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Teaching as Practice: Ritual, Benefits and the Costs of Devotion

Introduction: the complementarity of teaching and practice

In this chapter we examine Agonshū's teachings and practices, along with the expectations the movement has of its followers. These themes cannot be separated. Agonshū's basic teachings centre on karma and the necessary of 'cutting' or eradicating it, and its practices are meant to do just that. From the actions and rituals carried out by individuals in their homes and at the movement's centres, to its public services and the Hoshi Matsuri, Agonshū's practices are an articulation in ritual form of those teachings and a means of enacting them. They are also innately linked to Kiriyaama's life. As the previous chapter showed, the issue of karma and how it affects individual lives was very central to Kiriyaama's own life course and his understanding of why he faced so many problems before embarking on a religious path – and why, according to Agonshū, he was able to become a transcendent religious leader through cutting his karma.

Teaching and practice in Agonshū are highly founder-centric, devised by Kiriyaama, linked to important issues in his life and experiences, and grounded in the ritual processes he knew and developed. He was the key focus and leader of Agonshū rituals and practices until late in his life. When he became too frail to conduct the rituals himself he continued to serve as a symbolically powerful ritual presence – something that has continued after his death. The practices he instigated in Agonshū – notably the *goma* fire ritual – have, especially since his death, been portrayed as particular ritual forms developed by him alone. They have also been highly visible in nature; Agonshū has sought to attract outsiders through its use of spectacular ritual performances, notably the Hoshi Matsuri. It is a religion that seeks to attract attention and to be 'seen' so as to attract more members, and its spectacular public rituals are viewed in the movement as recruiting mechanisms¹ that propagate its teachings and enable non-members to take part in its events. Members have important roles in such contexts, for Agonshū makes significant demands on them. They are expected to perform practices in order to cut their karma, to take part in helping the movement operate successfully, to publicize the movement via its ritual and festival events and make these a success and to assist the movement financially. Such activities contribute to the nature of Agonshū as a spectacular religion while enacting its teachings in the lives of its followers.

Before turning more directly to Agonshū, we will return to the comments we made in Chapter 1 about how media – and even some academic – depictions have portrayed new religions as lacking in serious doctrine and depth. These depictions attribute their success to a lack of doctrinal sophistication, suggesting that it has occurred because they offer simplistic and easy to understand promises focused on this-worldly benefits and worldly advancement. This perspective not only implies that new religions are lightweight and superficial but implicitly dismisses their followers as gullible and concerned merely with material rewards. If we can distil these negative portrayals down to three basic points, they are that new religions focus primarily on promises of worldly benefits and thereby lack any coherent moral framework, they have little in the way of serious doctrines or a canon and followers, seduced by the hopes of material rewards, lack any real doctrinal awareness, and rely wholly on their leaders for such things.

None of these assumptions carries much weight in our view. Any criticism that new religions focus on 'this-worldly benefits' (*genze riyaku*) is particularly disingenuous because all this does is recognize that they are therefore highly normative in Japanese religious contexts, rather than being somehow deviant or superficial. This-worldly benefits are legitimated in Buddhist texts, manifest themes of morality, express the underlying belief that Shinto deities and Buddhist figures of worship are there and ready to aid humans in this world and that humans should benefit from the graces of the spiritual realm. All of these concepts are evident in the ways Buddhism and Shinto operate in Japan, while *genze riyaku* is a core theme in the dynamics of Japanese religious culture both historically and in the present day (Reader and Tanabe 1998). New religions have certainly developed themes of this-worldly benefits as part of their appeal, but in so doing they are following a pattern established by the older traditions rather than diverging from them. They have often, indeed, done it better, and this has been a factor in their ability to attract followers away from the older traditions, and in the hostility that they have faced as a result – a point evident in the attacks on earlier new religions in the nineteenth century mentioned in Chapter 1.

Moreover, a religion such as Agonshū, which views receiving benefits (material, spiritual and emotional) in this life to be inextricably linked to dealing with spiritual problems, pacifying the spirits of the dead and 'cutting one's karma', is not outlining a simplistically beguiling promise of 'this-worldly benefits'. It is setting out a worldview with a moral foundation that shows followers a way of dealing with the world around them and offers them the hope of attaining happiness and a sense of belonging. In doing these things it draws on some of the basic patterns of Japanese religious thought while expressing a doctrinal framework that is allied to practices designed to put those teachings into action.

The importance of teachings and texts

As we commented in Chapter 1, an element in the appeal of new movements in general has been their ability to produce a variety of materials that enable potential and existing followers to find out for themselves what the movement is saying. Agonshū fits into

this context well and encourages followers to engage with its teachings and develop an understanding of them. Kiriya's writings form a central element in this, along with a variety of other materials produced by the movement. These include various magazines as well as videos – and later, as the technology has moved on, CDs and DVDs – for members that set out core teachings in visual form accompanied by soundtracks narrating Kiriya's words. Such videos and DVDs can also be watched by interested parties at Agonshū centres – something that both authors have done at various times during their research (Reader 1991; Baffelli 2016). Often such materials reproduce the content of Kiriya's books and reiterate visually the messages within them. Thus, for example, Agonshū produced a video to set out in visual form the themes of Kiriya's 1981 book *1999 nen karuma to reishō kara no gedatsu*, including the film of Kiriya's 'encounter' with and reception of a message from Shakyamuni at Sahet Mahet in India that forms such an important position in Agonshū's history. The production of such materials has not stopped with Kiriya's death for subsequently new texts have developed; these are the *kaiso reiyu* spiritual messages said to be relayed by Kiriya's spirit. Furthermore Agonshū representatives have started offering interpretations of Kiriya's teaching and developing new strands to it, largely connected with his post-death status – issues we discuss at length in Chapter 5.

For those who want to know more about Agonshū's teachings, there are plentiful opportunities to do so via the large number of publications and aural and visual materials Agonshū produces. Kiriya encouraged followers to read such publications and listen to recordings of his sermons to deepen their understandings and to resolve any questions they had. In a Question and Answer session reported in Agonshū's membership magazine in 2012, for example, a member expressed doubts about the efficacy of her practice and asked whether it was worth continuing. Kiriya's reply not only stressed the importance of continuing the practice but also emphasized that anyone with doubts could visit Agonshū centres and have things explained to them there, and they could also listen again to his dharma talks (*hōwa*) and read his books (Agon Magazine 2012, 3–4: 16). Agonshū offers counselling services to followers not just so that they can seek advice on personal matters but also so that they can get clarifications about its teaching. As Kiriya also indicated, those with queries and doubts can contact the head Agonshū office and get detailed replies to their concerns (Agon Magazine 2012, 3–4: 16). Knowing that one can or should be aware of the teachings, and that avenues for understanding it are widely available, thus is an important part of being a member.

Teachings, practices, changes and continuities

Agonshū's teachings and practices work in tandem to provide followers with an understanding of the right way to live in this world, and to give them a sense of hope and a feeling that they can manage their problems and attain something better for themselves in this realm and beyond. Together they express themes of moral behaviour, self-development and advancement, along with a positive unified world view through which members can understand their place, as Japanese people, in the wider world

and their sense of identity as such. To that extent, we suggest that while Agonshū portrays itself as a Buddhist movement with universal aims and messages, it is at core predominantly concerned with issues pertinent to 'Japanese people' – a theme that we see becoming stronger as the movement has aged (see below, especially Chapter 4).

While teachings and practices operate together as a coherent whole rather than as separate spheres in Agonshū, this does not mean that they have remained constant throughout the movement's short history. Changes and turns of direction are neither uncommon nor surprising in newly formed movements, where an inspirational founder can frequently produce new revelations, while the contextual circumstances in which movements operate can necessitate or encourage shifts in practice and teaching. Part of the appeal of the new will always be in the excitement and sense of dynamism that it can bring – and such dynamism often means and produces changes, new ideas and new practices. Kōfuku no Kagaku provides a good recent example here. It started in the mid-1980s as a small study group focusing on discussion on happiness and truth but then grew comparatively quickly into a larger organization in the early 1990s and became more overtly oriented towards Buddhism as it did so. Texts from the early period were reprinted in 1994, replacing the word *kami* (deity/god) with *butsu* (Buddha) and *shinri* (god's truth) with *buppō shinri* (the truth of Buddha's teachings) (Baffelli 2016: 94). Over the years Kōfuku no Kagaku has included new teachings and practices, but the core teachings, based on the four 'Principles of Happiness' (*Kōfuku no genri*), that is, love (*ai*), wisdom (*chi*), self-reflection (*hansei*) and development (*hatten*), have remained constant, as has the central concept of the 'creation of Utopia' (*yūtopia kensetsu*). These core teachings have allowed the group to continue adding and experimenting with new practices, while at the same time expanding their range of influence into secular domains such as politics (the group established a political party in 2009) and education (Kōfuku no Kagaku opened a boarding school in 2010 and an unaccredited university in 2015) (Baffelli 2017).

Agonshū likewise has undergone many developments, shifts of focus, changes and additions to its teachings and practices during its lifetime. We saw this in Chapter 2, when various revelations received by Kiriya led to new developments in the movements he headed, from the focus on Juntei Kannon in the Kannon Jikeikai to the formation of Agonshū, and the emphasis on original Buddhism that emerged after the revelation he claimed to have received from Shakyamuni in India. The acquisition of a Buddha relic from Sri Lanka in 1986 also brought changes, as the *shinsei busshari* became Agonshū's main focus of worship. Kiriya's death has led to more changes, which will be discussed in Chapter 5. Agonshū thus epitomizes the tendency of new movements to amend, change and develop their orientations especially during their formative periods in the first-generation of leadership, not just in terms of teachings and focuses of worship but in practices. As Agonshū grew, for example, it developed more rituals and events through which the founder could be seen by audiences across Japan and beyond, and as it grew it began to perform rituals overseas that became central to its identity.

