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**A NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT IN SINGAPORE:
SYNCRETISM AND VARIATION IN THE
SAI BABA MOVEMENT**

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A New Religious Movement in Singapore: Syncretism and Variation in the Sai Baba Movement

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Abstract

This paper is based on a current ethnographic project on the Sai Baba Movement in Singapore and situates itself within the sociological study of New Religious Movements. Studies dealing with the expansion of “cults” and NRMs are well documented, but little has been done to explore how such movements proceed after the initial foothold has been established in the host country, neglecting to examine the patterns of interaction with the highly plural socio-ethnic and religious elements that exist in multicultural nations, particularly in Singapore, and its social implications. The Sai Baba movement practises and preaches ethno-religious ecumenism, and allows for adherents to maintain the religious affiliations and practices of their parent or current religion. This paper seeks to explore the nature of the Sai religious framework and its apparent success in Singapore, by studying the impact of ritual variations, syncretism, and its implications through an ethnographic lens.

Introduction

In this period of uncertainty and religiously-motivated terrorism, many societies accord a degree of negativity to new religious movements whose ideas and world views are considered strange, hard to understand, or run counter to dominant religious perspectives. Furthermore, the fear of religious cults in recent times has been made worse by the threat of religiously-motivated terrorist attacks and mass suicides, prompting suspicion, rejection, and the rise of anti-cult sentiments. In fact, even the term ‘cult’ is itself shrouded in controversy and has been debated in political, academic and theological circles. Regardless of what we label them however, new religious movements are often perceived as non-conformist and met with legal, theological and normative resistance.

It is interesting to note that despite the normative resistance of the majority, many such new movements and groups have arisen and continue to emerge and grow. Some movements have even spread to other nations and other cultures, adopting new and innovative strategies accordingly to cater to the religious demands of the local population, or have changed in form as a result of glocalization¹. Many studies have shown that these movements have traveled overseas mostly by way of migrants (Mearns, 1995), and the transnational movement of sacred and social

structures (Waghorne, 2004), but little has been done to explore how movements proceed after the initial foothold has been established in the host country.

One such movement that has most recently made the international headlines is the Sri Sathya Sai Baba Movement. The BBC documentary, *Secret Swami*², elevated the Movement's "cult status" by turning its lens onto the allegations of sexual abuse made by former devotees against their charismatic leader, Sathya Sai Baba. The exposé sent shockwaves to the millions of devotees found in 160 countries around the world. Sri Sathya Sai Baba, however, remains virtually untouchable, protected by some of India's political elite, and the movement continues to grow and embed itself in various cultures and societies, its influence spreading from Southeast Asia and Japan to as far as the UK, Sweden, and the United States.

This raises an interesting question: How do these religious movements succeed in spreading in such diverse social contexts, despite the presence of socio-cultural constraints? How may we study these patterns, without ignoring the complexities of ethno-religious identity, social space, and the voice of the adherents? I assert that the way forward to a more fruitful analysis of the study of new religious movements like the Sai Baba Movement requires a revision of the sociological notions of cults, religious conversion and practice through a more precise, anthropological lens. In this paper³, I will attempt to show how the Movement is able to spread in non-Hindu and non-Indian cultures, what forms it may take, and reveal the patterns of religious practice and membership growth, by studying the variations in structural and religious practices in multicultural Singapore.

On the Study of Cults and NRMs

A central view in the sociological study of religion is the rise of new religious movements and cults, and many scholars attribute this phenomenon to the decline or gradual secularization and desacralization of traditional religions like Christianity (Nelson, 1987; Johnstone, 1997; Hexham and Poewe, 1997). In the latter half of the 20th century, the religious economy thesis has dominated the discussion of religion in the field of sociology, with much success in the study and analysis of religious and cult movements in the United States and Canada (Stark and Finke, 2000; Stark and Bainbridge, 1985, 1997). The development of the study of religion and new religious movements from this idea of the religious marketplace has resulted in many problems when conceptualizing the very notion of religion itself. Several terms commonly tossed around in these studies of religion carry with them intrinsic assumptions that threaten objective observation. For instance, sociologists often conceive of "God" in a monotheistic sense than reflects more commonly Judeo-Christian religious traditions rather than some of those practised in Asia (Kurtz,

1995:17); it is also noted that many scholars use the term “church” as one that is synonymous with “religion” (McGuire, 1997:21), and cults as groups that “blend alien religious or psychological notions with *Christian* doctrine” (Mann, 1955:6; emphasis mine). In an attempt to explain the nature of religious activities trans-culturally, we unfortunately apply certain assumptions based on our own experiences to understand what is important and meaningful to other peoples (Saler, 2000).

Furthermore, the logic of the religious economy has unintentionally influenced a particularly myopic and limiting conception of cults and new religious movements (NRMs). Many contemporary works in this field either began to critique the propositions of Stark and Bainbridge by attempting to fit the model precisely to their empirical data (see Snow and Phillips, 1980; Greil and Rudy, 1984), or to view the process of variation in the religious marketplace as deviant phenomena, leading to the popular conception of cults as socially destructive (see Hassan, 1990) and “antichurch”. Consequently, NRMs are almost always studied as “cults” (see Dawson, 2003:117), or used as the antithesis to “anti-cult movements” (see Barker, 1986). As such, most studies have examined the issues of alleged cult brainwashing and sexual and physical violence (Beckford 1985; Barker, 1989; Richardson, 1996), with regards to collective stigmatization and demonization of deviant social values and concerns of secularization (Beckford, 2003).

Arguably, the difference between a cult, sect, and new religious movement are the assignment of correlative characteristics, negative to some and neutral or positive to others; in other words, societies, not scholars, decide what is a cult or sect or simply another religion⁴, and the adoption of these value-laden definitions would only embroil the researcher in a tangle of socio-political arguments on the nature of religious groups and complicate any meaningful, holistic study of these groups. A definition should acknowledge a NRM on its own merits and consequently analyze it as a social group and phenomenon with its own historical development and social patterns, and not merely as the result of a radical departure within a given religious economy, for “... it is attributes, not correlates, that belong in a definition” (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985:20). In other words, studying the development of new religious movements as entities that have separated from a “parent” religion is only partially useful as it does not fully maximize the research potential in gaining access to the distinctive qualities of these social phenomena.

