

Article

# Soka Gakkai International in Post-Apartheid South Africa

Ugo Dessì 

Department of Religious Studies, University of Vienna, 1010 Vienna, Austria; ugo.dessi@uni-leipzig.de

Received: 3 October 2020; Accepted: 5 November 2020; Published: 11 November 2020



**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the activities of Soka Gakkai International (SGI) in South Africa, a largely Christian country with the presence of very strong African Independent and Pentecostal churches, where Buddhism has mostly attracted the attention of a small minority of white middle-class people interested in meditational practices. By focusing on SGI South Africa, which has been able to reach out to a significant number of black, and, to a lesser extent, Coloured and Indian/Asian members, this ethnographic study aims to contribute to the understanding of Buddhism's interplay with a broader cross-section of post-apartheid South African society, and, secondarily, to add to the existing literature on this Japanese new religious movement overseas. After a brief overview of the historical development of SGI in South Africa, my analysis focuses on SGI South Africa's main ritual, social, and missionary activities; its interplay with local religions; its attempts to establish a meaningful link with South African culture; and, finally, on the religious experiences and narratives of SGI's South African members.

**Keywords:** Transnational Buddhism; Soka Gakkai International; South Africa; globalization

## 1. Introduction

Among the myriad of contemporary Japanese new religious movements Sōka Gakkai (Value Creation Society) is the largest and probably one of the most widely known. Established in the 1930s as the lay arm of the Shōshū branch of Nichiren Buddhism by the educator Makiguchi Tsunesaburō (1871–1944), it experienced a dramatic growth with the *shakubuku* proselytizing campaign launched in the 1950s by Toda Jōsei (1900–1958). From the doctrinal point of view, Soka Gakkai focuses on Nichiren's (1222–1282) interpretation of the Lotus Sutra and presents itself as a modern development of this Buddhist tradition. Central to this religious worldview is Nichiren's belief that we are living in the age of *mappō* (the age of the decline of the Dharma) leading to generalized greed and evil, and that faith in the Lotus Sutra and its saving powers can awaken the buddha-nature inherent in all beings. The latter aspect is closely related to the doctrine of *ichinen sanzen* interconnecting one's life state (*ichinen* or "one thought moment") and the wider environment (*sanzen* or "three thousand possible realms"), according to which "each individual life is a microcosm of the universe". Thus, the ultimate law of the universe embodied in religious practice (*nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō*, the invocation of the title of the Lotus Sutra) and in the *gohonzon* (the main object of devotion, a copy of the scroll originally inscribed by Nichiren with the calligraphy of *nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō* written down at the center) is believed to permeate all forms of life and the entire cosmos. As such, it can lead human beings to the goal of Buddhist enlightenment in this lifetime, as well as to the fulfilment of their potential for good, which opens the way to the creation of a peaceful and harmonious world. In Soka Gakkai's modern

language, these basic doctrinal tenets are often expressed in terms of the infinite potential/dignity inherent in the life of each human being and the realization of a “human revolution”.<sup>1</sup>

Under the third President Ikeda Daisaku (b. 1928) Sōka Gakkai extended its influence and even established in 1964 its own political party, the Kōmeitō, which was formally separated from the religious organization in 1970 after a wave of public criticism. In 1991 a conflict between Sōka Gakkai and the Nichiren Shōshū priesthood that had been going on for two decades eventually led to a split between them. Since 1975, when Soka Gakkai International (SGI) was created as an umbrella organization for pre-existing communities of practitioners around the world with Ikeda as its president, this new religious movement has been able to consolidate its presence in over 200 countries and to claim a membership of little more than 10 million. About 2 million of these are outside of Japan, especially in Asia and Oceania (c. one million), North America (c. 350,000), and South America (c. 240,000), with a meaningful presence of SGI followers also in Europe (c. 100,000). The international scope of SGI is certainly unprecedented for a Japanese new religious movement, as is the decidedly multiethnic following in most of its chapters, as well as its appeal to the younger generations. At the general level, SGI’s relative success and expansion overseas has been related to factors such as a psychological focus on the self-confidence of members and its practical application to social work and action (Métraux 2013). While various aspects of Sōka Gakkai have attracted the interest of academics, including its history and practices (Inoue et al. 1994; Machacek and Wilson 2000; Ōnishi 2009; McLaughlin 2018), its relationship to politics (Kisala 1994; Nakano 2004; Höhe 2011; Fisker-Nielsen 2012; Ehrhardt et al. 2014) and pacifism (Kisala 1999), as well as its overseas activities in different cultural contexts (e.g., Hammond and Machacek 1994; Wilson and Dobbelaere 1994; Chappell 2000; Clarke 2000, 2005; Seager 2006; Pereira 2008; Métraux 2010; Rodriguez Plasencia 2014), there is to date no study available on this new religious movement in a relatively peripheral region such as Southern Africa.

Religion occupies a very important place in South African society, as is shown, among other things, by its relevance to the narrative of oppression and liberation, the high percentage of South Africans who regard religion as very important in their lives (c. 74%), and the enduring strength and creativity of the African religious heritage both in highly popular hybrid forms of Christianity and in what David Chidester has termed “the permutations of wild religion” (cf. Schoeman 2017; Chidester 2012, p. 10). Today, the large majority of South Africans is Christian (c. 84%), with a strong presence of African Independent and Pentecostal churches, and secondarily mainstream Protestant denominations (e.g., Reformed, Anglican, Methodists, Lutheran) and the Roman Catholic Church, while a minority of South Africans subscribe to “traditional African religion” (5%). Among the religious minorities, Muslims (2%) are especially concentrated in the Western Cape province, Hindus (1%) in KwaZulu-Natal, and Jews (0.2%) in Gauteng and the Western Cape. Recent statistics suggest that there might be several thousand Buddhist practitioners in the country (Schoeman 2017).

The relatively short history of Buddhism in South Africa has already been illustrated by the precious work of a handful of scholars (van Loon 1980; Wratten 1995; Clasquin-Johnson and Krüger 1999; Clasquin-Johnson 1999, 2002, 2004, 2017). The early presence of Buddhist practices in the country has been documented among South African Indians in KwaZulu-Natal, from the 1920s until they eventually faded away in the 1970s. In those years, several groups of Buddhist practitioners began to appear after the influence of Western Buddhism, with links to modernized Theravāda, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism. Theravāda practices inspired the activities of the Buddhist Retreat Centre in Ixopo established in 1979 by Louis van Loon, while it was not until 1997 that the Theravāda tradition was formally introduced to South Africa with the establishment of a monastery by Burmese monks near Durban. In 1981, the Dharma Centre started its activities in the Western Cape under the leadership of Heila and Rodney Downey, who had studied Zen under Philip Kapleau Roshi; the center became later

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Soka Gakkai International (2015d); Fisker-Nielsen (2018). For a more detailed analysis of specific Soka Gakkai’s doctrines that are less relevant to the main concerns of this article, see, for example, Inoue et al. (1994) and McLaughlin (2018).

affiliated with the Korean Kwan Um school, and currently functions as an independent organization. A meditation center linked to the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism was opened in 1981 in the Great Karoo, followed 10 years later by another one in Johannesburg linked to the Gelug school. In 1993, Foguangshan (Buddha's Light Mountain), a Taiwanese new religious movement based on Chinese Buddhism, established its South African headquarters near Pretoria, and in 2005, the huge Nanhua Temple was built on the same site. To these and other scattered groups and retreat centers related to the aforementioned Buddhist traditions one should add the activities of international organizations such as the Tzu Chi Foundation and the Triratna Buddhists.

While these forms of Buddhism have mostly appealed to white middle-class South Africans or ethnic Asian communities, it is especially SGI, which was first introduced in South Africa in the early 1980s, that has been able to attract a significant number of black, and, secondarily, Coloured and Indian/Asian members.<sup>2</sup> Against this background, this study of SGI in South Africa aims not only to add to the existing literature on Sōka Gakkai overseas, but also to contribute to a better understanding of the interplay of Buddhism with a broader cross-section of post-apartheid South African society.<sup>3</sup> To this aim, I will first provide a brief overview of the historical development of SGI in South Africa. In the following sections, I will then focus on its main rituals and social activities, on the interplay with other religions and the core idea of *kōsen rufu*, on its attempts to establish a meaningful link with South Africa, and, finally, on the religious experiences of SGI's South African members.

