

The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, South Africa: “Self Transformation is World Transformation”

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ABSTRACT The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (BKWSU), a relatively new global spiritual movement, was founded in India by Dada Lekhraj or Brahma Baba and arose from a Hindu cultural base known as Om Mandli in the 1930s before becoming known as BKWSU in the 1960s. It emerged as a spiritual force in South Africa in the 1980s. The movement is becoming more significant in a post-apartheid South Africa, where its non-dogmatic, non-ritualistic embracing of non-cultural and non-religious beliefs appeals to a society that has had to endure generations of racial, religious and class distinction. The movement's strong focus on the spiritual empowerment of women through an understanding of the soul and its connection to God, appeals to South African women who appreciate a spiritual approach which is non-sectarian and non-doctrinaire in nature. This article traces the history and the role of the Brahma Kumaris movement and its contribution to South African society.

INTRODUCTION

The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (BKWSU) is a young spiritual movement in South Africa. Little is known about the essential tenets, teachings and workings of this unique group of people. This article comprises two parts. Part One begins with the movement's origins in India and briefly examines the basic principles of Brahma Kumaris (BK) practises (*gyan*, *yoga*, *dharna* and service), which embrace significant aspects of BK teachings and philosophy such as the soul, time and *karma*. Part Two traces the beginnings of the BKWSU in South Africa, the services it offers to the South African public, its members and the internal workings of the organisation itself.

The 'Insider' and Spiritual Ethnography

Writing from the perspective of both an anthropologist and member (student) of the BK movement raises key issues concerning reflexivity and spirituality. Having been an informal member and student of the BKs since 2006, attending classes, courses and workshops as well as participating in some activities, my personal involvement raises the insider argument (the primary sources of information and key informants emanating from Global Peace House, where I am a member) and writing about spirituality for an academic audience. Insider discourse as fieldwork experience is nothing new in ethnography but the methodological and ethi-

cal implications of studying a spiritual organisation with an insider's knowledge goes beyond any formal training. Bowie (2003: 49) in her study of the religious culture of the Focolare Movement, an ecclesial sect within the Roman Catholic Church, elaborates on the dilemma of being an insider in this context:

As anthropologists, we are interested in what people *say* about the truth, the way people *think* the world works, their *understanding* of the mysteries of God or gods, and their actual *behaviour*... This very neutrality makes it hard to communicate or even appreciate the flavour of a given religion and the inner experiences and motivations of its followers... the facts that make religion come alive for individuals are the least amenable to external scrutiny.

As an insider, the tendency to lean towards a range of intellectual stances ranging from critical detachment to neutrality, to showing an affinity or empathy towards the spiritual path, presents the challenge of negotiating the essence of the spiritual organisation and its principles on the one hand, and inviting academic suspicion of religious bias, on the other.

Relating fieldwork experiences and spiritual experience within this context in an intellectually neutral or dispassionate manner problematizes the use of such data by compromising the treatment of the organisation's objectives and respect for its members. In this instance, the key gatekeepers and informants were all members of the same group to whom the researcher had been exposed in her own spiritual journey. Much

of this article is also based on informal conversations, *ad hoc* commentaries and intense discussions during classes at the same site. The ethnographic experience of researching and writing about religion and spirituality to which the anthropologist is affiliated is a challenging negotiation of “the subjective world of spirituality and the objective world of culture and social structure” (Bowie 2003: 54), where the self is integral to the analysis and dissemination of such knowledge. In mediating spiritual knowledge for an academic audience the anthropologist bears the responsibility of accurately representing the religious experience and its varied nuances without compromising the integrity of the spiritual movement and the relationships therein. This article represents an attempt to maintain a balance between personal experiences, my interpretation of spiritual knowledge and an anthropologist’s perspective.

PART ONE

The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (BKWSU)

The Beginnings

The BKWSU was founded in India by Lekhraj Kripalani¹ or Brahma Baba and arose from a Hindu cultural base known as Om Mandli in the 1930s before becoming known as BKWSU in the 1960s. At the age of 60, Dada Lekhraj had a series of striking visions (*sakshatkars*), some of which were disturbing and some ecstatic. One of the first visions included the establishment of a perfect, ideal paradise and the creation of a new Golden Age (*Satyug*). He saw a strange light emanating from a vast and benevolent power and a new world where stars descended to become princesses and princes. A mighty being he said, was instructing him ‘to make a world such as this’ (Babb 1984: 402, translations taken from Jagdish, Ek Adbhut Jivan-Kahani).

This vision was followed by a contrasting one of the destruction and suffering of the world. He experienced prophetic visions of Vishnu and Shiva (who was experienced as a formless being of light), the feeling of being bodiless and being bathed in light during intense meditation, and received the message that he was the reincarnated form of the original Krishna soul (that

had gradually become an ordinary human being). He gained the inspiration that he, amongst others, had the capacity to become a human instrument for the creation of the new world – this planted the seeds for what was to become the *Prajapita Brahmakumari Ishwariya Vishwa Vidyalaya*, now known as the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University.

