

Defining Post-Bubble Religious Communities in Japan: The Case of Konohana Family

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Abstract – In Japanese society, some spiritual groups have been defined as NRM (New Religious Movements) or NNR (Neo-New religions) by scholars; however, there are also spiritual groups that are yet to be discussed comprehensively and do not have a clear definition. This article discusses the spiritual group Konohana Family Community, which is referred to as an ecovillage, as a case study to examine how contemporary Japanese spiritual communities are categorized. Although the community shares many practices with ecovillages, some of their beliefs, such as faith in the divine's will, communication with the world of the kami, mythologies regarding ancient Japanese ancestors and the structure of the universe and existence, together with various practices led by a charismatic spiritual leader, are in line with NRM and NNR. Accurate identification of the category the Konohana Family belongs to will help scholars to analyze other groups and communities operating in contemporary Japan, understand the processes happening within these groups, and better evaluate the structure of contemporary Japanese society.

Keywords – Neo-New Religions, Japanese Religions, Konohana Family Community, Spiritual Groups, Community.

I. INTRODUCTION

Categorizing different groups in Japanese society is not an easy task. While some groups seek to be acknowledged as religious groups, others refrain from defining themselves as such. Yet, while self-definition is one aspect of categorization, it is also important that the beliefs and practices of a group are carefully examined so it can be categorized according to its nature, based on previous knowledge. Group sorting is done to gain a better understanding of the beliefs and practices of its members. Ultimately, categorizing different groups in society helps us to better understand the wider social fabric to which these groups belong. For the Konohana Family Community (KH), a spiritual, self-sustaining community based in Fujinomiya, Shizuoka Prefecture, there are several features that could be considered religious, such as belief in gods and goddesses, having a leader with supernatural powers, daily rituals like praying and chanting, and a unique mythology about the origin of the Japanese people. However, the literature so far has treated KH as merely an ecovillage with spiritual beliefs, with no reference to the religious aspects of community life. Furthermore, comparisons between KH and other contemporary Japanese spiritual groups are limited. KH has so far been defined as: an ecovillage (see Arizona, 2020; Brecher, 2013; Dregger, 2016; Togami, 2018; Veizaga & Yamaji, 2010), and more specifically, a spiritual ecovillage (Liftin, 2016, p. 249), an eco-community (Pickerill, 2016, p. 31), a cross-cultural intentional community (Budd, 2018), a sustainable community (Matsutani, 2014, p. 156), and “a community focused on spirituality, sustainable agriculture, and mutual aid system” (Laurea, 2020, p. 93).

This article attempts to provide a comprehensive observation of KH, thoroughly looking into spirituality, practicalities, and leadership within the community. Data was collected by the author while living in the community for three months. The author conducted interviews with the community leader and members and analyzed the community's materials, including articles, books, diaries, and presentations, as well as newspaper and website articles written about the community by third parties. While the community is largely referred to as an ecological community, it does not see itself as such; neither does it see itself as a religious organization,

which raises questions around self-definition and objective definitions, which rely, as much as possible, on knowledge gained from previous scholars. Despite the small scale of the community (89 members as of May 2018), it is important to investigate such groups to recognize the current trends and processes happening in Japanese society in the new millennium.

II. NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS AND NEO-NEW RELIGIONS

New interpretations of existing religions are as old as Jodo-shu in the 12th century and Nichiren in the 13th century, yet scholars identify the groups that emerged at the end of the 19th century as New Religions or New Religious Movements (NRM). Such groups, including Tenrikyo and Omoto-kyo, were established by charismatic leaders who introduced new interpretations to existing religions like Buddhism and Shinto. They were striving to form a new social order by encouraging followers to act for the sake of the group, perform rituals, and participate in the group's activities. In the following century, more NRM were established, among which two of the most prominent are the Church of World Messianity (Sekai Kyusei Kyo) and Mahikari, which both not only had strong charismatic leaders who were said to be able to cure illness through a divine light but also strove for the restoration of the connection between man and the environment, mainly through the practice of organic agriculture with the goal of establishing paradise on earth (Blacker in Clarke, 2013). Although thousands of NRM emerged in the years after WWII, those established at the end of the 1970s are said to be distinguishable by their faith. They were named Neo-New religions or New-New religions (NNR) by Nishiyama Shigeru in 1979, a term that was later developed by Shimazono Susumu (in Tsukada, 2012, p. 135). These groups differ from their predecessors in their hybrid teachings from existing religions, as well as their concepts of 'the spiritual world', a prominent focus on this-worldly benefits, and practices of "reformation of the heart/mind" (*kokoronaoshi*) (Prohl, 2012, p. 247). In the NNR, the focus is on the spiritual level of the individual, which emphasizes the importance of mental practice, as well as physical.

NNR flourished while the Japanese economy was on the rise, and there have been comparisons between doctrines of the same groups before and after the end of the bubble economy (See Tsukada, 2012, p. 149-150 for a comparison of the nationalism in Mahikari and Kofuku no Kagaku before and after the bubble economy. Interestingly, the shift in Mahikari was from a national-focus on spiritual cultivation, *kokoronaoshi*, to a community and individually focused one); however, no research has been done concerning NNR or similar spiritual groups founded after 1991. Whether or not KH can be called an NNR requires close examination. Since very little, if anything, has been written about the history or present circumstances of KH, I shall begin with an introduction to the community, its members, its values, and beliefs before discussing a suitable definition for the group.

III. A FAMILY BEYOND BLOOD RELATIONS

Konohana Farm was established in 1994 by fifteen adults and five children, who had the objective of establishing an intentional community in the countryside of Fujinomiya, Shizuoka Prefecture. It was established after the community's leader, Jiji¹, had gathered supporters for his idea of starting a new way of living as "*one big family, beyond blood relations*" (from the Konohana Family's official website). It was first named Konohana Farm, and later (at an unknown date) the community changed its name to the Konohana Family (KH). The name "Konohana" derives from the name of the Shinto goddess of Mt. Fuji, *Konohana Sakuyahime no*

Mikoto, and the word “family” (in Japanese *famiri*), which is a part of its name, indicates the guiding principle of the community: to live as one big family. As of May 2018, KH consisted of 89 members: 32 males and 57 females, of which 61 were adults and 28 children. Throughout the years, about 150 people have been engaged in the community as members (according to the recollections of current members); only recently has KH established a more organized registration system for current and new members. The community’s income now comes through a variety of channels: organic agriculture, lectures, educational programs, a cafe and shop called Lotus Land, a guesthouse, food stands at local events, monthly events, handyman services, Tanpopo healing massage, a treatment clinic, and other occasional work such as selling pre-ordered lunch boxes and the like. KH also offers a ‘natural therapy program’ which helps individuals suffering from mental illness and *bad habits* (which usually refers to substance abuse, cigarettes, and alcohol) to heal without medicine, through the spiritual guidance of Jijji and the help of the members. Their work within the community is divided into teams; the rice-paddy team, harvest team, seedling team, fields team, Lotus Land team, office team, child-raising team, central team (house cleaning, laundry, etc.), kitchen team, and construction team. Work is done seven days a week, as the community is “*striving to live like nature, and just as the sun will not take a day off, nor the bees, so do we need to work every day,*” as Jijji explained in one of the community meetings. In the past, new members joined the community through being introduced by a mutual acquaintance or participating in the community’s activities. Later, its website became the main channel through which new members found out about the community.