## 2. A Short History of SGI South Africa

The beginnings of Sōka Gakkai practice in South Africa can be traced back to the early 1980s. At that time there were already a few independent practitioners in Johannesburg and Cape Town, including a couple of foreign nationals and a few Japanese families, who began to form ties under the unofficial leadership of a British member of SGI who had recently moved to South Africa. While avoiding any publicity because of the restrictions imposed by the apartheid regime, SGI in South Africa operated as a chapter of SGI-UK, from which it received printed materials and direct support, with senior leaders travelling regularly to South Africa on the occasion of annual general meetings (the first of which was held in 1987). In those years, joint monthly sessions of chanting for peace with SGI in UK and Ireland were regularly held, and for the almost exclusively white membership the main religious practice of chanting the *nam-myōhō-renge-kyō* represented both a means for individual religious growth and for “changing the karma of the country” (SGI South Africa 2012). In 1993, the first three *gohonzon* were conferred on South African members, and in 1997, after the end of the apartheid for the first time on two black members from Soweto. Around the same time a delegation of SGI-SA's youth members participated for the first time in a training course at the SGI general headquarters in Japan, and it was decided to publish a newsletter on a regular basis to divulge Nichiren's and Ikeda's writings among members, as well as to provide them with a forum for sharing their experiences and forging regional links. At the turn of the millennium SGI-SA was acknowledged by the Japanese headquarters as a national constituency of SGI and registered under South African law as a non-profit

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Wratten (1995, p. 235) and Clasquin-Johnson (2002, p. 158). The classification of South Africans in such ‘population groups’, which traces back to the distinction between ‘white’, ‘coloured’, and ‘native’ persons introduced by the apartheid system, has become an “ingrained marker of quasi-racial identity” for the majority of South Africans, and still survives in the censuses of the post-apartheid period (cf. Ellison and Wet 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise specified, this analysis of SGI-SA is based on information gathered during my fieldwork conducted in South Africa between July 2018 and October 2019, including participant observation at meetings and gatherings, printed materials for internal use (e.g., newsletters and leaflets), and informal conversations with members. In this connection, I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Max Deeg for his support during my Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellowship at Cardiff University (June 2018–August 2020). I would also like to thank Francesca Romana Perazzelli, Andrea Gaffé, Kayo Fusejima, Kyoko Kimura, Mary Butlin, and Cecil Plaatjies for their precious help during my fieldwork. I also take the opportunity to express my gratitude to Michel Clasquin-Johnson and Elisabetta Porcu for their careful reading of my manuscript and their invaluable comments. To Michel go my special thanks for kindly guiding me and other guests through the Freedom Park Museum during the days of the ASRSA Conference in 2019.

organization (technically, a ‘Section 21 company’). The same year the national center in Johannesburg was established, where the *gohonzon* enshrinement ceremony took place in 2003 (SGI South Africa 2012). Since then, SGI-SA has been growing slowly but steadily under the leadership of Loren Braithwaite, an Afro-American attorney from New York and SGI-USA member who moved to South Africa in the early 1990s, and currently claims a membership of little less than 1000, with a majority of South Africans and a solid base of Japanese permanent/temporary residents and international members. Most followers are found in Gauteng, but SGI-South Africa is also present in other parts of the country, such as the Western Cape (where another center was established in 2016 at the Oude Molen Eco Village in Cape Town), KwaZulu-Natal, and Mpumalanga.

### 3. Ritual Life and Social Activities

Following a well-established pattern worldwide, the main focus of SGI in South Africa is on chanting, discussion meetings, and the study of Nichiren Buddhism. These ritual activities are conducted both at private homes and within the context of regular meetings organized by groups, districts, and chapters.

Chanting may refer to the morning and evening *gongyō*, a formalized session including the recitation of portions of the Lotus Sutra and the *daimoku* (the repetition of *nam-myōhō-renge-kyō*), or, more specifically, just to the latter. Since 2002, after the revisions introduced by the Japanese headquarters to simplify the recitation and make it more accessible, the *gongyō* starts with the sound of the bell and three repetitions of the *nam-myōhō-renge-kyō*, followed by the recitation in Japanese of an excerpt from the “Expedient Means” chapter (*Hōben-pon*) and the verse section of the “Life Span” chapter (*Nyorai juryō-hon*) of the Lotus Sutra. A long chanting of the *nam-myōhō-renge-kyō* is then introduced and closed by the sound of the bell, and the session ends with three more repetitions of the *nam-myōhō-renge-kyō* and the three silent prayers (appreciation to the *gohonzon*, appreciation for the three founding presidents, and prayers for worldwide *kōsen rufu* and the deceased). During monthly meetings, the entire *gongyō* can take about 15 min, with long additional sessions of *daimoku*.

The *gongyō* also introduces the discussion meetings (*zadankai*), which represent another important aspect of SGI’s religious practice. These are usually held on a monthly basis at the homes of members and provide them with the opportunity to share their faith experiences and encourage each other. Even more importantly, these discussion meetings are meant to help members to apply Buddhist principles to everyday life. As written in *First Steps*, an introduction for new members originally compiled by SGI-SA in 2005 and currently in use, the “intellectual understanding of Nichiren Buddhism alone is not enough to propel our practice forward. Wonderful concepts can stimulate our minds, but it is the sincerity of another that can move our hearts” (SGI South Africa 2008, p. 2).

Whenever possible, the *gongyō* is performed while facing the *gohonzon*, which is usually enshrined in an altar with a cabinet. Members can apply to receive the *gohonzon* (which is dispatched by the Japanese headquarters) for a small fee, provided that they meet a series of requirements, such as a minimum of one year of regular practice, attendance to the meetings, a good knowledge of the basic tenets of SGI, and a serious commitment to the study of Nichiren Buddhism.

Coherently with SGI’s guidelines, the study of Buddhism and specifically of Nichiren’s teachings through the authoritative interpretation of president Ikeda occupies an important place within SGI-SA, with leaders warmly recommending members that “daily study is absolutely vital to Buddhism” (SGI South Africa 2020). One of the monthly meetings for chapters is devoted to the study of Nichiren’s writings (the *Gosho*), during which study materials are on sell for members and guests, including newsletters and compilations published by SGI-SA and other books and printed materials received by the Japanese headquarters or SGI-USA. SGI-SA conducts regional and national courses, and offers since 1999 entrance and elementary exams, as well as an intermediate exam (since 2003). Since 2016, SGI-SA participates in the centralized All-Africa Buddhist Study exam. For this purpose, two booklets are made available to candidates, the first one on the life of Nichiren and the history and

teachings of SGI (in which particular attention is given to the “errors” of the Nichiren Shōshū priesthood), and the second one collecting Ikeda’s interpretation of selected passages from Nichiren’s writings.

Social outreach activities are also part of SGI-SA’s concerns, and among them exhibitions occupy an important place. Already in 1998, the “World Boys and Girls Art Exhibition” originally presented by SGI in 1996 at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, was held in Johannesburg and in Cape Town with the collaboration of staff of the University of the Western Cape. In 2002, at the time of the United Nations summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, SGI hosted “Seeds of Change”, which won the third prize as independent exhibitor. Two years later another exhibition titled “Gandhi, King, Ikeda: A Legacy of Building Peace” was held in Johannesburg, Durban, and Cape Town on the 10th anniversary of South African new democracy; in Johannesburg, the mayor and the Minister of Arts and Culture were among the keynote speakers, together with Ela Gandhi (the granddaughter of Mahatma Gandhi) and SGI-SA’s general director, and in Durban, the inauguration followed a similar pattern with the participation, among others, of Zweli Mkhize, who has become a familiar presence to many South Africans during the days of the Covid-19 for his regular updates on the pandemic as Minister of Health. On the occasion of the 2011 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP17) in Durban, SGI-SA held the environmental exhibition “Seeds of Hope: Visions of Sustainability, Steps Toward Change”.

For some years, the Youth Division of SGI-SA also promoted “Victory Over Violence”, an educational campaign focusing on the root causes of violence that was originally launched by SGI-USA in 1999 after the Columbine High School shootings in Colorado, but these activities have been discontinued. Another important area of social outreach concerns public talks, among which the series “Hope Talks” launched by the Gauteng chapter in 2015 with guest speakers invited to discuss pressing social issues with the religious community. The “Hope Talks” are usually preceded by a chanting session open to the general public and have hosted high-profile guests such as human-rights activist Tshepo Madlingozi and South African Human Rights Commission member Lindiwe Mokate. Well-known public figures such as human-rights activists and writers Gcina Mhlophe and Elinor Sisulu were also guests at the Puku Afri-Kids Festival hosted at the SGI-SA national center in Johannesburg in 2016 (SGI South Africa 2017a).

Similarly, other initiatives for children and families (presented as “Children’s Day”) have been promoted in the past years by local groups, such as those at the Kalk Bay community within the Western Cape chapter. To this category of social outreach activities also belongs Origami for Africa, a program started in 2008 through which children are offered the opportunity to learn origami and to teach it to other children. Although this project is not among SGI-SA’s official activities, it is nonetheless relevant to our discussion because it was originally launched by one of its Japanese leaders in Westbank (one of the poor townships of Cape Town) primary school, and some of the children have also been later introduced to SGI’s practices. Origami for Africa has branches in Gauteng, Kleinmond, and Tulbagh, and features the South African poet Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali as honorary member.

