection to Japan, Johrei is indeed a "medium of propagation *and* a subjective perceptual experience" (Meyer and Stollow 2021, reference to the introduction of the special issue).

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ⁱ The expression “spiritual problems” (Fr. *problèmes spirituels*) is used in Kinshasa to refer to ill-will or “witchcraft” (Lingala: *kindoki*) in the family.

ⁱⁱ On the question of the relationality and multiplicity of religious life in contemporary Africa, see Spies and Seesemann (2016) and Spies (2019).

ⁱⁱⁱ The Catholic youth movement *Bilenge ya Mwinda* (youth of light) was founded at the parish Saint-Pierre de Kasa-Vubu in Kinshasa in 1972 by (later) bishop Mgr. Matondo Kua Nzambi (1932–2011). Incited by Zaire’s cardinal Albert Malula (1917–1989), the movement, still well-known today, endeavors to “initiate the young into a Christian life according to negro-African initiatic methods”. See <http://bymgoma.e-monsite.com/pages/les-bilenge-ya-mwinda-pleurent-mgr-matondo-kwa-nzambi.html>, accessed 2 October 2019 (author’s translation). Interestingly, it was also here, at the parish Saint-Pierre of Kasa-Vubu in Kinshasa, where in the 1950s the infamous Belgian father *Père Buffalo* had given birth to Kinshasa’s youth movement of *billism* (Gondola 2016).

^{iv} “L’acte que j’ai réalisé sous le nom de Johrei constitue ce qui s’appelle Baptême de Feu”, presented as a teaching by Meishu Sama (Mokichi Okada) of 20 January 1950. The last paragraph lends insight into the creative ways in which Okada imagined his Messianic doctrine to rhyme with Christianity: “In the New Testament, there is a passage in which it is said that John will baptize with water and Christ will baptize with fire. If the Flood represented the beginning of baptism by water, baptism by fire, attributed to Christ, could be only the Last Judgment that is about to come. Water is material, and fire is spiritual. For this reason, what we are currently achieving—the purification of the spiritual through the spirit—is none other than the baptism of fire. As the spirit is reflected in the matter, the influence that this baptism will have on the matter will have to produce an extraordinary change. But we must know that danger exists only through evil, not through good.” (Author’s translation of the French version that was circulated).

^v SGI was imported to Kinshasa from West Africa by a young dissident from the local MOA International branch in 1994. Just like the local “Raja Yoga” unit (Brahma Kumaris Spiritual University), SGI’s local followership is significantly smaller than the one of other Japanese new religions present in the city, and is mainly constituted by youngsters seeking fame.

^{vi} Interview with Mr. Paulin at the *Point de Lumière* of Mpasa Maba, Kinshasa, 17 September 2013.

^{vii} The song was composed by Guimaranz Mvevo. See Lambertz (2018, 184).

^{viii} In weekly sessions of flower arrangement, *Messianiques* craft little miniature Ikebanas called *fleurs de lumière*, which *Messianiques* distribute to passers-by on the street or place inside their houses to purify the spiritual atmosphere (cf. Lambertz 2018, 103-104).

^{ix} Interview with Mr. Patrick, Kinshasa-UPN, 18.09.2013.

^x Interview with Mr. Patrick, Kinshasa-Limete, 31.05.2010.

^{xi} Interview with Mr. Patrick, Kinshasa-Limete, 31.05.2010.

^{xii} See Pietz 1985, 1987, 1988, MacGaffey 1994.

^{xiii} Interview with Mr. Patrick, Kinshasa-Limete/Kingabwa, 25.06.2011.