Such changes do not mean that Agonshū is merely transient and with no fixed grounding. At its core from its earliest days it has had a stable core of teachings that provide the movement with a firm grounding upon which to build and add new

ideas, practices and rituals. Early studies of Agonshū (e.g. Reader 1988; Numata 1988) identified the centrality of teachings about ancestors and the spirits of the dead, which were seen as the source of benevolence if properly cared for and of unhappiness, misfortunes and dangers if neglected. The importance of rituals to pacify and liberate such spirits was central to Agonshū, manifest in one of the pyres at the Hoshi Matsuri, while various practices to be conducted both at home and in Agonshū centres were needed to achieve the core doctrinal goal of cutting one's karma in order to be free of past impediments and achieve happiness and liberation. Liberation (*gedatsu*) and cutting one's karma and thereby achieving Buddhahood (*jōbutsu*) were intricately linked. So were beliefs in the ability to acquire special powers to make one's life better in the here and now and in the thereafter, both through cutting karma and pacifying and transforming the spirits of the dead into benevolent entities, and through acquiring merit by performing ritual practices associated with the acquisition of benefits. The idea that membership of Agonshū was not just about individual issues but, through them, translated into a movement, led by Kiriyaama, with a mission to save the world, along with an emphasis on affirming the significance of being a Japanese movement asserting notions of Japanese identity, was also embedded in the movement from the early days. Such themes evident in early Agonshū have remained central until the present day, as shown by Alexandre Benod's (2013) study and by the interviews and studies of recent Agonshū materials we have done in the past few years.

They are manifest also in the various publications and media outputs that Agonshū has produced. For example, a short booklet by Kiriyaama titled *Hito wa donna innen o motsu ka* (an English translation of the would be 'What sort of karma do people have?' or more colloquially, 'What's your karma?') that sets out his core views on karma and its manifestations, was initially published in 1965 (in the era of the Kannon Jikeikai) but has remained in circulation ever since; it has been reprinted numerous times (the most recent we have is from 2013) and remains a core Agonshū text. Similarly, Kiriyaama instituted a series of five chants at the end of his sermons and at ritual events to emphasize the message of positivity and optimism that Agonshū sought to instil in followers. These five phrases are as follows: *Sā yaruzō! kanarazu seikō suru! watakushi wa totemo un ga ii no da! kanarazu umaku iku! zettai ni katsu!* and basically translate as 'Let's do it! I will certainly succeed! I am blessed with very good luck! I will certainly do well! I will definitely win!'² Kiriyaama got followers to chant these five phrases at the end of Agonshū's first *tsuitachi engi hōshō goma* (first of the month fire ritual) in April 1987 and they have been key chants in the movement ever since. As reiterations and expressions of the message Kiriyaama repeatedly emphasized in his writings and sermons, of how a positive attitude is key to overcoming problems and living a fruitful life, the five phrases have, in a real sense, become a canonical text and practice for Agonshū members. They were still chanted, for example, after each speech given by Kiriyaama at the end of monthly or annual ceremonies, such as the Agonshū's *Hatsu goma* (first fire ritual of the year ceremony) on 3 January 2014, an occasion one of us attended. This practice has continued since his death, with members being exhorted by Agonshū priests to end ritual events with the chants just as Kiriyaama would have done (see also Chapter 5). This is particularly interesting because it demonstrates how a form of language, intended to enhance the interaction between the leaders and

members, when the membership was smaller and direct interactions with Kiriyaama was more possible, gradually became ritualized as part of its canon. Agonshū has also published a twelve-volume set of Kiriyaama's talks under the series title '*Sā, yaru zō kanarazu katsu*' that focuses on how to realize their aspirations. Yet core ritual chants can also be amended or expanded; little more than a year after Kiriyaama's death the movement had added a sixth phrase to this canonical core, one that affirmed the continuing association between disciples and the founder who had instigated the core five chants (see Chapter 5).

Retaining a core set of teachings and practices helps a group develop a coherent sense of identity and provides it with a sense of stability even at periods of rapid change and growth. It enables members who joined early on to feel at home and act as guides who, familiar with core teachings, are able to provide information and assistance to new recruits seeking to adapt to the movement.³ They form a stable core around which to build as new events and revelations occur and as a movement expands. In Agonshū as this has happened new teachings and ritual practices have been added around that enduring core, and these then form part of its dynamic of novelty and innovation – as, for example, with Kiriyaama's revelation at Sahet Mahet that led to the building of a new temple and world mission and the acquisition of the Buddha relic that brought in a new focus of veneration and a shift in practices.

Karma, the dead, liberation and happiness

Cutting karma, dealing with the spirits of the dead, living a happy life and achieving liberation in this life and in the next realms form the most central elements in Agonshū's teachings. Cutting karma and pacifying the unhappy spirits of the dead operate on personal, individual and global levels. The dead do not terminate their relationship with this world or with their kin at death, for their spirits continue to exist and retain a link to this world. They need to be cared for via appropriate rituals to ensure that they are pacified, attain peace and become full ancestor spirits and realized buddhas (*jōbutsu*) after death, so that they can bestow benevolence on this world and find peace and move on in the next realm. Failure to do this will leave the dead as unhappy spirits who remain tied to this world with the potential to cause misfortune both in personal and wider contexts. Individuals are subject to various unhappy karmic fates and misfortunes if the spirits of the dead of their ancestry (going back generations) are not properly cared for, while the accumulated unhappy spirits (notably, in contexts where large numbers have died prematurely and violently, as in war) can have negative effects on the wider society and world. In all Agonshū lists, in the aforementioned text *Hito wa donna innen o motsu ka*, twenty-two such types of negative karma, including, unsurprisingly, the karma of imprisonment (*keigoku no innen*) (Kiriyaama 2013 [1965]). Unhappy spirits are believed to cause misfortunes, but also to reincarnate in people and determine the course of their lives.⁴

Although the terms 'karma' (*karuma*) and 'innen' (commonly translated as karma) appear to be used somewhat interchangeably in Agonshū, Kiriyaama has indicated that they manifest differences. *Innen*, in Agonshū, refers to 'the fundamental set of

karmic causes and conditions that determines a person's fate . . . *Innen* are conditions that determine a person's fate, whereas karma is the generative force that drives these conditions, or *innen*' (Kiryama 2000a: 92). As such, Agonshū's focus is on determining the *innen*, or conditions affecting and shaping the fate of individuals, and it identifies two sets of influences to this effect: horizontal (*yoko*) and vertical (*tate*). The horizontal forces relate to the karmic repercussions of our previous lives and impediments carried over from them, and the vertical to those inherited from our ancestors (Agonshū 1992: 2–3; Kiriyama 2000a: 99).

Karma and *innen* are negative forces. Unlike in older new religions (and in traditional Buddhism), in which karma could be either good, bringing merit or bad (Hardacre 1986: 31) movements such as Agonshū that attracted attention in the 1980s have viewed karma and *innen* very much as negative forces. Both Agonshū and Aum Shinrikyō, for instance, saw karma as something that had to be eradicated lest it produce further misfortunes. Aum was particularly pessimistic in this respect, viewing karma as a dark and foreboding force that permeated the phenomenal world, affected everyone who lived in it and required incessant ascetic practice to stem its negative pull. For Aum, karma, unless counteracted via ascetic practice, would inevitably lead the living, at death, to the Buddhist hells (Reader 2000a: 12–13). Agonshū was more optimistic in that it saw salvation and happiness in this world as viable and did not regard asceticism as a necessity simply to keep the forces of karma at bay. Nonetheless karma remained essentially negative, and was associated, in Agonshū, with the idea of *reishō* or spiritual hindrances. The term '*reishō*', according to Numata (1988: 63), became widespread among new movements and in popular culture in the 1980s, with Kiriyama playing an important role in arousing interest in the concept. In Agonshū *reishō* refers to hindrances from the spiritual world (such as unhappy spirits of the dead) that afflict the living and cause misfortunes. They are hindrances of the vertical variety, inherited by individuals from their familial ancestors.

Negative karma also impacts on what happens after death; Agonshū adheres to notions of transmigration (*rinne*) and says that at death spirits may fall into the (Buddhist) hells at death and certainly will have to confront their bad deeds in life. At the same time, according to Kiriyama, being a member of Agonshū serves to ameliorate these after-death fates. Compared to non-members, for whom the hellish realms after death are highly likely, Agonshū followers have the possibility of ascending to higher spiritual realms.⁵ They are offered solutions to the problems of karma and spiritual hindrances. The first step in this process is to identify what type of karmic problem is being suffered and which spirits are causing it, and this can be done via various services provided by Agonshū. Through his ascetic practices and insight Kiriyama had acquired *reishi* (clairvoyant powers) that enabled him to 'see' such spirits and identify which ones were causing specific problems. Through doing this, he (and those to whom he transmitted such spiritual skills and teachings so that they could serve as counsellors) could also determine the ritual practices and memorial services needed to pacify these spirits and remove their negative influences.

Kiryama claimed the ability to discern the causes of his followers' unhappiness (see Kiriyama 1993 and 2000a), for instance, identifying the unhappy spirits behind familial problems. After this he was able to perform pacifying rituals for them and

gave the spirits a posthumous Buddhist name. According to Kiriya he possesses two types of clairvoyance skills. One, which is called *gedatsu* clairvoyance, or clairvoyance of liberation, is used to identify and pacify ancestors' spirits who may be causing problems in someone's life. The second, called *meitoku* clairvoyance, is used to identify other unhappy spirits that may be the cause of unhappiness, but that are not immediately identifiable in the family line of the person affected (Kiriya 2000a: 88).