Admittedly, using the ontological definitions of cults and new religious movements interchangeably would somewhat result in conceptual confusion. Even some scholars who duly note this danger invariably fall prey to it⁵. However, some form of categorization and ideal types are still required, for it is “...unavoidable as a cognitive starting point in the search for trans-

cultural understanding” (Saler, 2000:9). Helpfully, Hexham and Poewe (1997) provide a more suitable definition of new religions as

[Religious] movements, cults, and sects that have developed in the past 200 years as a reaction to modernity. Although they embrace the new and reject a single, ongoing tradition, they borrow their ideas, doctrines, and practices from older religious traditions. (Hexham and Poewe, 1997:23).

NRMs indeed reject⁶ a *single* ongoing tradition by virtue of the fact that they exist outside the jurisdiction of the dominant religious institution by forming their own group and creating their own rules, norms, beliefs and practices. At the same time, one cannot deny that the formation of these movements has a historical root in a conventional religion and is the result of some form of departure. Although it is more useful to regard such religious movements as part of a continuum (see Beckford, 2003), where the oppositional distinctions between “cult” and “conventional religious organizations” are an exaggeration at best, exactly which elements of the new religious movement are truly “new” and “recombined” needs to be more clearly worked out in order for these definitions to be of any methodological use.

On Syncretism

Charles White (1972) in his study of Indian Saints asserted that Hinduism is a syncretistic religion, one that “develops by a process of assimilation and digestion rather than exclusion and destruction” by tracing and identifying the development of various Indian religious movements up to the Sai Baba as one that follows a pattern of parallels and innovations of and in accordance with their teachings or practices (White, 1972:869). Other scholars assert that the Movement “[has] developed within the broader framework of Hinduism” (Sinha, 1984:2), or generally, is the syncretistic and eclectic product of modern Hindu tradition (Babb, 1987). But what precisely is syncretism? Some have argued that in some sense all religions are syncretistic to the extent that they have historical links with other and earlier religions (see: van der Leeuw, 1933). On the other hand, one may also argue that some religions appear more syncretistic than others as a result of varying degrees of political and theological essentialization⁷.

Consequently, the notions of syncretism as a ‘mixture’ of religious and cultural elements and NRMs as cults are problematic when viewed from a monotheistic standpoint, whereby the perceived purity of a religious tradition is important for political and theological reasons. For the social scientist, however, the politics and process of religious syncretism are more important foci, not that certain religions are or are not syncretistic. The syncretistic process may be seen as “multiple possibilities in coherent tension”, of which one outcome is a synthesis of such possibilities in the formation of a New Religious Movement (Pye, 1993:5). With this approach,

new religions can be more fruitfully studied even in terms of the syncretism and anti-syncretism process (Shaw and Stewart, 1994; Stewart, 1999).

The Sai Baba Movement as NRM

So what exactly is the Sathya Sai Baba Movement? How may we make sense of the Movement's religious characteristic, and how may this allow us to study the growth of similar groups that seek to present a universal, multi-religious identity? I assert that the Sai Baba Movement adopts a recombination of ritualistic elements from established traditions, but ideologically both "break[s] with existing traditions" (Hexham & Poewe, 1997:37) as well as draws from not one established religion, but many⁸. More specifically I argue that what many scholars see as a variant of 'Hinduism' in the Sai Baba Movement may in fact be more accurately understood as a particular *syncretistic framework* in combination with Hindu and Indian cultural elements, and bound in the cohesive logic of Sai teachings. It is these cultural elements, sacred religious objects, and the meanings associated with them that appear to draw the seemingly diverse ethnicities and religions of the Chinese and Indians in Singapore to the Movement.

How are such seemingly diverse elements and sacred objects subordinated and cohesion maintained within the religious system of the Sai Baba Movement? Durkheim (1912) argued that religious systems are the result of the hierarchical subordination of certain sacred objects, each as an organizational centre⁹ of their own rites and beliefs, to a dominant sacred object and its own rites and beliefs. This system, in its entirety, is what is defined as a religion; in other words, it is "...a whole formed of separate and relatively distinct parts" (Durkheim, [1912] 1995:43). I assert that it is more useful to understand religion in terms of a framework; one may argue, therefore, that religion is integrated into a religious system via a framework that encompasses several sacred things and their corresponding rites and beliefs. What binds these 'organizational centres' into the system that we call religion is not a singular, sacred object to which all rites, behaviour, and rituals are oriented, but rather a particular framework that allows these centres to communicate and make sense of each other through the beliefs and expressions of adherents.

Within a particular framework, the Sai Baba Movement seeks to encompass all religions, and all its adherents, as equal with each other as well as to the central sacred figure of Sai Baba himself. The Movement teaches that all religions are equal, and oriented to the notion of a universal God. One may argue that since religious systems are made up of distinct centres of sacredness, it is conceptually plausible that the Movement may, without paradox, successfully unite all religions under its banner. This instantly raises an important question: how does the Movement seek to assimilate religious systems into its entirety, with obvious contradictions in the

degree of exclusivism of each distinct religion? How, for instance, would the Sai notion of an undefined universal God, accommodate the Christian assertion of Jesus as God to the exclusion of others?

The syncretic element adopted by the Movement has been observed in the Singaporean variants of Hinduism and Chinese Religion, and may be compared to “an empty bowl, which can be variously filled with the contents of institutionalized religions [and] re-interpreted and used in a particular way” (Wee, 1976:171). To some degree, the image of an ‘empty bowl’ can be thought of as the framework to which I am referring, one that is necessary in constituting the religious system and the sacred objects it encompasses. Without a religious framework, these centres may scatter or fragment into “a mere ceremony or a particular rite” (Durkheim, 1912:43), causing the movement to lose its significance, identity, and coherence as a religion. Likewise, without this framework, the sacred objects cannot be oriented to each other, subordinated, or even organized into a coherent system. It is important to note, however, that this framework is neither value-free nor a-religious. In fact, such frameworks are necessarily imbued with and grounded in history, tradition, and cultures from various socio-cultural and religious sources. Hinduism, for instance, was born of and flourished within the context of Indian society, tradition and culture. As a result, many identify Hinduism as an ‘Indian’ religion, which consequently leads to the mistaken assumption that there exists a single coherent form of Hinduism, and that this is synonymous with the religion of all Indian peoples. This common misconception does not, however, negate the social fact that religions, conceptualized and framed in human thought and through human action, are embedded in a certain cultural context.