Leaving his business, discarding social and religious traditions, Dada surrendered to God’s work. Incorporeal Shiva gave him the name ‘Prajapita Brahma’, Father of Humanity. Through him God imparted the knowledge that would give divine rebirth to all people... One of God’s teachings stated that through the moral upliftment of the woman the world would automatically gain upliftment. So the spiritual role of the woman as teacher and guide was practised from the very beginning. Brahma Baba formed a trust of 8 women and surrendered his entire property to this committee that it might be used for the spiritual service of uplifting humanity... The strict rules of conduct, deep philosophical teachings and mystical mission set forth by Baba have been carefully maintained by successors and present day leaders, faithfully preserving the magic and power of Baba’s direct experience of God (*Hinduism Today* 1995: 7)

Brahma Baba considered himself an ordinary soul and an instrument of Shiv Baba (God, the Supreme Soul) and never depicted himself as a guru. He led by example and put into practice the spiritual knowledge imparted in his communion with the Supreme Soul, always referring in his teaching to a direct communication with the source. “Brahma Baba encouraged women to understand and explore their potential and inspired them with the vision of the valuable contribution women can make as spiritual leaders. He found that women have the serenity and gentleness to understand and accept spiritual ideas easily... so by putting women forward, he sought to create a situation of equality and mutual respect and regard between men and women and all relationships regardless of gender” (Naraine 1998: 3).

Kranenburg (1999) refers to the Brahma Kumaris as a neo-Hindu sect and Wallis (2002) links the movement to a New Age religion. Wallis positions the Brahma Kumaris as a reflexive, neo Hindu tradition between “detraditionalisation and retraditionalisation because in

the process of constructing the 'new' and rejecting the old, elements are taken from the ancient material handed over by older traditions, and these strands of old traditions and in the applications of these we may recognise many of the characteristics of this 'new thinking'" (van der Velde 2003: 2). The detraditionalisation he alludes to is in Lekhraj's awareness of the plight of women within traditional Indian society and the Vallabhite community of which his family were devotees, his experiences of which heightened his sensitivity to improving their social status and spiritual empowerment: "Make the women move forward in such a way that everyone sees the power of women and that the sustenance from women is so elevated" (Brahma Baba 15/11/2009: 3). Babb (1984: 415) adds that while this unusual sect of women leaders causes discomfort and awe in patriarchal society, the movement itself exemplifies "the richness of Hindu tradition where elements of religious culture can be reordered to serve goals ostensibly quite remote from tradition".

Retraditionalisation and new age thinking is emphasised in the spiritual rebirth of members of the Brahma Kumaris who "should undergo death in life², they should die towards the outer world...Hindu mythology was reinterpreted by Lekhraj in order to lay a foundation for his teachings and to connect these to greater Hinduism, an ancient tradition often built upon by Indian teachers and founders of new religious groups" (van der Velde 3). The Brahma Kumaris however, consider themselves distinct from Hinduism and position themselves as a new religious movement (NRM) which provides its members with structured yet practical mechanisms for experiencing the spiritual world in their daily lives. In its title and categorisation as BKWSU, it becomes necessary to examine the terms 'religion' and 'spirituality' both of which are encompassed in the defining characteristics of the movement. Zwissler (2007: 51) states that "'religion' is associated with institution and societal pressure, whereas 'spirituality' relates to personal experience, privacy and individuality". Ramsay et al. (2010: 90) further elaborate that "religions are social institutions that involve relations of power, systems of knowledge in the form of doctrines and theologies and ritual behaviours demonstrated through institutional harbours such as churches, temples and mosques. By contrast, spirituality refers to pri-

vate internal processes that are negotiated and narrated by the self, sometimes within or through religion, sometimes despite religion or in its absence." Generally, religions uphold conformity and traditional practises while spirituality embraces a diversity of more universal yet personal expressions and experiences.

Brahma Kumari Disciplines and Practises

To achieve the aim of living as spiritual beings in the daily material (human) reality, Brahma Kumaris adhere to four disciplines: *gyan* (knowledge), *yoga* (meditation), *dharna* (virtuous inculcation) and *seva* (service). It is through the spiritual practise of soul consciousness, that a spiritual union with God, the Supreme Soul, Shiv Baba is ultimately attained. Each of these four disciplines or subjects and some of the related practises need to be examined to understand and appreciate the basic tenets of Brahma Kumari life choices: "BK philosophy comprises understandings of the self, God, Time, rebirth, karma, the world and social behaviour" (Ramsay and Smith 2008: 4).

Gyan (Knowledge)

Brahma Kumaris believe that following Godly knowledge and directions (*shrimat*) and not the dictates of one's own intellect (*manmat*) is essential for the upliftment and spiritual progress of those who choose this path. This knowledge is transmitted in the form of the *murli* (flute of knowledge) or messages delivered by Brahma Baba during his life (*sakarmurli*) as well as the *murlis* transmitted *via* a trance messenger every year (*murli* season) by Brahma Baba from the Subtle Region (*avyaktmurli*) since his demise in 1969. *Gyan*, through the practise of soul consciousness (considering oneself to be a soul and not a physical body), is how the soul regains its self-respect and how one obtains self-mastery of one's thoughts, words and actions: "Gyan means knowledge. The practical form of knowledge is said to be: Knowledge is light, knowledge is might. To be an embodiment of knowledge means that whatever actions you perform will be filled with light and might. They will be accurate. This is known as being an embodiment of knowledge. Do not become one who just speaks knowledge but be an embodiment of knowledge" (Bapdada 30/01/2010: 3).