Since karmic hindrances are the source of problems, cutting one's karma is the way to achieve *gedatsu*, liberation, and thus happiness and salvation. This is done through practices that also can help unhappy spirits attain salvation and peace (conflated in Agonshū under the term '*jōbutsu*' – becoming a Buddha, becoming a pacified/realized ancestral spirit). The first step in such contexts – at least in individual terms – is to identify the spiritual causes of one's misfortunes, and to this end Agonshū has established counselling and divination services that are available at its centres. The counselling process offers people an avenue through which they can articulate what they feel is going wrong in their lives, and it can be used not just by followers but also by members of the general public. While neither of us are members of Agonshū, we have been invited to undergo counselling on various occasions over the years when visiting the movement's centres. On one visit to an Agonshū centre in November 2005, for example, an invitation was extended to meet one of the *sensei* ('teacher' – as people at the centre referred to those who were credited with the ability to offer counselling). To do this required filling in a form about the 'problems' being faced (the form included several topics, such as health, work relationships, family) after which a discussion with the teacher would be set up. Although we have not gone any further than asking about the process and although neither of us has been assessed to divine whatever misfortunes might be afflicting us, or to identify what (in the eyes of Agonshū) are the root causes thereof, the process itself indicates how the movement works. The visitor or member has to take the first step in identifying the issues, after which counsellors can start to divine and ascertain the spiritual causes and sources of such misfortune and then prescribe the appropriate ritual actions that should be taken.

While the focus is certainly on individuals, who are at the core of problem solution, this does not mean that such individuals are necessarily held to be blameworthy for their problems or made to repent. Unlike in some movements, where problems may be 'brought upon oneself' (Hardacre 1986: 22), in Agonshū misfortune need not be a result of one's own failures but because of unfortunate prior conditions, such as the presence of unhappy spirits, one is not aware of. Kiriya's imprisonment provides a good example here. Subject to the karma of imprisonment due to unhappy spirits he had inherited but was unaware of, it would appear that in Agonshū terms he was not directly morally responsible for the crime, even as he had to take steps to deal with those unhappy spirits in order to move on. This stance in itself might heighten the attraction of Agonshū, since it offers explanations of problems that are within the remit of the individual without placing blame on those individuals.

While this appears to indicate that individuals are susceptible to malevolent spiritual forces it does not mean they are helpless. Far from it; Agonshū's emphasis on cutting karma is grounded in the view that karma can be eradicated and unhappy spirits liberated through practices and rituals. And here the individual holds the answer to

his/her problems simply by going to an Agonshū centre, undergoing counselling and identification of the causes of their problems, and engaging in practices and rituals – some performed by the individuals, others by Agonshū specialists on their behalf – that are designed to eradicate the karma affecting them. Practices – including morally rightful behaviour and good deeds – eradicate karma by pacifying the spirits that are an impediment to happiness, and by creating spiritual merit that counteracts negative influences and helps the individual improve his/her own mind and being. The chants of Agonshū disciples that they will ‘certainly succeed’ (*kanarazu seikō suru*) and that emphasize a positive mindset are externalized manifestations of the need to cut karma and free oneself from the hindrances of the past.

Liberation – *gedatsu* – pacifies the unhappy spirits, removes their impediments and produces happiness in this world; liberation, in other words, is a this-worldly accomplishment even as it involves dealing with the spirits of the dead. Liberation is important not just for the living individual but also for the spirits, which are also suffering and can finally achieve liberation from the ‘pain of death’ and be reborn (Kiriyaama 2000a: 238). Cutting karma leads to happiness and to success – the latter of which need not be materially based but can include leading a happy life, being optimistic and content, and having self-respect. Agonshū’s view of this-worldly benefits and success, as such, appears to be much the same as is found in the general Japanese religious context, in which ‘this-worldly’ need not mean ‘material’ but can include less tangible issues such as peace of mind and the like (Reader and Tanabe 1998).

Living a happy life is central to Agonshū. This reflects themes found repeatedly among the movements that have developed in Japan since the nineteenth century. Tenrikyō (1984, 2002), for example, speaks of *yōkigurashi* (living a joyous life). Happiness is, unsurprisingly, also one of the central elements of Kōfuku no Kagaku (Happy Science), whose definition of happiness in this life includes realization of one’s own potential, success and economic wealth. This-worldly positivism and the idea that one can attain salvation and happiness in the present life are not just recurrent characteristics of Japanese new religions but are, in the view of scholars such as Shimazono Susumu (e.g. 1992a), a defining marker of them. Agonshū certainly (as its canonical chants indicate) exudes a this-worldly positivism. At the same time, this is tinged with negative undertones and the recognition that the world is not ideal but an arena where negative forces that can cause misfortunes both individually and collectively exist. In recognizing such problems it exhibits the millennial themes that, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, have been a recurrent theme of Japanese religious traditions, and notably among the movements that emerged since the early nineteenth century. Agonshū’s millennialism attributes the turmoil and travails of the world to unhappy spirits (notably the war dead) that collectively pose an existential threat to humanity. Eradicating karma and performing rituals for the unhappy dead thus can be a collective as well as an individual practice; as such, Agonshū places great emphasis on public rituals and festivals – usually carried out on a grand scale and with spectacular effects – to this end.

This could certainly be seen as an example of social conservatism and a lack of overt political interest in changing society. By emphasizing individual transformation and collective rituals as the mechanism to change the world, Agonshū certainly eschews any idea of seeking a change in the social structure by means of protests and politically

oriented action. For Agonshū, any transformations in the phenomenal world or in the way society might operate are viewed in spiritual rather than political, social and economic terms.

Gender and female equality of attainment and practice

Despite Agonshū's apparent conservatism, lack of political engagement and eschewing of any means of transforming society other than by internalized individual spiritual change and ritual performances, Agonshū demonstrates a progressive orientation in the context of gender. Kiriya (2001: 73) has stated that ultimately everybody has the potential to become a buddha (*daredemo budda ni nareru no da. Anata mo, anata mo, soshite anata mo*).⁶ In its discussions of karma and spiritual hindrances Agonshū maintains a clear neutrality in gender terms. This is a significant attraction in the movement, and an area in which it differs significantly from what is found in much of established Buddhism and in many new religions. These have reinforced a conservative bias that places women in an inferior position in society and views them as having such deeply negative karmic forces that they can only attain enlightenment after being reborn as a man.⁷ Helen Hardacre (1984) has discussed how Reiyūkai, for example, views women as having such karmic afflictions that place them in a subservient position. The narratives of movements such as Tenshō Kōtai Jingū Kyō that elevate the sufferings and dutiful behaviour of Kitamura Sayo, a young oppressed housewife who stoically accepted her lot and worked devotedly for a husband and mother-in-law who mistreated her, reflect a recurrent theme of placing women in the subservient role they have long endured in Japan.

By contrast some of the so-called new new religions that became popular in the 1980s had a different and, we suggest, more modern view on gender, either according women the same status as men or viewing each as having differing yet complementary roles, without necessarily considering one more important than the other.⁸ In Aum Shinrikyō female practitioners could achieve similar and higher status to males, although that movement retained a traditional Buddhist view that women had 'bad karma' that needed to be overcome (Munakata 2010: 105–8). In Agonshū what mattered was how one dealt with one's vertical and horizontal karmic influences, not what one's gender was. As Kiriya's statement that everyone has the potential to become enlightened indicates, Agonshū does not say that women have greater karmic hindrances or need to do more practice than men in order to achieve similar levels of spiritual development. Female informants in Agonshū have told us that women can reach the higher levels of Agonshū just as can men, and they have contrasted what they find in Agonshū on this point with their perceptions of established traditions such as Shugendō. For example, in an interview conducted with a long-term female member in 2005, she explained the training necessary to become an Agonshū *shugenja* (ascetic practitioner) was the same for male and female members and both of them could perform at the Hoshi Matsuri. Her comments appeared to contain an implicit criticism of the restrictions placed on women in traditional Shugendō, for example, on female access to sacred mountains.⁹

Figure 3.1 A female *Yamabushi* performing during the Hoshi Matsuri. Photo by Ian Reader.

This made Agonshū attractive to women who wanted to develop themselves in spiritual terms and who were put off by the apparent gender prejudices of established Buddhism and some of the older new religions. Agonshū's own statistics indicate that more women than men are officially designated as *kyōshi*, teachers in service of the movement. In 1996 Agonshū reported that it had 259 such teachers of whom 113 were male and 146 female (Bunkachō 1997: 96). In 2016 there were 133 male and 173 female *kyōshi* (Bunkachō 2017: 97). In events such as the Hoshi Matsuri, female participants are highly visible at important points in the ritual process; it is a female *yamabushi* who shoots a series of symbolic arrows into the air to drive out evil spirits as a precursor to the ritual lighting of the *goma* pyres (Figure 3.1). The administrative chief (*rijichō*) of Agonshū has for many years been a female, Wada Naoko, and she has played a significant role in Agonshū, and especially in the period since Kiriya's death, she has delivered talks and overseen major ritual occasions (see Chapter 5). Her status, along with the visible presence of female practitioners at Agonshū events and centres, serves to demonstrate that Agonshū does not discriminate between males and females. All are subject to karma and all are equally able to cut themselves free of it.

Morality and performance

Agonshū links efficacy (solving problems), positive outcomes (succeeding in one's life and living a happy life individually and collectively), practices (e.g. rituals to care for the spirits of the dead) and morality (in which people have a moral duty to care for the deceased, even those not directly associated with them, and have a duty to act

in rightful ways) together. As such it could be seen as an example of the argument developed by Shimazono (1992a) that Japanese new religions contradict the Weberian notion that as societies undergo modernizing and rationalizing processes they become less oriented towards practices and notions related to magical and spiritual interventions in the world. In Shimazono's view new religions combine magic and morality. Their teachings have moral bases but they also incorporate the use of rituals and techniques that, underpinned by doctrinal interpretations of misfortune and its cures, enable people to better themselves and deal with their problems in this world. To that extent teachings tend to be this-worldly – and they are very much bound up with, reinforced by and articulated via practices.

