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Transcending Death: The Birth and Spiritual Messages of the Second Buddha

Introduction: dealing with the death of a founder

The death of Kiriyaama in August 2016 represented a major rite of passage for Agonshū. It was already facing a dilemma that confronts movements when their charismatic founder ages and appears less able to perform the roles or show the dynamism they previously did. Even if they can still make use of the founder's presence, as Agonshū did in Kiriyaama's later years when, although visibly weak, he continued to appear at ritual events, the loss of visible vitality may cause problems. Death presents an even greater dilemma. What happens when the figure whose insights and communications with spiritual realms provide the foundations of the movement's truth claims is no longer physically present to provide a direct link with the spiritual realm?

Once the founder dies, the movement has to deal both with the loss of physical presence and the problem of how to regard the deceased figure. It also may face problems of succession and secession – something that has occurred frequently among Japanese religious movements in modern times. Once the leader departs, the question of how to continue the movement and who, if any, might be able to manifest the attributes needed to do so becomes a moot question. As Christal Whelan has stated, after the death of the founder, 'acute tension gives way to an actual crisis as contention arises over the true spiritual heir of the religion' (2015 online).

Whelan was writing particularly about GLA after the death of its founder Takahashi Shinji. Prior to his death Takahashi had conferred the mantle of leadership on his 19-year-old daughter, Keiko, but her succession was opposed by many in the movement, who claimed that when he did this Takahashi had been extremely ill and was unable to act rationally, as a result of which his choice was invalid. A number of secessions and defections occurred led by senior devotees who felt they had more right to succession than Keiko; GLA's Kansai branch, one of the movement's greatest strongholds during Takahashi Shinji's lifetime, split off as a result. So, too, did Chino Shōhō who, believing she should inherit Takahashi's mantle, seceded to found Panawave Laboratory. Although GLA has subsequently stabilized under Keiko's leadership – which has succeeded in strengthening it overall – the Kansai branch of GLA remains separate (Whelan 2015).

Another example is Mahikari, where Okada Kōtama's death led to a conflict between his adopted daughter Okada Sachiko and a senior disciple, Sekiguchi Sakae, each claiming to have been designated by Okada as the new leader. As a result the movement split initially into two and later, with another secession, into three separate parts (Davis 1980: 2–5; Reader 1991: 20). Tenrikyō, Oomoto, Sekai Kyūseikyō and Reiyūkai, just to name religious movements commonly included in the category of the 'new', have all faced secessions and seen new movements emerge out of their organizations.¹ Secessions are not uncommon, in other words, and, as the examples of Mahikari and GLA indicate, while the charisma of a founder may be highly valued while s/he is alive, it can be challenged when the founder becomes subject to the normative human conditions of infirmity and mortality. Those with aspirations to leadership – perhaps because they viewed themselves as chosen or the most senior disciples – may in such cases seek to restrict the founder's charismatic authority by, for example, depicting him or her as not being capable of conferring leadership on a successor.

How a movement deals with the loss of its foundational inspiration, the extent to which it remains focused on that founder after death or feels it needs to move on and establish new parameters are all crucial issues at this stage. The path those who are leading Agonshū in the aftermath of Kiriya's death have chosen has been to focus on Kiriya as if he were continuing to lead the movement from the spiritual realms and to use that spiritual leadership as a way of maintaining the solidarity of the movement and, simultaneously, of affirming their own legitimacy. Their strategy has been to preserve and enhance Kiriya's charisma by transforming him from being a human founder into an enlightened Buddha who remains a continuing presence and guiding light in the movement, and who continues to transmit spiritual messages to them. This appears, at least initially, to have avoided any significant secessions or overt conflicts thus far, although provoking some unease online by people claiming to be unhappy Agonshū members.²

Not only has the movement used Kiriya after death as a stabilizing element and, in effect, its continuing leader, but it has also elevated him into its *de facto* main focus of veneration. We identify this process as 'losing the leader, and preserving, elevating and transforming the founder', and suggest that it represents a response often found in charismatic movements, of spiritually transforming a leader and placing him/her on a level beyond the human. This tends to happen when the movement is still young, and often within the first generation of leadership, when a founder, having initially been portrayed primarily as a teacher and prophet, then acquires the status of a saviour or something more exalted. As we discussed in Chapter 2, such figures might also be perceived, in their lifetimes, as a living deity or a manifestation of a Buddha. In other cases it is after death that elevation to a higher spiritual level occurs; Agonshū is an example here, for while Kiriya was regarded in high esteem, as the successor to Shakyamuni and a world saviour, and accorded respect that was tantamount to veneration in life, it has been after he died that he has become an actual figure and object of worship. His charisma has been memorialized and, through the enshrinement of his relics, preserved as a material presence, while he continues to be portrayed as a living spiritual entity and key source of authority guiding the movement.

In examining these issues through the lens of Agonshū, we also ask further questions. One is whether transforming the founder into a focus of veneration alters the dynamic and nature of movements, making them potentially backward looking, nostalgic and more focused on the past than the present and future. Another is the extent to which this makes movements more introverted, conservative and focused on the cultures from which they emerge, suggesting a turn away from universal messages towards an enhanced focus on reaffirmations of cultural particularism. This, we suggest, is especially pertinent in the context of Japanese new religions, which often have a strong emphasis on issues of Japanese identity and nationalism. As the previous chapter indicated, as it has aged, Agonshū has become more oriented towards nationalist themes, and in this chapter we look at how the loss of the founder may be exacerbating this tendency. Another issue we discuss is why Agonshū's post-Kiriyama leadership has chosen to portray him in the ways it has, as a realized Buddha seemingly more exalted than the original Buddha.

At the service of his followers: the leader in his final years

Even as Kiriyama became increasingly frail he continued to play a public role in Agonshū's rituals. Although Agonshū officials we have spoken to insist that Kiriyama remained fully active in the movement right up to the time of his death, our observations suggest something different. Agonshū produces videos of its ritual events that can be watched at Agonshū centres and these often show him in his later years not speaking or doing much apart from a few hand gestures or being lifted by officials to bestow a cursory benediction. We have also observed this at rituals we have attended. For example, at the *meitokusai* ritual event at Tokyo centre on 16 May 2012, instead of the usual live ritual, a video was shown of Kiriyama performing a memorial service (*kuyō*) for dead soldiers from a boat (one of the events discussed in Chapter 4). Kiriyama looked very weak and fragile, an image that could not be more different from the images of a younger and physically strong leader that occupied most of Agonshū's magazines in the 1980s. Similarly, at the *hatsugoma* ritual at Agonshū's Tokyo centre in January 2014 Kiriyama (93 years old at the time) was unable to deliver a sermon coherently, reading the same lines again a number of times. We witnessed a similar scene during the *kuyō* rituals in July of the same year. In his later years he appeared to be more of a presiding spirit than an active performer, remaining seated and passive as other officials carried out the *goma* rituals, before he was physically carried forward to perform brief ritual blessings at the end.³

Agonshū tailored and amended its rituals accordingly because of his increasingly weakened state. The Hoshi Matsuri had become shorter for such reasons; in the previous chapter we mentioned that the event in recent years has started later and ended earlier than in the 1980s. While one factor in making it shorter was that the crowds had become smaller than in Agonshū's heyday of the late 1980s, a prime reason was that, as Agonshū officials have confirmed to us, in his later years Kiriyama was unable to last the whole day.

The ageing of the founder also had an emotional effect on followers, who were clearly aware of his physical frailty and potential demise. Attendees at Agonshū rituals in Kiriyaama's latter years said that they had made special efforts to attend because it might be the last time they ever saw him.⁴ At Kiriyaama's funeral in October 2016, Agonshū broadcast films of ritual performances in earlier eras, notably the 1980s, and many members were crying at the images of their founder in his younger, more dynamic days. Showing such films in itself suggested a sense of nostalgia for those days, while the emotions devotees demonstrated might well also have been tinged with their own feelings not just for the younger, more dynamic Kiriyaama but for a similar period in their own lives.

Agonshū thus reformulated its ritual performances towards the end of Kiriyaama's life in ways that relieved him of his previous levels of involvement, but which also maintained his presence for followers and gave the rituals his charismatic imprimatur. As such, in his later years, rather than directing the movement, he was at the service of his followers and of those who ran the movement's everyday operations. To that extent we would suggest he had moved from being the prime ritual performer to being the major ritual presence in Agonshū ceremonies. After death, the ritualization of his presence has continued, with Kiriyaama transformed into an ever-present spiritual and (via his relics) physical entity at the service of the movement.

From exalted human to living spiritual presence

Although Kiriyaama's sermons and teachings portrayed him as a role model whose path anyone could follow and stated that followers could be like him and overcome their problems, cut their karma and achieve great things, in reality there was a gulf of difference between him and his followers. There was a constant emphasis in Agonshū on his special nature as the founder, teacher and discoverer of the inner truths of original Buddhism. It was *he* who received the transmission from Shakyamuni, *he* who was the saviour prophesied by Nostradamus and *he* who was the person who could carry out important rituals to eradicate members' karmic hindrances. It was he who presided over the Hoshi Matsuri, formulated Agonshū's teachings and dominated its publications. This clearly created a cult of personality around Kiriyaama (Benod 2013: 156–8) that was reinforced by the ways in which, as we noted in Chapter 2, Agonshū portrayed him as someone with a multiplicity of skills and talents beyond those of ordinary followers. The titles and honours he acquired from universities and Buddhist lineages from other countries similarly marked him out.

Yet even if Kiriyaama had attained an advanced spiritual level, could perceive the spiritual presence of numerous deities and was on familiar spiritual terms with the Buddha, he was still a human being. Unlike the founders of many Japanese new religions, he was not portrayed while alive as a living god (*ikigami*) or a living Buddha (*ikibotoke*). In one of our first interviews with Agonshū officials, in July 1987, on asking about Kiriyaama's status the response was unequivocal: he was a human being, not an *ikibotoke* (living Buddha), a response we have heard from ordinary members as well. Unlike figures such as Ōkawa Ryūhō of Kōfuku no Kagaku, who claimed to be the

founding deity of this world, El Cantāre, and the eternal Buddha, Kiriyaama did not proclaim himself to be a Buddha, deity or similarly transcendent spiritual being.⁵

Nor did Kiriyaama or Agonshū seek to enhance his status by claiming, during his lifetime, that he had had exalted past lives and incarnations. Kiriyaama (1993, 2000a) claimed to have developed clairvoyant powers and the ability to perceive the past lives of people, abilities he used to discern the karmic forces from previous lives that might afflict people suffering in this realm. Yet he did not make public claims about his own past lives, even though (from his assertions about his powers of clairvoyance) he claimed the ability to perceive such things. While he did at times refer to Koizumi Futoshinomikoto's claim that he was Susanoo reincarnated (Kiriyaama 2005; see also Chapter 4) and we have heard that Kiriyaama had claimed a connection to Susanoo on occasion,⁶ he does not appear to have made direct and specific public claims on this matter. There is nothing in his writings on reincarnation to this effect, or, indeed, towards claiming any special past status for himself.⁷ This contrasts with other leaders from the 1980s such as Ōkawa Ryūhō or Asahara Shōkō, who not only claimed the power to discern previous lives but used that power to elevate their own past status. Ōkawa, for instance, claimed numerous grand previous incarnations, such as being the Greek god Hermes (Numata 1995: 191–205; Winter 2013), while Aum Shinrikyō's Asahara had, in previous lives, been Imtophep, the creator of the Pyramids, and the Buddha Maitreya (Asahara and Yamaori 1992: 95).⁸ It has only been in death that Kiriyaama appears to have transcended his previous human condition.