Similarly, we can understand the Movement of Sathya Sai Baba as a religious system that is bounded by a syncretic framework, one that has been born from a particular socio-cultural environment, namely the South-Central Indian regions of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka; not only has the Movement acquired different rites and beliefs from various religious systems and traditions that have ceased to exist or may no longer be recognized as a dominant religious system, its historical development is also one rooted in Indian-Hindu cultural tradition. For instance, the Sanskrit text¹⁰, the Zoroastrian camphor flame, and their corresponding rites and beliefs have become prominent sacred objects and rituals synonymous with religious communities such as Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Sai Baba Movement, but they also have roots in the Aryan culture and may even be found in use in certain elements of Thai culture¹¹. Other rituals include the chanting of 108 names of Sai Baba¹², and the bhajan, or devotional singing, common in Hindu and other syncretic religions. As Sinha has pointed out in her numerous works on Hinduism in Singapore, these variations and differing opinions as to what

really constitutes 'Hinduism' clearly show the existence of not one but many "hinduisms" (Sinha, 1993, 1999, 2005; see also Senghaas, 2002). Lastly, the Movement's spiritual leader has his religious roots firmly planted in Hinduism, and this affinity for that particular religious tradition consequently shapes the nature of his teachings, and in turn, determines the sacred object to which all others are subordinated. In my opinion, these factors point to the syncretic nature of the Movement's religious framework, not of the religious system *per se*.

Given these conditions, why has the movement grown so successfully in various countries internationally, particularly in Singapore, where multiculturalism and multi-religiosity is a state-supported initiative? It may be argued that the Sai Baba Movement possesses no true "centre" in terms of religious tradition. NRMs generally lack the legitimacy and familiarity that dominant religious systems possess, and require a surrogate upon their arrival in the host culture (see Batsone, 2001). The first Sai community in Singapore established their first centre within the confines of a prominent Hindu temple, although this is not in itself surprising since the first wave of adherents were mostly Indian migrant workers. What is of interest is that in exchange for services rendered to the temple, the group was allowed by the temple owners to hold meetings, prayers, and recruit new members. As a result, the current majority of members are Hindus, and at the same time also ethnic Indians¹³. In fact, 12 out of the 14 major centres in Singapore operate from Hindu temples.

Furthermore, the relatively large Indian population and the State's Religious Harmony policy are major factors in the success rate of the movement to ground itself in the society more readily and establish a stable foothold, compared to the centres in Japan and China which have not seen nearly as much growth in the last 30 years¹⁴. The movement is easily identified with a state-essentialized form of Hinduism in Singapore, contributing to the sustained and phenomenal growth of new centres from 1993- 2006, as opposed to other cultures without a large Indian and Hindu population where the movement has faced a high degree of anti-cult resistance¹⁵. In the case of the Sai Baba Movement, the association with Hinduism was most suitable not only because of its syncretic nature, but its coherent identity as a dominant religious system, or what Durkheim refers to as a "constituted religion" (Durkheim, [1912] 1995:43). The difference, however, is that while both possess frameworks that are syncretistic, Hinduism enjoys worldwide recognition as a dominant religious system; thus, a certain degree of legitimacy and a clear sense of identity is accorded to the religion as well as to its adherents.

The structure of the movement allows for the absorption of certain socio-religious elements of different religious systems, yet creates the social space for high degrees of variation. This in turn appeals to certain types of adherents who then accept and rationalize the teachings readily to

suit their own purposes. Having said this, however, several conditions exist that result in an uneven ‘pull’ of new members, resulting in what I call a ‘Hierarchy of Affinities’. As a result, only certain *types* of people are attracted to and may easily join the movement, while other *types* are both structurally as well as culturally restrained. We shall next explore these conditions in some detail.

Hierarchy of Affinities¹⁶

The Sai Baba Movement preaches that religious thought from all religions can be interpreted as teachings of love oriented to a common, single, omnipresent and omniscient God, and institutionalized religions are seen as different expressions of those teachings. The point of unity among members appears to be the high degree of emphasis on social service and social work. The various Centres conduct training classes and provide economic aid to needy families, and also organize willing and qualified devotees to dispense free medical aid, IT services, and financial advice. Devotees include self-proclaimed Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Taoists. The Sai Baba movement not only practises and preaches religious and ethnic ecumenism, but allows for adherents to maintain their religious affiliation and practices of their parent or current religion. Christians who adhere to Sai Baba are allowed to practise and uphold Christian values and rituals, likewise Hindus and members of any other religion; in fact, they are highly encouraged to do so. Adherents then would effectively have a foot in both religious communities, new and old, making traditional notions of religious membership, ritual, and practice problematic.

Table 1: Hierarchy of Affinities

Ethnic Group	Religious Affiliation
Indian	Hinduism
Chinese	Chinese Religion: Taoism ↑ Buddhism*
Eurasian/Others	Christianity: Catholics ↑ Charismatic
Malays	Muslim

↑
 High Potential of Adherence

 Low Potential of Adherence

In the course of my research, I found that:

(1) The potential for membership/adherence in the Sai Baba Movement is highest when the individual is Indian-Hindu, and lowest when Malay-Muslim.¹⁷

(2) Race/Ethnicity affects mostly social networking, member recruitment, and social cohesion of the group. Specific factors include language, racial identification, and kinship/friendship ties.

(3) In cases where combinations of high value in Race and low value in Religion are found (eg. an Indian-Muslim), several determinants come into play: the level of adherence¹⁸ to the parent religion, and the type of social ties that exists. If adherence to the parent religion is low and social ties strong, then adherence to Sai Baba is possible. Kinship ties were found to have been the strongest determinant in these cases. In these cases, membership in the movement may require a religious conversion or effective reduction in the level of adherence to the parent religion (in this example, Islam).

The success of the movement in attracting members may be analyzed by the potential or affinity of certain individuals to adhere to the Sai religious system. In other words, people are generally more willing to accept such new religious ideas, based on 3 factors:

- (1) the extent to which the system of their dominant religious adherence is 'closed' or 'open',
- (2) the extent to which they can identify with other members of the community (for example along ethnic and religious lines), and lastly,
- (3) personal network ties (where families and close friends are introduced to the movement and eventually join).

For example, the possibility of accepting the idea of multiple god-heads in the religious ritual is more likely for those of a religion that has a similar conception of the sacred, for instance Taoism¹⁹ and Hinduism. The understanding of karma, the "divinity in Man", and the evil in his

‘ego’ appeal to many of my Catholic and Buddhist respondents. Given that both ideas exist in Sai teachings, I found that the extent to which a Christian devotee, for example, may accept these new ideas is also determined by his level of adherence to the teachings of his Church as well as the degree of social pressure he faces from kin. In this respect, one would be hard pressed to find a Malay-Muslim devotee, unless they have been aided by the community in some manner, or persuaded by kin or close friends to attend Sai activities. In fact, intensive participant observations of Sai activities revealed none. Interestingly, however, all my respondents reified the myth of the Malay-Muslim devotee, as if to perpetuate and reinforce their conviction with regard to the Sai ideal of universalism:

Interviewer: Have you had any Muslims in your Centre?