Winston Davis (1980: 299), too, has associated the appeal of new religions with their seeming ability to offer emotional responses to problems; Davis uses the term 'magic' in this respect, drawing on Weber's use of the term as an 'ad hoc and emotional way of responding to human need'. Focusing on Mahikari, in which members can learn the spiritual purification and healing technique of *okiyome*, which is meant to control spirits believed to be afflicting a person, and use them to bring benefits to the person concerned, Davis argues that this 'magical response to the world' is a key feature of new religions, in which there is a 'democratization of magic' that enables followers to face life's challenges and participate in and perform rituals and techniques such as *okiyome* (302).

Davis and Shimazono have both, in such terms, drawn attention to the ways in which new religions offer people the potential to be masters of their own fates and to be active ritual practitioners. Agonshū, in offering members the means to identify and deal with the issues that cause them misfortunes and to develop a sense of positivity through which they might achieve liberation and happiness, certainly democratizes the idea of practice, and most specifically that of engagement in esoteric rituals that had otherwise been the preserve of priestly classes. However, we consider it highly problematic to speak of 'magic' in the context of Agonshū. It is, for a start, not a term that we have found appearing in its Japanese-language¹⁰ or English-language publications. Spiritual powers – such as the clairvoyance that Kiriya claimed as an attribute – are not seen as some form of emotional or ad hoc response to the world but as the product of his long path of practice, which combined religious and scientific training, involved ascetic practices, meditation and ritual studies. As we noted in Chapter 2, Agonshū views such powers as having a basis in science as well as religion, even as they transcend both. In *Henshin no genri* Kiriya set out the five powers that could be attained through Agonshū practice, but these are not portrayed as magical in nature.

Davis actually uses 'magic' as a translation of the Japanese word *kiseki* used by Mahikari; *kiseki* is commonly translated as 'miracle' and this is how Mahikari views the term. Davis (1980: 11) conflates miracles and magic by asking, 'What are miracles if not the bridge between religion and magic?' However, movements such as Mahikari and Agonshū would reject this because they see magic as a mechanistic process that has no moral dimension whereas a miracle has a moral underpinning. Agonshū, like many religious movements in Japan, uses the idea of miracle (*kiseki*) to speak about beneficial events (e.g. healing or life improvement) that happen because of practice and counselling but it does not conceive it as something associated with magic.

Moreover, the notion of ritual as a moral action is prevalent in Agonshū, while spiritual potency is produced by ritual because of its essence as a moral act. Thus performing a memorial service or ritual for the spirits of the dead and venerating the *shinsei busshari* and calling on Buddha's grace can cancel out a bad deed or force, such as an unhappy spirit. This, in Agonshū's view, is a logical process, a 'mechanism' (*mekanizumu*) as Kiriyaama has referred to it,¹¹ through which unhappy spirits who are causing hindrances are transformed via rituals into realized buddhas. For those who believe that the spirits of the dead continue to exist after death and that they have a continuing relationship with this world, and who consider that praying and caring for those spirits is as vital a task after their death as it is to care for people in life, the rituals are a means of caring, not of magic. As such there is no sense of magic within the Agonshū framework of interpretation; spiritual powers may appear to be beyond the normative human compass but they can be attained through training and the moral force of ritual practice. They are therefore *earned*, and are not in any way ad hoc, emotional and acquired as a result of magic.

Besides considering the idea of 'magic' to be something of a misnomer in the Agonshū context, there are also some caveats to be made about the idea of 'democratization'. Certainly Agonshū enables its followers to perform a variety of practices and rituals; they can serve as *yamabushi* and conduct the *goma* fire rituals that have normally been the preserve of esoteric Buddhism and Shugendō, for instance, and they perform their own memorial rituals at home before their own replica of Agonshū's *shinsei busshari* casket. Anyone who wishes to do so can engage in such practices and share in their efficacy; ordinary people are masters of their fates and can achieve liberation both for their ancestors and for themselves, thereby attaining happiness and special powers in this life, and ascent into higher spiritual realms thereafter. Nor, as we have noted, is gender an issue.

However, 'democratization' comes at a price in terms of time, commitment and money. Being able to assume some roles, such as being a *yamabushi* and conducting *goma* rituals, for example, requires training, while ordinary membership requires monthly fees and a commitment to daily practice. For some people this can be a problem, a point made by the questioner cited in Chapter 2, who stated that some people had left the movement for such reasons. She, too, was worried about whether she could continue as a member, since that required training and extensive commitments to the movement in terms of time and money, especially for those who wished to take part in the Hoshi Matsuri as a *yamabushi* or be able to conduct *goma* rites. Even individuals who do not undergo such training and who simply wish to perform personal rituals for the departed at home have to take on board an array of obligations and membership fees.

Practices, duties and the costs of membership

Agonshū in effect offers potential followers a trade between what the movement promises to do for them and what they need to do for the movement. In such respects it is no different from any other religious movement that promises rewards and

expects devotion and support (the latter invariably including a financial dimension) in return – or, rather, expects devotion and support and offers rewards in return. This transactional dimension is common in religious terms, and Agonshū offers a good example of this phenomenon. It also is indicative of the wider religious consumer culture in Japan, where religious adherence and action are rarely cheap. This is not, as we emphasized in Chapter 1, something special to new movements but inherent in the established traditions, which have numerous inherited resources and which also make financial demands – often quite high ones – on members.

Participatory religion, which is what movements such as Agonshū are, can be demanding in such respects, and like many other movements, Agonshū charges monthly membership fees – according to the female member cited earlier, normally 2,000 yen per month.¹² Members might also be expected to buy at least some of the movement's books, magazines, videos, DVDs and so on, and pay for various ritual services. They are also, as in many other movements, expected to spread the word – not simply by telling others about Agonshū but by encouraging them to contribute to the movement by purchasing and writing requests on *goma* sticks to be burnt at events such as the Hoshi Matsuri. They are also expected to purchase a set of ritual implements that includes a replica of the *shinsei busshari* Buddha relic casket, which serves as a form of household altar, a rosary, a sutra book, incense and other items that are used in home prayers and ceremonies for the spirits of the dead. According to Benod (2013: 229) and Yamada (2012: 161), the collective cost of these items is 38,500 yen.¹³ Members are given a membership card valid for three years, which entitles them to use Agonshū facilities and attend and participate in rituals at its centres, although if one fails to pay one's monthly subscription for three months in a row this right may be withdrawn (Benod 2013: 236–7).¹⁴ They are expected also to follow a morally correct path by, for example, observing Buddhist precepts set out in Buddhism's eightfold path of right thoughts and actions.¹⁵

Members are expected and encouraged to perform *shugyō*, a term that literally alludes to ascetic practices, although in the ways it is used in many Japanese religious contexts – and certainly in Agonshū – it can be best considered as simply 'practice' without necessarily any ascetic dimensions.¹⁶ Agonshū describes all members who take part in its events and rituals as practitioners (*shugyōsha*).¹⁷ *Shugyō*, in effect, is any form of activity related to the movement – as can be seen by the basic list of members' practices listed by Agonshū. This cites four main types of practice (*shugyō*) for ordinary members. One is the daily practice of reciting sutras before one's personal *shinsei busshari* casket. Another is meditation, which can be learnt at major Agonshū centres, where a special room may be set aside for the practice. A third is participation in rituals in public places in Japan (*tochi jōreihō*), in order to pacify unhappy spirits there, and a fourth is the practice of cleaning (*seisō shugyō*). This can be done at Agonshū centres (members have an obligation to assist in ensuring the movement's centres operate smoothly and look tidy) but also in public places such as parks.¹⁸ Performing such public acts is not just a gesture of goodwill and public service but of promoting the movement and enhancing its public image. It is an act of proselytization. Members are expected to actively spread Agonshū's message and such public acts serve as a way of doing this. Agonshū differs little from other new religions, in which proselytizing

one's faith is part and parcel of being a devotee. Nor is the practice of cleaning and tidying public spaces special to Agonshū; it is a common activity in several new religions, through which devotees wearing clothing identifying themselves as devotees of a particular group seek to demonstrate the social caring nature of the movement concerned. It is also seen – as is any form of *shugyō* – as a spiritually enhancing activity in which the practical cleaning of a public space equates to the symbolic cleaning of the spirit and mind.¹⁹

The first mentioned of these forms of *shugyō* – the daily home ritual of veneration before the *shinsei busshari* casket – is the one that members are expected to do on a regular basis. It is also an indication of how practices can change in a new movement. Until 1986 the core practice for members was one known as the *senza gyō*, a daily practice extending over a period of 1,000 days in which disciples chanted Buddhist sutras before a home Agonshū altar (Reader 1988: 253; Benod 2013: 234). This individual practice along with communal fire rituals performed by Kiriya would, according to Kiriya (1981: 113–18) remove all negative karmic forces (*reishō*) from one's entire familial line and lead to liberation. Performing the *senza gyō* was also a way to acquire higher status within Agonshū. Because it involved an extended series of actions, it was considered to be demanding – and to that extent could have been seen as a barrier to some potential members. However, when the *shinsei busshari* was acquired in 1986, Kiriya declared that the *senza gyō* was no longer essential to the process of cutting karma; venerating the powerful Buddha relic and receiving the spiritual power emanating from it would take its place and be more efficacious (Agonshū 1986: 26). It was from that time on that miniature replica *shinsei busshari* caskets were made and acquired (for a fee) by members, whose practice turned to worship in which veneration and belief in the salvific powers of the *shinsei busshari* took precedence over notions of ascetic practice. According to Agonshū and members we have spoken to, the *shinsei busshari* enhanced the understandings and abilities of followers and speeded up their spiritual development compared to the practices they performed prior to its acquisition.²⁰

Higher ranks and the performance of rituals

As various commentators have noted, new religions tend to make it easy for people to join – and usually also their basic membership fees are low enough to make them attractive. However, as Christal Whelan (2015) puts it in her discussion of GLA: 'Joining GLA is easy to do, but becoming a member merely lets one through the door. Once inside, the novice cannot easily be passive without obtrusively drawing attention. There is considerable pressure to become more actively involved, which requires a continuing, and not small, investment of both time and money.' As Whelan notes, members also need to do a training course to learn the basics of the movement, and also attend other seminars and show willingness to volunteer at GLA centres in order to progress further. Participation in such training seminars requires fees (around 30,000 yen for the two-part training course required) as well as emotional commitments and time spent on volunteer work. The same is true in many other new movements. For

instance, to progress to higher ranks of membership in World Mate – ranks that enable the member to perform special forms of ritual practice and learn World Mate's arts of divination – requires substantial sums of money that might amount to several million yen (GBP £10,000 or more) (Kawakami 2008: 121–2).