Three subtle yet deep spiritual aspects are dominant in *gyan* and BK philosophy: the soul, time and *karma*. These aspects are consistently studied and ‘churned’ or contemplated by students and teachers (during *murlis* and meditation classes) and form pervasive themes in all the *murlis* and BK literature.

The Soul

At the core of BK knowledge is the distinction between the body and the soul. Every living being is inhabited by a soul and the physical body is considered a vehicle (chariot) of the soul: “The question of ‘who am I?’ is the first and most basic step of travelling the spiritual path for BKs” (Ramsay et al. 2010: 94). The soul is considered the primary source of conscious energy without which the body ceases to function and exist. A soul is an eternal life source which has no physical features (a tiny point of radiant, formless light) or social identity as we know it (age, race, class, gender) but has recorded in it an inherent knowledge of peace and love – our original, intrinsic qualities. The soul is referred to and depicted in BK literature and imagery as an infinitesimal point of light seated in the centre of the forehead and is referred to as the ‘third eye’. The soul’s function of creating thought, ideas as well as decision-making are aspects of consciousness which differentiate the knowledge of the soul from science which states that the brain creates thought, as well as other Hindu texts which also speak of the life force.

Every soul has three separate faculties which are inherent in all human beings: the mind, the intellect and the personality. With the power of the mind, one imagines, thinks and forms ideas. The thought process is the basis of all emotions, desires and sensations. Thoughts are processed and interpreted by the intellect. This is the faculty which understands, the single most crucial ability of the soul. The intellect also reasons, memorises, discriminates and makes decisions. The brain is the soul’s control panel, it provides the facilities for the soul’s expression. Any action once performed leaves an impression on the soul. Habits, temperaments and tendencies are all embedded in the soul (as images, feelings, sounds, trains of thought etc.) as a result of every action performed. These stored impressions formed in the past are a reservoir which

we draw upon, often subconsciously, as our source of thoughts and actions in the present (www.bkwsu.org/thesoul.htm).

BK philosophy maintains that the soul is an eternal form of energy that takes on the costume(s) of the physical body as it progresses through a cycle of 84 births. During this process human beings have forgotten their true nature as spiritual beings. The essence of BK philosophy is to teach those who are confused or have forgotten, their true identities: “According to the Brahma Kumaris we are souls (*atmas*) and our confusion takes the form of false identification with the bodies we happen to inhabit” (Babb 1984: 405). Brahma Baba is also a soul: “Just as the soul is a point, Baba is also a point but in that Point of Light is the whole Ocean of Knowledge” (DadiJanki 16.09.2010: 3). Each soul is unique, pure and equal to every other soul. The soul is the blueprint of our original eternal religion of truth and peace.

Time

The history of the world according to the BKs consists of a cycle of 5,000 years within which, four ages or *yugas* (Golden, Silver, Copper and Iron) of 1,250 years occur. The Confluence Age (*Sangamyug*) of approximately 100 years is the transition period between the Iron Age and the Golden Age (*Satyug*). Each cycle is a replica of the others and begins in absolute perfection (a pure and abundant world with no sorrow) and ends in complete degradation (a world of violence, lust and misery) thereby signalling another new cycle. Souls may enter this world at any point, a destiny to which their own spiritual realisation and purification is related. We are presently in the final age of depravity and impurity, in an era in which the world will be destroyed and all souls will return to the Supreme Abode to await the renewal of the cycle. The present Confluence age is marked by an upheaval of nature and souls, as an old world gives way to a new world order, it is characterised by natural calamity and man-made catastrophe.

Just prior to the close of *kaliyug*, however, the supreme soul (Shiv Baba) favours humanity with a remarkable act of grace. At this point, when human beings languish in the deepest alienation from their true nature as souls, the supreme soul makes available special knowledge

(gyan) of the true human situation to those few of special worthiness who are prepared to listen (through the medium of Brahma Baba and the human trance messenger)...Members of the Brahma Kumari movement enter this fifth era with the expectation that they will become fit to be reborn in the paradisiacal phase of the next world cycle. By preparing his followers Lekhraj (Brahma Baba) in effect creates the new world, thereby fulfilling the instructions he received from the supreme soul in his visions (Babb 1984: 407).

The Confluence age is considered a precious and unique time in the BK cosmology, because it is the only period in which God shares his divine knowledge with us and is a companion in our journey – it is a pilgrimage of Remembrance. The Golden Age is perfect, pure and blissful and God has no role in it nor is there the awareness of God as we have at present. Souls of the Confluence age have the knowledge of the three aspects of time – the beginning, the middle and the end (*trikaldarshi*) – knowledge that is only accessible to souls in this auspicious period.

Karma

The law of *Karma* is complex and can be interpreted in different ways and at different levels of consciousness. Essentially, each soul is said to exist within a cycle of cause and effect where “every action causes an equal and opposite reaction”. “Each action is a seed planted which comes to fruition according to time. Every second we perform an action. We are encouraged to be very aware of and monitor the quality of each thought, word and act as they emerge through us” (BKDclasses.net/2011/12/26/the philosophy of *karma*).