Devotee A: No... well, yes. The Muslim people we supplied the provisions to perhaps. Last time we supplied to 3 Muslims. But we never tell them to come here. We say we are Sai devotees [...] it's our jobs to serve them.

Devotee B: A few Malay-Muslim friends have come before. Other Muslims have not really come before.

Interviewer: Do people from all races and religions attend your activities?

Devotee C: Yes, all are welcome. 75%:25%. Chinese to Indians. We even have Muslims. [Quite a few] Malay-Muslims who used to come also. But I haven't seen them for some time.

The belief in the notion of Avatars is another idea readily acceptable to the Hindu devotee as Avatars are a prominent part of the Hindu religion. The Movement also appealed to many of my Hindu youth respondents as a revitalized, more engaging alternative to the Hindu religion. In a conversation over dinner, one of the devotees, Nunithee, recounted her journey of faith to and with the Movement:

I was born and raised Hindu, but I never went to temple [because] all I understood was statues and more statues. [...] I even lamented, why can't I have someone to follow by example, a real person, not a statue or a non-person, but a man like Jesus? [...] I was having problems at one point in my life, and one day I dreamt of Swami [Sathya Sai Baba]. I knew some friends in the Sai movement, and are still here now... Rina and Mary are in it... and they invited me for *bhajan*. And I went. And I just kept going. [...] Last year, we went to visit Swami, and it was just great to see him. Swami is the one I would like to emulate.

Carol, a Chinese devotee, recalled the miracle that led to her best friend's belief in Sai Baba:

[My] friends, married for 11 years, [were] a bit skeptical about Baba. But they thought they have nothing to lose. So they came to Puttaparthi with us. She had four miscarriages. So Swami asked what they want, and they said 'a child'. So he

said next year, they would have ‘a son’. Next year they really had a son. He is 12 years old now.

The narrative of ‘religion as experience’ is one that repeats through many of my interviews, with adherents experiencing some form of spiritual connection or miraculous event. For most Hindu respondents, the appeal of the living god-man is a major determining factor in their choice of adherence, while for many of the Chinese devotees interviewed, the miraculous healing of an ill family member or the sudden alleviation of suffering after a visit to the guru or a dream encounter was a prominent narrative. In any case, a hierarchy of sorts may be formed in terms of level of religiosity and adherence to the Sai movement, with the majority of its members being Indian-Hindus and Chinese-Buddhists. The success of the movement’s growth in Singapore then is limited along these two ethnic-religious lines.

The structure of the movement also allows for some level of adaptation in its local culture. Structurally, individual Centres enjoy a high level of autonomy from the local Central Council; it may be argued that this has both created a more vibrant and cohesive Sai identity, and exacerbated community fragmentation along ethnic lines. Chinese devotees have been engaging in the process of “de-Hinduising”²⁰ the altars and rituals within their centres, or adapting them to the needs of the particular community. Interestingly, in 1982 the first major Centre with majority Chinese members (90%) was formed as a result of Indian-Hindu resistance to the attempts at de-Hinduization. In the next section, I will look at some of the observable manifestations of this ethno-religious tension by analyzing the variations in a major Sai ritual, the *bhajan*, and its effects on the Movement.

The *Bhajan* Ritual

One of the main religious practices of the Sai Baba Movement is the *bhajan*, also known as the *Kirtana* (Khoo, 1981:56) or devotional singing sessions. The *bhajan* form was created between the 14th and 17th century and made popular by a Hindu revitalization movement called the *Bhakti*. Songs are often lyrically and musically simple enough for the masses to understand and learn, and often comes in the form of a *dhun*, a simple poetic form vocalized through musical chanting²¹. *Bhajan* songs are usually placed in a particular order, and for various reasons. It is common practice for the singing to open with a devotion to Lord Ganesha, a Hindu deity often referred to as the remover of obstacles, who also signifies Sathya Sai’s demand for the devotees’ complete spiritual and mental attention for the duration of the ritual. This is followed by a Hindu Mother Goddess song, also known as a *Devi*, and subsequently a song that makes reference to other Hindu deities Brahma, Vishnu, Lord Murugan, and Mahadeva. The remaining 5 or 6 songs in the

list are thematically chosen with reference in general terms to a universal God, and to pay homage and give praise to the greatness and divinity of Sathya Sai Baba himself.

The *bhajan* ritual is one of great importance in the Sai Baba movement. *Sathya Sai Speaks*, a comprehensive collection of the guru's teachings and most famous postulations on all things related to spirituality and the movement, records this importance placed on *bhajan* participation by Sathya Sai as one vital for spiritual life, growth and sustenance:

The procession to the cremation ground starts immediately on birth and the beating of the heart is the drum beat for the march towards that place. Some take a longer route, some reach quickly, but all are on the way. Therefore, devotional singing (*bhajan*) has to start in the childhood (*sic*) and has to continue. It must be the constant companion of man, his solace and strength. Do not postpone it to old age, for it is essential food for the mind.²²

The organizational structure clearly reflects the importance of this ritual at the heart of Sai spirituality with the inclusion of a Bhajan Convenor among committee positions at the regional, zonal, and centre levels. In each *Samithi*,²³ a member of the centre's executive committee is appointed as the Bhajan Convenor, who is responsible for organizing devotees into *bhajan* practice groups with the help of two or three other members. Khoo (1981) observes that the *bhajan* ritual serves not only a religious and spiritual function but plays a vital role in social interaction and integration of the members. The religious symbols and rituals of the *bhajan* reinforce the beliefs and conviction of the members as a community united and dedicated to a common cause of service. It also provides an avenue for rational discussion of social and spiritual issues among members of all races, social class, and religious traditions.

Bhajans are typically²⁴ conducted once a week and practices usually fall on the weekend prior to or on the day of the current week's proceedings. In some cases the centres conduct the ritual 2-3 times a week to cater to the demands of different groups of devotees, but generally devotees are encouraged to attend at least one. Preparations begin when devotees gather in the hall, usually a large room that can accommodate anywhere between 50-100 people, in some cases the wedding hall of the Hindu temple in which the centre operates. Two groups of people are assembled for the preparations, those intending to lead the community in devotional singing, and those who are able to play musical instruments for musical accompaniment. Competition for a place in that week's *bhajan* as a leader is intense as only 10 would be chosen for the week, whereas it is common to see the same 2-3 people in charge of musical accompaniment weekly as there are a small number of people who possess the skill to play the Indian *tabla* and harmonium.