Agonshū is no different in that entry may be easy but progression and higher status may require additional effort, time and expense. Beyond basic membership, followers can also take part in training sessions and other activities that enhance their status; these also require additional payment, either (or both) for the appropriate accoutrements that go with higher ranks, and the training sessions required.²¹ Agonshū lists a number of additional practices and training modes that can be attained. Two involve training sessions, the *Agon bukkyō denpōkai* (literally, the Agon Buddhism Transmission of the Law meeting/seminar) and the *Rennōjuku* (literally, 'brain-refining school'). In each of these members are taught various rituals and techniques (including fire ritual practices and sutra recitation) associated with Agonshū's way of pacifying and liberating spirits. At these training events, too, members can undergo the cold water austerity of standing under a waterfall (*takigyō*), an austerity widely found in Shugendō and other Japanese ascetic and shamanic traditions, and one that, according to Agonshū, disciplines the mind and body.²² Those who complete the above *Agon bukkyō denpōkai* training meetings five times qualify for permission to perform the esoteric *goma* fire ritual that has traditionally been the preserve of esoteric Buddhist priests and Shugendō initiates, but that, via Kiriya's training, is accessible to Agonshū members (Agonshū 2014).

Those who undergo such forms of training can also acquire the rank and status of *yamabushi*, mountain ascetic practitioners, and gain a distinctive set of clothing that marks the person out as (in the words of Agonshū) 'lay ascetics devoted to mental and physical self-discipline in the mountains' (Agon Shu 2017: 13). There appears to be no restriction on becoming a *yamabushi*; anyone who joins the movement can do so, it would appear, as long as they fulfil the obligations of practice, pay membership fees, attend appropriate training courses and acquire the appropriate ritual accoutrements. Between us we have attended a number of performances of the Hoshi Matsuri and talked to Agonshū practitioners wearing traditional *yamabushi* robes and participating in the fire rituals there; while a small number have been full-time Agonshū officials, most have held ordinary jobs and serve as *yamabushi* primarily at the Hoshi Matsuri and other Agonshū public fire rituals.

There are different levels of ranks in Agonshū's system of *yamabushi*, depending on experience and service, and indicated by different colours of robes (Benod 2013: 222); the highest ranks (including the movement's official leader, Fukada Seia) wear purple robes, and those at other levels wearing orange, green or white. Orange depicts a higher rank than white, while female practitioners normally wear green or white.²³ Besides *yamabushi* lay practitioners, Agonshū also has a small number of priests who have had Buddhist ordinations,²⁴ who oversee the movement's rituals and ceremonies, including funerals and the bestowal of posthumous names (*kaimyō*) on members, give sermons and (especially since Kiriya's death in 2016) provide interpretations of his teachings (see Chapter 5). Agonshū's performance of funerals and bestowing of posthumous names replicate standard practices and patterns in established Japanese Buddhist sects. In developing a priesthood Agonshū is in effect reiterating its argument that

it is a Buddhist movement, since Buddhism has in Japan and elsewhere been framed around an ordained clerical structure. In its system of ritual ranks for *yamabushi* and its development of a priesthood Agonshū thus appears to be replicating a hierarchic pattern found in the established Buddhist tradition. This again is not uncommon in new movements that, as they develop, accord greater status to longer-term members and those who contribute most to the movement in terms of engagement, service and fees. At the same time, however, Agonshū continues to offer followers more scope in terms of ritual participation than is normally the case in Buddhist sects dominated by their priesthoods, and while it has hierarchic dimensions, it offers anyone who wishes to progress up that hierarchic framework the opportunity to do so, as long as they are prepared to contribute and participate accordingly.

Kanjin: the practice of alms solicitation

There is one more area of practice and duty for members that we need to draw attention to before we outline some of the movement's main ritual events. This is the practice of *kanjin*, alms solicitation. It is especially prominent in the period leading up to the Hoshi Matsuri every February, when members are encouraged to engage in what Agonshū terms '*gomagi kanjin*', soliciting the purchase and writing of *gomagi* – the wooden sticks on which prayers are written, and that will be incinerated at the festival.²⁵ Although rarely mentioned in materials about Agonshū or, indeed, on its website,²⁶ *kanjin* plays an important role both in what Agonshū requires of followers and in how followers can achieve advancement and status within the movement. It represents a key element in the growth and success of the Hoshi Matsuri and in Agonshū's economy, and is evidence of the ways in which ordinary members contribute to the public face of the movement.

Kanjin is a term found in early Japanese Buddhism, relating to soliciting alms for the purpose of religious activities. Janet Goodwin (1994), for example, has detailed how early and medieval Japanese Buddhist mendicants known as *hijiri* went around the country preaching popular modes of Buddhism and soliciting alms to be used in the promotion of Buddhism and the construction of Buddhist statues and temples. Donations for such purposes brought merit to the donors that could aid them in their future life or lives. Such alms-solicitation was a key activity of Buddhist ascetics and it played a role, too, as Yoshii Toshiyuki (1996) has shown, in the promotion of Japanese pilgrimage sites and circuits.

Kanjin is thus a term associated with traditional Japanese Buddhism, and a way of acquiring the resources necessary to promote Buddhism and Buddhist institutions. By using the term Agonshū is thus identifying itself within a Buddhist framework, while legitimating its solicitation of donations by using the label of traditional Buddhist alms-collection. The practice of *gomagi kanjin*, according to Agonshū parlance, enables the wider public to take part in the festival alongside devotees and to participate in Agonshū's mission of world peace, while also benefitting from its methods of resolving personal problems, achieving goals and happiness, and caring for the spirits of the dead. Many of the *gomagi* burnt at the Hoshi Matsuri come from people outside the movement; visitors

on the day may well decide to purchase and write on *gomagi*, while large numbers have been solicited in advance through the *kanjin* activities of Agonshū members.

Agonshū's concept of *kanjin* appears to have been developed by Kiriyaama during the early 1980s, the period when the movement expanded rapidly and when the Hoshi Matsuri grew from a small ritual event into a huge mass affair. In the early 1980s Kiriyaama referred to *kanjin* in various sermons, and Agonshū produced a booklet of some thirty pages about the practice, drawing mainly on Kiriyaama's talks coupled with advice about how to go about it. This booklet – the *Gomagi kanjin shugyō tokuhon* (Manual for the practice of *gomagi* alms-solicitation) has been circulated to members inside the movement, rather than being publicly available, although a copy has been put online on a website about Agonshū that is not run by or connected to the movement.²⁷

The title of the booklet clearly identifies alms solicitation as a religious practice (*shugyō*). The booklet reproduces Kiriyaama's sermons about the practice, in which he identifies the *goma* ritual and its *goma* sticks through a standard esoteric Buddhist lens as a symbolic means of burning away evil passions and desires (*bonnō*) and thereby liberating oneself. Without eradicating such passions and the negative karma associated with them one cannot attain happiness (p. 3). Alms solicitation, Kiriyaama states, is one of the highest activities possible; it is both practice (*shugyō*) and almsgiving (*fuse*) (pp. 7–8). The *goma* stick is a microcosm of the world and of the wider path of Buddhism; by writing just one *goma* stick one creates a karmic link to the world of the Buddhas and to the provision of good fortune (p. 8). Shakyamuni himself preached the importance of almsgiving as a key element in Buddhism and by this, Kiriyaama argues, he was indicating the practice of *gomagi kanjin* (p. 9). Kiriyaama emphasizes that devotion (to Agonshū) is not just about doing one's own practice but spreading the word to others, through such things as distributing leaflets and soliciting alms through the sale of *gomagi* (*gomagi kanjin*).

He refutes firmly the notion that this is in any way a business or sales activity (*shōbai de wa nai* 'it is not commerce!'). Indeed, it is totally the reverse – it is an almsgiving act of spreading the (Buddhist) law (*hō o fuse shite*; p. 9) and of understanding Buddhist teaching. Such activities are in no way commercial, he proclaims, for we (i.e. Agonshū members) are not sales people but representatives of Shakyamuni engaged in the sacred practice of spreading his teaching (pp. 9–11). He recognizes that people might feel apprehensive and uneasy about accosting non-members and asking them to pay for and write on *gomagi*, but he exhorts them to remember that they are disciples of the Buddha with an obligation to spread the teaching (p. 11). This is not just a religious activity but also a social one aimed at human salvation at a time when society and the world in general are in a precarious state (p. 13). Even getting just one person to purchase a *gomagi* is both an act of proselytization and of social welfare; if a person writes just one *gomagi*, then that person will be connected to the Buddha and Buddhist teachings, and to the good karmic connections (*en*) associated with them. This will spread Agonshū's teaching and method of enabling unhappy spirits to be pacified and become realized buddhas (*jōbutsu hō*) and thus improve the state of a world threatened by destruction and unease (pp. 15–16).