Around four years (no accurate information was found) after the founding of the community, they achieved self-sufficiency, which they claim to still have. Being successful in attaining self-sufficiency and cultivating microorganisms, the community started offering tours and workshops through which potential new members could be introduced to the farm. A number of interviews conducted in January and February 2018 revealed that new members, whose interest had initially been in the environmental aspects of the community, did not decide to join merely for those reasons, but also for the values and life-purpose that the community was offering. These values and purpose, along with the reasoning and the logic behind them, were introduced by Jijji - he is the only member who introduces new beliefs and practices that are adopted by the community, as well as the only member that can dismiss them when he considers them to no longer be beneficial for KH. The reason no other member can do so is simply because no one else is said to have the ultimate certification of regular communication with the divine.

IV. A DIVINE AUTHORITY

Furuta Isami, known as Jijji, was born in Mino-city, Gifu Prefecture, in 1951. He claims that his ancestors were village leaders in the Edo period, and that his father was a local politician. He got married when he was 21, and at the age of 25, he and his wife founded an interior design company in Komaki city, Aichi Prefecture. They ran that company until he established Konohana Farm. Jijji says that at the age of nineteen, his late grandmother’s spirit came to *sit above his head permanently* [his words] and was always with him, protecting him. Eleven years later, his grandmother’s spirit disappeared, and instead, a fifty-year-old Indian male took her place. Later, he says that he discovered it was Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. During this time, Jijji claims to have had an out-of-body experience in which his spirit took Buddha’s body, and that he later realized he had switched bodies with Buddha, so that Buddha was seeing through his eyes and speaking through his mouth. When he was working at his interior design business, Jijji could recognize his clients’ problems and give them

his insights and advice, as Buddha was speaking through his mouth. At that time, Jijji states that he learned a technique through which he could find out people's karma². Karma is, according to KH, the Yin and Yang tendencies of a person and their capacity to recognize the reality in which they live. Via this technique, Jijji can analyze peoples' names according to their kanji strokes³.

One of the important points to mention about Jijji's story of his spiritual journey prior to founding KH⁴ is his out-of-body experience, in which he says he was floating in space and looking down at the earth. Through this experience, he says he realized that humankind is destroying the earth "*like skin cancer*" (from KH resources). Realizing this, he became determined to tell "*this truth*" to other people and make a change, as he felt he bore responsibility for this damage. Then, suffering from a lack of understanding by his wife and parents, Jijji continued to talk about his experiences and the "*truth*", which he had discovered on his spiritual journey, and gradually people started gathering in his office every evening to listen to him. He was very lonely at that time, and just like the biblical Jonah, Jijji had a hard time accepting the path that he claims had been decided for him by the divine. He says that it was hard for him to put aside his ego and "*gain-and-loss calculation and intentions*." However, he could not stop what he was doing, as he realized the importance of his path.

Jijji says that at the age of 39, Buddha's spirit left his body, and he started encountering Shinto gods and goddesses; the first was Amaterasu Omikami. After this encounter, Jijji says that a voice told him to climb to the summit of Mount Fuji before sunrise, and when he was there, he received this message from Amaterasu Omikami: "*Preach the spirit that you have learned and mastered from the divine to the whole land under the sun⁵ from now on.*" That was the time when he realized he should teach others how to go through the process that he had been through, which he would eventually call "polishing the heart" (*kokoro wo migaku*).

After years of consulting for his clients, workers, co-workers, and their families, who had come regularly to hear him speak in his office, and accompanied him on shrine visits, Jijji introduced the idea of starting a community around Mount Fuji. He told them that this community would be one big family, beyond blood relations, and that it would not pollute the earth as they would be self-sufficient and would make a living through organic agriculture. Although none of the people who joined Jijji had professional background in agriculture, fourteen of them were willing to move with him to Mount Fuji. They started an organic agricultural farm, which is still one of the community's main sources of income today. They were also involved in the Effective Microorganism Movement back in the 1990s and started producing their own miso and soy sauce. The place selected to start the community was an old house in Fujinomiya, a house that would soon become one of four houses owned by the community to provide members with a place to live while it continues to grow.

V. A PATH TO SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

Consuming and selling organic agriculture and cultivating effective microorganisms are not the only ways KH members aim to improve the Earth's condition. There is more to it than just the food, as they often explain. The success of their mission is also bound to their numerous principles concerning external and internal behavior. Members need to speak their minds and say everything they think or feel, without hiding anything, as this was, and still is, Jijji's explicit request. Members are constantly told that the ultimate way to polish their heart is by 'getting over' their ego (*jiga wo koeru*). The ego, as it is explained by Jijji, is the selfish voice of a person, the consciousness that strives to promote what *I* think is good or right. The attachment to our physical belongings, our family members, friends, as well as the attachment to our own thoughts and ideas, forms the ego,

which consequently distorts our minds. In order to overcome the ego, members should not be attached to what they think or feel, and should share everything that comes into their minds with other members in community meetings. The same is true for members' possessions; since the founding of KH, members have been asked to share all of their money and assets with the community, as they are aiming to become one big family, and a family shares one wallet. Those members who did not agree to share all of their money and assets eventually left KH. This was in the initial stages of the community and the membership process has since changed. Today, all new members are required to share all of their material possessions as a preliminary condition of membership.

Having no attachment to family members or partners is also requested. Children of KH members are considered to be 'the children of the community'. They call all adults by their first names, regardless of their blood relationship, and although some of them know who their siblings are, they are not supposed to treat them differently from other child-members. There is a designated child-raising team that is in charge of meeting all the physical needs of the children. The same no-attachment approach is also true in romantic relationships. Marriage has no meaning in KH, so a couple can be married yet still have sexual relationships with other people (not necessarily members of KH). The only factor that matters when considering a communion, a consideration that is sometimes discussed in the community meetings, is whether or not this communion will fulfill *the divine's will*. This concept is one of those that members of KH try to live in accordance with, as a way of getting over their ego, and, eventually, improving their spiritual level.

The Divine Will

When members refer to 'the divine' in Japanese they use the words *kami sama*, which is a term that can, but does not exclusively, refer to Shinto gods and goddesses. Although some of the beliefs of the community are based on Shinto gods and goddesses (Konohana is named after the Shinto Goddess of Mount Fuji, and it was Amaterasu Omikami who is considered to have given Jijji the message for starting the community), there are other entities that are said to communicate with Jijji: the spirit of the late Nakayama Miki, founder of Tenrikyo, and the spirit of the late Mirra Alfassa, founder of Auroville, are just two examples out of many. The divine is very present in the community and is talked about every day. Everything is done due to the interest accorded to it by the divine, and humans should empty themselves, or in other words, refrain from having their own thoughts or wishes, so they can listen more carefully and fulfill divine will.