SGI-SA has promoted some other activities among disadvantaged communities in South African townships. In the Western Cape these have especially focused on Westbank, where in the past years, SGI-SA has organized the Youth Fun Day and joined other public celebrations on Women’s Day (9 August) and Heritage Day (24 September). On several occasions the Gauteng chapter has delivered donations to senior citizens’ homes and a childcare center in Alexandra (a township in Johannesburg) on Mandela Day (18 July), in response to the call of the Nelson Mandela Foundation to dedicate 67 (the number of years Mandela has fought for social justice) minutes of one’s own time to a humanitarian cause. More recently in February 2020, SGI-SA organized the event “Peace and Unity in Diversity” in Elsie’s River (Cape Town) with the aim to “take Buddhism to the people”, featuring an Ikeda-poetry reading and performance, music, the screening of the SGI promotional video *Our Shared Humanity*, and speeches by local Buddhists as well as by elders, activists and workers from the wider local community.

#### 4. Interplay with Other Religions and *Kōsen Rufu*

Although Sōka Gakkai has notoriously a rather weak record of interreligious activities in Japan, a more pronounced engagement with this area can be seen in SGI, in accordance with the vow to “respect other religions, engage in dialogue and work together with them toward the resolution of fundamental issues concerning humanity” found in its 1995 Charter (Soka Gakkai International 2015a; SGI South Africa 2008, pp. x–xii). SGI-SA, too, has been involved in some forms of interreligious cooperation. Already in 2000, SGI and SGI-SA sent representatives to the Third Parliament of the World Religions held in Cape Town. In 2011, during the days of the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Durban, SGI-SA participated in a multi-faith rally at the King’s Park Stadium together with Desmond Tutu and other religious leaders to urge the negotiating parties to reach an agreement. Since 2011, when it joined for the first time the Freedom Park Interfaith Committee in Pretoria on the occasion of the Day of Reconciliation, SGI-SA has participated in the interreligious prayers promoted by this committee on national days, and since 2013 it takes part in the “Prayers for the City” event organized by the Cape Town Interfaith Initiative. In 2017, with the impending dramatic water crisis in Cape Town, SGI-SA’s representatives joined other religious groups (African healing traditions, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Baha’i, and Sufism) at the V&A Waterfront to offer prayers as a blessing of the city and for badly needed rain. In 2014, SGI-SA had also participated in the interfaith prayer service at St. George’s Cathedral in Cape Town to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Gandhi’s departure from the country. The last interreligious activity in which SGI-SA has participated before the lockdown imposed in March 2020 by the South African government to counter the coronavirus outbreak has been the “7 Sacred Days in Cape Town” organized at the beginning of February by the Cape Town Interfaith Initiative (on the occasion of the “World Interfaith Harmony Week” promoted by the United Nations), during which SGI-SA joined the “Prayers for Our City” day in Elsie’s River.

With a very few exceptions, such as the activities within the Cape Town Interfaith Initiative (which counts among its members the Tushita Kadampa Buddhist Centre founded in 2008), SGI-SA has no connections with other Buddhist groups (cf. Wratten 1995, p. 234). SGI-SA’s attitude towards the Nichiren Shōshū deserves however a separate discussion. I have already mentioned that a harsh criticism of the priesthood features prominently in one of the booklets for the preparation of the All-Africa Buddhist Study exam. SGI-SA laments that since 2006 a few members have left the organization and “given their loyalties to the priesthood”. This helps to explain why, although there are neither Nichiren Shōshū priests nor temples in South Africa, SGI-SA’s leaders have paid considerable attention to this painful issue, even publishing in 2009 a pamphlet titled “The Nichiren Shoshu Priesthood Issue in South Africa: Questions and Answers” to counter the activities of those who “encourage other SGI members to join them while slandering the SGI and President Ikeda”. To understand the level of animosity surrounding this issue one may note that in this document such “priesthood members” are blamed for “supporting evil, in the same way that many white South Africans supported apartheid by voting for the National Party without personally witnessing or getting involved in human rights violations”.<sup>4</sup>

SGI-SA’s interreligious activities and the other forms of social outreach illustrated in the previous section should be seen against the backdrop of the concept of *kōsen rufu*, which plays a key role in the overall economy of this new religious movement. *Kōsen rufu* is a term originally found in the Lotus Sutra and Nichiren’s writings meaning “to widely declare” the truth of the sutra, and thus refers to the propagation of Nichiren Buddhism. In the early phase of Sōka Gakkai’s development, *kōsen rufu* implied the conversion to Nichiren Buddhism of believers in other “evil religions” through aggressive proselytization (*shakubuku*), but since at least the 1970s a milder understanding of this

<sup>4</sup> SGI South Africa (2009). Broadly speaking, the conflict with the Nichiren Shōshū priesthood revolves around issues of power (the authority of the high priest, the exclusive transmission of the Dharma, and the inequality between priests and lay people) and doctrinal matters. For a detailed account, see, for example, Métraux (1992); and Hurst (2000).

idea has been gradually promoted, leading to the explicit profession of religious tolerance in the aforementioned 1995 Charter (Sōka Gakkai Kyōgaku 1967; Murata 1969; Kisala 2004). In president Ikeda's official interpretation featuring on SGI's website ("Understanding Kosen-rufu"), *kōsen rufu* is now understood as "the spread of the Mystic Law from one person to another", that is, "the movement to communicate the ultimate way to happiness and the highest principle of peace to people of all classes and nations through the correct philosophy and teaching of Nichiren Daishonin". At its best, *kōsen rufu* should therefore consist in "sharing with our fellow human beings through heart-to-heart dialogue and friendship, striving together with them to find the way to become better and happier people" with the aim to create an "alliance of individuals working for the happiness of all" (Soka Gakkai International 2015b). As such, *kōsen rufu* also provides the basis for the wide range of social activities promoted by Sōka Gakkai and SGI. And yet, there are still some ambiguities surrounding *kōsen rufu* and indications that a more assertive view of this concept has continued to have some currency within this new religious movement.<sup>5</sup>

Consistently with SGI's policy, SGI-SA, too, promotes the understanding of *kōsen rufu* as "the ceaseless effort to enhance the value of human dignity, to awaken all people to a sense of their limitless worth and potential". In other words, by developing one's own inherent buddha-nature—the core of SGI's "human revolution"—individuals can contribute to "the great goal of a world in which all beings are equally respected; and in which human rights are for everyone, and not the preserve of the white, the wealthy and the powerful". Accordingly, SGI-SA is eager to clarify that "a single view on the value of life", and not "a single religion" should be "widely declared and spread" through the process of *kōsen rufu* (SGI South Africa 2008, pp. ix, 18). However, this does not prevent SGI-SA to carve out a prominent place for Nichiren Buddhism, which is presented as "religion at its best", and "almost unique in its optimism about the potential of the individual human being, its emphasis on the preciousness of life and the profound equality of all people". As one official document significantly reminds SGI-SA's members, "just because all honestly practiced religions deserve equal legal and social respect, this does not mean that they necessarily all have equal power to make people happy".<sup>6</sup> Coherently, although potential members are not required to abandon their religious convictions and affiliations as soon as they join SGI-SA, it is generally expected that at some point, and preferably before receiving the *gohonzon*, they make a choice for the exclusive practice of Nichiren Buddhism.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the activities of SGI-SA are characterized by a rather strong missionary flavor. One of the usual topics of discussion during gatherings and in SGI-SA's publications is how to attract new members ("*kōsen-rufu* for Africa"). Already since the early post-apartheid years, when the new political climate allowed for a more public profile, SGI-SA listed "mission" ("Each one teach one!") among its main goals, and at the turn of the millennium a campaign was launched to reach a membership of 500 by May 2005. Later on, SGI-SA reaffirmed its determination to grow the organization to 1000 members by 18 November 2018—the fifth anniversary of the opening of the Hall of the Great Vow for Kosen-rufu (Kōsen Rufu Daiseidō) at the Japanese headquarters in Tokyo. The need for such expansion, as explained in SGI-SA's newsletter, was justified by the fact that "introducing others to the practice is the foundation for creating a transformation in our society—as people become happy and empowered, their environments are transformed". As part of this effort a new "Intro pack" for voluntary missionary work was designed and published by SGI-SA and made available to members (for a small price), including items for easy distribution such as the small booklet *Buddhist Words of Wisdom* (collecting quotations from Nichiren's writings and selected speeches of

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Ikeda (1996); Kisala (1999, pp. 167–68); and Dessì (2013, pp. 35–39). Incidentally, this is the way in which Ikeda exemplifies *kosen-rufu* in what is presented as his authoritative explanation of this concept on SGI's website: "Any vendor or salesperson, for example, believes that his or her product—whether it be televisions, fast food, or fresh vegetables—is the best and makes efforts to have as many people as possible know about it and buy it. This is an example of the widespread propagation (*kosen-rufu*) of one's beliefs in a sense" (Soka Gakkai International 2015b).