It is not unusual to see groups of 15-20 potential leaders practicing in the *bhajan* hall. Devotees then practice by themselves as well as in front of the *bhajan* Convenor; some

informants have spent up to 2 hours practising one or a few songs that are picked from a wide selection of songs written specifically for the ritual. The songs are available in a variety of languages, and each *bhajan* requires up to 10 songs of devotion. Generally, the songs used are predominantly in Sanskrit and a few in English, while general instructions are always given in English throughout the ritual. The guidelines for devotional singing that informants often strictly adhered to were purportedly laid down personally by Sathya Sai Baba:

Let those with a good voice and musical talent lead; the *keertan* (singing the name of God) must be pleasant, it should not jar on the ear. If your voice is grating or out of tune, do not disturb the melody, but, repeat the *namavali* (song reciting the name of God) in your mind.²⁵

Bhajan leaders are required to set the melody of the devotional singing; as a result, devotees who want to sing and lead the *bhajan* have to practise together before the actual *bhajan* is conducted. The *bhajan* Convenor and his aides then select the best singers for the *bhajans*, giving feedback and guidance on their vocal quality and performance wherever necessary. Members who are not chosen to lead are turned away but highly encouraged to participate again in the selection process the following week. Respondent interviews and observations have shown that selection is highly competitive and to some extent affected by racial and personal favoritism. One respondent acknowledged that “they pick the good singers, but if you hang around, ask advice, work hard, they notice you and pick you.” Devotees who are close friends of the committee or are active in Centre planning have a higher tendency to be selected, and I also observed a higher tendency for people of a particular ethnic group to be selected if there is a similarly high percentage in the executive committee.

The final preparations for the ritual are made half an hour before the event, and rely heavily on communal help from those attending the *bhajan* that day. Devotees who arrive early lend a helping hand by setting up sitting mats on either side of the hall, where they will be seated throughout the *bhajan*. Some devotees are directed to assist in the hanging of laminated photographs and pictures of Sathya Sai Baba around the hall with the use of some form of temporary adhesive which allows for easy removal. Regular members of the centre that is organizing the *bhajan* attend to the altar, primarily because it is treated with a higher degree of importance, but also because altar paraphernalia are kept in storage by the committee members for safekeeping. Other devotees help in the unfurling of a large and long red carpet in the centre of the floor which trails from the foot of the altar that is set up at the front of the hall. The red carpet is a very prominent and vital part of the room layout as it effectively divides the room into two social spaces; the group of devotees is segregated by gender on either side for the duration of the ritual. Devotees are dressed primarily in white.

Religious Objects and Symbolic Practices

The altar (plate 1) is set up on a three-tier platform that resembles a short flight of stairs that are lined with tea lights and candles. At the foot of these stairs is a small-framed picture of the feet of Sathya Sai Baba (plate 2). His feet are described by devotees as “lotus feet” and are regarded with great reverence. The “Lotus” image, a powerful symbol in Hinduism, Jainism, as well as Buddhism, is a strong symbol of beauty, softness, and sacredness, which coincides with the “lotus feet” of divine beings, often attributed with similar properties²⁶. It follows then that the adoration of the feet of Sathya Sai Baba also implies deistic deference, worship, and a spiritual connection to the sacred, reinforcing the guru’s proclaimed identity as a divine avatar. In fact, all devotee respondents identified the guru as the very being of the universal God.

At the top of the flight of stairs sits an elaborately carved and designed high-back chair. Devotees believe that Sathya Sai Baba is actually present during the ceremony, and sits in this chair as the ritual is carried out. In fact, respondents insist that the guru is present simultaneously at all *bhajan* celebrations across the globe, affirming the belief that the guru’s status is one of god-like omnipresence. As a result, both the chair and the red carpet that leads to it are accorded some level of sanctity; to touch the carpet during the ritual or to sit in the chair is taboo. Devotees also place beside the chair a life-size photograph of the guru, framed in an equally elaborate gold-coloured frame. The photograph, the central focus of the altar, usually presents a regal image of the guru in his saffron robes (plate 3). Statues of Sathya Sai Baba are prohibited under the guru’s strict instructions, and can never be found in these *bhajan* rituals.

On the other hand, a small picture or statuette of Shirdi Sai Baba, said to be the founding father of the Movement, may be found on one of the lower platforms amongst statuettes of various deities from mainly the Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian traditions. These are placed on the second and third platforms from the top, with the statuette of the Hindu deity Lord Ganesha in the middle, while those of the Chinese and Christian deities for instance those of Buddha, Kuan Yin, the Virgin Mary and Jesus are usually found in flanking positions. The image of Ganesha is perceived symbolically as the “remover of obstacles”, in accordance with Hindu beliefs. This symbol effectively defines the spiritual preparation and concentration that is required of the devotees participating in the event and as a result plays an important part at the beginning and is meant to resonate throughout the ritual, although the degree of its centrality to the ritual in practical terms seems to diminish as the *bhajan* progresses. The placement of these figurines on the altar appears arbitrary, but some circumstances reveal patterns of deliberate placements of certain deities on higher platforms than others, especially when the social composition of the *bhajan* group is predominantly Chinese, or when a particular ethnic-religious festival is being

celebrated. Generally however, the images of Hindu deities appear to occupy the central and higher areas of the altar. Other religious paraphernalia like Buddhist chanting beads, rosaries, prayer cards and other blessed items may be placed on the altar as well.

Variations in Ritual Practices

Several key variations were observed in the execution of the ritual. For instance, the white attire was not a standard in all Centres, and no official instructions for the wearing of white as formal attire exists. One group wears pink as official Centre colours, while another Centre has adopted light blue attire. However, devotees in the majority of the Centres in Singapore as well as around the world still use white as the symbolic colour of purity.

Other variations include the incorporative use of technology in bhajans, for example the use of overhead projectors and PowerPoint presentations instead of the distribution of song books to the participants. This in fact also further affects the conduct of the ritual itself in terms of aesthetics; without the need for reading, the lighting levels may be lowered or raised as the coordinators deem fit or appropriate at certain points in the ritual process. Although not all members agree with the use of lighting as they feel it manipulates the mood of the participants unnaturally, others interpret this as an aid to their concentration and meditation during the ritual. Another example would be the placing of the sacred Chair; some respondents believe that the Chair should be placed at the highest platform of the altar, with the picture of Sathya Sai resting beside or on top of it, while yet others insist that the Chair may be placed some distance away from the altar towards the side of the hall. Both interpretations draw from different rationalizations of the assumed presence of Sathya Sai in the chair itself. One respondent claimed that “Although Swami is God to me, we should not make the focus of the worship to be on him solely, to be understood like that [sic]. So where Swami sits is important that he can watch and be with us more than be worshipped.” On the other hand, those who practise otherwise insist that their great leader should be placed in the highest position possible, that is, at the top tier of the altar.