In order to know the will of the divine, KH members strive to become empty, yet not all of them are successful in doing so. Therefore, to help members who find it hard to become attuned to and understand divine will, other members can directly communicate with the divine and convey messages. Jijji was the first to communicate with the divine, and he is considered the highest authority among KH members. Yet through the years, a few more members with channeling abilities have also joined KH, and they are considered to have higher spiritual levels. One of the members who is not considered to be among those who have direct communication with the divine told me what it was like for her to listen to the divine:

It might not be a voice - I never heard a voice, but there is a sense. It's more like trust. There are many different patterns: Yumi⁶ [Jijji's private secretary who is considered a miko⁷] can really feel and hear, so does Jijji. I cannot really hear anything, sometimes I sense. But just by hearing the stories of Yumi and Jijji, who really share time together [with the divine], I really believe this is true. It is a very thin line, to me, and some people call it a 'cult group', but I really feel that this is really true. (January 8, 2018).

According to KH beliefs, everything happens according to divine will. If something does not go well, it is considered to be because it is not meant to happen, as one of the members told me during an interview:

If things don't go well, even if I have made the best effort-it's the divine telling me it is not the right direction. (February 21, 2018).

The path to understanding divine will varies among members. Some members indicated that when they had just come to the community, it was hard for them to gain such 'emptiness' in order to perceive divine will, but later they came to understand it better:

When I had just come here, I thought so many things: 'I want to change that', 'this should be changed like that'. I thought a lot and suggested a lot, but all these things just came from my own preferences or my fixed world view. At that time, things didn't change. [...] my personality - which was the source of these suggestions - was the problem. I received this feedback from other members. When I just observed [...] things gradually changed, and it went in the direction I hoped it would. It all happened [although] there were no words coming out of my mouth. It just went in this direction because of the flow. Even now, I have some thoughts like 'oh, I wish this part would become like this...', but the difference between the time I came here and now is that now I am aware of the flow. Also, now I know my wishes are not always correct. The answer is that things are becoming what they should become anyway. [...]. The important thing here is the spirituality, spiritual development, and to be together with the universe. [...] then, even if there were no expectations, the energy would flow, so things manifest. [...] Before we, humans, were born, we all promised the divine to fulfill our role. And we are given that role. Our role is to improve our spirituality. Become the divine's tool which they can easily use. (February 6, 2018).

Although these members are said to gain the emptiness required to perceive divine will, it does not mean that they can successfully and fully get over their ego. The only member who is considered to be over his ego entirely is Jijji. When interviewing the community's miko, Yumi, she was asked about the spiritual improvement of the members, and she stated that it was not a good thing for her to push other KH members into spiritual improvement:

[...] I was - I used to be more pushy. I was like 'oh- you should do that' [...] like [in the name of] justice. But now I know - it doesn't work because everyone has a different will and path and determination.

When I asked her if Jijji was the one pushing the members towards it, she said:

Yes and no. If he does, it's not his will. For me - that's my will, right? Like, I want members to be like this. But for him, that's through the divine that he does that, like, due to the divine will. [...] he unconsciously kind of senses the divine will, so he kind of tells such things to the members. But not based on his will. So in such a meaning - yes and no. So it's a little different from my case. I'm more like a human. (February 12, 2018).

As the community tries to operate according to divine will, the members who can communicate with the divine often share their experiences with those who cannot. One example of this can be found in their decision-making. Decisions in the community are said to be consequences of mutual agreement that is achieved through discussions in community meetings, and they are sometimes said to be decided by a non-verbal perception of the natural flow between members. On one occasion, Jijji announced at the community meeting that KH was about to purchase the land behind Lotus Land, which would become an extension to the kitchen. He explained

that it was necessary because recently there had been many international guests, care guests (participants in the natural therapy program), and new members, and that the kitchen of Lotus Land was very small. He mentioned that Lotus Land was important for the community, and the community was important, so they would have to do their best to continue the growth of KH. The land would cost around 10,000,000 JPY, and he already negotiated with the landowner, who would not reduce the price because he was in debt. Jijji also announced that because the community had had many expenses that year, the contract would be signed in January. It was Jijji who had negotiated with the landowner and who eventually decided to buy the land. When I asked some members if they had known about the issue of buying the land, they said they had, but that they had had no idea about the details, such as the price or the content of the negotiation, until after it was decided. They trusted that Jijji would fulfill the will of the divine. He was the one who had gotten over his ego after being a disciple of Buddha for nine years, and therefore he has become empty and can receive messages from the divine. Jijji is also the one who can tell the members how they can improve their spirituality by analyzing the characteristics of a person with two different tools that he claims to have received from Buddha. The first is the karma reading I mentioned earlier, and the second is the Heliocentric Calendar.

VI. PERSONALITY ANALYSIS

In KH, learning the personality⁸ of a person is based on two methods of analysis, explained by Jijji as ‘the driver and the vehicle’. The karma of a person, which implies the characteristics of their personality, is known as ‘the driver’, who is navigating the vehicle. The Heliocentric Calendar (HC) implies the set of abilities the person is born with and is known as ‘the vehicle’ that the driver is navigating. Understanding these two tools can help a person recognize why certain events occur in their lives and how they can navigate through them in order to attain better results. Every current or potential member, care-guest, and sometimes guests and researchers like the author will have their names and date of birth analyzed.

Karma Reading

Without getting into the Kanji-stroke calculations and details of the analysis itself, in basic terms, the karma analysis refers to *yin and yang*: according to KH, *yin* people are supposed to have the tendency to be passive and modest, consider matters negatively or carefully, to be dependent, harmonious, introverted, thoughtful, and act carefully. Thus, their actions tend to produce fruitful results. On the other hand, *yang* people are supposed to have the tendency to be less careful and positive, problematic, independent, active, self-righteous, and have a strong desire for self-realization and development. However, it is also said that not all of these characteristics will manifest in a *yin* or *yang* person and that different tendencies might be observed in different people. Moreover, it is also noted that some people do not show the typical *yin/yang* characteristics according to their tendency because they try to hide them. It is also said that there is a “neutral” personality, neither *yin* nor *yang*, and the people who have it are more relaxed and focused on themselves (retrieved from the KH presentation “learning the personality” given in February 2018).

Karma Reading (*karuma yomi*) also analyses the ‘capacity’ of a person’s personality, or, what they are able or unable to comprehend in life, as well as their perspective, simply by the count of the Kanji letters and number of strokes in a person’s first name. The higher the stroke number is, the bigger the capacity of the person to think deeply about things. Regarding the number of kanji letters in a given name, a person with only one kanji letter has a very narrow perspective and can only see things from his own point of view. Two kanji implies that a

person can also see things from others' points of view, and three letters implies both of the former qualities, as well as an objective perspective.

KH members often use karma in order to explain the way a person acts and why their own personality has one tendency or another. One of the members told me about his tendency, explained by his karma:

I am a kind of congenital-to-be-depressed person. [...]. My tendency is a little Yin. I am minus 1.

When I asked him how he knew he was born to be depressed he answered:

Oh, that's because Jiji told me. So I am close to 0, to neutral, so I'm in a very good balance, but it is minus 1, so I understand what I have to do, but since I am minus 1, I cannot really put it into action, and I think a lot. Then I get frustrated and become depressed. So that's what minus 1 means. (February 9, 2018).