Preparations, death and response

It is clear that the movement had paid some attention to the issue of succession while Kiriyaama was alive. We first learnt of this in July 1987, during lengthy interviews with Agonshū figures in Tokyo at a time when Kiriyaama was very active and seemingly at the height of his powers. When asked about future succession, officials did not shy away from the question and replied that he would be succeeded from within the organization, but that Kiriyaama's charisma was his alone and would not transfer to others. However, officials stated, the movement would continue to be blessed with great spiritual force, since it had the *shinsei busshari* – Shakyamuni's relic, the living presence of the Buddha – and this would serve thereafter as the movement's focus, source of authority and spiritual power. Shakyamuni, in other words, would be Agonshū's main image of worship and its living charismatic presence. Subsequently, in 2014, a follow-up interview with Agonshū representatives also indicated that there was no designated successor and that the movement would be run by a board of senior members when Kiriyaama departed. The position, therefore, appeared not to have changed between 1987 and 2014. Nor does there appear to have been any official announcement from Kiriyaama while alive about succession. It would appear that from early on it was understood that there would be no direct successor and that the focus of charismatic and spiritual power in Agonshū would be placed in its main object of worship. At the same time it is not beyond the bounds of speculation that the lack of a

clearly designated successor may also have been a source of tension in the group and made those running it uneasy.

We certainly sense that his death caused problems, given that Agonshū took some time to publicly react to or announce the death. He died on 29 August 2016, but the death was not made public until two weeks later, on 12 September, when a number of newspapers reported the news.⁹ Members we have talked to appeared as unaware as the general public that their founder had died, only finding out just before the public announcement was made.¹⁰ Agonshū's official website was not updated and even some time after his death continued to mention future events, such as the 2017 Hoshi Matsuri, at which Kiriyaama would preside and referring to him in ways that implied he was still alive.¹¹ *Agon Magazine*, the movement's Japanese-language bimonthly members' magazine of September–October 2016, made no mention of his demise¹² and even after the death had become public knowledge the movement appeared to say little about the matter. When one of us visited an Agonshū centre in Kyushu on 1 October 2016, during the usual first of the month fire ritual (*Tsuitachi engi hōshō goma*) there was no evident sign at the centre that the leader had passed away and the members participated in the ritual transmitted on screen as they had done on previous occasions. The priest celebrating the rituals only very briefly mentioned the leader's departure in his speech, and the funeral ceremony on 16 October was announced among other event announcements at the end, but without specific details about its schedule. Even several months after his death Agonshū's official website appeared not to register the death and funeral. In its profile of Kiriyaama even as late as July 2017 the last event recorded was the award of a peace prize to Kiriyaama in 2016; the website's list of 'news' (*oshirase*) at this time included events such as an annual Go contest sponsored by Agonshū in which the prize is the Kiriyaama Cup, reports on the annual Agonshū ceremony at the National Cemetery in June 2016 and an announcement about the June 2017 National Cemetery ceremony. It contained no mention of his death or funeral.

This does not mean that Agonshū was in denial over the death. To some extent, the absence of information on its website might simply be a manifestation of something we referred to in Chapter 4, about the movement not being particularly in touch with the most modern technological developments. Agonshū acknowledged his death with the aforementioned announcement at the 1 October ritual, and in reports released to the media, and it held a funeral on 16 October 2017, while at subsequent events such as the Hoshi Matsuri of 2017 not only was his death acknowledged but his relics were memorialized and enshrined. As we indicate below, the way that his death has been interpreted and a posthumous role developed for him suggests that the delay in public announcements might have been in order to organize a strategy and develop an understanding in the movement about the founder's posthumous role.

A narrative has emerged to counter any suggestion that in his last years he had ceased to be active in any sense other than as a visibly weakened presence carried in by helpers to add lustre to Agonshū rituals. In interviews with different Agonshū officials in February 2017, they insisted that he remained alert until the end. One stated that Kiriyaama's handshake remained firm, that he continued to be lucid and to give sermons right up to the time of his death and that he had died on his way back to Agonshū's headquarters after having given a sermon in Hokkaidō. According to this

official, Kiriyaama knew when he was going to die and had said it would be by the end of August. He had, it would appear from this narrative, chosen the time to go.¹³ An article in Sankei Square reported that Kiriyaama continued to carry out various engagements, including his annual act of veneration at Yasukuni Shrine and at the National Cemetery as well as visiting various parts of the country before, on 29 August 2016, giving a peaceful smile in front of his followers and dying.¹⁴

Whether this is a hagiographic narrative developed subsequent to the event to create the impression of someone who, despite the visible signs of ageing evident to observers, never lost his vitality and who could foresee and choose the time of his own death¹⁵ is unclear. However, it is clear that an underlying message within the narrative that has developed around his death is of a leader who remained in touch to the very end even as he was aware of his imminent death.

The narrative does, however, appear to be at odds with the apparent time it took to make any sort of public announcement about the death. When we have asked why it took so long to make the death publicly known, we have been told that this was in order for Agonshū to make appropriate preparations for dealing with the situation. However, we have not been able to ascertain why it would take two weeks to do this, not simply because of Kiriyaama's age and frailty but because the above narrative implies that Kiriyaama (and presumably those around him, if as the Agonshū narrative insists he remained capable of communications) knew when his time was coming to an end. What the delay between his death and its public announcement suggests to us is that Agonshū's active leadership was struggling to work out how to deal with the most significant event in its recent history, while also seeking to retain its authority in this transition period. At a critical point in its trajectory Agonshū's leaders had to choose how to legitimate their own succession. Even if the plan had been for senior figures already highly placed in the movement to continue in charge, they needed to show that their assumption of authority was legitimate and reassure the membership at this time of unease.

From the evidence available thus far, they have chosen to do this by using Kiriyaama's own voice – from beyond the grave – and by co-opting his charismatic authority in this process. The comments we heard from senior officials that Kiriyaama was in good spirits and lucid until the very end, and the Sankei Square report that he smiled at those around him at the last moment of his life, provides a narrative that guards against the sort of arguments and accusations that emerged in GLA in 1976, when senior disciples, aggrieved at the accession of his young daughter, argued that Takahashi Shinji could not have been in the appropriate state of mind to properly ordain a successor. It also helps protect the image of Kiriyaama as a spiritually advanced being, preserving an aura around him that not only counters any suggestion that he might have become weak and lost his personal powers but actually enhances his power by showing he chose when to leave his body. Ensuring that a charismatic figure is not seen to be weak and reduced to the all-too-human state of age and infirmity is a viable strategy for both preserving charismatic status and ensuring that a founder or leader can be transformed into something even more potent at death. This strategy appears, at present, to be used by Sōka Gakkai regarding its leader Ikeda Daisaku, who is now in his nineties, and who has not been seen in public since 2010. This lack of visibility has in turn raised

questions of whether he is simply incapable through infirmity to appear in the public gaze, or whether senior figures around him have taken the decision to not expose him because of his frailty and instead to preserve his aura by emphasizing his writings.¹⁶

In the case of Agonshū, the group did not withdraw the leader from view but instead exposed his frail and aged body to members until the very end. This, we think, was because Agonshū has constantly placed so much emphasis on the performance of rituals that withdrawing their chief ritual performer would have created a greater image of infirmity, fallibility and weakness than would keeping him, in his enfeebled state, in public view. Kiriyaama was central not just to Agonshū's teaching but the public performances around which much of the interest in the movement had been built. He was, in effect, the embodiment of his teaching. As we discussed in Chapter 3, Agonshū's doctrine focuses on the idea of 'cutting karma' in order to liberate negative influences by spirits causing illness and misfortunes. As we showed in Chapter 2, Kiriyaama's life history has become a representation of this teaching, showing how he was able to overcome several misfortunes to cut his karma. Similarly, the narrative of his body being strong and his mind being fully alert until the very end provides a final (and decisive) proof about the validity of his teachings. In order to do this, he needed to be publicly visible, even if weak, with his weakness simultaneously denied. In this process it appears that in order to support the charismatic relationship between the leader and his followers, the leader's body needed, both in its physical sense and in its 'glorified' aspect (by which we mean how it is perceived and interpreted by members), to be put on display, controlled (and finally owned) by the organization. By exposing the leader's body and by its glorification, 'tension can be maintained in the followers' emotional connection with their leader' (Huang 2009: 39).

Funeral and aftermath

Kiriyaama's funeral service was held at Agonshū's temple at Yamashina on 16 October 2016. The ceremony (called *Agonshūsō*, Agonshū funeral rite) was scheduled to start at 1 p.m. and an impressive crowd from all over Japan and also from overseas came to say goodbye to their leader. They started arriving at the site several hours in advance and were asked to register and then told where to sit. Along with the seats inside the temple, attendees started filling a tent outside the temple and other areas that were set up nearby with television screens to broadcast the ritual from inside the temple. All participants wore black, as is customary for funeral services in Japan. However, the event was organized more as a celebration than a mourning ceremony; the emphasis on celebration was to become clearer in later months (see below) when the event came to be portrayed in Agonshū not as a death but as a transformation and as the beginning of a new era of empowerment. The ceremony (unusually for a Japanese funeral) started with music and dance performances, including *gagaku* (imperial court music often used in Shinto rituals) and *taiko* drums. A video of Kiriyaama's life in Agonshū was played to remind attendees the reason for the ceremony, and many started crying. The chanting during the rituals were performed by monks from different Buddhist denominations and from China, Sri Lanka and Bhutan, while the memorial fire ritual, called *Agonshū*

kaiso Kiriyaama Seiyū Daisōjō Agonshūsō Gomahōsō (Agonshū Memorial Fire Buddhist Memorial Service for the Great Priest Kiriyaama Seiyū Founder of Agonshū) was performed by Fukada Seia, who has been designated the official leader (*kanchō*) of the movement and is its chief ritual officer. Following this a member of Agonshū's board of governors, representing all members, expressed their gratitude (*hōon kansha*) and good intentions (*kokorozashi*) towards Kiriyaama.