The BK philosophy of *karma* relates to the quality of thoughts, words and deeds and where they occur on the continuum between pure and impure. The quality of these actions depends on whether they are performed in soul consciousness or body consciousness. “Notions of karma and rebirth are fundamental to BK philosophy when actions are performed on the basis of high consciousness or good intent (soul consciousness), they bring the same in return as opposed to selfish intent (body consciousness) which creates karmic debt and suffering” (Ramsay et al. 2010: 99).

The results of these actions occur in the short and long term, may emanate from previous actions of a distant past or another life time and impact the body, mind, relationships, circumstances and opportunities in beneficial or negative ways: “God, Shiv Baba through Brahma Baba, provides us with detailed descriptions of the laws and accounts of karma and each BK individually interprets this according to their capacity and understanding. The more an individual BK is spiritually powerful, clear, pure and with understanding of the gyan, the greater their ability to manage, accept and effectively interpret the laws of karma and calculate the accounts of karma” (BKDclasses.net/2011/12/26/the philosophy of karma).

Through knowledge (by following *shrimat*), remembrance of Baba and the practise of Raja Yoga meditation, God or Shiv Baba who is beyond the influence of the karmic cycle, provides the soul with a means to counteract the bondages of *karma* and those who make the effort may incur the blessing of entering the new cycle in the Golden Age.

Yoga – Meditation

The *raja* yoga meditation practised by BKs, is at the heart of establishing a loving connection and relationship with the Supreme Soul: It “is a twofold act of remembering God and being in a state of self-awareness or ‘soul consciousness’, remembering one’s eternal form as a point of light. This contrasts with the general ‘body consciousness’ that BK’s consider to be the way of the world...all other practises such as daily classes, vegetarianism and celibacy³ are ‘spiritual technologies’ designed to promote this state of transcendent union” (Ramsay et al. 2010: 94).

Meditation is the art of stilling the mind and restoring one’s true state of being, which is loving and peaceful yet vibrant and dynamic. This benefits the body and thought processes in positive ways with far reaching physical and psychological benefits: “The simplest definition of meditation is the cultivation of self awareness... as yourself awareness expands through the practise of meditation you will gradually learn to lessen your dependence on external ‘things’ for your feelings and begin to generate your own... when you allow your true nature (which is clear, light, loving, peaceful and content) to inform and shape your thoughts, feelings and actions,

even in the most challenging situations, then both the processes and outcomes of day-to-day life become very different” (Mike George 2010: 2).

Raja yoga meditation is performed with the student, teacher or *yogi* sitting with their eyes open, generally with their gaze resting on the point of light image of a framed Shiv Baba (image of a radiant red orb with a light in the centre) found in all BK centres. By keeping the eyes open, one is encouraged to stabilise the mind despite the external environment and it also facilitates the practice of *drishti* (vision) where souls exchange pure love and blessings through the eyes while in a state of soul consciousness and remembrance of God. *Drishti* is considered a powerful current (*sakash*) transmitting good wishes and positive vibrations. The aim of the study and practise of *Raja* yoga is to become *karmateet*, meaning, free from or beyond the effects of *karma*. This protects the soul from its old nature (worldly, old habits) as well as the influences of others. For BKs, “*Raja* yoga confirms their attainment of power-producing purity, since only the truly pure can engage in the technique with full success, as it guarantees their soteriological destiny, since the pure can be confident of a place in satyug, the first age of the universal cycle...it is a way of knowing that you are not who you seem to be: you are not a physical and social being, bound to the world and the institutions of the world, but a soul. Knowing this, one becomes a witness (*sakshi*) to the material self, released from the bondage of this world and fit to live in a world of the free” (Babb 1984: 411). *Raja* yoga is referred to as a ‘kingly’ (*raja*) form of yoga and a BK is someone who abides by the philosophy and principles of *Raja* Yoga, a self sovereign and master of the self. *Raja* yoga is the mechanism by which BKs stay in remembrance of the Father (Shiv Baba) to whom they belong and by being worthy, claim an inheritance of the world to come. Brahma Baba’s role is that of the Father of Humanity and the divine medium of the Supreme Soul. Brahma Baba continues to play his part in this drama by purifying souls from his present abode in the Subtle region, until the change of cycle.

Dharna (Virtuous Inculcation)

The BKWSU is primarily a teaching organisation. The teaching and learning of virtues (pa-

tience, tolerance, humility, happiness, contentment, determination, truthfulness, wisdom, etc) through meditation and churning during *murli* classes re-establishes the best qualities inherent in every being and offers a new approach to improving the quality of the relationships one has. BKs uphold that virtues are the natural power of good within each of us and they are our reality: “A sensible soul has that quality of *dharna* that enables the soul to draw power – not just for the self but enables others to also take power” (Dadi Janki 10/12/2009: 3). Morning classes and daily *murli* classes involving the reading, study and discussion of the *murli* are a form of everyday spiritual sustenance for BKs. Meditation and receiving *drishti* are also significant practises of *dharna*. The combination of studying the *murli*, meditating on virtues and receiving *sakash* among soul conscious beings (BKs) creates a powerful connection with God: “God works as a moderator, bringing strong experiences of love and belonging, morphing this tension (of negative reactions such as anger, jealousy or fear) into a welcome process of change, enabling internal change to take place more easily than if we were alone” (Ramsay et al. 2010: 95). The main content of the *murli* is followed by ‘essence for *dharna*’ where adherents are advised how to make the teachings beneficial in practical ways: “In your *dharna* too, all virtues should automatically be visible in every action” (Brahma Baba 02/04/2008: 2). Each *murli* has guidance and directives relating to *gyan*, *yoga*, *dharna* and *seva*.