<sup>6</sup> SGI South Africa (2009, pp. 13–14). For a similar approach in other SGI's branches, see, for example, Rodríguez Plasencia (2014, pp. 216–20).

president Ikeda), a foldable leaflet about Nichiren Buddhism titled “Can We Create Happiness?” and cards introducing the basic practice of *nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō* as “the key to unlocking your highest potential” (SGI South Africa 2017b, pp. 3, 15).

Another common SGI practice, the ‘home visits,’ is widely performed especially by SGI-SA’s leaders and committed followers with the aim to strengthen existing ties and renew contact with non-participating members. It is not unheard for very dynamic members to plan to conduct at least one home visit per week in their own chapters. Rather than being casual, these home visits follow to a large extent a standardized format that is also taught at training courses for leaders. SGI-SA’s members have also tried to reach out to university students by forming in 2011 a Buddhist student society (Society of Buddhism in Action) at the University of Cape Town, which has operated at the February orientation week with the display of books, magazines, and *nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō* cards, and organized discussion meetings and interfaith talks.

Although SGI-SA still falls short of the target to reach 1000 members nationwide, its growth has been relatively slow but steady since the official end of the apartheid in 1994. Similar to other branches of SGI (cf. Métraux 2003, p. 124; Pereira 2008, p. 103; Cornejo 2013, pp. 67, 70; Welsch 2018, p. 26), female members represent the majority, and women often occupy other important roles (e.g., the general director) besides their responsibilities in local chapters according to the SGI organizational structure with a men, women, young men, and young women division. As briefly anticipated above, it is also important to emphasize that this new religious movement has been exceptionally effective in appealing to black and Coloured South Africans. It is difficult to quantify with certainty their percentage within the SGI-SA’s membership because there are no statistics available, but based on the participation at general meetings and other activities promoted by the organization, as well as personal communications with members, a conservative estimate would suggest that black and (secondarily) Coloured South Africans represent no less than one half of SGI-SA’s members. SGI-SA has been able, more than other forms of Buddhism in the country, to reach out to a reasonably faithful cross-section of South African society. For Clasquin-Johnson, this might be explained by the fact that mainstream South African Buddhism has largely mirrored Western Buddhism, a phenomenon mainly connected to educated middle-class people, and that in South Africa a black middle class is still developing.<sup>7</sup> From a different angle, SGI-SA’s relative success can be related to the peculiarity of its basic practice (chanting the *daimoku*), which requires a relatively limited amount of time and money for potential low-income members, at least in comparison to the long sessions of meditation and the participation in Buddhist retreats that often characterize mainstream South African ‘white’ Buddhism.<sup>8</sup> From a more practical perspective, it may be noted that SGI-SA has done and is still doing something that mainstream South African Buddhism as a whole does not usually do, that is, it has reached out to the black and Coloured communities in the poor townships through the personal presence and action of committed members. Examples of this approach are offered by the early presence of SGI-SA in Soweto already in the 1990s, and the aforementioned activities promoted by SGI-SA in Westbank and Alexandra through its chapters and the initiatives of individual leaders and members.<sup>9</sup>

## 5. Linking SGI to South Africa

Linking in a meaningful way the theme of human rights in the post-apartheid context to the quest for a Buddhist human revolution has been one of the main concerns of SGI since its introduction in South Africa. To be sure, this narrative has also been relevant to SGI in general. President Ikeda has

<sup>7</sup> Clasquin-Johnson (2009). Following Clasquin-Johnson (2002, pp. 160–61), ‘mainstream South African Buddhism’ can be roughly defined as a stream of Western Buddhism revolving around the lay practice of meditation in retreat centers and small groups mostly made up of middle-class white South Africans.

<sup>8</sup> On the reduction of time and financial costs for the participation in SGI’s activities as a strategy of adaptation and proselytization, cf., for example, Barone (2007, pp. 126–28) and Clarke (2000, p. 285).

<sup>9</sup> On SGI as a multicultural and socially inclusive form of Buddhism in other parts of the world, see, for example, Chappell (2000).

praised Nelson Mandela (1918–2013) as one of the three “champions” or key contemporary figures in the struggle for human rights, together with Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. In his book of conversations with the Brazilian intellectual Austregésilo de Athayde specifically dedicated to the theme of human rights, Ikeda recalls his encounter with Mandela at the offices of the *Seikyō shinbun* (Sōka Gakkai’s newspaper) in Tokyo at the time of his visit to Japan in October 1990 as deputy president of the African National Congress. On that occasion, Ikeda made five proposals to Mandela, including the organization of an anti-apartheid exhibition to be held in Japan. To Ikeda’s satisfaction, eight months after his meeting with Mandela, the “Human Rights Photography Exhibition” sponsored by the Sōka Gakkai Peace Committee was inaugurated at the Toda Peace Memorial Hall in Yokohama on the 15th anniversary of the Soweto uprisings (16 June 1976) with the collaboration of the African National Congress and the United Nations Apartheid Center. Although SGI had already promoted some peace activities since 1957 (when president Toda called for a ban on nuclear weapons), including the organization of traveling peace exhibitions (Kisala 2004), this new initiative was admittedly quite significant for Ikeda because of its potential to “intensify understanding of the importance of human rights in Japan and throughout the world” (de Athayde and Ikeda 2009, pp. 17–20). It is worth noting that in the same book, Ikeda delineates a sort of lineage concerning the practice of non-violence, thus establishing a link between Mandela’s anti-apartheid political activism and Buddhism, with the former ultimately deriving from the latter through Gandhi’s *satyagraha* (non-violent resistance):

Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King were both strongly influenced by the thoughts and deeds of Mahatma Gandhi, the fountainhead of a global non-violence movement. In a speech at the Gandhi Memorial Hall, Mandela declared himself a Gandhi-ist. Professor Harvey Cox of Harvard has told me that King’s non-violence formed under Gandhi’s influence. I believe that the source of Gandhi’s non-violence can be traced to Shakyamuni Buddha. (de Athayde and Ikeda 2009, p. 22)

Elsewhere, as in his 2014 Peace Proposal, Ikeda has attempted to relate Mandela to SGI’s Nichiren Buddhism in different ways, such as through the idea of “character value” attributed by SGI’s founder Makiguchi to those individuals “whose presence is always sought after and appreciated in times of crisis even if they may not otherwise attract much attention”, and “always function as a unifying force in society”. For Ikeda, Mandela “manifested just such character value” because his life dedicated to the opposition to the apartheid “served as a beacon of hope and courage to people around the world” (Ikeda 2014, pp. 3–4). In the same Peace Proposal, Ikeda likens the “deep sense of mission and commitment based on a personal vow” that characterized Mandela’s lifework to SGI members’ aspiration “to live our lives as Bodhisattvas of the Earth”—that is, those “bodhisattvas who had vowed to Shakyamuni that, throughout their lives, they would work for the sake of people mired in despair and were willing to be born in times of confusion and social unrest in order to do so”. This parallel is quite significant, because living “a life dedicated to fulfilling one’s vow” on behalf of those who suffer is presented by Ikeda as “something that Nichiren identified as an essential aspect of Buddhist practice” (Ikeda 2014, p. 5). Ikeda’s co-optation of Mandela’s legacy into SGI’s universe of belief is then given additional strength through reference to the issue of education, which is presented as “the source of light that enables people’s dignity to shine” for both SGI and Mandela (Ikeda 2014, p. 11).

Given these premises, it is not surprising that a black South African young woman features prominently in the promotional video *Our Shared Humanity* produced in 2006 by SGI and widely used ever since to introduce this new religious movement to the general public. Khosi’s story, from her childhood in a poor township to the PhD program at a university in the United States, serves as a testimonial of the capacity of SGI’s religious practice to open up a new set of life choices in a social environment still burdened by the legacy of apartheid’s oppressive years. “Growing up in Soweto in the 1980s during the apartheid when things were so much in upheaval”, the young protagonist says, “I ended up having a sense of powerlessness and low self-esteem but at the same time I did have the ambition to succeed and I saw myself as someone who was successful in the future, educated,

because education is the key really". However, Khosi adds, it was only after she started practicing Nichiren Buddhism that she realized that she had to battle with her "negative internal beliefs", take responsibility for herself and reaffirm her "power to decide" in order to fulfil her dream (Soga Gakkai International 2006).

The narrative of 'Mandela as a bodhisattva' suggested by Ikeda does not seem to find a great deal of currency and elaboration within SGI-SA, but as one would expect the figure of the South African leader is held in the highest esteem.<sup>10</sup> Among other things, in July 2013, SGI-SA participated in interfaith prayers for the wellbeing of Mandela at the Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory in Johannesburg, as well as in another prayer session at the Gauteng Provincial Legislature, and since the death of Mandela in December of the same year has held memorial services for the charismatic South African leader on various occasions. It is also worth mentioning that the link between the issue of human rights in post-apartheid South Africa and SGI's Buddhism is further reinforced by the fact that Braithwaite, SGI-SA's general director since 2001, moved to South Africa in 1993 as one of the organizers of the Free Elections Fund (meeting at that time also with Mandela), which was created to increase voter registration and education in South Africa's first democratic elections (SGI South Africa 2008, pp. 101–2).