Kiriyaama states that *gomagi kanjin* is also a practice of spiritual/mental liberation (*kokoro gedatsugyō*) through which one can counter and confront one's own pride.

Feeling embarrassed about approaching people for alms, he says, is a matter of pride and this needs to be dispensed with if one is to follow the Buddhist path. Here he draws attention to traditional monastic practices of alms solicitation such as the Zen Buddhist monastic begging round (*takuhatsu*) and argues that what Agonshū members do in their *gomagi kanjin* practice is the same. The aim is not to acquire money but to spread the word and to enable other people to become involved and gain the merit of giving alms (as with donating to begging monks) (pp. 18–19). Interestingly Kiriya also notes that it does not matter if one is unable to vend a single *gomagi* because what is truly important is the practice itself (p. 20). However, he then offers advice on the best ways to sell the *gomagi*, and the booklet provides further suggestions for this. One should start by writing one's own *gomagi* with a prayer for successful alms solicitation and by making lists of one's contacts. After talking to people one knows about Agonshū, one can branch out by attending local events and talking to people there about the Hoshi Matsuri, and so on (pp. 22–9). At all times one should carry Agonshū pamphlets as well as copies of newspaper articles about the event that can be handed out to anyone interested. In such contexts, Agonshū's practice of commissioning paid newspaper articles about the Hoshi Matsuri (see Chapter 2) serves an added purpose, as a means through which to potentially sell more *gomagi*.

One can also use the telephone or write to people, explaining what Agonshū does, telling them about the 'amazing' (*fushigi*) events that happen at the Hoshi Matsuri and how they can be part of it simply by purchasing and writing a *gomagi*, and how one can do *senzo kuyō* (memorial services for ancestors) through the medium of the *gomagi*. Given that doing such services is a common practice in Japanese religious contexts – and one that when normally done at Buddhist temples can be costly – the suggestion that one can fulfil obligations to one's ancestors through the purchase of just a few *goma* sticks costing 100 yen each could serve as a striking sales pitch. One should also check whether those one approaches have particular needs or worries at the time; for example, grandparents who have grandchildren about to undergo important examinations might be interested in the potential of Agonshū prayers for education success that can be written on *gomagi* and so on (pp. 29–30). One should also afterwards call or contact people one has persuaded to purchase *gomagi*, to check on their well-being. The booklet also contains a sample experience, of *gomagi kanjin* experiences, in which a member talks of how s/he went about the whole process, including giving *gomagi* to other people as a way of making connections with them, and of how this helped improve his/her own situation (p. 31).

Members who collect sizeable numbers of *gomagi* through this process are offered rewards in the shape of spiritual goods such as Buddhist pictures, mandalas, amulets and pendants related to Agonshū. We will see this in more detail in Chapter 5. *Kanjin* activities are a way to acquire greater status in the movement, and are strongly encouraged by the movement, whose website contains numerous examples of *kanjin* activities. Among recent ones are a fire ceremony held in Osaka in November 2016, when 400,000 *gomagi* were collected and incinerated for the protection of the Osaka region,²⁸ and a regular monthly event in the area around the Hiroshima Peace Park, in which Agonshū rituals for world peace and related *gomagi kanjin* activities are carried out.²⁹ To that extent, while *kanjin* is particularly focused on the Hoshi Matsuri, a point

that recurs throughout the above-mentioned booklet, it is also a widespread practice related to the movement's other ritual activities.

A number of points are evident in the context of *kanjin* in Agonshū. It has been a significant element in the development and expansion of the Hoshi Matsuri, and as a source of finance within Agonshū. One pays 100 yen for a standard *gomagi* on which to write a prayer for success or for the spirits of the dead; when one considers that some thirty million *gomagi* have been burnt in some years at the Hoshi Matsuri (Reader 1988) this represents a considerable sum for the movement, even allowing for the costs of producing and bringing the *gomagi* to Yamashina and the expense of putting on the ceremony. If the numbers being collected, written on and burnt may be less than in earlier times (see next chapter), they still are counted in their millions.

Besides being a major financial resource for Agonshū, the practice and concept of *kanjin*, especially in the ways in which it has been portrayed in Kiriya's sermons, emphasizes the extent to which Agonshū seeks to identify itself within a Buddhist framework and to present its activities as Buddhist. This is evident in how soliciting the purchase of *gomagi* is associated with the Zen monastic begging round, and in Agonshū's use of Buddhist terms such as *kanjin* and *fuse*. It also is a means whereby Agonshū can engage with people beyond the movement; one can be part of an Agonshū ritual and make a contribution (if one is so persuaded by Agonshū's rhetoric about world peace and the like) to its causes.³⁰ At the same time, of course, the wider emphasis on *kanjin* can be viewed as another example of the entrepreneurial dimensions of the movement and of Kiriya. It fits well with Kiriya's sales talk, cited in Chapter 2, in that he sought to convince a concerned disciple that paying a monthly fee was worth it. The rewards offered for managing to sell plentiful *gomagi* – and the suggestions that one should initially buy and write one's own for the success of the venture and perhaps give out a few as gifts – also have a clearly entrepreneurial dimension to them.

Kanjin can also clearly be viewed in a negative light, as an example of what critics claim new religions in general do – namely, exploit followers and seek money. While all religions, as we have previously noted, rely on donations and funding from followers, the extent to which Agonshū encourages *kanjin* could be seen as adding fuel to such criticisms.³¹ Sometimes complaints about such matters may be voiced online by disgruntled members or ex-members³² while the woman concerned about monthly fees, who referred to people leaving the movement because of financial concerns, also indicates that this can be a worry for devotees. The insistence in Agonshū's booklet and in Kiriya's sermons that this is not *shōbai* (business, commerce) seems to show, too, that Agonshū is well aware of the ways critics (and worried members) might view things, and of the extent to which its activities to finance itself and to make its rituals successful could be tinged with the odour of commercialism and the potential criticisms associated with it.

Major rituals and public events

There are a number of ritual and festive events in Agonshū's annual calendar and in this it is little different from any other Japanese religious organization or institution. In

Agonshū there are two important monthly events. One is the *Tsuitachi engi hōshō goma* (first of the month fire ritual) held on the first of each month. It consists of a fire ritual followed by a sermon and lasts half an hour – a time determined initially by television arrangements Agonshū negotiated with broadcasting firms to transmit live broadcasts of the event to members across the country (Baffelli 2016: 73–4). The fire ritual and sermon were both done by Kiriya until quite late in his life. This ritual focuses on seeking practical benefits, such as happiness, prosperity and dealing with life problems, and the sermons deal with overcoming problems and encouraging a sense of positivism.³³ The other monthly event is the *meitokusai* ritual, for the liberation of ancestors and spirits of the dead, held on the 16th of every month. The former ritual is held at Agonshū's Tokyo centre and the latter at its main temple near Kyoto; both rituals developed in the late 1980s at the period of its greatest expansion. Like other Agonshū rituals they are broadcast to its centres throughout Japan via satellite broadcasting on Agonshū's own media network, in a way that constructs a sense of community and of mutual participation even among those unable to be physically present (74). The two form a dyad in focusing respectively on this-worldly themes and the spirits of the dead. The *meitokusai* ritual is based, according to Agonshū, in esoteric Buddhist rites from the Tibetan Nyingmapa tradition transmitted to and mastered by Kiriya, and it deals with ancestral spirits who cannot be liberated simply by personally conducted rituals at home. It has in recent years focused particularly on the spirits of the Japanese war dead and on memorializing them and paying homage to their legacy (this aspect will be discussed further in Chapter 4).³⁴ Members who undergo training in the *meitokusai* ritual techniques and practices and attend the ceremony in person can subsequently carry out the ritual at home as well.³⁵ Other calendar events include various festivals for deities venerated in Agonshū as well as divinatory activities aimed at interpreting one's fate and discerning whatever spiritual forces might be impeding one from fulfilling one's potential.

The most public event in Agonshū's calendar – indeed its main focus – is the annual Hoshi Matsuri. Since various descriptions of the event have been given elsewhere (e.g. Reader 1988, 1991, 1994; Baffelli 2016: 77–80) and a detailed photo-visual account of the festival is readily available online,³⁶ we will not go into great detail about the festival, but will restrict ourselves to a brief overview along with some observations about the key themes it involves.

Hoshi Matsuri translates as 'Star Festival' and as such refers to the importance attributed by Agonshū to astrology and horoscopes and, more in general, the idea of controlling one's own destiny.

This is explicitly stated in the presentation of the Hoshi Matsuri on Agonshū's website, in both the English and Japanese versions:

Hoshi means 'star' in Japanese, but the 'star' in the Hoshi Matsuri does not mean a star shining in the night sky.

When described in this context, it represents 'the star of destiny'.

It is this star that governs the joys and woes we encounter.

In 'esoteric Buddhism', one of the Buddhist schools, an excellent way to determine the cycle of people's luck was discovered by analyzing the star of destiny. This is called 'Mikkyo Senseijyutsu' (fortune-telling by Agon Buddhist astrology).