The ceremony continued with Ishihara Shintarō, the well-known right-wing former governor of Tokyo who, as we mentioned in Chapter 4, had close links with Kiriyaama, delivering a eulogy describing Kiriyaama as a great patriot. The celebration continued with a long list of condolences affirming the greatness of the leader, including messages from the former President of Taiwan and political and religious representatives from Bhutan, Israel, China and Sri Lanka, as well as from Japanese Shinto shrine priests and institutions, including Yasukuni Shrine. Other organizations (such as the Japanese national broadcaster NHK) and academic institutions (including the University of San Francisco and SOAS University of London) also sent messages of condolence. This long list served to affirm to the audience that their deceased leader was a recognized authority in both the secular and religious domains nationally and internationally. After the main ceremony, attendees were invited to enter the temple building where Kiriyaama's embalmed body, dressed in ritual clothes, was displayed in a glass coffin. Attendees were given the opportunity to 'worship the founder' (*kaiso reihai*) and they queued until late at night in order to say a final goodbye. Members who attended the service later posted comments online about the emotions that were stirred and the tears they shed at seeing their deceased leader for the last time.¹⁷ On this occasion too, just as it had in the various rituals at which the frail Kiriyaama had been present in his final years of life, the exposure of the physical body of the leader played a central role in creating a community of emotions with and between members. It also demonstrated that his body was still intact – something that helped Kiriyaama's subsequent transformation. Afterwards he was cremated (as is normal in Japan) and his relics collected and placed in a reliquary that has now become an object of veneration in the movement.

The death meant that a new leader (*kanchō*) had to be named, and the person who assumed this role, as was mentioned earlier, was Fukada Seia, an ordained Agonshū priest in his eighties who had been performing major ritual roles in the movement for some time. Wada Naoko, who had been the movement's administrative head (*rijichō*) while Kiriyaama was alive, continued in that role. According to various members we have talked to, she runs the organization and is the chief driving force behind the movement now; she also performed the first ringing of the bell used to usher out the old and welcome in the New Year of 2017 and led Agonshū's New Year's celebrations (*Agon Magazine* 2017, 1/2: 1). Other figures in Agonshū have also been visually prominent in the period since Kiriyaama's death, including ordained Agonshū priests such as Kiyokawa Hakuhō, who have conducted various rituals and delivered talks (see below) outlining the movement's teachings and presenting its interpretations of Kiriyaama's post-death status.¹⁸

While Fukada has been designated as the official leader, he does not have (at the time of writing) the same levels of authority or ranks and titles that Kiriyaama had in life; while Fukada is simply *kanchō* (leader) and is referred to as Fukada Seia Shōsōjō

(literally, 'junior priest') Kiriyaama was *kanchō geika* (the latter word meaning 'his holiness') and Kiriyaama Daisōjō (great priest). Kiriyaama's continuing superior status was evident at the 2017 Hoshi Matsuri; Fukada had a seat before the pyres and altar from where he physically conducted the rituals, but this was overshadowed by another chair on a dais above where he sat (Figure 5.1). The empty chair conveyed a clear message; this was Kiriyaama's seat, the place from whence he had presided over past festivals and rituals and where, even in death, he continued to preside. As such, Kiriyaama remained present in spirit not just on the altar where his relics were enshrined, but in the ritual arena, where Agonshū paid homage to him through the symbolism of the empty chair above that of the physically present new leader Fukuda. Not only that but the empty chair faced the altar where his relics were being enshrined; the proceedings were also broadcast on a large screen overlooking the ritual arena and at one point an image from behind Kiriyaama's empty seat was displayed on the screen as his relics were being placed on the altar. The image was striking; Kiriyaama was not just presiding in spirit over the entire ritual but was watching himself be enshrined. In death, Kiriyaama was as present and in charge of the festival as he had been in life. We will return to the 2017 Hoshi Matsuri shortly.

Kiriyaama's presence has also been evident in other Agonshū's ceremonies and rituals in the months after his death. Agonshū's first fire ritual ceremony of the year (the *hatsugoma*) was, according to Agonshū's website, overseen by Kiriyaama's protective spirit (*reiryoku shugo*)¹⁹ while, at the 1 October 2016 *hatsugoma* the monk who oversaw the ritual ended by briefly mentioning that Kiriyaama had passed away,

Figure 5.1 Fukada at the Hoshi Matsuri in 2017 and Kiriyaama's empty chair. Photo by Ian Reader.

concluded by asking everyone to recite the five chants (*sa zaruzō* and so on) that Kiriyaama used to conclude his sermons and *hatsugoma* rituals. Kiriyaama's legacy was thus being continued with ritual officials and worshippers alike repeating what he did.

Communicating from beyond the grave: the founder's spirit speaks

The transformation of Kiriyaama and of his charismatic authority has accelerated since his death. Stories circulated among members about miraculous happenings surrounding the funeral, with one person posting online comments about seeing a golden dragon spirit hovering above the founder's body as if to protect it, and other posters referring to miraculous events performed by Kiriyaama at his funeral.²⁰

His relics became a focus of veneration with the power to bestow blessings on worshippers, and around four months after his death, after an initial period of apparent silence, his spirit began to deliver messages to senior figures in the movement that have been recorded and relayed to members via Agonshū publications. Since his death Kiriyaama has been referred to in Agonshū as the *kaiso* (with, as we noted above, followers being asked to 'worship the founder' [*kaiso reihai*] at the end of his funeral).²¹ The spirit messages he delivers are known as the *kaiso reiyu* (The founder's spiritual instructions) and collectively they emphasize his continuing presence in the movement, affirm his position as its spiritual leader and are delivered using his posthumous name and title Kongō Seiyū (see also below).

According to Agonshū officials we have questioned, Kiriyaama's spirit expresses these messages to senior figures in the movement, with the implication that he speaks not to one single person but at least to two senior figures.²² The notion that a deceased founder can remain spiritually present as a guiding spirit and that s/he can continue to transmit messages to followers is a phenomenon found in other religious movements besides Agonshū. The founder of Byakkō Shinkōkai, Goi Masahisa, for example, continued to transmit messages to the movement via a senior female disciple, Saionji Masami, who thus occupied the titular leadership of the movement, while Goi remained as its guiding spirit (Pye 1986). Agonshū's current leaders, in communicating with Kiriyaama and invoking his spirit to transmit messages and encourage followers, are thus doing something that is by no means new in the Japanese religious environment, where claims of receiving spirit messages from past figures are not uncommon.²³ Indeed they are following the path set out by Kiriyaama himself, in his claim to have received a spiritual communication from the historical Buddha at Sahet Mahet entrusting him with the mission of spreading Buddhism to the rest of the world. As such the Sahet Mahet message was not just the transmission of the mantle of Buddhism from Shakyamuni to Kiriyaama and evidence that sacred figures who have achieved nirvana can continue to communicate with the living, but also the foundation of the subsequent transmission of authority to the next generation of leaders in Agonshū. It also plays a significant role in the ways that Agonshū seeks to represent Kiriyaama in his post-death manifestation.

What appears to be the first *kaiso reiyu* message appeared towards the end of 2016. This was printed on plain paper, in an eighteen-page document dated December

2016 and circulated to members by Agonshū.²⁴ It does not indicate why Kiriyaama is communicating from beyond the grave or through whom he is speaking. The message begins by stating that there are two types of nirvana (full enlightenment): nirvana in this body (*uyoe*) and after death (*muyoe*). Kiriyaama²⁵ informed followers in this message that he had achieved the former (nirvana in this body); on 29 August 2016 (i.e. the day he died) he left his physical body, entered complete nirvana and ascended to the highest spiritual realm, namely, the Buddha realm (*bukkai*).²⁶ He outlined his life in ways that drew parallels with the story of the Buddha, emphasized that in 1980 he had received a 'vibration' from the Buddha when he was in India and spoke of his feeling that he would become a complete or realized Buddha before his death – and that he would be able to die when he had achieved total Buddhahood.²⁷ After this (i.e. after his death) he would be able to help and guide his followers from the Buddha realm. He states that followers might have been upset when they heard he had died but he counsels them not to feel like this. As he had explained in various sermons, Shakyamuni's relics were the true body of the living Buddha; when he returned to the Buddha realm at physical death his relics became the living body of Buddha in this world, placed in a stupa and venerated by his disciples. The same is true for Kiriyaama; while he has left his physical body and returned to the Buddha realm, he continues to be a living presence in this world. By enshrining and venerating his relics Agonshū is following the same path as the Buddha's disciples, while he (Kiriyaama) remains the 'living founder' (*ikite iru kaiso*) who, just as in life, continues to bestow spiritual power on his followers while also helping them from the Buddha realm. Emphasizing that it is very difficult to attain enlightenment, and that it can only be achieved via the path he has set out, he decided to return to the *bukkai* (Buddha realm) to assist his followers. Whenever they are in need they can call out to '*kaiso Kiriyaama Seiyū*' and he will step in to help them.²⁸ Of course, he assures them, all the Buddhas and gods (*kami*) will also aid them.

He continues that his true relics will be enshrined using the *Tōzanryū gomahō* (literally, 'the Kiriyaama²⁹ style of performing the *goma*') – the ritual method he devised – at the first *goma* ritual of the year and then at the Hoshi Matsuri.³⁰ He emphasizes that his spiritual powers have increased because of his ascent to the Buddha realm and that his spiritual presence will be there in each *goma* stick at Agonshū rituals. He then speaks of Agonshū as the only true religion (*makoto no shūkyō*); it has brought together Shakyamuni's path of becoming Buddha, with the power of Bhutanese Buddhism, and the ancient law of the gods (*shinpō*) of Japan. As a result only Agonshū has the power to eradicate the world's bad karma and save all humanity; only Agonshū is lighting *goma* fires around the world to pacify the spirits of the dead and save people. Only Agonshū conducts a great ritual event – the Hoshi Matsuri – to this end.

Thus he implores followers to strive to collect as many *gomagi* as possible for the Hoshi Matsuri so as to create the good karma needed to save the world. He finishes with a reminder of a planned future event, in which Agonshū will perform rituals in the sea areas north of Japan to pacify the spirits of the Japanese war dead, something that will help bring happiness to the Japanese people, safety to the Far East region and world peace. He then makes a brief reference to a special pendant (about which we

will say more later) offered to devotees who collect a substantial number of *gomagi* for the Hoshi Matsuri, exhorts his followers to venerate his true bodily relics and ends by affirming his desire to bestow his spiritual power on them from the highest realms. As the living *kaiso*, he will be with them and wants them all to strive their utmost alongside him to support Agonshū's ideals and activities.