Within SGI-SA, another way of strengthening the ideal connection between Nichiren Buddhism and South Africa has been the frequent reiteration of Ikeda's assertion, "The 21st century will be the century of Africa", an idea that the SGI's president first expressed in the 1960s. For Ikeda, the meaning of these words is that "those who suffer most have the greatest right to happiness" and that "unless Africa becomes a 'Continent of Happiness,' global peace cannot be realized" (SGI South Africa 2010b). In the acceptance speech for the honorary degree that he received in April 2013 by the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban, Ikeda has further elaborated on this motto by saying that he shares with another icon of anti-apartheid activism, Steve Biko (1946–1977), the belief that "Africa has a great gift to offer to the rest of the world, a human face that can replace the brutal and violent realities of our time", and that this new century of Africa is indeed "about to unfold here, from South Africa" (SGI South Africa 2013).

The two honorary degrees received by Ikeda in South Africa (one from the University of KwaZulu-Natal and another one in 1995 from the University of the North) add up to the almost 400 academic honors conferred upon the SGI president by various universities worldwide, thus contributing to a broader public-relations strategy through which SGI has been able to elevate its prestige both internationally and locally. In South Africa as elsewhere (cf. Pereira 2008; Welsch 2018, p. 26), this search for legitimacy has also been pursued by associating SGI with high-profile public figures, as in the case of Ela Gandhi and other politicians, activists, and intellectuals featuring at exhibitions and events organized by SGI-SA.

Among these, we find Mathole Motshekga, former African National Congress chief whip and chairperson of the Kara Heritage Institute, and Mmatshilo Motsei, author, activist, and spiritual healer, who were invited in October 2017 as guest speakers to the SGI-SA "Hope Talks" series to discuss the topic of "African Spirituality and Buddhism: The True Spirit of Ubuntu". On that occasion, Motshekga illustrated his views on "African spiritual philosophy" by presenting Africa as the cradle of humankind and all our knowledge systems, and the key idea of *ubuntu* (a Nguni expression that can be loosely translated as 'humanness') as the quality of human beings *qua* spiritual beings emanated from a single source; and Motsei celebrated the richness of South African spiritual and cultural legacy, which is however severely undermined by local educational systems that place too much emphasis on individualism and competition. The third speaker representing SGI-SA, after adding some reflections on his "double identity" as a Buddhist and traditional healer, recalled the words of praise for South

---

<sup>10</sup> A parallel to this narrative can be found, for example, in the connection established between SGI and the national hero José Martí (1853–1895) in Cuba. See Rodríguez Plasencia (2014).

African spirituality offered by president Ikeda in his speech for the honorary degree received from the University of KwaZulu-Natal.<sup>11</sup> Besides its contents and underlying communication strategies, this specific event is relevant to our discussion in that it points to another area of application of the *kōsen rufu* principle in South Africa, that is, the accommodation to traditional religion. This aspect is by no means marginal to SGI-SA's concerns especially in view of the important role played by the native heritage and spirituality in the cultural narrative of the new South African democracy, which finds one of its most forceful expressions in the Freedom Park in Pretoria, a huge national memorial and heritage destination established by the South African government in 2004 to honor those who sacrificed their lives for freedom.

I have already mentioned that SGI-SA takes part since 2011 in the Freedom Park Interfaith Committee, whose members gather on national days to offer interreligious prayers. Rather significantly, a professional storyteller employed at the Freedom Park Museum features on the SGI website with her testimony of how she manages to combine the South African spiritual tradition with Buddhism. Nomsa, who has been an SGI-SA's member since 2001, presents herself as "part of the broader spiritual tradition that includes healers" and claims that Buddhist practice has influenced her work in many ways: She has come "to a deeper understanding of life", which she wants to be reflected in her stories; she feels that her Buddhist practice makes her work "sacred"; and chanting the *daimoku* gives her "creative inspiration". Moreover, although she denies being herself a traditional healer (*sangoma*) like her mother, she admits that part of her inspiration comes from dreams, and that chanting facilitates this process:

I am definitely not a *sangoma* but it just happens that when I am sleeping, I get ideas—some of the songs I sing in my performances come to me in dreams. I used to struggle to remember these songs, but now I automatically wake up and I record the song or write down the vision. And when I am chanting, that creativity comes to me directly. It's amazing. (Soka Gakkai International 2015c)

The issue of the compatibility of African traditional beliefs and Buddhism has also been discussed within the framework of SGI-SA's national courses, apparently attracting much interest among participants and even giving rise to some animated discussions. Some of these issues have been clarified in a long article published in 2003 in the SGI-SA's newsletter, which argues for the suitability of Buddhism to contemporary South Africa. Here, Buddhism is presented as compatible with the "noble side" of the idea of *ubuntu* (i.e., understood as "a person is a person through other persons"), which has to do with respect, compassion, and responsibility toward others, but not with what is presented as its 'dark side'. The latter refers instead to its use within local communities to promote group conformity, and is characterized as oppressive (and, the article suggests, close to the apartheid ideology) because it tends to present humanity in terms of 'us' and 'them'. Moreover, the article continues, Buddhism is appropriate for South Africa because it holds members responsible for their own actions thus allowing for the manifestation of the ideal of human dignity in daily life, and for a human revolution that has the power to change both one's own nation and the entire world. Also, not secondarily, Buddhism is presented as suitable to South Africa because it insists not only on the primacy of human dignity but also on the deep respect for cultural values, which is expressed in the precept of "following the customs of the region"; in this respect, the article adds, Buddhism is different from other 'colonial religions' (i.e., Christianity) that superimposed external cultural values and were historically used to create divisions (SGI South Africa 2003).

The precept that the newsletter article above refers to is formally known in Japanese as *zuihō bini* ("adapting to local customs") and is commonly used within SGI to argue for the universal applicability of Buddhist principles (e.g., Seager 2006, pp. 141–70). SGI-SA presents it as "the principle of adapting

---

<sup>11</sup> SGI South Africa (2017c). On Motshekga's religious and political thought, see Chidester (2012, pp. 152–75).

the precepts to the locality”, according to which “practitioners of Buddhism are encouraged to take a flexible, open approach to the cultural context in which they find themselves”. Members of SGI-SA can follow “local customs and practices” unless they are contrary to “the Buddhist principles of respecting the inherent dignity and sanctity of human life”. Based on this general principle, it is acknowledged that the responsibility “to develop the kinds of activities that will be most appropriate to their cultural setting and will make the most lasting contribution to their respective societies” rests on SGI’s local branches (SGI South Africa 2008, p. 115). Indeed, most of SGI-SA’s attempts to link Nichiren Buddhism to South Africa presented in this section, from Ikeda’s cooptation of Mandela’s legacy to the interactions with South African traditional religion, can be understood as strategies of both propagation (*kōsen rufu*) and adaptation (*zuihō bini*). The same modest attempt to apply the idea of *zuihō bini* to the South African context can be seen in the practice of chanting while sitting in chairs (and not in the *seiza* kneeling position), which is however common in SGI as a whole (e.g., Clarke 2000, p. 283); and in the composition of some Buddhist songs inspired by local music, such as the ‘*kōsen rufu* song’ modeled after those used in the South African political struggle, with the aim to bring vibrancy and a local flavor to SGI-SA’s meetings. It is also worth mentioning that some South African members have found themselves particularly comfortable with the silent prayers at the end of the *gongyō*, because they offer the opportunity to insert the traditional veneration for the ancestors in SGI-SA’s Buddhist practice.

## 6. Members’ Experiences and Narratives

Another area of interest for the study of SGI-SA is represented by the narratives of members, which help to shed light on how and to what extent this form of Buddhism may have met the needs of the South African socioeconomic fabric and previously segregated groups. In this regard, it may be observed that the aforementioned testimonial of the black South African practitioner featuring in SGI’s promotional video, with her progress from “powerlessness and low self-esteem” to the discovery of her own potential and the fulfilment of her “ambition to succeed” anticipates some of the recurring themes.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, the experience of Nichiren Buddhism as a means to empowerment is one of the common features in the narratives of SGI-SA’s members. Siphesihle, a black female member coming from a Christian family in Soweto, was introduced to SGI-SA by a friend during a period of conflict and crisis within her congregation. At that time, she was also going through some financial difficulties and major problems within the family. After she started practicing, she recalls, she suddenly felt that life was “full of new interests and possibilities”, and now she strongly believes that the encounter with her friend (who she had not seen in about thirty years) was actually part of a mysterious cosmic plan. Everyone possesses a transformative power within oneself, Siphesihle affirms, and through the practice of Nichiren Buddhism she was finally able to realize this. Thato, another black member from the Gauteng province, recalls that what attracted him to the Buddhist practice was especially “the idea that the power to direct our lives and to change ourselves and our circumstances lies within us”. John, a white follower from the same area, affirms that “because of Nichiren Buddhism, I was able to change the course and direction of my life. This practice has given me the tools to bring out the full potential within me and inspire others”. A similar experience is reported by two teenagers practicing Nichiren Buddhism in Cape Town. Leah confesses that “I had no confidence”, and that “since I have started chanting, I am able to overcome my fear and weaknesses”. Kungawo, who lives in one of the townships in the Cape Flats, recalls that he used to be bullied by other children and he would get upset very easily; after his marimba teacher introduced him to chanting and SGI-SA, he experienced a lot of changes in his life, and, as he says, “I am now calm, I can control myself and I walk away from situations that are not good for me”.