A female member also tried to explain why it was her karma that eventually led her husband to commit suicide:

I feel that my tendencies – until I came here I really... hum... I thought I was only doing good things. When I came here, I understood my tendencies and habits better, since everyone had told me that. Then I realized I should try to fix these patterns until they disappear and to improve myself. It would have been good for my late husband.

When I asked her what she meant, she replied:

When my husband died, at the [community] meeting, we discussed that issue. At that time, I realized that if I changed myself, it would be like a commemorative ceremony [kuyo] devoted to my late husband. [...] He committed suicide, [and] I was told by the members that the habits of my husband and myself had brought him to this state - a suicidal state. I felt like I could not stay like that, and I had to change.

I then asked her what had changed in her during the time she had been a member of KH. Her answer was:

I am a 3-letter-Yang, so my ego is very strong. For example, even if I think that something is good for others, it might be only from my point of view. I have repeated that, and members pointed it out, so I have realized that. I feel I should remove my big ego, and then I could live my daily life. But still, my ego is still very strong. (January 23, 2018).

Karma reading is brought up daily and regularly in the community, and I often heard phrases such as: *Hiroko is doing everything very fast, and she doesn't think much before she acts because she has two letters Yang.* Members' karma is known to all, just like their age or the city and prefecture they are originally from. Once every few years, Jiji gives a presentation in which he explains aspects of the community's spirituality and beliefs to the child-members. In the karma reading presentation I attended, Jiji was analyzing the children's names one by one. The following analysis is of a junior high school girl:

The three letters Yin type is kind of rare. So she thinks a lot, but she is passive, and she tends to think in a negative way. She has many worries, so if she goes out into society, she might get depressed. [...]. Thinking is a burden for her. If she receives a piece of good advice, though, she can be smart, so it was good for you [talking to the girl] that you encountered me [Jiji]. She is minus three, and Jiji is plus 4, so the relationship is very good. So you and Jiji are spiritual partners, and if you want to make the best of yourself, it is a good

partnership. (February 17, 2018).

For KH members, it is very natural to use karma readings in order to analyze situations. However, the term karma is used in other situations as well. One example of this is KH rule 1:100, which emphasizes the responsibility of each member toward any situation they are involved in. It calls on members to reflect on themselves, or in other words, *polish the heart*, whenever they are involved in a problematic situation. One of the members explained:

According to KH, I would say a KH rule, so if you are in a situation - like legally you have no responsibility - but you are in this situation, and your car was kind of broken or damaged, [...] and your body might have damage, that means that your karma has attracted this kind of situation. So that means, even if legally you don't have any kind of [legal] responsibility, and you don't have to pay the person, you are in this kind of trouble or problematic situation, so it means you have to reflect on the pollution in your mind. That means one [1]. That means whatever happens to you - we should reflect on ourselves to improve our spirituality. That's the meaning of this rule 1 versus 100 [hyaku tai ichi]. So whatever happens to you is just a reflection of your mind. (February 12, 2018).

The number one represents a member who faces a bad situation, while the number one hundred represents the possibilities of their karma. The idea behind it is that negative situations that happen to members are always their fault, even if they did not take any physical action. It is their fault since they attracted the karma leading to this situation through their minds, which makes them responsible.

Karma is a term that has received a new interpretation in the community and is widely used. The theory of karma reading was introduced to Jijji by the divine when he was “*spiritually ready*”, in his words. In 2011, after the Great East Japan Earthquake, and after Jijji celebrated his sixtieth birthday in a ceremony that KH refers to as ‘the living funeral’, Jijji is said to have been given a new theory from the divine, this time based on astrology.

Heliocentric Calendar (HC)

Just like any astrological theory, the HC is based on the belief that the positions of stars in the Milky Way at a certain time can explain the set of abilities a person has. Each star has its own meaning, and this is divided into three groups; **mind** represented by Mercury, Venus, Earth, and Mars; **social relations**, represented by Jupiter and Saturn; and **spirituality**, represented by Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto (from the KH explanation sheet). Data about the position of the stars at a given time is taken from the NASA database. HC analysis is conducted in order “*to analyze a person’s life from the planetary map of the solar system based on his/her birthday and time, know the mission given by the universe, and analyze his/her own mental structure and social tendency*” (from KH community materials), and is done by drawing a map of the position of the stars at a certain date and time. The angles created between the stars have a meaning, and the meaning can be seen in the lines drawn between them (see figure 1). A solid line means that the star’s qualities function fully, so the person in question has these abilities; a dotted line means that the star functions partially, and no line means that the characteristics that this star represents do not exist. According to KH beliefs, these qualities are created due to the way the planets communicate with each other through vibrancy (*hibiki*), rotation, and harmony.

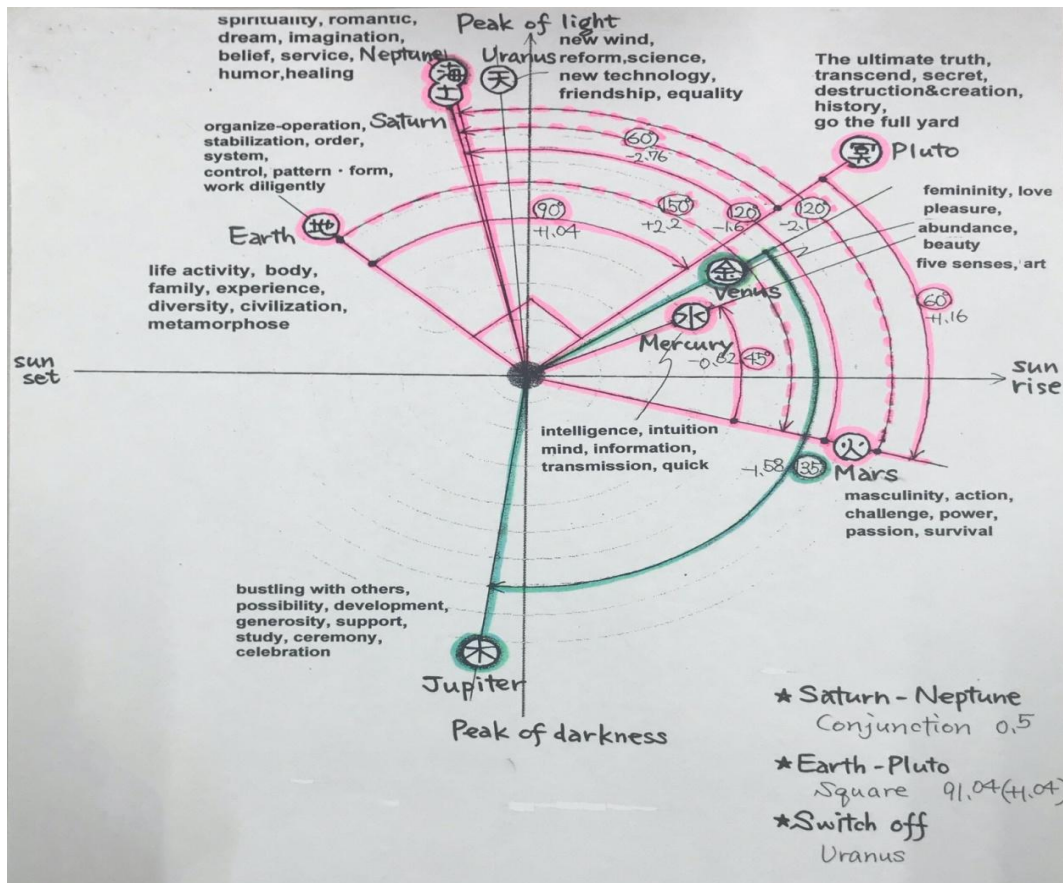


Fig. 1. Heliocentric Calendar analysis. This chart was made for one of the guests in the community during November 2017.