A further *kaiso reiyu* appeared before Agonshū's first *goma* ritual of 2017, and this was printed in the first issue of the members' magazine of 2017 (*Agon Magazine* 2017, 1/2). Much of it replicates the themes of the earlier message. This *kaiso reiyu* begins with Kiriyaama's spirit offering a New Year's greeting, and affirming his continued presence in the movement via his relics, with the phrase 'my true bodily relics that are in and of themselves the living founder'³¹ (*Agon Magazine* 2017, 1/2: 5). These relics, enshrined in the head temple through Kiriyaama's special *goma* ritual (the *Tōzanryū gomahō*), were protecting all Agonshū members and empowering the *gomagi* they used in their rituals (7). He warns that the world was entering a phase of great change because the karma (*innen*) of many countries was about to erupt – and people are losing spiritual power because they are hidebound by their karma. Japan, too, faces upheavals but there is a difference, for it is the country where Agonshū's teaching is present³² and as such is the only place which has the teaching to liberate karma (*innen o gedatsu*) (8). Japan is destined to be transformed and become the world leader (*sekai no rīdā*), but to accomplish this it is necessary for 'all of you' (*shokun*, i.e. all Agonshū members) to proselytize and bring about the spiritual manifestation (*reisei kengen*) of human salvation through the sacred fires of the *goma*. To this end he exhorts members to make the forthcoming Hoshi Matsuri a huge success and further the mission to save humankind by bringing many *gomagi* to the festival (8). He emphasizes that his relics will be present at the *kekkaï* (the sacred arena containing the altar and the two pyres) when the sacred fire (*seika*) for human salvation is lit, and that he will be there in spirit with all those taking part (8). He then speaks again of the planned ritual services and commemorations in the seas north of Japan for the Japanese war dead and for world peace in July 2017, and reiterates that Agonshū is the only religion that has the power to eliminate bad karma, uplift people's spiritual powers and save humanity (9). As such he exhorts them to continue striving to build a spiritual society, says that he will be at their side and tells them to realize their spiritual abilities, and 'this year too strive to do your best together with me'³³ (10).

Kiriyaama issued two *kaiso reiyu* messages prior to the 2017 Hoshi Matsuri, both of which were later published in *Agon Magazine* (2017, 3/4). In the first, on 10 February 2017, he said that tomorrow's festival is when 'my true body relics' would be enshrined, and repeated previous messages that he would enter the *kekkaï* with the practitioners and do the ritual practices alongside them. He would also go to places outside the *kekkaï* where others are doing *shugyō* and help there. He reiterated his wish for everyone to do even more practice, affirmed that his spirit was striving for them to reach highest spiritual levels, talked of how they were a 'a group of holy people' (*seisha no shūdan*) seeking salvation for humanity and ended by exhorting them to strive tomorrow with him. He restated this message in another, shorter, *kaiso reiyu* at 5.20 a.m. on the morning of the Hoshi Matsuri, emphasizing again that his true body

relics would be enshrined and that he would be spiritually present, while encouraging his followers to enhance their practice.

Another striking spiritual message delivered via the new leadership appeared in a leaflet circulated in Agonshū prior to the Hoshi Matsuri in February 2017. The leaflet offered devotees the chance to acquire a special spiritually charged pendant that would bring the wearer special benefits and spiritual protection. This was the '*Saishō Kongō Seiyū daikakuson reirikishugo pendanto*' (a literal translation would be 'most victorious Diamond Seiyū most enlightened venerated spiritually powerful protector pendant'), and it contains various terms illustrative of Agonshū's post-death depiction of Kiriyaama. Seiyū is of course Kiriyaama's given name, and the terms related to it (such as 'most victorious' and 'most enlightened') are elements in Kiriyaama's posthumous name³⁴; *kongō* (diamond) is a term found notably in esoteric Buddhism, and signifies unchanging wisdom. In Shingon Buddhism it is part of the term of reverence that that sect uses (*Namu daishi henjō kongō*) for its founder figure, Kūkai, in his posthumous miracle-working and transcendent guise of Kōbō Daishi.³⁵ Kiriyaama's posthumous title thus portrays him as a spiritually powerful protective and enlightened figure of veneration. The leaflet indicates that Kiriyaama's spirit is immanently present in the pendant, which is a *bunshin* of the founder; *bunshin* is a term signifying a manifestation or spiritual presence of a deity or similar sacred entity. Shinto *kami* and Buddhist figures of worship can appear spiritually in the form of *bunshin* manifest in statues and amulets, while a standard explanation for the efficacy and significance of items such as amulets is that they are *bunshin* of the gods and Buddha figures venerated at the shrines and temples that vend them (Reader and Tanabe 1998). In other words, Kiriyaama is being portrayed in a similar mode to Shinto deities and Buddhist figures of worship, with his *bunshin* or spiritual presence, according to the leaflet, enabling the pendant wearer to further penetrate into the teachings and practices of Agonshū, and to be together with Kiriyaama's spirit. The leaflet further exalts Kiriyaama as an enlightened being whose spirit remains present in this world with the power to grant benefits to the living.

The pendant is given to those who have solicited (*kanjin*) 2,000 *gomagi* for ritual incineration at the 2017 Hoshi Matsuri. Since one *gomagi* stick costs 100 yen, collecting 2,000 such sticks (whether by encouraging others to purchase them or, perhaps, paying for some oneself as well) means that a member has collected a minimum of 200,000 yen (in UK terms as of January 2018, over £1,300) for the movement. Agonshū had previously offered other rewards for those who had solicited large numbers of *gomagi* for the Hoshi Matsuri, and in harnessing Kiriyaama's spirit to encourage donations and sales in the aftermath of his death the new leadership is clearly continuing this practice and showing that it retains the commercial and entrepreneurial spirit of the Kiriyaama era.

The leaflet also contained an extract from the above December 2016 *kaiso reiyu* in which Kiriyaama exhorted followers to make the Hoshi Matsuri a success by soliciting as many *goma* sticks as possible. He also validated the spiritual nature of the pendant as a living embodiment of his spirit, expressed his delight that the pendant, his *bunshin*, was available and affirmed that, having entered the realms of enlightenment, he could transmit spiritual power to the wearer.³⁶

The 2017 Hoshi Matsuri: enshrining the founder in his presence

Kiriyama's relics were initially enshrined on 1 January 2017 during Agonshū's first *goma* ritual of the year, at which the new leaders spoke of how his spirit continued to protect the movement (*Agon Magazine* 2017, 1/2: 2) while the founder's spirit message exhorted followers to make the Hoshi Matsuri a success and to continue Agonshū's mission of world salvation. The relics were also central to the 2017 Hoshi Matsuri, where they were enshrined on the main altar. The Hoshi Matsuri marked a further point in his post-death elevation, in which he not only joined the Buddha as a figure of worship and as a continuing material presence but also surpassed him to become Agonshū's de facto central focus of veneration.

Much at the 2017 festival replicated earlier Hoshi Matsuri. These included a background of dramatic martial-style music, processions by members dressed as *yamabushi*, invocations to gods and Buddhas, the lighting of the two pyres and the burning of millions of *gomagi* for worldly benefits and the liberation of unhappy spirits. It also involved, as in previous years, shrines and stalls where visitors could purchase amulets, have divinations done and acquire various Agonshū goods, and groups of Agonshū members dressed as various deities, chanting, soliciting alms and offering various amulets and other Agonshū goods for sale. Yet the occasion was different from previous years in three ways that signified the changes and the continuities produced by Kiriyama's death. The three crucial differences were the physical absence of Kiriyama as a living physical figure in the ritual arena, the overarching presence of Kiriyama as a spiritual and (via his relics) physical presence and authority, and the commemoration and enshrinement of his spirit and relics. Together they sent out a potent message reinforced by the narrative broadcast over loudspeakers, by Agonshū's subsequent report of the event, and by the explanation – by an Agonshū priest – of the meanings of Kiriyama's demise that was published in the Agon members' magazine after the Hoshi Matsuri.

On its website and in pre-festival publicity, Agonshū offered people the opportunity to offer 'prayers to the great spiritual power of a Buddha!'³⁷ Accompanying this invocation was a photograph of Kiriyama and a message about the 'manifestation of the spiritual power' (*reiriki kengen*) of the founder.³⁸ Kiriyama was hailed as a Buddha whose spirit would be present at the festival – a promise that Kiriyama had already made in a *kaiso reiyu* prior to the event – and the 2017 Hoshi Matsuri was proclaimed as the 'festival of the great rebirth of the second Buddha' (*dai ni no budda oofukkatsu sai*). At the festival loudspeaker announcements informed the gathered throng that Kiriyama was now the 'second Buddha' (*dai ni no budda*) who had joined the 'first Buddha' (*dai ichi no budda*) Shakyamuni, the *shinsei busshari* who was Agonshū's main image of worship.³⁹

The festival started, according to Agonshū's subsequent report, with a ritual in the main temple at which the bodily relics of the living (*ikeru*) Agonshū founder Kiriyama Seiyū Daishōjō Geika (his title when alive) were 'reverently accepted' (*hōtaisare*) on a Shinto-style *mikoshi* and carried by Shinto priests in procession (Figure 5.2),

Figure 5.2 Shrine maidens (*miko*) and Shinto priests at the Hoshi Matsuri. Photo by Ian Reader.

accompanied by music, chants and Agonshū practitioners in *yamabushi* garb, to the main ritual arena (*kekkaï*). The Agonshū report thus conveyed the message that Kiriyaama, although dead, was still alive and it reinforced this by using the title he had when alive. The casket containing the relics was draped in a gold cloth and before it were placed Kiriyaama's personal ritual implements. The arena was covered with a layer of snow but, according to the magazine report, as the relics were brought down to it, the snow stopped, the clouds cleared and the sun burst through.⁴⁰ The relics were then ritually enshrined on the altar in an extended process in which Shinto priests offered prayers and invocations, Shinto shrine maidens performed traditional Shinto *kagura* ritual dances and various *yamabushi* practitioners made offerings. A *yamabushi mondō* (dialogue) was broadcast outlining Kiriyaama's achievements in life and attributing all manner of innovations, spectacular spiritual deeds and accomplishments to him. Fukada Seia, as Agonshū's chief ritualist and *kanchō*, oversaw the process although, as we noted above, Kiriyaama's empty chair indicated who the presiding spirit was – a point affirmed in the subsequent *Agon Magazine* report that stated that Kiriyaama's spirit had presided over the whole affair and that everyone present had felt the spiritual power of the 'second Buddha's vibration' (*Agon Magazine* 2017, 3/4: 20, 34).