<sup>12</sup> The following narratives feature in SGI-SA’s materials available to members only and have been anonymized.

In most cases, empowerment through Buddhist practice has represented the way out of difficult situations and serious life crises for members and is usually accompanied by the belief of having achieved some tangible worldly benefits. For Lara and Jane, for example, this has meant much better family relationships, for Trevor an improved relationship with his siblings and the attenuation of some health problems, while James relates the good health of his child to the positive effects of the *daimoku*. Mark attributes to the power of chanting his own recovery from suicidal depression, and Patricia narrates that it was only after joining SGI-SA that she was able to work through the pain for the death of her only child. Members coming from the most disadvantaged areas tend to frame the benefits of the Buddhist practice in terms of ‘social redemption’. This pattern, which is apparent in the aforementioned cases of Khosi and Siphesihle, is also seen in several other instances of township-based practice. Mia, a black orphan from the townships, decided to chant until she was eventually accepted by a better school. Siyabonga recalls that the encounter with SGI-SA represented the turning point of his life after a series of business failures and financial losses, and that “the *daimoku* enabled me to break the chains of hopelessness and despair”. For Elijah, the encounter with Nichiren Buddhism was the real key to overcome his drinking problem and improve his working conditions.

Elijah’s experience is meaningful also because he recalls that “chanting and participation in the SGI meetings has been a life-change experience, not the least because of the support provided by fellow members”. This introduces another benefit that members occasionally relate to the practice of Nichiren Buddhism, that is, the possibility to rely on a ‘safety network’, as pragmatically stated by Naledi (“The practice . . . connects me to the right network”) and acknowledged by other SGI-SA’s members. Jailoshini, for example, says that what initially attracted her to SGI-SA was not the religious practice but the support that she received from her group members of the Gauteng chapter, and Melokuhle gratefully acknowledges the strong support received by her fellow members in Cape Town as a single young mother, to the point that “SGI became our immediate family”. Perhaps even more explicitly, Lubanzi, a black African who joined SGI-SA in Durban in 2005, affirms that SGI-SA “provides a sense of security in the midst of the ‘muddy pond’ of society”. Indeed, for not a few members the SGI-SA’s community can be perceived as a safe and supporting environment within a context often burdened by serious social and economic problems, and with alarming rates of deprivation and violence.<sup>13</sup>

The narratives of other members suggest that the benefits of Buddhist practice are not something to be obtained once for all but require an enduring determination. “Chanting energizes me”, says Paul, a Coloured member from Cape Town, but “my problems have actually increased. I am forced to deal with my karma and still chant for a victory. I feel better though. My attitude towards my life state has changed”. John, a member already mentioned above, is convinced that the practice of Nichiren Buddhism has allowed him to realize his full potential and to open “many doors”. However, he also specifies that this was “not an overnight miracle transformation”, but something that he was able to achieve “through determination, discipline and faith”. Also, Rethabile, another black female practitioner from Johannesburg, thinks that she was able to pass her exams as a result of her chanting of the *nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō* and her “continuous faith and determination”.

Such continuous effort required by SGI’s Buddhism can provide the framework for a sort of ‘work ethic’. Lubanzi, for example, says that when he began to practice, he made a vow “to achieve specific goals” in his life, with a strong determination to eventually “enjoy actual proof of happiness” and change his “financial karma”. Also, because of this “renewed determination” and a “changed attitude toward chanting”, he soon started to experience positive changes in his life until he was finally offered a long-awaited job. Several other narratives touch upon this dimension of SGI-SA’s practice. In Joshua’s words, a black member from one of the townships of Cape Town, “practicing Buddhism has helped me to become more responsible and trustworthy . . . sometimes people are not at home but they can

---

<sup>13</sup> Incidentally, a letter of introduction or a thorough vetting is required, for safety reasons, for those who wish to join SGI-SA’s meetings at members’ private homes. For the value attached to social ties and support in other SGI’s branches, see, for example, Barone (2007); Welsch (2018); and Di Marzio (2019).

still trust me to do my work . . . the practice has taught me to persevere". Noah is convinced that his practice plays "a huge role" in his work: "I was shy and did not get one hundred percent benefit through what I was doing", he says, but "through chanting, I have gained courage and confidence. I started communicating freely with people. Then clients started praising me for my attitude towards them and my work". Amahle narrates how she was able to impress (and get an apology from) the boss who was making her life miserable by means of her integrity at work sustained by her chanting at home. However, she continues, an even clearer proof that her discipline was bearing fruit came later, when the same company was placed under liquidation:

I went to the Chief Executive Officer to ask for some work documents I required. He was shocked that I was still working seriously when everyone had given up . . . the same week I received a call from my CEO requesting an urgent meeting with me . . . I was introduced to the Chief Operating Officer who represented the new investors. My CEO had told them about me, and they were offering me a position. I was one of 12 people out of 2800 former employees who were offered jobs. I had won!

Such positive attitude toward self-cultivation and responsibility is strongly encouraged by SGI-SA's leaders, and the topic of 'work and Buddhism' has also been discussed in seminars within the national courses. For general director Braithwaite, "If discipline becomes a habit then discipline becomes a strength . . . the principle of 'voluntarily assuming the appropriate karma' represents the transformation from a passive life to an active self-motivated life" (SGI South Africa 2014). In a message to SGI-SA's members published in the official newsletter, she has also expressed her determination to "become less ambivalent about money", specifying that "by this 'ambivalence' I meant that I was not paying sufficient attention to my monetary affairs, was taking my monetary fortune for granted and not taking full responsibility for my future financial well-being" (SGI South Africa 2010a). Rather significantly, the same issue of the SGI-SA's newsletter features a long article in which "The Best Car Salesperson in Japan" reveals that the "three secrets" of his success (setting high targets, courage and high spirits, prompt action and response to the situation) as well as his concern and care for all customers derive from his lifetime engagement with Nichiren Buddhism as a devout Sōka Gakkai member.

## 7. Conclusions

The analysis above helps to shed some light on the interplay of SGI with South African society. Originally introduced in the country in the 1980s and practiced almost exclusively by white and Japanese members, this form of Nichiren Buddhism has expanded its area of influence in the post-apartheid years to embrace more diverse sections of the population, having been able to attract a number of black and Coloured South Africans that is unprecedented for any other Buddhist organization in the country. As such, it can be broadly characterized with the typology of "export" or "Evangelical Buddhism" used by Jan Nattier to describe Sōka Gakkai in North America, with the specification that for a minority of SGI-SA's members this is rather a form of "Ethnic" (but not necessarily "baggage") or "Elite" ("import") Buddhism.<sup>14</sup> What SGI basically offers to its potential pool of South African followers is a simple, not particularly time-consuming, and relatively inexpensive religious practice (chanting the *daimoku*) in a safe and supporting environment, with the aim to achieve self-realization/empowerment and a set of concrete worldly benefits. To be sure, such worldly orientation and pragmatic attitude is generalized in SGI worldwide, as is the ability to reach out to individuals experiencing a period of 'crisis' (e.g., Métraux 2003, p. 124; Barone 2007; Cornejo 2013, p. 65; Di Marzio 2019). In the specific case of South Africa, while there are suggestions that for a minority of followers the practice of Nichiren Buddhism can help to fill the vacuum created by a declining commitment to Christianity

<sup>14</sup> Nattier (1998, pp. 188–90). For the ongoing debate on 'two' and 'three Buddhisms', and, more in general, on the categorization of Buddhist groups, see, for example, Prebish (1993); Numrich (2003); Elverskog (2006); Wilson (2009); Hickey (2010); Borup (2016); and Mitchell (2016, pp. 207–9).

(as is more common, for example, in Europe), the benefits promised by SGI-SA can especially be appealing to low-income or deprived sectors of the population in search for a temporary relief from their hardships or a more longed-for and rewarding 'social redemption'. In this connection, the discipline and determination attached to SGI's practice can play an additional role and contribute in several instances to a sort of work ethic, paralleling to some extent the emphasis on ethical discipline and hard work found among the African-initiated churches (cf. [Kiernan 1994](#); [Chidester 2012](#), p. 33). It is also apparent that some attempts have been made to tune SGI's Nichiren Buddhism with the local context, as is shown, for example, by the very effort to reach out to the townships, to co-opt Mandela's legacy, to establish a meaningful link between SGI's human revolution and the issue of human rights in South Africa, and to foster some basic interactions with traditional spirituality and local religions.