Seva (Service)

Brahma Kumaris advance into the future as pure and humble instruments of God. As peace messengers they prepare the way for a new spiritual age. There are three primary forms of service: physical service, service of the *yagya* (the Brahmin family of Brahma Kumaris and Kumars) and service of the mind (*mansaseva*). The BKWSU is known to perform service in the form of free courses, classes and lectures inspired by the vision of creating a world where people live peacefully and in harmony with one another, the natural environment and the elements. Teachers and students often visit prisons, hospitals, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and schools to provide guidance to a diverse audience of all religions, ages, races and

backgrounds. To uplift the spiritual ethos of humanity, BKWSU offers a range of educational programmes for children, health practitioners and the corporate environment in which the recognition of the intrinsic goodness of all human beings is part of the process of facilitating self awareness and self empowerment.

“Service means that people should know who God is and what He does, and understanding it, they should see what they need to do...service is to walk along, taking hold of someone’s hand who may be faltering in life and giving them the stick of gyan and yoga. To give the donation of good vibrations is also to do the highest service” (Dadi Janki 10/01/2012: 11). BKs also understand that specific to the confluence age (the present time), more attention is required towards self-effort (self transformation and soul consciousness is service towards the self), service in the form of support to BKs in the spiritual family (*yagya*) and *mansaseva*, or service through the mind as a form of practical yet invisible community service on a global level: “We have found the Unlimited Father, we have a study that helps to keep our mind in the unlimited and the service we do is unlimited. If we get trapped in limited service, we are not serving – we will be compelled to do what the mind wants and not be free for God to use us. Mansa seva is about being powerful and dynamic – and getting up and doing whatever needs to be done” (Dadi Janki 30/04/2011: 1). It is the practise of sending vibrations of pure blessings and good wishes to souls (as well as the elements) all over the world with the peaceful, elevated and unlimited attitude of being Baba’s instrument for service: “We give others support without making them dependent on us. As instruments we give others support so that they become soul conscious. Remembrance at Amrit Vela (the hour of nectar, between 4 and 5am everyday) is also service. The atmosphere becomes powerful. The whole world will receive those vibrations” (Dadi Janki 17/01/2012: 1). Service, according to the BKs is valuable, but limited in its worldly, physical manifestation to the few souls who benefit, but *mensaseva* is unlimited and more effective in its yogic, vibrational form in reaching out to souls across the world.

The disciplines of *gyan*, *yoga*, *dharna* and *seva* allow BKs to live a life of introspection and self-oriented action while experiencing in-

dependence on many levels – thereby referring to the spiritual more than the religious in their definition. However, “the Brahma Kumaris is tightly organized and rule bound and certainly fits with any definition of a religion, with its scriptures, rituals and criteria for membership” (Ramsay et al. 2010: 91).

PART TWO

The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (BKWSU) in South Africa

While there is abundant literature on the history of the Brahma Kumaris in India, the South African history of the Brahma Kumaris has been challenging to research because of the scarcity of written documentation. Oral histories emerged from conversations with residents and teachers of the local Brahma Kumaris University headquarters in Durban, Global Peace House. Citing histories related to them by more senior members, five such interviews provided valuable insight into the growth of the movement in South Africa since the 1980s and it is these versions, together with my own experiences, that inform this article.

Three key figures feature prominently in the early inception of the movement namely, Brother Seelan, Sister Grace and Brother Jay Pema, who made significant choices in establishing the foundation of what was to become the Brahma Kumaris (BK) movement in South Africa. None of these founders were connected or related in any way but found themselves drawn to the unique knowledge they experienced on encountering the *Raja* Yoga philosophy of the BKs, which other bodies of knowledge did not inspire. Other members who laid the foundation for future BK teaching and service were detailed in a joint collaboration with several centre residents who shared the following information:

In the very early 1980s, Sister Nola, a white South African from Cape Town and Sister Maria, a Jewish medical doctor from Cape Town, spent an extended period of time in the UK... they individually made contact with the BKs in London, and began the practice of Raj Yoga meditation. Both sisters... made plans to return to South Africa (SA) to start Brahma Kumaris service in SA. They occupied a flat in Yeoville in 1981 and began advertising meditation sessions. Brother Jay Pema, a young

Gujerati businessman, was one of the first students to begin attending classes. He is currently the Chairperson of the South African Executive Board of the Brahma Kumaris. In the latter part of that year, Brother Seelan, from Durban ... was attracted to an article, written by Liz Hodgkinson of London, that the sisters placed in the Sunday newspaper, and he followed up by contacting them. They began posting him the lessons from the correspondence course in Raja Yoga Meditation, *via* post. Brother Seelan made a trip to Johannesburg in Easter the following year, to meet with the sisters and Brother Jay Pema... In June/July of that year, Brother Seelan was informed that Sister Jayanti, the director of BK services in UK/Europe was visiting Harare and planning to visit SA. Brother Seelan hosted Sister Jayanti in his residence in Redhill, Durban. He arranged for various lectures and seminars in public venues and institutions in the city. Thereafter, Brother Seelan was given the responsibility of continuing with advertising and teaching of Raja Yoga meditation in Durban. ... He went on to offer the course in outside venues but his home in Redhill became the first Gita Patshala (a place of learning or school) in Durban.