The relic casket, draped with gold cloth, was then carried by a *yamabushi* to the altar and placed there, strikingly (to our eye), in front of the *shinsei busshari* casket of Shakyamuni in a way that partially obscured the latter. As this enshrinement was taking place, the riveting image mentioned earlier, of the view from Kiriyaama's empty chair

facing the altar, appeared on the large screen, to transmit the message that Kiriyaama was not simply overseeing the ritual but was ‘watching’ and presiding over his own enshrinement. Throughout this process the loudspeaker commentary highlighted his life and achievements, from his mastery of various ascetic and esoteric practices, to his founding of Agonshū, his mission of world salvation, the establishment of ‘original Buddhism’ and of ‘complete Buddhism’, and his activities in discovering the path to spiritual liberation (*gedatsu*) and the pacification of unhappy spirits. Not only had he unified Buddhism but he had also united the (Shinto) *kami* and the Buddhas, and striven for world peace and the salvation of humanity (*jinrui kyūsai*) via numerous rituals around the world.

His international profile was emphasized with a recitation of how he had been recognized through honours and titles bestowed by Buddhists in other countries. The entire narrative emphasized what had been manifest via the various *kaiso reiyu* and leaflets cited above: that Kiriyaama was no longer a human founder but a spiritual presence and figure of worship, on a level with the Buddha. *Agon Magazine*, the Japanese-language members’ magazine, elaborated further on this by reminding followers of how in 1980 Kiriyaama had received the vibration at Sahet Mahet in India, followed by the true Buddha relics (*shinsei busshari*) and how, through these, Shakyamuni was enshrined at temple as the ‘*dai ichi no budda*’. With the addition of Kiriyaama’s relics as the ‘second Buddha’ the sacred site had now become the incomparable sacred centre of complete Buddhism.⁴¹ Agonshū was proclaimed as the ‘group of holy people’ (*seisha no shūdan*) dedicated to transmitting the true law (*shōbō*)⁴² in order to save all humanity. If the first stage in the ritual transformation of Kiriyaama had occurred at his funeral in October 2016 when followers were encouraged to ‘worship the founder’ as he remained bodily intact prior to cremation, the Hoshi Matsuri represented the completion of this process of turning him into a figure of worship materially enshrined through his relics so that he could be ever-present hereafter. It was also, according to Agonshū, a turning point for the movement; with ‘the festival of the rebirth of the second Buddha’ Agonshū’s mission of spiritual awakening aimed at cutting the world’s karma was starting in earnest (*Agon Magazine* 2017, 3/4: 46). As such Kiriyaama’s death and enshrinement were not end or crisis points in the movement’s history or in the life trajectory of its founder, but points of departure and of a new beginning in the mission to save humanity and realize a new era filled with sacred spiritual light.

In the same *Agon* members’ magazine devotees who participated in the festival reiterated such themes, and indicated that the promise made by their founder in his spiritual messages, to be present with them and oversee their practices at the Hoshi Matsuri, had been fulfilled. They spoke of how they had been together with their ‘sacred teacher’ (*seishi*, one of the terms of endearment and veneration used for Kiriyaama) at the holy fires, that they had felt that Kiriyaama’s power was with them and of how it had spread through the *goma* sticks and amulets onto the attendees (*Agon Magazine* 2017, 3/4: 64–72). This magazine account thus affirms the view promoted by the movement that Kiriyaama remains spiritually present and that, despite his physical demise, his power permeates every activity it undertakes.

Elevating the founder, surpassing the Buddha

The 2017 Hoshi Matsuri was all about Kiriyaama in ways that appeared to eclipse Agonshū's main image of worship, the *shinsei busshari* of the Buddha Shakyamuni. Although Agonshū had previously described the *shinsei busshari* relic as the manifestation of the living Shakyamuni and the highest figure of worship in Buddhism,⁴³ by proclaiming Kiriyaama as the second Buddha it appeared to raise him to a similar category. Yet it went further than that. The symbolic imagery of the Hoshi Matsuri enshrinement, in which Kiriyaama's reliquary was placed on the altar in front of the *shinsei busshari* casket, suggested that his relics were taking precedence over the *shinsei busshari* and that the deceased founder's spirit was surpassing that of Shakyamuni.

These themes were developed further by the Agonshū priest Kiyokawa Hakuhō in an article in *Agon Magazine* that followed on from its report on the 2017 Hoshi Matsuri (Kiyokawa 2017). In it Kiyokawa expanded on the symbolic themes of the festival and explained how Agonshū regarded its departed founder. The following is a summary of Kiyokawa's article, which was underpinned by extensive references to Kiriyaama's own writings.

According to Kiyokawa, while Shakyamuni is the 'first Buddha', the focus of his discussion is the 'second Buddha' (*dai ni no budda*, i.e. Kiriyaama). He repeats the story of how Kiriyaama turned to Buddhism, saw the truth in the Āgamas and established the correct way of becoming a Buddha (*jōbutsuhō*). Shakyamuni had died over 2,000 years ago, Kiyokawa reminded readers, and now there was a need for a new Buddha (*nyorai*) to promulgate true Buddhism for this current age. This Buddha is the *kaiso* (i.e. Kiriyaama) (Kiyokawa 2017: 48) who has come to bring salvation to all. Kiyokawa emphasized the importance of the Sahet Mahet vibration, through which Shakyamuni transmitted his spiritual fiat to Kiriyaama, and through which the world's sacred centre moved to Japan (48), a transmission subsequently affirmed by the 1986 donation of the Buddha relic from Sri Lanka. According to Kiyokawa, Kiriyaama also received vibrations from the Buddha relic and became the mediator of the *shinsei busshari*'s sacred power. This gives Agonshū a special link to Shakyamuni because Kiriyaama was the direct disciple (*deshi*) of the first Buddha (48–9).

In August 2016, during an Agonshū ritual, Kiriyaama attained complete buddhahood⁴⁴ (*kanzen na budda to nararemashta*) and this and his direct link to the *dai ichi no budda* meant that henceforth Agonshū followers, as disciples of the *kaiso*, could receive the spiritual power of Buddha and themselves attain buddhahood. Kiyokawa then explained the difference between the two Buddhas (Shakyamuni and Kiriyaama); the former's power can only be accessed indirectly (*masetsu*) and mediated via Kiriyaama, whereas the powers of the 'second Buddha' Kiriyaama can be directly accessed by devotees (Kiyokawa 2017: 49).

Not only is the *dai ni no budda* directly accessible but he appears to be more powerful than the original Buddha. According to Kiyokawa, Shakyamuni developed a system for cutting karma and enhancing spiritual awareness that was pertinent for the times in which he lived. However, that was a simpler world than now. Because of rapid changes and increasing numbers of people today Shakyamuni's system was no longer sufficient to save everyone; the world needed a new way to develop the spiritual power

of greater numbers of people. This, Kiyokawa stated, was what Kiriyaama, the second Buddha, had done; he had made Shakyamuni's system more powerful by incorporating elements from Bhutanese Buddhism – the most powerful and dynamic strand within the Tibetan lineage of Buddhism – that were not known in Shakyamuni's time, thereby creating a 'complete Buddhism' (*kanzen bukkō*). To this 'complete Buddhism' he had further added the power of the Shinto gods. To this extent Agonshū's association with Shinto that we reported on in Chapter 4 serves not just as evidence of how Agonshū has embraced nationalism and developed links to the wider frameworks of religion in Japan, but it provides a mechanism whereby the movement can claim it has both made Buddhism complete and gone beyond it.

As such Agonshū is more powerful than earlier Buddhism while the 'second Buddha' has manifested greater powers of salvation than the first Buddha (Kiyokawa 2017: 49).⁴⁵ It was Kiriyaama (rather than Shakyamuni) who developed the teaching of the Āgamas, the core sutras of Buddhism. Kiriyaama not only received Shakyamuni's imprimatur but had also been identified by Nostradamus's prophecies as the saviour destined to lead the world out of turmoil. His power was enhanced because it was combined with that of Shakyamuni. Moreover his spiritual standing had been recognized by various influential forces around the world, with Kiriyaama's meeting with the Pope cited as an example of this.

Kiriyaama's role as a world saviour came at a turning point in history according to Kiyokawa, for Christian power (i.e. the power of Western states) is coming to an end. Kiriyaama had said, in his book *1999 nen karuma to reishō kara no dasshutsu karuma*, that Nostradamus's prophecies signified the end of the era in which Christian Western culture dominated the world. Kiyokawa now confirmed that this was the case; Western culture and Christianity are at a point of implosion due to their emphasis on materialism (Kiyokawa 2017: 54). We are now at a time when the world needs a Buddhist spiritual culture inspired by the power of the *dai ni no budda* to eradicate the destructive karma of Christian-inspired culture and materialism and to heighten spiritual awareness (54–5). Citing Agonshū's rituals for peace around the world in places such as Jerusalem as examples of this process in action, Kiyokawa further emphasized the ability of Agonshū to enable the spirits of the dead to attain buddhahood, because it possesses the power of Kiriyaama the second Buddha (56).

Kiyokawa then thanked the founder (*kaiso*) for all of this. While cautioning followers that the founder had said that the world is in crisis Kiyokawa reminded them that he had also told followers that they were destined to build a new realm of light and peace. Kiriyaama's return to this world as the *dai ni no budda* was in order to realize this. The *kaiso*, Kiyokawa (2017: 57) concluded, had explained everything and all we (i.e. his disciples) needed to do was to walk the path outlined by him and unflinchingly realize the ideals and vows of the holy teacher (*seishi*).

The Northern Seas, the spirits of the dead, the *kami* and reflections on the war

We will discuss some of the implications of the spirit messages, enshrinement and posthumous treatment of Kiriyaama shortly. First we wish to look at another significant

event carried out by Agonshū after Kiriyaama's death that was in the pipeline before he died. This was the *Hoppō Yōjō hōyō* or Northern Seas memorial service, of June 2017, another in the series of rituals for the spirits of the war dead carried out by Agonshū in regions where battles and losses of life had occurred during the Pacific War. The Northern Seas event involved memorial services at sea and *goma* rituals on the island of Sakhalin (now belonging to Russia but formerly Japanese) for the Japanese who lost their lives in the naval encounters between Japan and Russia at the end of the war. Kiriyaama had, according to Agonshū, wanted to do this ritual and, as was indicated above, his spirit had reminded followers about this plan and about his wish that it would be fulfilled.