There is also meaning in the generation the person was born in, as it is said that individuals from the same generation tend to share the same values. The duration in years of a given generation is decided by the orbit of Pluto since KH believes this planet represents “the flow of the era” (*jidai no nagare*). The generations are named after zodiac signs, and two consecutive generations form an era; the generations between 1883-1913 (Gemini) and 1913-1938 (Cancer) caused the two world wars and represent the *Era of Darkness*; 1938-1957 (Leo) and 1957-1971 (Virgo) represent the era of *Postwar Recovery & Prosperity*; 1971-1984 (Libra) and 1984-1995 (Scorpio) represent the *Bridging Generation*; and finally, 1995-2008 (Sagittarius) and 2008-2024 (Capricorn) are expected to be the *Generation of the Peak of Light*, which will create a harmonious world.

HC analysis, unlike karma reading, is not in everyday use, and the only times when members discuss the HC of a person are when new care-guests come. As these guests seek mental help, KH members turn to the HC to explain the guests’ mental structure and social involvement, or, in their words, to understand what ‘vehicle’ each person is ‘driving’, so they can better understand how they can help this care-guest to heal.

While karma reading and the HC are tools to understand a person’s personality in order for them to know their weak and strong points and adjust their mental and physical behavior to eventually get over their ego and be more attentive to the will of the divine, KH has also developed another tool that is said to help the community to *improve the flow*, and improve the atmosphere and energy in every action they perform. This tool is not said to have originated in KH, as karma reading and the HC did, but was introduced to them by non-members and adopted and adjusted, according to the understanding of KH, in order to meet their needs. This tool, the Katakamuna, is practiced by all members a few times every day, from the time they learn how to speak.

VII. KATAKAMUNA

The Katakamuna was introduced to KH in 2014 by a teacher specializing in it. The members claimed that after a few classes, they realized that they understood the Katakamuna better than this teacher and therefore dismissed him and developed their own learning materials. Then, they started to develop and expand the theory of Katakamuna based on the previous teacher's explanations. The original theory of the Katakamuna is based on the myth that 13,000 years ago, Japan was inhabited by people called the Katakamuna People, who are, according to KH, the ancestors of present-day Japanese. People of this civilization could sense the potential of a phenomenon prior to its existence. Therefore, in the Katakamuna theory, there is a constant tension, dependence, and interaction between *the potential world* and *the phenomenal world*, which will be further explained in the next paragraph. The vibrancy of the potential world could be sensed by the Katakamuna people, and they classified these vibrations into 48 sounds (syllables), which allegedly represent the system by which the universe operates: the universal structure of creation, development, and disappearance. It is said that for many years the theory of Katakamuna was hidden from human beings because humans were far from the spiritual state that could support their understanding of the Katakamuna, but in 1949, a physicist named Narasaki Satsuki discovered the Katakamuna and revealed its mystery through five years of research.

The name Katakamuna derives from the transformation of vibrancy from *the potential world*, the world of *kamu* (refers to *kami*, the divine), to *the phenomenal world*, the world of *kata* (which refers to shape, or existence), and *na*, which is the shift from one world to the other. A simple example of this process would be the life of a human: before one was born, one's spirit is in the *kamu* world, which is *the potential world*. After birth, the spirit goes through a qualitative shift, which is the *na*, and then the individual is born – and becomes a phenomenon in the world of *kata*, which is the *phenomenal world*. After the individual dies, the spirit again goes through a qualitative shift (*na*) and returns to the world of *kamu*, the *potential world*. This process is said to happen to all phenomena we can observe, like thoughts becoming actions, the influence of our words, or any other aspect of life.

Each of the 48 syllables that are said to represent the vibrancy of the *potential world* has a meaning (see table 1). There are 80 chants that KH is familiar with. One of them is chanted daily by community members, while others are chanted on special occasions. KH doctrine denotes that most of the Katakamuna chants concern sexual relations between men and women. The sounds are parallel to the Japanese katakana sounds, and therefore, by looking at the meaning of the syllables of the Katakamuna, it is possible to analyze Japanese words and names. As with karma reading, KH also uses the Katakamuna to analyze people's personalities based on their names. Without going into further explanation about name and word analysis, according to this theory, there are 'distorted sounds' which imply 'distorted thinking' by a person.

Table 1. Katakamuna Syllables' Meanings (five out of 48 syllables).

㇀HI	one (hitotsu), secret (hisoka), to open (hiraku), to echo (hibiku), light (hikari), day (hi), fire (hi), sun (hi), a starting point from stillness to motion, the beginning of things
㇁HU	Two (futatsu), to vibrate (furueru), to touch (fureru), deep (fukai), to fill / block (fusagu), to bend down (fusu), to increase (fueru), to swell (fukuramu), to gain weight (futoru), a stage where two contradictory characteristics that expand and contract spread as fluctuation.
㇂MI	Fill (michiru); water (mizu); honeydew (mitsu); path (michi); body (mi); something in Sensho-kado (Ama-kai: the world

	between the potential world and the phenomenal world); something consisting of electricity, magnetism and force; something that you cannot see, but can feel with your mind.
YO	Evil (yokoshima); confusion; world (yo); night (yoru); to get drunk (you); a state where energy is divided into Sei Han (forward and reverse) at the stage HU, going beyond the stage MI, developing, going back and forward, flowing evilly, and becoming a rotating vortex flow.
I	Position (ichi); the first particle that appears in the phenomenal world; something combining five physical elementary quantum components of electricity, magnetism, force, time and place; the energy of I is uneven and has differences (SA), and this is called ISA, meaning “Let’s do it”

The community mostly chants Katakamuna chants number 5 and 6⁹. Some of these chants have a meaning in Japanese, for example: “*hi fu mi yo i*” - is an old form of Japanese counting, one-two-three-four-five, that is no longer in use in modern Japan, and “*ma wa ri te me ku ru*” - meaning “seasons are changing”. The members, adults, and children, say chants number 5 and 6 before their meetings. Adults also chant while they work, when fermenting microorganisms, and sometimes on random occasions. The members explain that children should also chant since it develops their pineal gland, so every child in the community is required to chant as soon as he or she can developmentally do so. KH members believe that chanting *adjusts the atmosphere* of their meetings, so they will be successful and fruitful, and that *everyone will have one mind and heart*.

While some members told the author the history of the Katakamuna and the meaning behind it, other members seemed not to know exactly what it was. When the author asked one of the adult members what Katakamuna was, she replied:

A new but old thing, so it is very interesting. I didn't know Katakamuna at all, but if we'd just used a Japanese word we could know its' real meaning. Since ancient times, there has been such knowledge, and now KH has encountered Katakamuna and analyzed these things. It is so great. I don't know so much about Katakamuna, but there are people from outside the community who have studied Katakamuna. Their Katakamuna and KH's Katakamuna are totally different. (January 17, 2018).