These variations appear to be inevitable, given the initiative of the Movement in accepting adherents of different religions and ethnicities and attempting to construct a cohesive spiritual community. Although these variations mentioned seem to bear little or no sociological interest at first glance, upon closer inspection they are not simply the product of the syncretic nature of Sai spirituality, nor merely the result of individual assertions as to what is proper ritual conduct and practice. In fact, these ritual variations are most significantly the point of contention and conflict between members of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Tong (2002) in his study of

syncretism in Chinese religion in Singapore uses a useful model of multiple ritual interpretations to explain how these variations can exist in harmony within an overarching framework. He argues that individuals are aware of the existence of practical variations in the rituals mentioned, but do not view them as incorrect. In Chinese religion, there is an inherent logic that allows individuals the freedom, within the confines of an “overarching framework” of acceptability, “to construct the system of beliefs and practices he deems to be correct” (Tong, 2002:45-46).

In this sense, to a certain degree, I see a similar syncretic pattern in my observations of the Sai Baba Movement, although Tong’s notion of a framework appears analytically limited to the micro-analysis of the adherent’s sense-making. Members draw upon their experiences and knowledge of Sai teachings to justify their own beliefs and assertions of what elements in a particular ritual should be included or excluded. The inclusion of religion-specific songs, for instance, is an example of an attempt of certain groups of members to assert a more ecumenical character to the Hindu nature of Sai bhajans. The lyrics of some hymns are presented in a manner that seeks to draw comparisons, or rather attention to, the Sai idea of universal monotheism. Some bhajan songs are specifically chosen in reference to the deities of the major world religions, either directly by name, or by indirect references to some key attribute that these deities possess, for example Buddha’s ‘Lotus Feet’ and the ‘Sacred Heart’ of Jesus. Such songs may also contain explicit references to Sathya Sai Baba as Jesus Christ, Mother Mary, Krishna, Buddha, Kuan Yin and other deities of mainstream religion. For example:

Our Jesus came and He is here again

Sai Krishna, Sai Rama *Sai is His name*
 Sai Krishna, Sai Allah, Sai is His name
 Zorashtra Zorashtra, Mohammed, Jehova *is His name*
 Jesus Christ from Bethlehem and *Sai is the same*
 Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Glory is to thy name
 Sathya Baba, Sai Baba blessed be thy name²⁷

Here, the names of divine beings like ‘Jesus’ take on a particular quality; in this case, that of the divine Messiah whom Christians claim will return to the worldly plane in a second coming. By claiming the oneness of Jesus and other divine personalities with that of Sai Baba, adherents are encouraged not only to see the link between the two deities, but also to equate those divine powers and characteristics with that of Sathya Sai Baba himself. In fact, the Avatar is believed to return in a “second coming” in the form of a man called Prema Baba. Official teaching asserts therefore a worship of deities of any dominant religious tradition is acceptable for they are perceived as different avenues on the same path of a singular idea of spirituality. If we take this argument to its logical conclusion, then there is no necessity for adherents to pray to the Gods of

their dominant religious traditions, and in fact these Godheads are arbitrary; prayer and devotion to Sathya Sai Baba is sufficient, for adherents believe that he embodies the universal God. Sai spirituality argues for a united effort of service and prayer but devotees appear to avoid the problematic nature of religious doctrinal exclusivism by elevating certain Godheads and religious rites above others in ritual practice.

The contention regarding the interpretations of adherents arises more poignantly not when members attempt to include non-Hindu elements to the rituals, but when they seek to *exclude* certain items, songs, and ritualistic acts in the *bhajan* in order to de-hinduize the ritual altogether. A prominent Chinese leader in one of the Movement's major Centres recalled her experience with other leading Indian devotees in Puttaparthi:

[The Indian leaders] were a bit restrictive. They said we couldn't practice with the men and ladies together. But Baba said to me... "according to the environment, we can change..." We are Chinese. We are not Indians. Sorry about that...what we are carrying on is an Indian tradition. I was telling the Indians, "you are Tamil, you are Hindi...what do you know about Sanskrit?" They always say we pronounce [the words] wrongly. So I ask: "how do you know you are right?"

In such cases, these interpretive acts are no longer merely a functional part of the wide range of possibilities for spiritual interpretations on the part of individuals, but become potentially divisive lines between those of different religions and ethnicities. These attempts are consequently met with resistance on the part of many Hindu and Indian members, who see the manipulation of such ritual behaviour as a tampering of sorts with what they see as the authentic ritual as it has been developed and passed down from their religious leader. In other words, even the "overarching framework" is being contested by adherents of different groups within the Movement.

In fact, there exist different interpretations of what constitutes an 'acceptable' framework. Certain ritual symbols and actions that have been passed down from the spiritual Centre in Puttaparthi, that is, those that have been practised in bhajans around the world in its initial stages of transnational travel, have long been considered by most devotees as the authentic form of Sai ritual worship. Taking into account the fact that the majority of members at the initial stages of development of its overseas Centres were Indian-Hindu migrants, this authenticity was more readily accepted by the first wave of devotees, but not those in the second generation that began to incorporate increasingly diverse members. Furthermore, unlike the syncretism of Chinese religion, the Sai Baba Movement does have the additional element: the influence of a powerful leader. Centre leaders often vocalize new ideas and proposals to their guru during their informal personal interviews with the god-man, and often these proposals may have not been submitted to or approved by the local Central council. I have observed some instances where 'guru-approved'

variations have been implemented by certain groups but have resulted in disapproval from members of the Central council, although no formal sanctions were undertaken since these variations did not involve a direct tampering with basic Sai teachings. Some members even find avenues of reprieve to express their desired ritual variations by holding bhajans in the privacy of their own homes and inviting like-minded individuals who wish to participate. Over time, these groups may themselves eventually develop into officially-registered Centres.

Although a general instruction exists to outline the key elements and symbols to be employed in Sai rituals, these instructions are specific enough to adequately provide a stable condition necessary for functional variation and negotiation to take place, but to some degree too vague such that it creates a space for religious and ethnic differences and conflict to manifest. Many of my respondents viewed this space as a buffer zone; any attempts to use this space by a member of another ethnic or religious group appeared as an encroachment into neutral territory and very real possibility that the assertion of one categorical point of view would result in the marginalization of their group in the community. The point here is also that conflict is less apparent as a process of negotiation with regards to constructing individual systems of beliefs and meaning, but more as an undercurrent of ethnic and religious differences.