Sister Grace Grimsel, an educator from the Eastern Cape, took a three-month sabbatical from work in 1983. ... She wrote to Mother Teresa, offering to do voluntary work with her. Mother Teresa however, recommended that she do voluntary work in their satellite projects in London and other parts of the UK. Sister Grace ... happened to visit a Raja Yoga centre where she came into contact with the BKs.... She was introduced to Sudesh Didi, and was given permission to receive *murlis* *via* post to sustain herself in South Africa. Sister Grace was also provided with the contact details of Sister Nola and Brother Seelan. Upon her return to SA, contact was made and the group connected every so often *via* telephone and occasional visits.

In 1985, Dadi Janki, who was the administrator of services outside of India, and based in London at the time, recommended that a young meditation teacher, Brother Paul Desmond (24) come to South Africa to assist in the expansion of BK services. He was accompanied by Brother Peter Newman. They arrived in Johannesburg and followed through on referrals to a few Gujarati families in places such as Brits and Lenasia. This was a time when many families

were introduced to the philosophy and practice of Raja Yoga meditation. Shanti Jevan began attending with her four daughters [who] became part of the team of instrument servers for the BKs. Sister Aroona (eldest) and Sister Kalpana (youngest) now manage BK service in Pretoria. Sister Usha Jevan, the third daughter, is currently an Executive Director of the Brahma Kumaris SA Board and regional co-ordinator of BK services in KZN. Sister Dipty came into contact with the four daughters who attended her mother's vernacular lessons in Lenasia and was also introduced to the BKs. She is currently part of the team that manages services in Johannesburg.

Brother Paul and Peter also did a road trip down to Durban, via Newcastle, Ladysmith and Danhauser, offering presentations along the way. These efforts saw the birth of small Gita Patshalas in all of the aforementioned towns. ... the brothers were hosted by Mr Daddy Moodliar of Isipingo. They made contact with Sister Bhoemie, who set up a Gita Patshala in her home in Isipingo and her friend Sister Veliamma, who set up a Gita Patshala in her home in Bayview Chatsworth.

Shortly after the arrival of the UK brothers, two BK sisters from Nairobi ... Sister Jyotsna and Sister Hansa, arrived in Lenasia and eventually also visited Durban. In October 1985, they offered a seminar in a town hall in Tongaat. This seminar was attended by many prominent members of the family, including local school principals and priests. Of the group that attended, Mr BJ Maharaj, Mr Jayson Rambally and Mr Balay, all made the decision to forsake their former ardent practice of Hindu devotion and engage in the study of Raja Yoga meditation. A meditation centre was set up in Tongaat and service in Durban expanded in the north coast. Brother Mannie... began service in Verulam. Brother Aniruth... set up a Gita Patshala (GP) in Riverdene, Newlands West in 1990. Brother Ashwin ... established a GP in Kharwastan in the early '90s.

Also in the mid '80s, the Nairobi sisters... were hosted by Sister Grace in Port Elizabeth and offered courses and programmes there. They also visited Grahams town, East London and Cape Town and stayed in the homes of vegetarian Hindu families. ... Significant future Raja Yoga teachers emanated from their tour, including Sister Brigita, who currently manages the

BK centre in Gleningdale, Port Elizabeth and Sister Zosha (now deceased).

Sister Pratiba, came to Durban in the late 1980s to study computer science at Natal University. As a cousin of the Jevan family, she was introduced to the BKs via her aunt and cousins in 1985. She set up a meditation teaching place in the flat she was living in, in St Georges Street, Durban.

As service began expanding considerably, plans were made for all satellite branches to meet weekly on a Sunday in various places in Durban, initially in school rooms or halls. In the early 1990s, a meditation centre, run by the organisation and not donated by a family (not a GP) but a centre, was set up in rented houses and run by dedicated BK sisters, who emerged from initial service done in SA. ...In 1993, land in Effingham Heights, was donated by Brother BJ's father... This property was developed with the support of the Brahma Kumaris constituency and various philanthropists...

... in Johannesburg, ... a centre was set up in the home of Barbar Bhai and Lakshmi Bhen, and later progressed to a flat in Yeoville. ... Service in Johannesburg was done from rented homes in Observatory and Lenasia. Today, both ... are owned by the BKs. In the early 1990s service also expanded to Soweto. A property in Soweto is also currently owned by the BKs.

Early lectures attended by these stalwarts focussed on the spiritual significance of customary practices giving universality to religious rituals and traditions. Observatory, in Johannesburg is today the National Headquarters. Belinda Bhen is the National Co-Ordinator for BKWSU, South Africa. Today BKWSU owns properties in Durban (Effingham, Phoenix and Verulam), Johannesburg (Observatory, Lenasia and Soweto), Cape Town (Claremont) and Port Elizabeth (Malabar).

Organisational Structure and Culture

The organisational structure and culture of BKWSU in South Africa and globally is exceptional in its operational ethic and hierarchy.