Another adult member, whom I asked the same question, replied:

It's a very broad world view... what can I say? KH itself got to know about Katakamuna, and since then, KH's capacity has expanded. I understand that this is something important, but I still don't grasp it well enough. (January 23, 2018).

A third member with whom I discussed the Katakamuna said he was chanting it *for my adjustment, for myself. When I do my daily work I tend to forget what is really important, so this is the time to remember [...]. That is why I feel that this is important. That is why I practice.* (January 21, 2018).

Although some members do not know much about the Katakamuna, they do understand it as something important, and that by practicing it, their spiritual level, and the overall harmony of the community, can be improved. Members who are highly evaluated in two aspects of community life, namely a comprehensive understanding of KH's different beliefs and implementing the necessary practices in order to get over one's ego, are perceived to have a higher level of spirituality. This forms an unwritten spiritual hierarchy in the community.

VIII. SPIRITUAL RANKING

The spiritual level of members is not indicated by numbers or any ordinary scale but is more of a vague eval-

-uation. According to the explanations given by community members, it is important to evaluate one's spirituality to help one improve and develop. For the same reason, members are constantly told by other members about their 'bad habits', destructive tendencies, immaturity, and bad work performance. The latter is the ultimate test for high spiritual level: if the member does not perform well at their work, it is said to be an outcome of low spirituality since the spirit is tuning the actions and their outcomes. It seems that all members know what their spiritual rank is and act accordingly. Quite often, members declare: "*I have a big ego*", "*...this is because I didn't get over my ego yet*", and other similar statements. KH members believe that the best way to get over their ego is to forget about the self and live only for others. The only person who has reached this level of spirituality is Jijji, and he is the only member who can explicitly identify other members' spiritual levels. In the community meetings which I attended, Jijji was making implications, mocking, and scolding different members for their low spiritual levels, which were mainly evidenced by their bad performances or mistakes in their work. Whether it is higher spirituality that improves the members' function or the higher function that improves members' spiritual level, is left as a chicken or egg paradox.

Although members do not use numbers or other symbols to discern their spiritual level, there is a clear hierarchy, and members who are closer to Jijji are those with higher spirituality. His secretary, Yumi, is one of the members who is said to have the highest spirituality, and as mentioned earlier, is considered a miko. When asked about her relationship with Jijji compared to other members, she said:

I guess I'm the closest, like spiritually, because I can understand the most of what he says and I can sense the importance, and as on my spiritual path I kind of receive many messages and visions from the divine, which is so different from other members too. Not many other members have direct contact with the divine, right? Like Jijji and I do. (February 12, 2018).

When discussing members' spiritual levels, tools such as karma readings or the HC cannot be used to assess them. While KH members say that anyone can tell a person's spiritual level if they observe the person, members trust Jijji as the ultimate authority. When asked about how to assess a person's spiritual level, Yumi replied:

[...] we can sense it. That's why Jijji says he always gives marks to the members because he can sense without such tools [karma reading and HC], [but] with intuition, with vibrancy. He can sense, I can sense, maybe you can sense that too. 'That person is this level or that level' - we can tell. I can sense from their atmosphere, vibrancy, and from their words and actions. And the consistency between their words and actions. We can sense it. (February 12, 2018).

The spiritual levels of all members, guests, care guests, or even celebrities and other people who are not related to KH are often discussed in community meetings, during work time, and in daily conversation. The spiritual level of parents also determines the spiritual level of a baby who is born from their sexual intercourse. Communions that occur in KH should resonate with the divine's will since the community is striving to beget children with high spirituality that will improve the spiritual level of society in the future. Jijji gave a nine-hour presentation entitled *sex and the universe* in which he described in detail the process of life-creation by the Katakamuna, where *beautiful sex* (as opposed to *polluted sex*) was a spiritual state that "*indicated the fundamental principles of the universe*". In order to express the right sex, "*It is necessary for people who have reached a certain level to enhance the partner's level of consciousness and convey the mystery of sex gradually*". One of the times this level of consciousness was conveyed was in a controversial ceremony that was

held in 2013 or 2014 (according to members' recollections), and was called a sex purification ceremony, *sei misogi*.

IX. PURIFICATION CEREMONIES

According to a newspaper article published in June 2014 (see Nifty Kokorogu, 2015), Jiji has had sexual relationships with more than half of the female members of KH, some of them against the will of the women concerned, many of whom had explicitly asked him to stop. No rape charges were filled as the alleged victims never complained. The occasion described below was a part of the *sei misogi* ceremony that the community was conducting. As a part of this ceremony, key figures in KH were asked by Jiji to write down all of their sexual histories and hand them to him. Those who had *polluted sex habits* were pointed out by Jiji in the community meetings and were called on to change their ways. *Polluted sex habits* are said to be those not in accordance with divine will, and which therefore increase the pollution of the earth. For that reason, it was important for Jiji to compel these members to cease their bad habits immediately. One of the times, Jiji used physical violence against male members (who are no longer members of KH). A current member explains:

[...] in order to correct people's perceptions, Jiji hit people. [...] Since it was so very important – that is why. A person who violates this importance and makes things dirty; these people were hit until Jiji's hand hurt – it happened so many times. (February 10, 2018).

Another member described it as follows:

Now, on the internet, it is written that he [Jiji] was violent, but at the beginning, he was really caring and thinking about the person when he hit those people. [...]. Even before this case had happened, a couple of times, Jiji really cared about some members and would do it, but it depends on the member: how they perceive it will determine if it's violence. If [the member who was hit] would stay here, he would think that it is a totally natural thing to happen, but because he couldn't really stay here, he left. That's why he kind of says that it was violence. These days Jiji is almost not doing it anymore, the generation has changed, and the era has changed. (February 20, 2018).

Some of the assaulted former members tried to sue Jiji. At the time of my departure from the community, the case was still ongoing. Regarding the accusations of rape, Jiji explained the situation and why he considered it to be an educational act:

I demonstrated what is beautiful sex and what is polluted sex. I did it because it was important to me. [...] what is sacred and what is polluted - it depends on the spiritual level of the person behind it. That's why we know what is polluted and sacred. So, depending on what spirituality is behind the sex, the sex can be sacred or polluted. At that time [the time of the sei misogi], everyone understood what was sacred and what was polluted [...]. [...] in detail, there is sacred sex and stupid sex, so they need to experience what is what [...]. [...] I understood the importance of it by intuition and practiced it. I had some partners that I could create such important things with. [...] There are people with lower-levels [of spirituality], so it's a kind of individual path [of development][...]. I have a wife, [...], but unfortunately her spiritual level didn't reach such a state. But she understands that I have other partners that have reached such a level that can create such a partnership. [...] The right order is created by the spiritual level of the female members. [...]. That's why, if the spiritual level of the female is low, the male would also express a low level. So, in this sense, living

together in a community will become very dangerous, because it might create a disordered place. A community might collapse due to money and sex - that's what has occurred in the past in many communities. So people with disordered minds, [...] they have a spiritual level of sex as low as the general people. [...]. [...] So to [two female members], I demonstrated to them what was polluted sex, and what is precious sex. [...]. [...] I just demonstrated for people that have a lower sexual level. [...] That's why, for people that don't understand the sacredness of sex, when I demonstrated such sacred sex and polluted sex to the members, they thought that it was rape. So that's why they said 'it's like rape' because it wasn't raping because there weren't any victims in this situation. [...]'¹⁰ (February 20, 2018).