There are also evident limits to SGI's effective capacity thus far to fit in the South African socio-cultural context, which is indirectly testified by its small size when compared to other SGI branches worldwide and even in Africa (e.g., the one in Côte d'Ivoire claims several thousand members). White and non-South-African (including Japanese) members, for example, have often been over-represented in roles of leadership. This is another indication that the integration of non-white South Africans within the local branch of Soka Gakkai has not been fully accomplished yet. However, it should be acknowledged that SGI has showed a proactive attitude in approaching this issue that is almost unknown in forms of both mainstream and non-mainstream South African Buddhism. One may think, for example, of the meditation retreats promoted by South African Buddhist groups and leaders that, politically progressive however they might be, continue to attract mostly white practitioners (for the various reasons illustrated in this article) thus perpetuating in a sort of vicious circle an environment where black and Coloured South Africans may feel uncomfortable and 'racially' isolated. Or we may think of cases such as Foguanshan, which continues to be in South Africa mainly the religion of Taiwanese or Chinese immigrants, despite (or perhaps due to) past attempts to focus on the monastic training of a vast number of black (South)Africans. Although SGI-SA offers to South African women opportunities for self-expression in a still significantly patriarchal society, somehow paradoxically this takes place within the framework of a gendered division of labor (SGI's men, women, young men, and young women divisions) originally based on traditional Japanese social norms and gender bias (cf. [McLaughlin 2018](#), p. 13). Of course, Japanese society is not static and monolithic, and this gendered framework does not have nowadays the same social and cultural meaning that it carried in the formative years of Soka Gakkai. Among other things, joint meetings are widespread and leadership responsibilities can cross divisions. However, it cannot be completely ruled out that such gendered division of labor, as an *organizational pattern* transplanted in South Africa, may potentially resonate with (and thus reinforce) local forms of gender bias. Despite the image of a horizontal organization given by the decentralized practice within groups, SGI-SA reflects SGI's hierarchical structure under Ikeda's charismatic leadership, and although it enjoys some autonomy, the Japanese headquarters have the final say on sensitive matters of practice and organization.<sup>15</sup> To date, apart from the chanting and sutra recitation in Japanese during the *gongyō*, the language exclusively used in SGI-SA's publications, meetings, and communications is English, to the detriment of Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans, and all other official languages that are spoken as a first language by most South Africans. It should be acknowledged that SGI-SA promotes, differently from mainstream South Africa Buddhism (cf. [Wratten 2000](#)), some level of social engagement, which finds expression especially in educational activities focusing on peace and human rights. On the one hand, this is consistent with SGI's focus on the inner transformation of individuals through religious practice that should gradually change society as a whole, rather than on welfare activities aimed to alleviate material suffering. On the other hand, this has resulted (perhaps not independently from the small size and limited resources of

---

<sup>15</sup> On this feature of SGI, cf. [Dobbelaere \(2006\)](#) and [Welsch \(2018, p. 37\)](#). An example of the effects of this pyramidal structure is provided by the SGI general headquarters for Africa's single-handed decision to prohibit SGI-SA's members from offering themselves as volunteers for my in-depth interviews.

SGI-SA) in a kind of ‘low-intensity’ social engagement that is almost silent on some of the harsh and pressing realities of South African society, such as the dramatic levels of violence and the inhuman effects of capitalism and the apartheid legacy on large sectors of the population. In other words, SGI-SA’s emphasis on human revolution and self-expression has not always been accompanied by a critical approach toward the socio-economic structures underlying oppression and suffering.

Finally, when approached from the perspective of Japanese religions’ interplay with global society, and specifically with other religions, powerful global ideas, and secular global systems (cf. Dessì 2017), the dynamics analyzed above generally confirm the overall trajectory of SGI. SGI-SA’s attitude towards local religions reiterates a well-established pattern through which this new religious movement performs a global repositioning vis-à-vis other religions in terms of an inclusivism (the conditional acceptance of other religions’ authority) characterized on the one hand by the officially sanctioned respect for other religions and some forms of interfaith dialogue, and, on the other hand, by a strong missionary approach sustained by the firm belief that Nichiren Buddhism is ‘religion at its best’. SGI-SA’s stated purpose to adapt Nichiren Buddhism to South African culture, though in not a few cases mostly rhetorical and subsumed to propagation and public-relation strategies, nonetheless reveals some basic interactions between the global and the local (glocalization) that are also pursued by other SGI branches, and, at the central level, especially through the issues of human rights and ecology (a theme, the latter, which is however not emphasized by SGI-SA despite the organization of a few exhibitions). Finally, SGI-SA’s interplay with the economy and other social systems with a global reach, though somehow constrained by its small size, can be placed within the wider framework of SGI’s overall engagement with pressing global issues such as peace and human rights as an eminently educational endeavor, which implies some degree of accommodation with the dysfunctional forces of the global market economy.

**Funding:** This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 793853.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

- Barone, Carlo. 2007. A Neo-Durkheimian Analysis of a New Religious Movement: The Case of Soka Gakkai in Italy. *Theory and Society* 36: 117–40. [CrossRef]
- Borup, Jørn. 2016. Who are these Buddhists and How Many of Them are There? Theoretical and Methodological Challenges in Counting Immigrant Buddhists: A Danish Case Study. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 31: 85–100. [CrossRef]
- Chappell, David W. 2000. Racial Diversity in the Soka Gakkai. In *Engaged Buddhism in the West*. Edited by Christopher S. Queen. Somerville: Wisdom Publications, pp. 184–217.
- Chidester, David. 2012. *Wild Religion: Tracking the Sacred in South Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Clarke, Peter B. 2000. “Success” and “Failure”: Japanese New Religions Abroad. In *Japanese New Religions: In Global Perspective*. Edited by Peter B. Clarke. Richmond: Curzon Press, pp. 272–311.
- Clarke, Peter B. 2005. Globalization and the Pursuit of a Shared Understanding of the Absolute: The Case of Soka Gakkai in Brazil. In *Buddhist Missionaries in the Era of Globalization*. Edited by Linda Learman. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, pp. 123–39.
- Clasquin-Johnson, Michel. 2009. So Where Are All Those Black Buddhists, Then? Available online: [http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/2566/Black\\_Buddhists\\_article.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](http://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/2566/Black_Buddhists_article.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y) (accessed on 20 May 2020).
- Clasquin-Johnson, Michel, and Js Kobus Krüger, eds. 1999. *Buddhism and Africa*. Pretoria: University of South Africa Press.
- Clasquin-Johnson, Michel. 1999. Transplanting Buddhism: An Investigation into the Spread of Buddhism, with Reference to Buddhism in South Africa. Ph.D. dissertation, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.