In addition to determining personal destiny, it is also one of the methods of improving a person's luck, by turning around his/her misfortune and further boosting the streak of good fortune. This is believed to be one of the ultimate secret methods of esoteric Buddhist prayer called 'Jokashofuku' – the miracle-working secret method of eliminating evil and changing luck for the better. This is the 'Hoshi Matsuri Goma-kuyo' or Fire Rites ceremony in which the 'stars' are dedicated by burning goma on the day of setsubun, which is a New Year Day in the lunar calendar.³⁷

In an English pamphlet distributed during the 2017 festival the explanation of '*hoshi*' is less clear and only states that Agonshū 'refers to the Fire Rites Festival as Agon Hoshi Matsuri because the fire rites are conducted in the special manner of esoteric Buddhism, as a means of transforming destiny', while the Japanese version of the same pamphlet more explicitly refers to the 'stars of destiny' (*unmei no hoshi*) (Agon Shu 2017). Consultations about charting one's destiny by identifying one's 'stars of destiny' is one of the services offered at Agonshū centres and it figures prominently at the Hoshi Matsuri.

It is also important to note that 'Star Festivals' (*hoshi matsuri*) are not unique to Agonshū but are common in the esoteric Buddhist and Shugendō traditions as annual events performed usually at the New Year, Winter Solstice or *Setsubun* (the traditional Japanese beginning of spring) (Sekimori 2006: 218).³⁸ The emphasis of these rituals and festivals is on avoiding misfortune and ensuring long life (Sekimori 2006). This is another example, in other words, of Agonshū drawing on and incorporating elements from existing traditions into its own framework. It also draws on a long Japanese tradition of divination and fortune telling, in which people have sought to discern their potential futures through a variety of consultation practices, including astrology and palmistry.³⁹ Agonshū is just one of many new movements that have used divinatory techniques to offer followers various ways of trying to ascertain and find ways of improving their destinies.

While divination plays a role in Agonshū and the festival, the movement has in more recent times amended its English translation of the name of its main festival, both to emphasize the importance of its fire rituals and to emphasize how Shinto themes have become part of it. Since the mid-1990s Agonshū, while using the title Hoshi Matsuri, also refers to it in English as 'The Combined Shinto-Buddhist Fire Rites Festival' (Japanese: *Shinbutsu ryōkai daisaitō gomaku*).⁴⁰ It takes place on 11 February each year at Agonshū's main temple complex at Yamashina just outside Kyoto. February 11 is a public holiday, *Kenkoku kinenbi* (National Foundation Day), and one reason for choosing to hold the event on a public holiday is simply that this makes it easier for people to attend and boosts the potential crowd. There are clear underlying symbolic meanings to the choice as well, for the holiday has nationalist dimensions, referring back to the mythical foundation of the country by Emperor Jimmu (the descendant of the Amaterasu the Sun Goddess according to Shinto myths). The prevalence of nationalist images, from Japanese flags to references during the rituals to the spirits of past emperors and the like, has from the 1980s onwards given the occasion a nationalistic dimension that has attracted attention from outside observers (Reader 1988: 240).

Inaugurated in 1970 as a small event it grew in size until, by the late 1980s, it attracted over half a million visitors each year, with millions of *gomagi* being burnt on two huge pyres in a sustained event lasting much of the day. The size of the event owes much to Agonshū's publicity activities; it promotes the event widely via pamphlets, many of them delivered door-to-door,⁴¹ television advertisements and the activities of its members. Agonshū is also aided, it appears, by tourist agencies and offices in the Kyoto area, which have put the event in their calendar of interesting things to see for visitors.⁴² Many who attend are ordinary members of the public who may not necessarily be interested in joining the movement but who come along out of curiosity or interest aroused by the spectacular nature of the event. Its dramatic style – involving processions of Agonshū members in *yamabushi* clothing accompanied by martial-style music broadcast over loudspeakers, chanting, ritual dialogues, the lighting and the roaring flames of two massive pyres and numerous side events (including dancing by figures dressed in Shinto-style costumes and representing various deities) – is designed to attract attention and crowds, and it has succeeded in doing so for some decades. As such the Hoshi Matsuri offers a public gateway to Agonshū, and also a means through which anyone can engage with the movement's activities and offer prayers for their ancestors and personal benefits.

Central to the event are two large pyres on which *gomagi* are burnt in the ritual *goma* process (Figure 3.2). Initially there was only one pyre but as the event grew two pyres became necessary to accommodate the growing number of *goma* sticks. Located in the *kekkaï* (the ritual arena, marked off by four bamboo gateways and with a huge altar on which are numerous offerings and a copy of the *shinsei busshari* casket) the two pyres represent respectively the realization of one's wishes (*hōshō*) and the liberation

Figure 3.2 Hoshi Matsuri pyres before the ritual begins. Photo by Ian Reader.

of the spirits of the dead (*gedatsu*). As such they replicate the orientations of the two rituals (the *tsuitachi goma* and *meitokusai*) mentioned above and combine two main themes (personal development and amelioration, and dealing with the spirits of the dead) we have identified as key to Agonshū's overall teaching and orientations. The burning of the pyres symbolically liberates the intentions written on the *goma* sticks being incinerated and extinguishes negative forces (Figure 3.3). As the flames consume the *gomagi*, they, according to esoteric Buddhism, release the wishes and bring them to the attention of the Buddhas. Fire also has a purifying dimension, as an agency removing the negative karmic forces of the dead. In this act of ritual incineration the *goma* sticks serve also as an offering to the gods and Buddhas.⁴³ Agonshū also – in order to allay any worries that might arise from the incineration of such large amounts of wood – includes a note in its publicity materials to say that the wood comes either from controlled afforestation projects in Indonesia or from waste timber in Japan, and that in both cases the movement follows closely laws on the protection of resources and the environment (Agon Shu 2017: 12).

In the 1980s the two pyres were referred to by Buddhist terms: the *taizōkai* (womb world) and *kongōkai* (diamond world). These two realms – the womb and diamond – represent the two mandalas prominent in esoteric Buddhism that signify the potential for enlightenment in this phenomenal realm (the womb), and the practices leading to enlightenment (the diamond). These symbolic designations and meanings are indicative of Agonshū's roots in Shingon Buddhism and Shugendō, and are, according to Agonshū officials, still present even though the Hoshi Matsuri has been depicted since 1993 as a combined Shinto-Buddhist ritual.⁴⁴ The two pyres have subsequently

Figure 3.3 Hoshi Matsuri performance. Photo by Ian Reader. From the Photo Archives of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, Nagoya, Japan.

been referred to as the *shinkai* (realm of the *kami* [Shinto gods]) and the *bukkai* (realm of the Buddhas), with the former representing the realization of wishes (*hōshō*) and the latter the liberation of the spirits of the dead (*gedatsu*).

As such the two pyres represent two major pillars of Japanese religiosity (this-worldly themes and caring for the spirits of the dead) while the ritual process of the Hoshi Matsuri combines Agonshū's main themes of caring for and liberating the spirits of the dead and of realizing human wishes, into one coherent framework. The pyres together also reflect the widely acknowledged orientations in Japan of its two older traditions, with Shinto being commonly viewed as concerned with issues in this life and Buddhism with matters of death and memorialization.⁴⁵ Together, they can be seen as sending out an implicit message that Agonshū is at core very much a Japanese religion that draws on and brings together the themes of its main traditions in a new form. The re-designation of the pyres and the emphasis nowadays on the festival as a combined Shinto-Buddhist rite also illustrate recent developments in the movement, in which themes more closely aligned to Shinto and to nationalist themes have become more prevalent as the movement has got older. These are themes we address more closely in the next chapter.

World Peace, internationalism and Japanese identity

While the Hoshi Matsuri exudes themes related to Japanese religious world views and Japan itself (the date itself with its nationalistic associations and the twin themes of this-worldly realization and the liberation of unhappy spirits of the dead), there is another dimension to the Hoshi Matsuri that is widely promoted by Agonshū and that (at least in theory) sits above these Japan-centric themes. This is the theme of world peace (*sekai heiwa*). In Agonshū teaching, threats to harmony and peace occur because of the karmic problems caused by unhappy spirits along with the unhappiness of those whose wishes and hopes of salvation are frustrated. To bring about world peace requires dealing with such issues, and this is what the pyres and rituals of the Hoshi Matsuri do according to Agonshū. This focus on world peace was from early on linked to Agonshū's messages about the potential calamities facing the world at the end of the last millennium and to the prophecies of Nostradamus, but it has remained an overarching theme in the movement and in its publicity even after the potential disasters of the late twentieth century have receded into history. The fact that the festival is held at Agonshū's holy site, designated as the 'new Sahet Mahet' from which Agonshū aims to spread 'complete Buddhism' to the world, reaffirms this sense of mission. The theme of world peace features strongly in the messages broadcast over the Hoshi Matsuri loudspeakers and in its *kanjin* campaigns. It is also emphasized in symbolic terms through the presence of various dignitaries from different faiths who have been invited to attend the festival; at different times we have noted the presence of Egyptian Muslim leaders (1988), Mayan Grand Elders (in 2010) and Sri Lankan and Bhutanese monks at the festival (as well as at Kiriama's funeral in 2016). Loudspeaker announcements, too, have made sure that attendees at the festival are aware of the presence of such foreign religious figures, while members of the public, according to

Agonshū, have also voiced their appreciation of being able to make a contribution to world peace through their own attendance.⁴⁶

Rituals remain the framework through which world peace may be achieved, according to Agonshū, and to this end it has carried out numerous public events with a message of world peace not just in Japan but overseas and/or with overseas religious leaders. These began in the Kannon Jikeikai period and continued through Agonshū's early years with fire rituals in sites associated with Japan's wartime engagements in the Pacific region (Reader 1994: 52) and in Japan with figures such as the Dalai Lama, with whom Kiriya conducted a fire ceremony for world peace in Tokyo in 1984.⁴⁷ Subsequently they have been held in places as diverse as Ulan Bator in Mongolia (1996), New York (2000, 2001), Paris (2003), Auschwitz (2006), Siberia (2007), Israel⁴⁸ (2008), Jerusalem (2013) and – as in earlier years – at numerous sites around the Pacific. The first of these was at Palau in 1977 and subsequent rituals have been conducted in places such as Guadalcanal (2009). Many of these places (notably Siberia and the Pacific region sites) were places where there were many Japanese war dead, and these have become the prime focus of such rituals more recently.