Global Organisational Culture

The BKWSU headquarters in Mount Abu, Rajasthan, India, were established in 1952. There are Regional Coordinating Offices in

London (coordinating Western Europe, South Africa, the Middle East), the US (America and Caribbean Islands), Russia (Eastern Europe) and Australia (Australia and Asia). The National Coordinating Offices are located in all countries where the activities of the BKWSU are carried out and are officially registered bodies... BKWSU is an international non-governmental organization that holds general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the UN and consultative status with UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund). As a global organization, akin to a multinational corporation in terms of its global sweep, membership size, property holding and budget size, BKWSU is distinguished by its practice of spiritual principles in management, leading to, comparatively low levels of conflict and organizational malaise in an institution of this size and cross cultural complexity (Ramsay and Smith 2008: 3-5).

Its most striking feature is its predominantly female leadership. Following the death of Dada Lekhraj in 1969, two Dadis (elder sisters or older maternal figures), Dadi Prakashmani and Didi (sister) Manmohini of the original *Om Mandli* group were appointed the administrative heads of the organisation. After Didi Manmohini's demise in 1982, the leadership naturally evolved to include Dadi Janki and Dadi Gulzar. The three Dadis shared between them the responsibility (together with other seniors) of leading the entire organisation, overseeing the Indian subcontinent and the international regions. The three Dadis formed the backbone of the organisation, providing spiritual support to BKs and guidance in the service activities of BKWSU. These role models established a solid leadership style based on accessibility to all despite rank. Leadership continues to be sustained through example, with humility and nurturance characterising the basis of relationships within the *yagya*. Guru-dom, disciple-ship and objects of reverence are rejected and there is no conflict in decision making or in acceptance of and support for the choice of leaders. A cultural ethos of spiritual solidarity and routine daily practices (morning classes, meditation, vegetarianism and celibacy) permeates and encompasses the national and regional organisations, synchronising a group cohesion that is standardised across the globe. This is further reinforced by the constant mobility of Brahma Kumaris and Kumars be-

tween local and international centres and an annual pilgrimage to Mount Abu for a period of intensive spiritual enrichment, which includes mass gatherings with the Supreme Soul *via* the medium of a trance messenger.

Local Membership and Organisational Culture

An interview with a resident teacher and youth co-ordinator at Global Peace House who has been a Brahma Kumari for almost 17 years yielded details relating to the development of the movement since its inception in South Africa. She shared her views on two key issues: the attraction of this NRM for South Africans and the contribution of the BKs to South African society. As a resident and teacher at BK centres in both Johannesburg and Durban, she believes that the unique and contrasting experience of self-transformation attracts people to the BKs. The non-dogmatic and all embracing nature of the non-cultural and non-religious appeals to a society that has endured deep racial, religious and class cleavages across generations. Unlike religious movements where devotion is a heightened emotion achieved through chanting, singing and praying for inner power to be imbibed, the power to practise is not as intense and is achieved by gaining the willpower to do so freely and naturally. In this way, people have a contrasting experience of transformation – unlike any other.

Householders and ‘complete’ families easily embrace celibacy and 90 percent of BK students easily and naturally adopt vegetarianism, aspects which they do not consider disciplines (the ‘should’ dos) but rather the consequences of meditation. Young professionals and ‘yuppies’ exposed to a BK lifestyle from childhood and adolescence willingly and confidently accept BK habits and practises. There is no dogmatism or tedious reference to outdated rituals and the consistent, non-judgemental support provided by BKs dissipates reluctance and fears among potential students. Further to accommodating people from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, the empowerment of women and the raising of their consciousness in decision-making have appealed to South African women, given their cultural legacy of subservience.

Local membership is relatively small, but has increased exponentially every year. In

Durban (Global Peace House) the centre attracts an ethnically diverse group of visitors. While membership continues to be predominantly Indian, the number of people from other ethnic groups is also increasing. In KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), BK membership is 60 percent female and 40 percent male. KZN has the largest number of Brothers in South Africa and Africa. BK membership is composed of centre residents (renunciates) and non-residents (renunciates and students). A significant number of centre residents are unmarried women who are professionals (including medical doctors, engineers, accountants, research scientists, teachers, bankers, health practitioners etc.) whose responsibilities to the centres they inhabit must be balanced or reconfigured to the needs of the *yagya*. Howell’s (1998) study of BK gender ratios, reverse sex polarity and attrition rates in western countries, affirms this as an international trend since the mid 1980s when substantial numbers of professional and technically skilled people began to join and won acceptance for the continuation of their careers while fully engaging with the organisation’s duties and activities. The local hierarchy consists of a Regional Coordinator, Centre Coordinators, residents, teachers, service instruments and students. These ranks may also be categorised as resident and non-resident members. Students may be further delineated into regular students and evening class students and attendance of classes at the centre determines who qualifies to participate in the pilgrimage to the spiritual headquarters in Madhuban (India).

BK Services and Contributions to South African Society

Brahma Kumari teachers, and centre coordinators offer meditation courses at introductory (beginners), intermediate and advanced levels, free of charge, at all BKWSU centres across the country. Other services to the South African public include: large scale awareness programmes, exhibitions at holistic health and healing fairs, voluntary motivational talks and seminars at schools, NGOs, prisons and companies and the hosting of dialogues between different sectors, leaders and experts. BKWSU also conducts life skills workshops (on anger and stress management, aspects of love, self respect and faith etc.) as well as hosting retreats (for example,

silence and yoga retreats, retreats for youth, national and teachers' retreats) at the BK centres or other local venues. BKs host local and international Brahma Kumaris who speak publically on significant subjects relating to contemporary concerns within the spiritual context of bringing peace to the self and to the world – 'self-transformation is world transformation' is a popular BK adage.