The preparations for the event were reported in the Agon members' magazine for May–June 2017 (*Agon Magazine* 2017, 5/6), while a series of newspaper reports that Agonshū displays on its website afterwards have provided accounts (from an Agonshū perspective) of the event.⁴⁶ On 9 April 2017, Agonshū held a special meeting to highlight the forthcoming event. Interestingly, on this occasion, there was no *kaiso reiyū*; instead, Wada Naoko, the administrative head, spoke on Kiriyaama's behalf, reporting various things he had said to her and reiterating that it had been the *kaiso*'s wish that this venture would take place and be a great success. As Kiriyaama's disciples (*deshi*) she and the movement's members had a duty to continue his work.

She mentioned various previous rituals Kiriyaama had done for the war dead and stated that he would be present (in the form of his relics, which Agonshū was taking on board the ship) for the coming event. Its aim was not just to perform pacification rituals for the Japanese war dead and for the protection of country. Before 1945 the northern islands such as Sakhalin had been Japanese territory and on them were Shinto shrines enshrining Japanese deities (*kami*). The shrines had disappeared at the end of war (when the islands were taken over by Russia) and hence the *kami* there had no home. So, besides pacifying and repatriating the spirits of the Japanese war dead, the aim was also to bring the *kami* who had lost their shrines, back to Japan and give them a home there. This again was the founder's wish.

Wada then turned to recent world events, including an American missile strike on war-torn Syria that had occurred just two days previously on 7 April 2017, to highlight the continuing dangers the world faced, and to reiterate Kiriyaama's message about Japan's role as a peace-bringer; the founder had told her that there is no country as blessed and peaceful as Japan. Moreover, Wada said, they (in Japan) were fortunate to have the *kaiso* to teach and help them become a great religious movement working not only for their own sakes but also for the whole world. Repeating an early spirit message of Kiriyaama she spoke of the world in turmoil and of the need to build a *seisha no shūdan*, a group of holy people, in order to save Japan and carry out Agonshū's mission of realizing world peace through prayer. Only Japan could do this; emphasizing that this had been a recurrent theme of Kiriyaama's talks, she said it was their duty to achieve his wishes via events such as the *Hoppō Yōjō hōyō* to cut Japan's karma and make the country the world's leader. Repeating Kiriyaama's standard exhortations, she ended by asking everyone to work together to achieve his wishes (*Agon Magazine* 2017, 5/6: 25–31).

The magazine followed this account by reporting an invited lecture (titled *Hoppō no eirei he no omoi* 'thoughts about the spirits of the northern seas') given to Agonshū

members by Kamijima Yoshirō on the day before Wada's talk. Kamijima was a journalist who had interviewed Kiriyaama on many occasions, and who has written for the *Sankei Shinbun*. He subsequently wrote a positive article about the Northern Seas ritual (in which he participated) for the *Sankei Shinbun* – an article now displayed also on Agonshū's website.⁴⁷ In his lecture Kamijima outlined nationalist revisionist views about the war that reiterated and intensified Kiriyaama's comments, cited in the previous chapter and reported in the *Sankei Shinbun* in 2012, in which Kiriyaama claimed that Japan was forced to go to war because of Western colonial policies and to defend itself. Kamijima emphasized Kiriyaama's patriotism, citing his visits to Yasukuni Shrine and Kiriyaama's frequent comments about how fortunate he was to have been born Japanese. Kiriyaama, Kamijima noted, had also emphasized the importance of ancestors and had told him that the Japanese would have no future if they failed to pay attention to them. Kamijima then showed the audience a map of Asia before the Pacific War – a map showing that, apart from Japan and Thailand, the region had been colonized and dominated by white Western colonial powers. While Japan had expanded into Korea and elsewhere, this was not due to a desire to colonize such places but for defensive reasons; fearing the threat of Russia, Japan had had to create a protective barrier around itself. Indeed, Kamijima claimed, a factor in Japan's war was the wish to abolish discrimination, and he 'demonstrated' this with a map showing that by 1942 whole areas had been removed from colonial rule (and, he said, subsequently the countries of Asia had attained freedom). While not denying that Japan had caused some problems for Asian peoples he refuted the idea that it had waged war against Asians; the war was against white colonial forces. Indeed, he cited the 1943 establishment of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere, instituted by the Japanese government and representatives of the areas it controlled, to emphasize this point. This area, he noted, was where Kiriyaama's *jōbutsuhō* rituals for the spirits of the dead have been primarily focused – rituals that were, Kamijima asserted, not just for the Japanese but for all the Asian dead. Kiriyaama focused mainly on Japanese spirits because to attain world peace one first has to care for one's own spirits of dead; he was, Kamijima (2017: 33–49) said, a patriot (a point, Kamijima noted, that Ishihara Shintarō had made in his eulogy at Kiriyaama's funeral) but a patriot with a universal message who had established a universal religion to bring about world peace.

The talks by Wada and Kamijima in different ways outline the continuing nationalist orientations of Agonshū and suggest that it is becoming stronger. Kamijima's speech appears to be little more than revisionist right-wing nationalist apologetics about Japan's actions in the war. Given that it was an invited speech to Agonshū, by a figure who was presented as someone who knew Kiriyaama well and was in tune with his thinking, it indicates that the increasing focus on a Japanese nationalist agenda outlined in the previous chapter was a product of Kiriyaama's thinking that remains strong in Agonshū after his death.

The *Hoppō Yōjō hōyō* occurred between 30 June and 6 July 2017, when a ship chartered by Agonshū travelled around the Northern Seas carrying Agonshū members, led by Wada and Fukada, who conducted various rituals there, while a Bhutanese Buddhist ritual was also held for world peace during the voyage. Kiriyaama's relics were on board the ship and hence he symbolically oversaw the whole ritual. On return to

Japan the party visited Yasukuni Shrine to pay their respects there before going to the Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery to enshrine the souls of the war dead there.⁴⁸

New titles, new rituals, new exhortations

In the months after the Northern Seas' rituals Agonshū has added further events focused on its founder to its ritual calendar, published further *kaiso reiyu* said to be from Kiriyaama, expanded its set of five canonical chants by adding a reference to him and given him a further title of respect and reverence. Its magazine has continued to reproduce the texts of earlier sermons and new pamphlets and flyers advertising Agonshū events and new encouragement for those who solicit large numbers of *gomagi* for forthcoming rituals such as the Hoshi Matsuri have appeared.

The anniversary of his funeral was commemorated by a new ritual that was preceded by a new *kaiso reiyu* reiterating many of the themes of earlier messages while expressing Kiriyaama's happiness that the event was taking place. The spiritual message also reminded followers that they needed to continue in their practice and exhorted them to continue spreading the word of Agonshū. Fukada performed the *goma* ritual and spoke about Agonshū's activities of the past year, such as the Northern Seas voyage along with the reception of Kiriyaama's *kaiso reiyu*. He also referred to Kiriyaama not just as the *dai ni no budda* but as the *dai ni no oogu no nyorai*. This term basically draws on a standard Buddhist lexicon and refers to a venerable (*oogu*) Buddha (*nyorai*) or enlightened being,⁴⁹ and reiterates the earlier term of reverence ('second Buddha'). The term *oogu no nyorai* appears to have entered Agonshū's terminology during 2017 and adds a further degree of reverence and authority, along with an additional title of respect, to Kiriyaama. In 2017 Kiriyaama's spiritual presence was further affirmed in an addition to the five chants; as well as chanting that they will succeed members also now add a sixth pledge: *watashi wa seishi to tomo ni ayumu* ('I will walk together with the sacred teacher', i.e. Kiriyaama).⁵⁰

Kiriyaama's presence was highly evident also at the *hatsugoma* or first *goma* ritual of 2018. This was performed in Kyoto and transmitted live to other Agonshū centres including the Tokyo main centre, where one of us observed it. Fukada again oversaw the *goma* ritual, in which prayers were directed to three figures: Buddha, the Japanese deity Susanoo and Kiriyaama the second Buddha. At one point the recorded voice of Kiriyaama was broadcast, overlapping Fukada's voice in chanting the sutras, and at another a video of a younger Kiriyaama performing an esoteric ritual also appeared on screen and was integrated into the ceremony. The camera at times also zoomed in on the altar (something of a recurrent trope in Agonshū broadcasts) to show the reliquaries there; as at the Hoshi Matsuri Kiriyaama's relic casket was placed in front of the Buddha's *shinsei busshari* casket. Kiriyaama was thus a living part of the ceremony, incorporated into it via his historical, physical personage as a ritual performer and highlighted as a sacred object of reverence placed in front of the Buddha.

Fukada then gave a talk in which he first announced the creation of a new event in Agonshū's calendar – the celebration of the founder's birth, to be held annually on 7 January. Following this he introduced a new *kaiso reiyu* that again reiterated

the exhortations of earlier messages while emphasizing that it is Kiriya's spirit who continues to guide the movement and that it is his instructions that are being followed. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the message also contained an exhortation to solicit and purchase many *gomagi*. Fukada ended the message by asking everyone to chant the canonical chants (now six). The ceremony continued with a short talk from Wada Naoko about her activities in which she visited China and went to various temples and universities Kiriya had previously visited; the image produced was one that in effect reiterated the idea outlined in the sixth (and new) chant of following in the sacred teacher's footsteps.⁵¹

According to a flyer obtained on the occasion of the *hatsugoma*, the schedule for the forthcoming celebration of the founder's birthday (*kaiso seitansai*) was to follow a pattern not dissimilar to the first of the year ritual. It was to start with a *goma* ritual, followed by a speech of gratitude to Kiriya and a video of one of his sermons. Then would come a preview of the forthcoming Hoshi Matsuri and preparations for collecting *gomagi*, and a sermon from Wada Naoko, after which a video of the founder performing an esoteric ritual blessing would end the celebration.⁵²

Another flyer collected at the Tokyo centre on the occasion of the *hatsugoma* related to the 2018 Hoshi Matsuri. As with the flyer in 2017 offering a sacred pendant that contained Kiriya's spirit for those who solicited 2,000 *gomagi*, this one offered a reward for those who collected 2,000 *gomagi* for the 2018 event. On this occasion the reward was a sacred mandala (the *reikō himitsu mandara* or secret spiritual light mandala) containing the second Buddha's secret inner spiritual light. The mandala, the flyer stated, was an aid to a secret meditation method. There was an accompanying excerpt from one of Kiriya's spiritual messages in which he encouraged followers to get this mandala (by, of course, collecting 2,000 *gomagi*) and talked about it as a powerful meditation aide. In the spiritual message Kiriya states that he had previously taught them traditional meditation techniques but henceforth he planned (from this spring, i.e. spring 2018) to teach a new secret meditation technique (*okugi no meisōhō*). The new mandala would be an aide in this meditation. The flyer did not indicate how he would do this teaching from beyond the grave but the implications within it – that a new meditation technique was going to be used and that a new mandala was needed for this – were clear.