Sexual relations should only be made, then, when divine certification is received, or as KH members describe it, as a ceremonial act, and not merely to seek pleasure, although not every sexual act is considered to be an act of purification. While the *sei misogi* is only done on special occasions (the only occasion that members mentioned was the one held in 2013 or 2014), other ceremonies are conducted more often: there are annual ceremonies in the community, such as the Fuji Sengen Festival held every January, seedling and harvesting ceremonies that are common in Japan, and a KH version of the *Setsubun* in February, when KH members invite both good spirits and demons (*fuku wa uchi, oni mo uchi*), as they believe that the demons are nothing but a mirror to ourselves and help us improve; and on a full moon and a new moon, the community celebrate by drinking *omiki*¹¹ that is produced in the community.

There are also daily purification ceremonies, like the Katakamuna chant that is done daily, and a hand gesture ceremony, called "four claps", that is usually, but not solely, done before a meal. The hand gesture ceremony was introduced by Jijji, and it represents the law of the universe. It is said that the one who performs it knows the universal structure and is harmonizing with the divine. The ceremony is also held before conducting any work that involves microorganisms (*koji*), such as preparing the *koji* with rice, or stirring the soy sauce, as one of the principles of KH is to treat all living things that humans share the earth with well, microorganisms included. It is for this reason that community members do not buy meat and dairy (though they can eat them if they receive them), and it is also the reason that the community practices organic agriculture – to not pollute the earth or the human body. However, when it comes to other practices the community maintains, these values can be dismissed. They will only last if they serve KH's spiritual goals.

X. ENVIRONMENTALISM

Working seven days a week, like animals, plants, the sun, and all other elements in the natural world, is only one way in which KH is trying to pursue harmony with nature. The community also has a cardboard recycling station, solar panels, and two compost toilets in their outdoor facilities. The community can be found on the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) website, and many researchers worldwide who are interested in environmentalism and community operation have visited in the last few years. However, the community had not intended to become an ecovillage until a female member, who was previously involved in the Ecovillage Network, joined. One of the members who founded the community together with Jijji said they did not even know the words "community" or "ecovillage" before this female member joined. They called themselves 'a farm', and practiced organic agriculture (*yuki nogyo*), but they did not use the word "organic" in the English pronunciation as they do today. After this member joined, KH realized some of their practices were similar to those of ecovillages when it came to farming. Putting aside spirituality, both KH and ecovillages are based on organic agriculture and the a

-spiration to improve the environment.

Environmental Practices

As well as being the outcome of environmental concern and one of the community's main income sources, selling organic products is also a means to spread KH's beliefs and values. Therefore, they see great importance in improving their spirituality in order for the production to be of high quality. In order to transmit positive energy and make better products, members often chant Katakamuna while working in the fields, kitchen, warehouses, and other places. Growing healthy, organic, and delicious-looking food is thereby seen as equivalent to spreading their spiritual beliefs and practices to wider society, a mission they highly prize. Since the distribution of their values and spiritual beliefs takes priority, other practices that might contradict environmentalism are sometimes implemented. If organic food needs to be delivered in single-use plastic packaging, the ends justify the means.

One of the members, who was running a soba (buckwheat noodles) stand prior to joining but closed it as he wanted to refrain from producing a lot of plastic, explained why in KH it is different:

[...] My tendency is to be very extreme. I'm often told that I am a person of either 0 or 100. Nothing in between. That's why when I think about things - I don't have anything in the middle. So I have lived my life always using nothing at all or using a lot! KH is flexible. According to the need, we change. So talking about lunch boxes, we are going to make them as good as we can and do the best we can do. So rather than doing workshops here for a few people, if we're doing lunch boxes for hundreds of people, the same values will be distributed. It is easier to understand our values like that. Not doing that for the reason we might create garbage is not good. We will make lunch boxes at any opportunity we have. And then, on other occasions, you can have this kind of food at A-UN [monthly soba restaurant event held by the community] and at Lotus Land. Both of them are the same food. If I start to think, 'we produce so much garbage', that is my ego talking. That's why it's bad to refrain from plastic usage because by using it, we can distribute our values. We distribute our values via delicious lunch boxes. When I reflect back on myself, what I have done by saying 'I won't pollute the earth' – that was very superficial. (February 21, 2018).

A similar explanation was also provided for the usage of plastic for packing KH's organic products, the plastic mulch in the fields, and for the self-consumption of plastic when drinking *omiki* and making lunch boxes for community trips. This plastic is not recycled, as Fujinomiya has no plastic recycling facilities. However, the community states that it is burned in a facility that produces very little pollution.

A serious concern for pollution is shown in a different area: pollution of the body. KH strives to eliminate the consumption of foods that contain "bad energy", in particular meat and fish. The community considers the stress experienced by animals while being slaughtered to be the cause of the bad energy in meat and fish, and, from their perspective, this energy makes the body unhealthy. They also assert that the intestines of Japanese people are one meter longer than those of any other people, which causes the meat to stay in their bodies longer and to rot. The ultimate verification that meat should not be consumed comes from Jijji. He says that in one of his out-of-body experiences, in which he was flying in space and watching the earth, he noticed that the earth was surrounded by the sad souls of dead animals killed by the food industry. According to KH, food should be produced in a way that does no harm and it should be appreciated by the eater before it is consumed. Therefore,

in KH, all food should be consumed after at least one minute of silent prayer, followed by saying *itadakimasu*¹² a few times.

Despite this, the community raises chickens for egg consumption and manure, while the old chickens are sold to a chicken-dealer. According to one of the members, “*the dealer is probably using the old chickens to feed carnivores in a zoo*”. Also, although the community does not buy milk for self-consumption, they do use it in the food and drinks offered in their café. Although another member said she had worked in the milk industry and was not happy with the treatment the cows had received, here too, the means of financial gain is prioritized over care for animal welfare in the food industry, which the community is said to be concerned by.

A Fishhook

Although agriculture is one of the main sources of income for KH, and is the practice the community is most recognized for, the treatment of their crops also has a spiritual aspect. They believe that the energy that they transmit to the crops is what makes them delicious, and if they transmit negative energy, the crops will feel it and get sick or die. Here too, the spiritual level of members is decided by their success in their work. Bad work implies a low spiritual level or deviated mind. One of the members described what it was like working in the field with Jijji in the first years of the community:

At the beginning, I worked with Jijji in the vegetable fields, and while working in the fields, for example, we drew a line that we should plant along. If I planted away from the line we had drawn, he would say that my spirit was deviant - and I should straighten it. [...] In the beginning, I let our chicks die a lot. If I could not really observe the chickens well or if I was not feeling completely at one with them, then [it meant] I was in an unstable condition. That's why Jijji really scolded me. (February 19, 2018).