The following programmes and workshop activities are conducted in South Africa and globally for specialised groups. Locally, the BK websites for these projects offer translations of the various aspects of empowerment in English, Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho and Afrikaans.

- Values in Health Care – A Spiritual Approach is the Foundation's flagship initiative. It is a modular professional development programme that helps healthcare professionals to support themselves, one another and their patients.

Virtues and values such as compassion, cooperation, peacefulness and self-care are examined. These empower professionals in different settings to cope more effectively with their work, raise morale and restore confidence and purpose in their work environment. Through experiential activities, reflection and introspection, participants identify their key values and use these insights to improve and re-energise their work.

- Women of Spirit is a workshop that is usually conducted at a retreat where the personal power and spirit of women is acknowledged. By re-discovering and reclaiming themselves, women reawaken their elevated qualities of love, sustenance, endurance, generosity and intuition.
- Spirituality and Men are workshops and retreats for men to reflect and share their personal experiences. They offer a space to encourage activities designed to provide practical spiritual approaches for coping with the challenges facing men in a changing world.
- The Brahma Kumaris Environment Initiative led to BK participation in dialogues and presentations relating to renewable energy, the confluence of climate and consciousness, vegetarianism and non-violence for sustainable living, Earth care workshops, sustainable capacity building, natural farming and yogic agriculture and climate justice and food security. A strong contingent of local and internationally

renowned BK speakers made a significant contribution to the COP 17 climate change conference hosted in Durban in 2011.

- The International Youth Forum was established in 1995 and has expanded internationally across 49 countries into a network of 8,000 young adults between the ages of 16 and 30 years. United by the belief "when I change, the world changes", they explore personal empowerment through creative spiritual research of values and principles at the heart of consciousness in their annual international and national retreats. The framework that defines all their activities is You First, a process developed for young people to explore and understand their spirituality, connect with their inner strength and resources, and acquire practices which will sustain them in developing their true potential. In South Africa, Young Women of Spirit retreats and events have been held in Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg for young women and young women leaders from all backgrounds to explore personal empowerment and self-esteem.

CONCLUSION

Globally, humanity is experiencing an increasing wave of spiritual awareness which promotes an opportunity for self-transformation through the development of positive thoughts, attitudes and behaviours. The Brahma Kumaris is one such movement which has a relatively young history in South Africa. Its visibility has grown significantly through its efforts to create awareness about the pivotal role of spirituality in a world experiencing constant change. Its history and present activities globally and locally indicate a dynamic organisation based on firm spiritual principles which are often considered controversial. Writing about the sacred or the spiritual in an anthropological context challenges the accuracy of representation of information and presents a negotiation of methodological and ethical concerns for the insider researcher. However, newer directions in the area of auto-ethnography for instance, indicate both a dynamism and introspection that engages and embraces such processes which augurs well for contemporary research of this nature.

The BK practise of *Raja* Yoga philosophy and its related disciplines is not well known to the

local public at large and the organisation's small membership and unconventional methods of disseminating information about itself have led to its slow introduction to South African society. Its defining influence however, has been the strong presence of women leadership and the unique yet all-encompassing nature of its courses, lectures and programmes which transcend religious and cultural differences. Spiritual and religious in its definition, the Brahma Kumaris represent a NRM which offers its students spiritual ways of coping with a non-spiritual reality.

NOTES

- ¹ Dada Lekhraj was the son of a schoolteacher, a devout Hindu, a lifelong vegetarian and teetotaler and a well educated man involved in the wheat trade who later became a diamond trader. He was part of the Vallabacharya sect and the Bhai Bund merchant community.
- ² Death while living (*murjeeva janam*) refers to the change of consciousness and sense of identity while in the body (of this present birth). Members of the movement consider themselves to be Brahma's daughters and sons because they are reborn through the knowledge he enunciates (mouth born creations) which separates them from the rest of the world. Although they live in this world they are 'dead' to it.
- ³ Celibacy is the most controversial aspect of BK practice. Purity at its various levels is the foundation of a virtuous life and it is through such purity that true liberation is considered possible. All relationships should be pure with the vision of soul consciousness where we view each other as brothers and sisters of a global spiritual family. Husbands and wives live chaste lives as sexual intercourse is inconsistent with BK philosophy. In the BK scheme of the four ages, sexual intercourse did not exist in the first half of the cycle. Souls entered the world by being invoked (*yog bal*) and not through procreation. Babb (1984: 406) relates how this midpoint of the cycle changes the world from heaven to hell with the advent of sexual lust (*kam vikar*), bringing forth a decline in levels of purity, virtues and waning yogic power: "Sexual passion, more than anything else, entrenches and confirms us in our false identifications with the body. All forms of violence, avariciousness and exploitation arise from this. With the onset of sexual reproduction, the world begins an ineluctable slide into depravity and ever-deepening slavery to the body and its urges. The fall of the world is also the fall of womankind. During the first half of the cycle men and women are entirely equal but with the beginning of what is called 'body consciousness', women become objects of lust and fall under the domination of men. Thus the bondage of women is the bondage of all."

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