Enshrinement, legitimization and not letting go

We have outlined the spirit messages of Kiriya, the above account by an Agonshū priest, the more recent discussions around the Northern Seas ritual event and the most recent developments at the start of 2018, at length because they together express clearly how the movement and its leadership are currently framing their deceased founder and how they are seeking to direct the movement in the wake of his loss. Here, again, we stress the importance of understanding how a movement functions through examining how it presents itself and represents events associated with it. There is an internalized logic at work here – just as there was, as we discussed in Chapter 2, in the hagiographic constructions through which movements portray the early lives of

their founders. Understanding such logic is vital for understanding how a religious movement such as Agonshū operates and what meanings it presents to and contains for followers.

Agonshū was heavily 'Kiryama focused' while he was alive. It was a movement created by him and centred on his charisma and ideas. Agonshū rituals focused on him, as did its publications and public narratives, all of which served to reinforce his charismatic standing in the eyes of his followers. Kiriyama did not designate who would follow him as leader, and there was no scope, while he was alive, for another charismatic figure to emerge as an obvious successor. There were (at least in the last decade or more) no family members who appear to have been active in Agonshū and who might, as has happened in many Japanese new religions, have been able to inherit the leadership. The operative leadership of Kiriyama's later years, in which Wada held the main administrative role and Fukada the senior ritual one, has continued after Kiriyama's death. It is evident that they were central to Agonshū's functioning in the period before Kiriyama died; even if the Agonshū narrative portrays Kiriyama as having been lucid and healthy until the very moment of death, the need for him to be aided in carrying out blessings and his inability to deliver sermons in his final years suggests that he had become a figurehead more than an active hands-on leader.

Yet even if Wada, Fukada and other senior followers were actively running the movement and taking leading ritual roles prior to Kiriyama's death, they still faced dilemmas of legitimacy when he died. As the secessions and succession disputes in movements such as Mahikari and GLA have shown, the death of a founder is a precarious moment for new movements, one that not only raises questions of succession but of how to retain a sense of potency and spiritual dynamism when a primary source of such things, epitomized by the leader's charisma, is lost. This can, in its turn, also be a source of worry to first-generation devotees (especially in comparatively new movements such as Agonshū) who have joined the movement to be part of an imminently realizable mission led by, and alongside, their charismatic founder and leader, and who might feel that now that the leader has gone, the mission itself has become impossible. They are bound also to be concerned when the movement they have joined has placed such a profound focus on the performance of rituals, which their founder had repeatedly emphasized were essential in order to pacify the spirits of the dead and solve both world and individual problems, and when the lynchpin of such rituals dies.

The narratives of Kiriyama's state of being immediately prior to death and of his spiritual messages – the *kaiso reiyu* – afterwards, along with the enshrinement of his relics, affirmations of his special spiritual power and of the rebirth of the second Buddha show us how these dilemmas are being handled. They illustrate how Agonshū's current leaders are seeking to assuage members' concerns while legitimizing their own positions. Fukada and Wada both play public roles, Fukada particularly with *goma* rituals but both reporting on events in the movement and outlining the founder's spiritual messages. It is they who report the contents of Kiriyama's spiritual messages, and they thus serve as representatives and manifestations of his authority; they are, in effect, the voices of legitimacy who have not just assumed the mantle of current leadership by default but have had it bestowed on them by the founder. They speak for

him by narrating his words and commenting on them. The first *kaiso reiyu* we cited provides a reason for his death and projects it not as the result of old age and infirmity but because of his achievement in life. Becoming a totally realized Buddha enabled him to dispense with his physical body and be liberated from this physical realm. Thus Kiriyaama in life had transcended the normative human condition and the frailties of age and death; rather than being struck down by death, he was able to die and to dispense with his physical body because of achieving total enlightenment. The story so projected – that he left his body when he reached the highest levels of realization – thus affirms that he was in control at death and that those now running the movement had his benediction to do so. Indeed, it shows that he left his body so that he could continue his work in the higher realms and because he was happy with his successors to Agonshū's leadership in this realm.

Agonshū's current leaders have thus developed a strategy of dealing with Kiriyaama that affirms their position of authority, while seeking to console and encourage followers who might feel less enthused about the movement after losing their founder. They have done this by enhancing his spiritual status in death and projecting him not simply a human founder who started the movement and who, as a result, deserves respect for pointing the way to higher truths, and not just as a spiritual entity in another realm. From being the figure that developed a connection to the main focus of worship in Agonshū, he has become that main focus, more powerful, indeed, than the official main image of worship. As his spiritual messages indicate, he exists in the highest Buddhist realms helping raise Agonshū followers to those realms but he is also immanent and active in this world, personified by his relics and by his spiritual presence, relaying messages, manifesting himself in pendants and leading his followers to world salvation. He is, as Kiyokawa's account sets out, a *more* powerful spiritual presence than before, more so than the Buddha – and he, of course, belongs to Agonshū alone. This not only reaffirms Agonshū's uniqueness as the only avenue for salvation and as the only true religion, but it further emphasizes the potency and special nature of Japan. As Kiyokawa noted, the addition of the powers of the *kami* have made Agonshū more potent and have made the second Buddha more powerful than Shakyamuni. Because of this Japan has become the epicentre of the world, the country with the true teaching of Agonshū and its mission of world salvation.

The talks prior to the *Hoppō Yōjō hōyō* events of June–July 2017 show that the nationalist orientations of Agonshū have become stronger as well. This is evident in Wada's speech evoking the memory of Kiriyaama and urging followers to support the rituals in order to realize his wishes, and the intensely nationalist revisionism of Kamijima's talk – itself picking up on themes articulated by Kiriyaama in his later years. Moreover, by using Bhutanese rituals Agonshū appears to be engaging in further acts of nationalist appropriation by using the priests and Buddhist practices of another Asian country to pacify, repatriate and enshrine the spirits of Japanese soldiers and sailors. In such terms, Bhutanese ritual practices have become subservient to Japanese motivations.

What is striking, too, is that the death of Kiriyaama has been used not just to reinforce a nationalist message but also to intensify the immediacy of Agonshū's mission and to argue that the loss of the founder is actually a means through which it can be fulfilled.

Because Kiriya has gone to another realm, the movement is stronger spiritually. It now has its sacred founder present both in this world, via his relics and spirit, and in the Buddha realm. Agonshū's mission, so its narrative states, is not weakened because of its leader's departure from this world, but stronger because of it.

Agonshū's leaders thus seek to counter any loss of hope among members at the demise of their leader by claiming that because of Kiriya's enhanced post-death status, and because he has now shed his human body to enter the realms of ultimate enlightenment, they now have the power to realize their mission. The loss of the founder is the start of the new mission – something that, in this narrative, is heightened by reaffirmations of Japan's special position in the world. As such followers are encouraged not to lose heart but to intensify their practice and work on behalf of Agonshū. Striving harder for salvation in the wake of the founder's death and rebirth as a Buddha sits alongside striving harder to collect more *gomagi* for the ritual.

The memorialization, preservation and co-option of charisma

Clearly the ways in which Agonshū's leaders have dealt with their founder's death serve to strengthen their authority while seeking to maintain a movement that has faced problems because of an ageing and perhaps eroding membership. The recurrent invocations to 'strive with me' articulated in the *kaiso reiyu* and in Wada's subsequent talk evoke memories of the living, vital Kiriya of earlier years, while the constant calls for members to do *kanjin* and gather *gomagi* for the Hoshi Matsuri serve as a sign of the need the leaders place on trying to draw in sufficient economic resources. While some might see the calls for increased alms and donations gathering to smack of a mercenary nature and exploitation of members grieving at the loss of their founder, these can also be seen as continuations of the ways Agonshū operated while Kiriya was alive – as our comments on *kanjin* and on Kiriya's replies to questions about the costs of membership (see Chapter 3) indicated.

What is occurring in Agonshū on one level is a memorialization of charisma. The founder's charismatic authority was key to the development of Agonshū – as it has in many other Japanese new religions. It remains critical for his successors and disciples to preserve that charismatic aura, and this is generally only feasible by elevating the founder to a new level and making him/her a focus of worship. Charismatic authority and potency have been retained in the spirit of Kiriya along with his material presence in this world via his relics. The Agon members' magazine of May–June 2017, besides reporting Wada and Kamijima's talks about the Northern Seas' ritual, also inaugurated a new series that reprinted some of Kiriya's sermons, under the title *Kaiso hōwa shiri-zu* ('The founder's sermon series'), as if to reiterate the centrality of Kiriya in the movement's doctrinal structure; the first sermon chosen for the series dates from 1992 and discusses spiritual hindrances, karma and Agonshū's processes for transforming the spirits of the dead into realized buddhas (Kiriya 2017 [1992]). It is, in essence, a reiteration of Agonshū core teachings, while its publication and the series it headlines transmit the message that, although the founder is no longer here,

the essential teachings remain the same and that Agonshū and the new leadership thus represent continuity not disjuncture. The use of videos showing him performing esoteric rituals and his 'presence' via recordings of his chanting during contemporary rituals further emphasize this notion of continuity and of immanence. The founder may have died but the founder remains present and even, as the new leaflets indicate, ready to teach a new secret meditation technique.

Agonshū is an example of how a new movement deals with the loss of the immediacy charisma as manifested in the living physical body and presence of its founder. In Chapter 2 we talked of how charisma is relational, and how those around a leader help to create and reinforce his/her charismatic nature and status. The ways in which Agonshū leaders such as Wada, Fukada and Kiyokawa have enhanced Kiriya's post-death status by publishing messages that they portray as coming from Kiriya, taking part in rituals while placing themselves in a symbolically subservient position to the departed yet spiritually present founder and talking of him as a second yet more powerful Buddha show this relational dynamic need not only be operative during a leader's lifetime. In continuing their elevation and praise of Kiriya after death and in using his voice as a continuing spiritual presence, the new leaders are further enhancing the idea of a charisma that does not die or evaporate at death but is maintained, continued and transformed thereafter.

Rather than Weber's argument that charisma is followed by routinization, what seems to be happening in Agonshū is both a memorialization of charisma, and, via his relics, a preservation of it in a material form that keeps the (dead) leader symbolically alive. It could also be seen as an attempt at enhancing that charismatic status by asserting that the posthumous founder has become ever more potent spiritually. While some degree of routinization has occurred in Agonshū, in that Fukada has become the official leader and has assumed the main ritual roles in the movement, and in that Wada runs the administration and plays a role in relaying messages and overseeing events, this appears at present to be a subservient routinization, one that remains in thrall to a higher form, as symbolized by Kiriya's empty chair above Fukada at the Hoshi Matsuri, by the title – *Shōsōjō* – Fukada has compared to that of his predecessor and by the fact that when Wada delivers talks such as that before the Northern Seas event, she relies heavily on invocations of Kiriya's spirit and his words. Their position of authority and their routinized stature as leaders are reliant on being representatives of the dead yet charismatically present founder.