Agonshū's ritual services have thus focused especially on pacifying the spirits of the dead while framing such actions within the wider rubric of world peace. The choice of sites such as Auschwitz and Jerusalem, too, has clear resonances with issues of war and remembrance; the 2013 Jerusalem fire ritual was to pray both for peace in the Middle East and for world peace, and at this time Agonshū also erected a Buddhist stupa in that city. They have also – as the various rituals in places such as Paris and New York, and rituals with figures such as the Dalai Lama, indicate – served to project Agonshū as a world religion active on the international stage. Often such rituals also display a seemingly ecumenical dimension in which religious actors from different traditions play roles – something on display in the One Peace Live Aura event Agonshū held at its Yamashina temple site on 7 November 2010. This involved a fire ritual conducted by Kiriya and Agonshū devotees along with Mayan religious leaders from Guatemala, while messages of support were read out from religious and other leaders in Bhutan and Israel, and performers from Sri Lanka and Bhutan provided dance and musical accompaniment.⁴⁹ As with events in Japan such as the Hoshi Matsuri, these events are broadcast live and transmitted to Agonshū centres in Japan so that members can feel a sense of participation while seeing their leaders operating on an international stage. Agonshū's international orientations are also demonstrated by various overseas symbols that have been incorporated into its main ritual complex at Yamashina. There is, for example, a Bhutanese Buddhist Hall that contains Buddhist paintings from Bhutan, and the Jerusalem Peace and Friendship Square, in which stands the statue of a lion to symbolize friendship and peace (Figure 3.4).

Although there are clearly elements of international engagement and universal aspiration in all of this – and we have no doubt that Agonshū is sincere in its hopes for world peace – we consider that underlying these public events and demonstrations of international engagement is a pervasive sense of Japanese identity. As such these international dimensions are in many respects secondary to Agonshū's orientations as a movement born, developed and located in Japan. The emphasis on Japan as the spiritual centre from which world peace will come and from which Buddhism (the

Figure 3.4 Jerusalem Lion symbolizing overseas activities and world peace. Photo by Ian Reader.

only true and complete form thereof) will spread to the world reinforces this point. So does the presence and involvement in what are essentially Japanese rituals, of foreign dignitaries whose appearance serves to reaffirm (at least in the eyes of members) the universal stature of their movement. Likewise the sight of Agonshū leaders going to Auschwitz and Jerusalem to conduct rituals to pacify spirits and bring peace to the troubled regions of other nations through Japanese-style rituals sends out a message to members. The incorporation of motifs such as the Bhutanese Hall at Yamashina and the placing of an Agonshū stupa in Jerusalem also show how Agonshū's engagement with the world is one replete with symbolic meanings, in which Agonshū (and through it, Japan) can go out and save the world via its Japanese-centred interpretation of the causes and solutions of problems, while assimilating the wider world into Japan and domesticating it.

Perhaps the most striking example of this was at the 2012 Hoshi Matsuri. Although world peace remained an overarching theme, the real focus was very much, and understandably, on the terrible events of 11 March 2011, when the earthquake and tsunami disaster killed thousands, wrecked swathes of northern Japan, damaged the Fukushima nuclear reactor site, caused the area around it to become uninhabitable and aroused serious worries about nuclear contamination. The 2012 Hoshi Matsuri – the first one after the March 2011 tragedy – focused on praying for those who died in the disasters, rebuilding Japan and developing a new civilization (*bunmei*) out of the ruins of that tragedy.⁵⁰ Agonshū also ran several other events focusing on the tragedy in which it talked of reviving the Japanese spirit (*kokoro*) and offering 'prayers for Japan' (*Nihon no inori*) – the latter being the title of an Agonshū event involving Japanese

traditional arts and drama along with lectures in Kyoto a week after the 2012 Hoshi Matsuri. At this event various participants spoke about ways to revive the Japanese spirit and focused on Japanese ancient myths that marked the country out as special.⁵¹ While it is understandable that Japanese issues would be central to Agonshū's activities in the aftermath of the March 2011 disasters, at the same time such events also clearly shed light on the underlying focus in the movement as world peace took a back seat to the more immediate concerns of Japan. It was a further indicator of how Agonshū's universalist messages about world peace are underpinned by and ultimately best understood in the light of its nature as a Japanese movement, one whose nationalist orientations have become increasingly prominent as it has aged.

The importance of teachings, the meanings of practice

Teachings are important in new religions such as Agonshū. Developed via the experiences and insights of founders such as Kiriyaama, they provide meaningful messages to ordinary people helping them understand their position in the world. They articulate moral codes and ways of living, explain why misfortunes happen and how they should be dealt with and provide cosmological explanations relating to deities and other figures of worship and their role in the universe. They reorient the world in the context of the founder's experiences; Kiriyaama's pained earlier life and misfortunes such as his imprisonment serve as indicators of the problems that can hit anyone – even a future religious saviour – in this life and as a teaching of hope that even a convicted felon can achieve salvation and happiness. Such teachings and the practices they embrace create new frameworks of meaning for followers. They may also change in line with circumstances. For Agonshū the donation of the *shinsei busshari* was recognition of Kiriyaama's status as a saviour and of his mission to spread Buddhism to the world. It was, in those terms, a logical and reasonable thing to amend Agonshū practice away from austerities and towards veneration of the relic – something that made it more accessible for greater numbers of people and thereby, in Agonshū's vision, increased the numbers who could perform rituals to pacify the dead and save the world. Whereas an outside viewer might consider that such changes might smack of a degree of opportunism (especially given the lack of clarity about how the relic was acquired) in order to increase membership levels and make practice easier for followers, within Agonshū the message was clear. In a sense, it replicated the transformation in Kiriyaama's own life path when, in 1970, Juntei Kannon told him he had cut his karma and no longer needed to focus on a personal path of asceticism but should instead go out and spread his message to the world.

Agonshū offers followers a set of teachings that draw on Japanese folk and Buddhist ideas about the relationship of the spirit and human worlds, in which the spirits of the dead have influence in this world, both positively and negatively. To ensure the positive nature of such influences one has to pacify those spirits and enable them to attain buddhahood while cutting one's own karma and removing one's spiritual impediments. This is essential in order to achieve one's wishes and to attain peace for one's ancestors. Agonshū's practices are closely allied to, and are a means of enacting, its teachings; it

is via rituals that practitioners pacify and liberate the spirits of the dead, cut their own karma and open the way to happiness, success and spiritual empowerment. Members thereby reinforce their sense of being and take part, along with their founder and other members, in a mission to transform the world. They also, as we have outlined above, express a sense of Japanese identity that underlies and implicitly subsumes the theme of world salvation and grounds the movement in its Japanese environment.

We have mentioned at several points how new religions have often been dismissed as lacking in serious meaning or as somehow deviant and contrary to Japanese norms. The academic Watanabe Masako (2011: 87) sums up an attitude found widely in Japan, especially among the mass media, that ‘converting to a new religion also means cutting oneself off from the world of “common sense”’. However, as this chapter has shown, and as Watanabe herself implies (2011: 88), such views misunderstand and misrepresent what movements such as Agonshū are doing and saying. They fail also to recognize a central element in Japanese religious structure – that teachings and doctrines do not exist in a vacuum but correlate with and are articulated in and through practices. Far from cutting themselves off from normative values or ‘common sense’ in Japanese religious terms, what Agonshū members are doing, and are being encouraged by their movement to do, is express values that are grounded in commonly shared Japanese religious perspectives. The linking of karma – seen as governing all human activity and as a barrier to spiritual progress – to the idea of the spirits of the dead is not a departure from traditional customs or traditional concepts. Nor is the idea of ritual practice as an efficacious and innately moral code of conduct through which negative karma can be eradicated, moral codes expressed and society made better. These notions provide Agonshū members with a coherent framework through which to counter personal problems and to express their aspirations for a better world. Agonshū members know the importance of practice, without which teachings and moral codes are empty of meaning. As such they take part in rituals, at home and at Agonshū centres, and through them find a sense of belonging with the movement. The enthusiasm we have seen and heard about when conversing with devotees taking part at mass events such as the Hoshi Matsuri indicates how readily members can engage with the practices that support their teachings. Such mass events afford members an opportunity to step outside normative day-to-day routines to be a mountain ascetic practitioner and a ritual performer acting (in their eyes) to cut their own karma, strengthen their country and save the world.

There is a close symbiosis in Agonshū between the idea of a leader with special spiritual power, insight and knowledge, teachings that can be readily projected via the leader’s insights, and practices and rituals that can be performed at home and communally. Together they form a whole that characterizes Agonshū and, we suggest, this is also reflective of a wider pattern among new religions in Japan. This nexus of founder/teacher/inspiration, with messages and understandable teachings about the world and the individual, and the rituals and practices that enact and give meaning to those teachings, was significant in Agonshū’s rise and its acclamation, in the 1980s, as a ‘new’ new religion. They are themes that resonate across the historical spectrum as well, indicating that Agonshū, while being very new in Japanese terms, was at the same time doing things and expressing concepts that are deep-rooted historically.

This does not mean that a movement such as Agonshū will necessarily be successful in what it does, or that it will always be able to continue growing in the way it did when it first attracted mass attention. By the latter years of the past century and into the beginning of this one, a variety of problems began to surface that affected Agonshū's development, and that of other movements as well. As this happened, and as Agonshū moved from being a very new religion infused with an aura of dynamism into one that was (along with its leader) becoming older, some of the issues we have drawn attention to in this chapter – notably the underlying current of nationalism – have become more evident. It is to such matters that we turn in the next chapter.