The pattern of variations may indeed be traced to generally three major interacting factors: (1) Location, (2) Demographics, and (3) Events. Centres that have their base of operations on Hindu temple grounds are more likely to incorporate Hindu rites and symbols like *Arathi* and *vibhuti*²⁸ into their *bhajan* rituals as a form of respect for their patrons. Furthermore, the number of Hindu members in temple Centres would be considerably higher than those of other religions. The community also has patron-client obligations to provide manpower and other services to the temple leaders should the need arise, and hence leaders in those centres are also usually Hindu or have an affinity for most things Hindu. This relationship with temple leadership is vital for the continued presence of the community, and there have been cases of communities that were ejected from temple grounds as a result of personal disagreements between the temple owner and the Sai movement.

With regard to demographics, it follows then that the numerical superiority of a particular religious or ethnic group in a community also effects the variations employed. For instance, there is a tendency to see a prominence of Chinese songs and deities placed at the altars of a centre dominated by Chinese members. However, the demographic situation is slightly more complex, for there are cases where the community consists of a large number of non-committee Hindu members, but a disproportionate number of Hindu members sit on the Centre committee. The

ethno-religious character of the rituals depends on the balance and the outcome of negotiation between these two major groups of members.

Finally, certain religious and cultural events like Christmas, Shiva's birthday, Chinese New Year, and Sathya Sai Baba's birthday shape the nature of ritual behavior for that period of time. The altar may be adjusted to give what appears as more honour for a particular deity, although philosophically-speaking, respondents insist that "there is no difference between these godheads". Songs, music, and dress may also vary for these purposes. Temple Centres, for instance, may cater their rituals and actions to the benefit of temple devotees and leaders during Hindu festivals and celebrations. In all, the interaction between these three factors results in a complex blend of conflict, negotiation, and variations, exacerbating certain ethno-religious elements within the movement while paradoxically providing for a cohesive community of believers.

Conclusion

The examination of ritual variations revealed interesting patterns and conditions that determine the affinity of adherence to the Movement. Although seemingly harmonious and cohesive on the surface, there exists an underlying tension based on issues of race and ethnicity within the Movement in Singapore. An exploration of how the Movement spread in Singapore also revealed that the initial expansion of Centres in Singapore were both the result of increase in membership as well as disagreements in the 'acceptability' of ritual variations based on ethno-religious differences.

The Sai philosophy of service seems most compatible with social work and nation-building and this may partly explain the general level of support given to the movement by the Indian government, particularly the local government in Puttaparthi. The government's pragmatic position in Singapore appears to be characterized by benign neglect rather than outright support for the movement, possibly as a result of the perception that the movement's activities would actually aid the nation-building effort rather than hinder it. Even temple authorities tolerate and in most cases welcome the movement's presence due to their contributions to daily temple administration and the encouragement of Hindu youth involvement in social service. Either way, the lack of opposition allows the movement space to grow and its members to engage in meaningful social action. Indeed, the Sai notion of service as a national duty has shown some marked contribution in the building of Malaysian middle-class Indian identity and community to the benefit of the state (see Kent, 2000; 2004).

Conceptually, the Sai Baba Movement is geared to maintaining social cohesion within the communities of adherents; education, social and ritual practices, and Sai spirituality all reinforce

a shared belief in the service of society and humanity. In addition, the movement's centralized structure appears capable of maintaining a high level of uniformity and conformity of all members and centres under its care. Effectively, however, the multi-ethnic, multi-religious nature of the movement's loose membership structure and generalized "human values" education programmes provide the space where potential conflict and negotiation of meanings, religious symbols and action can take place. Although the formal structure of the Movement is highly centralized, informal structures like network ties maintained by charismatic authority still exist. Informal networks on one hand strengthen the international Movement by deferring authority to the Spiritual Centre in India, but consequently weaken the local central councils and hierarchies. These factors result in an inherent problem that eventually undermines the structural strength of the Movement and poses interesting possibilities for its sustained role in welfare and social development. One may argue that the Sai framework, although the source of vibrancy of expression and ideas, fosters the contention of religious meanings – the result of the interaction between a plurality of local religious and cultural artifacts with those of Indian origin – that may eventually affect the cohesion, identity and stability of the movement. Many argue that the movement's sustainability is determined by its charismatic leader; his death may change the shape of the movement as it exists today.

In multicultural Singapore, however, the regulation of religious and ethnic identity may in fact act as an effective counterbalance to potential ethnic disharmony. The space left by the state in providing social welfare benefits has also resulted in an alternative to debating the demands of Sai religious ideas; that is, the avenue to pursue the more pragmatic form of socio-religious action by engaging in and providing social service and welfare. Although the future of the movement is yet undetermined, it appears, at least in Singapore, that the rate of growth in the number of centres has dropped significantly since 1997. On the other hand, the rate of recruitment of new and young members in certain centres is higher than others. These patterns seem to suggest that the movement is reaching a new stage in its localization process, but deeper research is required to adequately analyze their implications.

This paper has concentrated only on the "pull" factors and local aspects of the movement, and has not set out to examine other factors which are of equal importance. Data collection and analysis on "push" factors, for instance the impact of modernity and modernization on the movement in Singapore, is currently being conducted in an on-going research project. The findings in this paper, however, are intended to be the first step in shaping a more holistic view of the growth of the Sai Baba Movement in Singapore, and more generally NRMs in Asia, through a

combination of sociological and ethnographic approaches, which may eventually prompt a review of the dominant sociological notions of religious conversion, variation, and practice.

Endnotes

¹ Ionescu (2000) studied the Japanese New Religion Soka Gakkai in Germany and noticed that practices and rites varied at local, national, and international levels when more local Germans began to join the community. Clarke (2000) similarly observes the tension between local practice and ideal notions of purity, and how this affects the success or failure of such movements abroad. Both scholars raise the question of stability and sustainability of the Movement in the wake of the push and pull of local-global forces.

² *Secret Swami*, Produced by This World, BBC. Reporter: Tanya Datta, Producer/Director: Eamon Hardy, Editor: Karen O'Connor. *Secret Swami* was broadcast in the UK on Thursday, 17 June, 2004 at 2100 BST on BBC Two. Source: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/this_world/3791921.stm

³ Several published sources exist on the development of the Sai Baba Movement and its glocal impact in non-Indian cultures (Brent, 1972; White, 1972; Klass, 1991; Howe, 2001). There are also many official publications, biographies of devotees, or collection of accounts of encounters with Sathya Sai Baba (Krystal, 1984; Hislop, 1985; Warner, 1990). Most of the impressive ethnographic works on the Sai Baba movement in Singapore come from unpublished works in the form of Honours and Master's dissertations (Khoo, 1981; Menon, 1983, Sinha, 1985; Santhosh, 1997). This paper builds upon the ethnographic data made available by these unpublished works through an intensive 12 months of field research in the 14 major Centres in Singapore through participant observation and in-depth interviews. It is also part of a larger, ongoing project on the globalization of the Sathya Sai Baba Movement.