By enshrining Kiriya's relics and declaring him to be a main image of worship Agonshū is also demonstrating how movements may be reluctant to let go of the past and of sacred figures so important to their dynamic. Andrea Castiglioni (forthcoming) has recently directly addressed these questions in Japanese contexts through examining the relationship between the ascetics of Mount Yudono and their lay devotees and patrons during the Edo period (1600–1868). By mummifying the body of the ascetic to transform it into a 'flesh body icon,' devotees were able to ensure that the performance of charismatic authority by these ascetics continued after death. Their devotees put on exhibitions of the ascetic's mummified body and conducted ceremonies in which that (deceased yet preserved as if alive) body was re-clothed. As such, Castiglioni raises the question about who it was that produced the ascetic's charisma, 'owned' his body

in both life and after death and had the authority and power to define and shape its performance.⁵³ Agonshū showed similar orientations when, in later life, it continued to use Kiriyaama in rituals, while, in death, his physical remains continue to play a role in the movement. By showing that his death was not some terminal event but instead a shedding of the human form because Kiriyaama had attained total enlightenment, and by continuing to relay the messages he is said to emit to them, they are also continuing in this mode. They are not just showing an unwillingness to let him go but are subtly trying to strengthen their own position and status. As the representatives and transmitters of this sacred figure's messages and spirit, and controllers of his relics, they are in essence co-opting his charisma and, just as happened in his latter years, when his frail body was used as a symbol in Agonshū rituals, so too now are his relics and spirit used in similar ways.

Agonshū's operative leaders, we have suggested, already had control of Kiriyaama as a physical presence when he was still alive but apparently no longer physically able to sustain the performance of demanding public rituals and sermons. In death they have retained that control not by proclaiming themselves as leaders in his place but by confirming him as the all-powerful founder-leader and continuing spiritual presence and, now, the main focus of worship. They have done this by interpreting the writings he did while alive (as Kiyokawa has done) and by relaying the spiritual messages – the *kaiso reiyu* – that are, according to the current leadership, transmitted by Kiriyaama. By channelling his spirit they are affirming their right to leadership while seeking to strengthen their position and authority by seemingly demeaning it through their deference to Kiriyaama the *kaiso* who continues to issue instructions and bestow spiritual teachings and benefits. They merely serve as mouthpieces of the founder; their authority is thus grounded in a posture of seeming subservience.

Of course, this relies on their claims to be spoken to by his spirit and we are aware that some members have raised concerns about this on some internet discussions boards. Claims that Wada in particular is seeking to control the movement, and concerns that the repeated encouragement for members to make Agonshū events a success and to gather *goma* sticks are little more than attempts to increase the movement's revenues (and perhaps shore up a movement that is losing members) have appeared in such locations. Such comments need to be treated with caution, not just because internet discussion forums allow for posters to hide their identities and make claims (e.g. some participants who express hostile attitudes to the current state of the movement claim to be long-term members – a claim that cannot be verified) but because many such boards and threads are explicitly oriented towards drumming up hostility to Agonshū and other new movements, and some display prejudices and unsubstantiated allegations.⁵⁴

Nonetheless they indicate the possibility that some members may feel uneasy about the latest developments in the movement. The repeated calls (in *kaiso reiyu*, for example) for followers to solicit *gomagi* could raise concerns among members. Likewise the idea of new meditation techniques that require a mandala (as indicated by the flyer put out before the 2018 Hoshi Matsuri) indicates a potential further requirement and demand on members, some of who (as we indicated earlier) might already be struggling because of the movement's demands. The extent to which the movement might be facing problems and hence needing to get more support from existing members is

unclear, but the various developments since Kiriyaama's death, such as the development of new festivals and the call to learn new meditation techniques, appear to suggest a drive towards increasing the mechanisms for gaining financial support from members.

At the same time, however, there are clear barriers to much overt questioning of these developments. For a start, challenging the authority of the current leaders implicitly means challenging that of the founder himself and doubting his charisma and spiritual power; if he is as advanced as a spiritual leader as followers believe, it would seem evident that he could send messages to them from higher spiritual realms. After all, Shakyamuni – in the context of Agonshū belief – did just that to Kiriyaama in 1980 and that spiritual communication was intrinsic to Agonshū's construction of its self-image as a movement with a mission, and accepted as such by members.

Continuity and the seeds of transformation

By making Kiriyaama the continuing spiritual leader and immanent presence Agonshū is countering the loss of the charismatic physical presence of their founder by transforming, preserving, sanctifying and elevating that charisma, in the persona of Kiriyaama the *kaiso*, the founder who has died but remains alive and spiritually present. To that degree they are clearly trying to assert a form of continuity and to reassure members that their founder's teachings and practices will carry on as before. They are also demonstrating that they are able to continue interpreting that charisma and transmitting his teaching. Kiyokawa's article shows that the leaders not only understand the inner nuances of the teaching but can also interpret it to show why Kiriyaama is now the second Buddha and why Agonshū is so strong. Being able to systematize and interpret the teachings of a founder is a clear way to achieve or at least lay claims to authority. In Kiyokawa's words we can see this strategy in action.

This also opens the door to potential new teachings, modes of interpretation and transformations. In Chapter 3 we drew attention to Kiriyaama's teaching that everyone could attain buddhahood. Although Kiriyaama in life was repeatedly portrayed as existing at a more advanced spiritual level than his disciples, the notion that one could realize enlightenment was nonetheless a theme that remained prevalent in Agonshū. Since his death and elevation to the Buddha realms, however, there appear to be suggestions of a departure from this position. In the *kaiso reiyu* of December 2016 Kiriyaama states that attaining buddhahood is very difficult and he appears to indicate a shift of focus by saying that people should call out to him for assistance. He, as such, will serve as an agency operating from the Buddha realms to help people achieve post-death transcendence. This in a sense looks potentially akin to the stance of Pure Land Buddhism, which adheres to the notion of the difficulty or impossibility of buddhahood and says that to achieve salvation (in the form of rebirth in the Pure Land) one needs to call out the name of Amida Buddha, who will thereby grant salvation. Kiriyaama's spirit, as an enlightened Buddha in the Buddha realms, appears to be portrayed in a similar light in this *kaiso reiyu*. Whether Agonshū is developing in this way, as a movement that emphasizes the salvific powers of a Buddha figure (in the guise of its founder) is unclear. It is evident at least in Kiyokawa's talk, which draws on Kiriyaama's

writings while portraying him in a new light as more powerful than Shakyamuni, that Agonshū's teaching and worship are in the process of being reinterpreted and reoriented in the aftermath of his death. How far this process will go remains to be seen, but such examples, in the short period since his death, indicate that not only is the current leadership seeking to stabilize the movement and affirm its own authority by focusing on the posthumous Kiriyaama but they may be developing the grounds through which to reinterpret his teachings, and thus Agonshū, in the longer run.

Looking back to the glorious past?

Agonshū is intent on preserving its founder's charisma and retaining a focus on charismatic leadership not through the ascent of a second charismatic leader figure (something that rarely occurs in the context of new religious movements, at least in the immediate aftermath of the loss of a founder)⁵⁵ but through the veneration of its initial founder. This raises the question of whether Agonshū (and other movements that appear to venerate their founders) may be looking back to an earlier period when its leader was younger and alive and when the movement appeared to be more in tune with the mood of the age, rather than looking forward. While the use of videos depicting the younger Kiriyaama performing rituals and the use of his voice in the chanting of sutras during *goma* rituals can be seen as a way of maintaining the living dynamic presence of the founder, it clearly contains a backward looking nostalgic dimension, back to the time when he (and the movement) were younger and not impaired by the processes of physical ageing and (in the case of the movement) of a loss of dynamic. The emotional responses of members at his funeral, watching films of a younger Kiriyaama, certainly also indicated emotive feelings for a past when the membership itself was younger and the movement appeared to be stronger.

On one level one could argue that Agonshū was always operating with a retrospective dynamic; its talk of a return to 'original Buddhism' implied a return to a 'time when' and to an image of purity and origins. Yet it was also infused with a sense of optimism and confidence that this 'return to origins' was also a new beginning, a regeneration of the idealized past in the present in order to construct an idealized future. Its travails in the past two or so decades, as the confidence of the 1980s evaporated, removed that optimism. This influenced the move away from messages of world salvation towards a more overt emphasis on nationalist themes. With Kiriyaama's death and enshrinement the possibility of becoming ever-more entrenched in considerations of the past has become stronger.

By focusing on Kiriyaama's spirit Agonshū also is continuing, we argue, with a process of internalization and a more overt Japan-centred orientation. In its emphasis on repatriating the Japanese spirits of the war dead, along with the *kami* of the islands formerly under Japanese rule, and in its visits to Yasukuni Shrine Agonshū has been turning inwards as it has aged. The enshrinement of Kiriyaama is a continuation of this process. The 2017 Hoshi Matsuri narrative of Kiriyaama's life certainly indicated a major focus on the past, even as it sought to portray the event as a rebirth and an occasion for regeneration and the onset of a newly galvanized mission.

The enshrinement of his relics and the ways in which followers asked to act as he did (e.g. by chanting the five positive phrases as Kiriyaama used to, and now adding a sixth that innately ties them to his path) indicate a focus on doing what the founder did. While messages in the *kaiso reiyu* mention how Kiriyaama's death and rebirth as a Buddha have opened up a new opportunity for world salvation, they also contain a nostalgic dimension. It was in its heyday in the 1980s that Agonshū was so intent on talking about a world mission of salvation and when Kiriyaama, interpreting the prophecies of Nostradamus, saw himself as the saviour who had come to stop the world falling into chaos and catastrophe. While this vision of world salvation has always been present in Agonshū it had, in recent years, become somewhat marginalized as the movement faced difficulties, ceased to expand and became increasingly focused on nationalist themes. That tendency does not look like abating. Yet by also using rhetorical images redolent of Agonshū's earlier era, which tell members that the time for their mission has now come, and by drawing on the image of their departed yet present founder to do so, Agonshū appears to be trying to move forward by using nostalgic notions of past glory to promise future regeneration.

We cannot at present tell the extent to which Agonshū will continue to do this and become like other new movements that appear to all intents and purposes to have turned their founders into their main focuses of worship, somewhat displacing the initial deities that their founders venerated. At present, from the evidence in the short period since Kiriyaama's death, the signs are that this process is under way in Agonshū and that it is becoming not so much a religion founded by Kiriyaama Seiyū, as a religion centred on him and seeking to bring back the glories of the past when it had a mission of world salvation and believed it was about to spread its truth to the world, while drawing on his image in order to sustain its support structures in the present.