- Clasquin-Johnson, Michel. 2002. Buddhism in South Africa. In *Westward Dharma: Buddhism beyond Asia*. Edited by Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 152–62.
- Clasquin-Johnson, Michel. 2004. Ixopo: The Evolution of a South African Buddhist Centre. *Journal for the Study of Religion* 17: 45–65.
- Clasquin-Johnson, Michel. 2017. Buddhism in Africa. In *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Buddhism*. Edited by Michael Jerrison. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 349–65.
- Cornejo, Monica. 2013. Individual Spirituality and Religious Membership among Soka Gakkai Buddhists in Spain. In *Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality: Ethnographic Approaches*. Edited by Anna Fedele and Kim E. Knibbe. London: Routledge, pp. 62–77.
- de Athayde, Austregésilo, and Daisaku Ikeda. 2009. *Human Rights in the Twenty-First Century*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Dessì, Ugo. 2013. *Japanese Religions and Globalization*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Dessì, Ugo. 2017. *The Global Repositioning of Japanese Religions: An Integrated Approach*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Di Marzio, Raffaella. 2019. Experiences of Affiliation to the Italian Soka Gakkai: An Analysis According to the Rambo et al. Integrated Model. *The Journal of CESNUR* 3: 108–21.
- Dobbelaere, Karel. 2006. Soka Gakkai in a Globalized World. *The Journal of Oriental Studies* 16: 105–12.
- Ehrhardt, George, Axel Klein, Levi McLaughlin, and Steven R. Reed. 2014. *Kōmeitō: Politics and Religion in Japan*. Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies at UC Berkeley.
- Ellison, George T. H., and Thea de Wet. 2020. The Classification of South Africa's Mixed-Heritage Peoples 1910–2011: A Century of Conflation, Contradiction, Containment, and Contention. In *The Palgrave International Handbook of Mixed Racial and Ethnic Classification*. Edited by Zarine L. Rocha and Peter J. Aspinall. London: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 425–55.
- Elverskog, Johan. 2006. Two Buddhisms in Contemporary Mongolia. *Contemporary Buddhism* 7: 29–46. [CrossRef]
- Fisker-Nielsen, Anne Mette. 2012. *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Japan: Soka Gakkai Youth and Komeito*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Fisker-Nielsen, Anne Mette. 2018. Sōka Gakkai. In *Handbook of East-Asian New Religious Movements*. Edited by Lukas Pokorny and Franz Winter. Leiden: Brill, pp. 109–127.
- Hammond, Philip, and David Machacek. 1994. *Soka Gakkai in America: Accommodation and Conversion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hickey, Wakoh S. 2010. Two Buddhisms, Three Buddhisms, and Racism. *Journal of Global Buddhism* 11: 1–25.
- Höhe, Sybille. 2011. *Religion, Staat und Politik in Japan: Geschichte und zeitgeschichtliche Bedeutung von Sōka Gakkai, Kōmeitō und Neuer Kōmeitō*. Munich: Iudicium Verlag.
- Hurst, Jane. 2000. A Buddhist Reformation in the Twentieth Century: Causes and Implications of the Conflict between the Soka Gakkai and the Nichiren Shoshu Priesthood. In *Global Citizens: The Soka Gakkai Buddhist Movement in the World*. Edited by David Machacek and Bryan Wilson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 67–96.
- Ikeda, Daisaku. 1996. A New Humanism for the Coming Century. Lecture delivered at Rajiv Gandhi Institute for Contemporary Studies, New Delhi. Available online: <http://www.daisakuikeda.org/sub/resources/works/lect/lect-09.html> (accessed on 20 May 2020).
- Ikeda, Daisaku. 2014. Value Creation for Global Change: Building Resilient and Sustainable Societies (2014 Peace Proposal). Available online: <https://www.sgi.org/content/files/about-us/president-ikedas-proposals/peaceproposal2014.pdf> (accessed on 20 May 2020).
- Inoue, Nobutaka, Tsushima Michihito, Nishiyama Shigeru, Kōmoto Mitsugi, and Nakamaki Hirochika, eds. 1994. *Shinshūkyō jiten*. Tokyo: Kōbundō.
- Kiernan, Jim. 1994. The Healing Community and the Future of the Urban Working Class. *Journal for the Study of Religion* 7: 49–64.
- Kisala, Robert. 1994. Sōka Gakkai, Kōmeitō, and the Separation of Religion and State in Japan. *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture* 18: 7–17.
- Kisala, Robert. 1999. *Prophets of Peace: Pacifism and Cultural Identity in Japan's New Religions*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Kisala, Robert. 2004. Soka Gakkai: Searching for the Mainstream. In *Controversial New Religions*. Edited by James Lewis and Jesper A. Petersen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 139–52.

- Machacek, David, and Bryan Wilson, eds. 2000. *Global Citizens: The Soka Gakkai Buddhist Movement in the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McLaughlin, Levi. 2018. *Sōka Gakkai's Human Revolution: The Rise of a Mimetic Nation in Modern Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Métraux, Daniel A. 1992. The Dispute between the Sōka Gakkai and the Nichiren Shōshū Priesthood: A Lay Revolution against a Conservative Clergy. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 19: 325–36. [CrossRef]
- Métraux, Daniel A. 2003. The Soka Gakkai in Australia: Globalization of a New Japanese Religion. *Journal of Global Buddhism* 4: 108–43.
- Métraux, Daniel A. 2010. *How Soka Gakkai Became a Global Buddhist Movement: Internationalization of a Global Buddhist Movement*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Métraux, Daniel. 2013. Soka Gakkai International: The Global Expansion of a Japanese Buddhist Movement. *Religion Compass* 7: 423–32. [CrossRef]
- Mitchell, Scott A. 2016. *Buddhism in America: Global Religion, Local Contexts*. London and New York: Bloomsbury.
- Murata, Kiyooki. 1969. *Japan's New Buddhism: An Objective Account of Soka Gakkai*. New York: Weatherhill.
- Nakano, Tsuyoshi. 2004. *Sengo Nihon no shūkyō to seiji*. Tokyo: Hara Shobō.
- Nattier, Jan. 1998. Who is a Buddhist? Charting the Landscape of Buddhist America. In *The Faces of Buddhism in America*. Edited by Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 183–95.
- Numrich, Paul D. 2003. Two Buddhisms Further Considered. *Contemporary Buddhism* 4: 55–78. [CrossRef]
- Ōnishi, Katsuaki. 2009. *Honmon Butsuryūkō to Sōka Gakkai no shakaigakuteki kenkyū: Shūkyōteki haitasei to genseshugi*. Tokyo: Ronsōsha.
- Pereira, Ronan Alves. 2008. The Transplantation of Soka Gakkai to Brazil: Building “The Closest Organization to the Heart of Ikeda-Sensei”. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 35: 95–113. [CrossRef]
- Prebish, Charles S. 1993. Two Buddhisms Reconsidered. *Buddhist Studies Review* 10: 187–206.
- Rodriguez Plasencia, Girardo. 2014. Sōka Gakkai in Cuba: Building a ‘Spiritual Bridge’ to Local Particularism, the ‘Mystic East’ and the World. *Journal of Religion in Japan* 3: 198–225. [CrossRef]
- Schoeman, Willem J. 2017. South African Religious Demography: The 2013 General Household Survey. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73: 1–7. [CrossRef]
- Seager, Richard H. 2006. *Encountering the Dharma: Daisaku Ikeda, Sōka Gakkai, and the Globalization of Buddhist Humanism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- SGI South Africa. 2003. *SGI-SA Newsletter*. Johannesburg: SGI-SA, November.
- SGI South Africa. 2008. *First Steps: An Easy Day-by-Day Introduction to Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism*, 2nd ed. Johannesburg: SGI-SA.
- SGI South Africa. 2009. *The Nichiren Shoshu Priesthood Issue in South Africa: Questions and Answers*. Johannesburg: SGI-SA.
- SGI South Africa. 2010a. *Life to life*. Johannesburg: SGI-SA, April.
- SGI South Africa. 2010b. *Life to life*. Johannesburg: SGI-SA, June.
- SGI South Africa. 2012. *Life to life*. Johannesburg: SGI-SA, December/January.
- SGI South Africa. 2013. *Life to life*. Johannesburg: SGI-SA, August.
- SGI South Africa. 2014. *Life to life*. Johannesburg: SGI-SA, March.
- SGI South Africa. 2017a. *Life to life*. Johannesburg: SGI-SA, March.
- SGI South Africa. 2017b. *Life to life*. Johannesburg: SGI-SA, July.
- SGI South Africa. 2017c. *Life to life*. Johannesburg: SGI-SA, November.
- SGI South Africa. 2020. Start Practising Now. Available online: <http://www.sgi-sa.org.za/about-buddhism/start-practising-now> (accessed on 20 May 2020).
- Soga Gakkai International. 2006. *Our Shared Humanity (Promotional Video)*. Tokyo: SGI and Knucklehead Productions.
- Soka Gakkai International. 2015a. SGI Charter. Available online: <https://www.sgi.org/about-us/sgi-charter.html> (accessed on 20 May 2020).
- Soka Gakkai International. 2015b. Understanding Kosen-rufu. Available online: <https://www.sgi.org/about-us/president-ikedas-writings/kosen-rufu.html> (accessed on 20 May 2020).
- Soka Gakkai International. 2015c. An Unfolding Story by Nomsa Mdlalose, South Africa. Available online: <https://www.sgi.org/people-and-perspectives/an-unfolding-story.html> (accessed on 20 May 2020).

- Soka Gakkai International. 2015d. Three Thousand Realms in a Single Moment of Life. Available online: <https://www.sgi.org/about-us/buddhist-concepts/three-thousand-realms-in-a-single-moment-of-life.html> (accessed on 24 October 2020).
- Sōka Gakkai Kyōgaku, ed. 1967. *Shakubuku kyōten*. Tokyo: Sōka Gakkai.
- van Loon, Louis. 1980. The Indian Buddhist Community in South Africa: Its Historical Origins and Socio-Religious Attitudes and Practices. *Religion in Southern Africa* 1: 3–18.
- Welsch, Denise. 2018. Passing on the Law: The Growth of Soka Gakkai International in Argentina. *International Journal of Latin American Religions* 2: 22–40. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Wilson, Jeff. 2009. Mapping the American Buddhist Terrain. *Religion Compass* 3: 836–46. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Wilson, Bryan, and Karel Dobbelaere. 1994. *A Time to Chant. The Soka Gakkai Buddhists in Britain*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Wratten, Darrel. 1995. Buddhism in South Africa: From Textual Imagination to Contextual Innovation. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa.
- Wratten, Darrel. 2000. Engaged Buddhism in South Africa. In *Engaged Buddhism in the West*. Edited by Christopher S. Queen. Boston: Wisdom Publications, pp. 446–67.

**Publisher's Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



© 2020 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).