⁴ An idea presented by Stark and Bainbridge (1986): "What is cult and what is sect is not decided by scholars, but by societies... [A] group may be a cult in one and a sect in another" (Stark and Bainbridge, 1986:489).

⁵ While Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe (1997) proffered that new religions "break with existing traditions to create something that did not previously exist" (Hexham and Poewe, 1997:36), they later insist that new religions and their leaders have become adept at recombining "bits and pieces of various distinct traditions" (ibid, p.37).

⁶ When I refer to the selection and rejection of cultural and religious elements by NRMs, I do not suggest that NRMs are living entities capable of making such decisions, but rather that at some point in time, the leaders of the community had attempted to concretize informal religious practices into some semblance of doctrine or written guidelines. Hatcher (1999) refers to this as the "conscious selection" of different elements in the cultural construction of religion (Hatcher, 1999:8), in combination with the historical process of religious development.

⁷ Throughout history, States have politically managed religious worship and ideas by enforcing official doctrine and curbing variation, for example, support for the Christian cult of Jesus by the Roman Empire, which later developed into Roman Catholicism. Official Thai Buddhism today is also the result of a violent history of cult suppression. More specifically, the major religions in Singapore are essentialized by the State and closely associated with State-defined notions of race (see Sinha, 1999; Tong, 2002).

⁸ Namely, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. Further analysis of this is currently being worked on in another paper.

⁹ Durkheim (1912) refers to these organizational centres and the beliefs and rites that revolve around them as "cults of their own" (Durkheim, 1912 [1995:43]). Here, I refrain from using the term 'cult' in my own text to avoid a further complication in the use of the term, as I have highlighted earlier.

¹⁰ Sanskrit itself has acquired a status of sacredness and is still used by Buddhist and Hindu religious and cultural groups in many parts of the world, despite being labelled by certain historians and linguists as a 'dead' language (van Gulik, 1956).

¹¹ The Thai language and certain names and titles for example have roots in Sanskrit. Source: 'The National Language' <http://www.mahidol.ac.th/thailand/language.html>

¹² The number 108 is particularly interesting. The number is deeply embedded in religious and astrological mythologies and may be found in many religious and spiritual traditions worldwide. It is believed that '108' became particularly significant in the 7th century when the Eastern Orthodox Church adopted the Julian calendar to calculate the precise year of the creation of the world; the number 108 was a central part

of the mathematical equation for that calculation and has since taken on a spiritual significance for much of humanity. According to Buddhist mythology, the sacred Buddhist footprint has 108 Auspicious Illustrations; Chinese mythology holds that there are 108 sacred stars in the universe. Sacred Hindu texts mention the 108 maid servants of Krishna, and the Sanskrit alphabet is said to have 108 letters. The familiarity of the number 108 increases the possibility and ease of transition of potential and current devotees, particularly those whose identity is most in-tune with their adherence to one of the aforementioned dominant religions. Sources: Dr. Waldemar C. Sailer, *The World of the Buddha Footprint*. Online: <http://milan.milanovic.org/math/english/creation/creation.html>; <http://www.dralbani.com/buddhafootprint/introduction.html>.

¹³ In Singapore, there is a close correlation in the census category of 'Indian' and the religion of Hinduism; a high majority of local Indians here are Hindus. 'Racial' and Ethnic groups are essentialized under the Chinese, Malay, Indian, Eurasian, and Others (CMIEO) census categories, labelled officially as 'races'.

¹⁴ Since 1975, the number of major Centres registered under the Sai Baba organization in Singapore has risen to 14. This number is considerably lower in Japan (9) and Hong Kong (2).

¹⁵ Europe, Israel, and the US are some examples.

¹⁶ The Hierarchy of Affinities is loosely based on the idea of Elective Affinities first postulated by Max Weber ([1905] 1976).

¹⁷ This model assumes that the analysis of ideal types must already take into account the cultural specifics of the group studied (eg. the type of ethnicities/race that exist, and its relationship with religion in that social context). The analysis here is specific to a Singaporean context.

¹⁸ Here the level of adherence refers to the level of religiosity in terms of daily practices, fulfillment of ritual requirements, and personal belief and identity.

¹⁹ On the other hand, it was also found that although the potential for Buddhists to adhere to Sai teachings is lower than for Taoists, there are more Buddhist members in the Movement in Singapore. This, however, is the result of a significantly lower and declining percentage of the population that adheres to the latter religion (see Tong, 2002).

²⁰ Santhosh (1997) first observed this process of "de-Hinduising" in his undergraduate study (Santhosh, 1997:52). My own research reveals that various degrees of Chinese resistance to the movement's Hindu identity were evident even prior to 1981.

²¹ For a more sophisticated description of a bhajan's musical properties, see http://www.chandrakantha.com/articles/indian_music/bhajan.html

²² *Sathya Sai Speaks*, (I):123

²³ Sai centres are often referred to by devotees as *Samithis*.

²⁴ The description here is a composite of several research sites, primarily based on interviews and observations of the *bhajan* event at 8 Centres in Singapore over a period of 12 months in order to ascertain the general norms of a typical *bhajan* session as well as the post and pre-ritual activities.

²⁵ SSS, (VII):177-178

²⁶ For a more in depth exploration into this phenomenon of the lotus feet, see 'The Sublime Essence of the Lotus Feet' by Laurel Fishman. Online at http://www.vai.com/realillusions/07lotusfeet_sublime.html

²⁷ My emphasis is in italics. Source: http://www.sathyasai.org/songs/bhajans_default.htm

²⁸ *Vibhuti* is sacred ash that is placed on the foreheads of Hindu devotees, while the *Arathi* rites are prayers and rituals oriented to a sacred camphor flame, comparable to that of a similar rite in Zoroastrianism. Both are important symbols in Hindu religious worship. I have found that the distribution of *Vibhuti* and the *Arathi* rite are always conducted in Sai Centres operating on temple grounds, while other Centres may or may not perform these actions.

Plates

1. A typical altar found at bhajan rituals in Sai *Samithis*.
2. A gold framed picture of Sri Sathya Sai Baba's lotus feet.
3. Full body portrait of Sri Sathya Sai Baba in saffron robes.



Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3