Another member explained that it was all a matter of consciousness: “*If we plant something, it has to be straight. If it deviates, even just a little bit, Jijji will say ‘your mind deviates’ . [...]. Rather than being hard on us, it is just about being conscious about what we are doing*” (February 20, 2018). These members’ experiences elaborate on the process of improving spirituality through improvement in work. The next step is to transmit this spirituality through the products the community is selling, as presented in the previous section.

KH is not only self-sufficient in terms of food, but it also has an impressive production scale in terms of the variety and quantity of organic agricultural products, with fertilizers based on neem, zeolite, and calcium. However, community members consistently emphasize that organic food is secondary to spiritual development in terms of importance. On my first day in KH, I was told by two different members that the community *is not all about the food, but about learning one’s heart (kokoro wo manabu)*. Therefore, despite the fact that the community is registered as an ecovillage, its first priority is spirituality. Still, the community attracts many new members via its environmental practices. Some of KH’s members came out of environmental interest, and they entered via various channels: some had heard that it was an ecovillage and decided to join, others came to visit after hearing about it from *Chikyū-Mura* NPO, an organization that promotes environmental education, or were introduced to it via a mailing list about environmental protection. Some received help from KH with their organic agricultural initiatives, while others came on a tour which introduced organic farming, or simply searched online for information about sustainable living. All of these people initially came to KH because they were interested in environmentalism and agriculture. Two members joined after they encountered KH when

participating in its past program, the EDE (Ecovillage Design workshop). However, the EDE, which had been supervised by Gaia Education¹³, has not been held in the community since accusations of violence emerged against KH. Since the EDE was withdrawn by Gaia Education, KH refrains from calling itself an ecovillage and offers its own educational program, The Truth School (*shingakkō*), where they teach mainly about spirituality and community living, as well as organic agricultural practices. The new definition adopted by KH is 'A Village of Bodhisattvas' (*bosatsu no sato*), which, unlike the term ecovillage, emphasizes the idea of spirituality that they wish to convey.

Although some members were attracted to the community for environmental reasons, all of them admit that since they learned about the fundamental importance of spirituality, this is the reason they stay in the community. A female member explained:

When I had just arrived, spirituality wasn't that important [to me]. I wanted to have physical things: solar panels, eco-houses, nice food, and self-sufficiency - those kinds of things. Because of this attitude, in [the] meeting, someone pointed out that my spirit and ego have a problem. At that time, I was thinking, 'why do you say that? You don't know me!', and I was very angry in the beginning. I didn't have a good attitude for learning. I took things very negatively. I was angry for the first six months until I started to feel 'oh, maybe they are saying something that is good for me because there is no point in them telling me such a thing'. I just realized that. [But] still, it's so slow to realize such a thing. (January 8, 2018).

One of the main channels through which potential new members can come to learn about the community's practices and KH's farming and community living is through the community's website. It was built as a recruitment tool for new members and is filled with pictures of the fields at the foot of Mount Fuji, delicious-looking plant-based meals, and the adults and children of the community smiling while doing various activities. One of the members explained to me the significance of the website for the community: "[...] at some point we needed to transmit our values to wider society, so we built the website - and it was like a fishhook, so the necessary people would come here". (January 22, 2018). However, just as a fishhook would not be effective if one did not consider the sea conditions, such as the season, the weather, and the tendencies of the fish, there are various reasons why individuals join a spiritual community at a certain time and in certain conditions, which are not related to the community itself. To understand why a given community gains popularity at a certain point in time, it is also important to look into the external social, economic, and political contexts in which the community is operating.

XI. PUTTING COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN CONTEXT

KH explicitly refrains from calling itself a religion, a religious organization, or identifying itself with any existing religion. Although there are clear religious characteristics to the community, such as the belief in kami, Buddha, and even having a *miko* and a Shinto priest (*kannushi*) in the community, to name just a few, KH calls itself *a village of Bodhisattvas* and defines itself as a sustainable spiritual community that focuses on polishing the heart and improving its members' spirituality. While the practices KH offers, such as Katakamuna chanting, hand gestures, and *sei misogi* are not documented in any other place, the community's ideal of striving for spiritual development is far from unique. The idea of personal spiritual growth was well known for many years before KH was established; spirituality has been gaining popularity in Japan since the late 1970s, and during the 1980s and 1990s, themes referring to the alteration of the mind and spirit as well as topics related to self-

searching were gathered under the umbrella term The Spiritual World (*seishin sekai*) (Shimazono & Graf, 2012, p. 460). One of the explanations offered for the growing interest in spirituality is the rising demand for knowledge and practices which are neither religious nor scientific (Shimazono & Graf, 2012, p. 477), which, by definition, religious organizations could not fill. Some of the practices that were offered by *spiritual world* writers tried to fill the gap with ideas of getting over the ego and organic agricultural initiatives. These ideas may have prepared the ground for the acceptance of New Age beliefs and new environmental ideologies or communal living with the aim of spiritual growth.

The political and economic state of Japan has also been evident as a significant influence for individuals in the quest for spiritual guidance. Prominent examples of times when new religions flowered were after the Meiji restoration, Japan's militarization in the 1920s and 1930s, at the end of World War II, and since the 1970s (Prohl, 2012, p. 241-264), at the time of Japan's economic growth. While only a few studies on spiritual and religious movements after the 1990s have been made, It is generally agreed that the economic stagnation of Japan during the 1990s led to income insecurity, which in turn caused widespread social and mental instability, resulting in a high suicide rate. This would have urged individuals to search for new solutions to their economic, social, personal, and mental problems. While neither NRM nor NNR offer practical economic resolutions, KH stands out in the crowd. Its Kibbutz-like economy can answer economic concerns while being accompanied by a community you interact with daily, alongside the promise of personal spiritual guidance that refrains from being called religious, as the reputation of religions largely descended during the second half of the 1990s.

Following the terrorist attack by Aum Shinrikyo in 1995, other new religions in Japan suffered from a negative image, regardless of their size (Prohl, 2012, p. 255). In a survey conducted on Japanese college students after the Aum incident, only twenty per cent responded positively to the question "do you believe in religion?" (Dorman, 2012, p. 515). The public was reluctant to engage with any religious organization and questioned their intentions. If KH ever intended to register as a religious organization, even merely for tax benefits, it was clear at that time they would then meet with extreme difficulties in recruiting new members and encounter high levels of suspicion from public authorities. However, with the existing public interest in spirituality and decreasing trust in organized religions, the public need for alternative spiritual guidance could now be fulfilled by a non-religious entity. Although it is unclear if KH was a product of the circumstances or accidentally found an organization that would perfectly fit the post-Aum era, they offered non-religious spirituality that some segments of the public were eager to consume.

With 60 to 70 per cent of the college students in the survey mentioned above claiming to believe in Shinto gods and goddesses, Buddha, spirits, souls, supernatural phenomena, destiny, and retribution for past deeds (Dorman, 2012, p. 514), yet most of them not defining themselves as religious, it is clear that there is a question of the definition of religion and religious, be it an established religion such as Buddhism and Shinto, or a newer NRM or NNR. As KH's validity, in the eyes of its members, depends on the spiritual relations of its leader with the Buddha, and Shinto gods and goddesses, it is difficult to dismiss KH as non-religious. However, this debate has been settled by Shimazono & Graf (2012, p. 484), who show that participants in non-religious new spirituality movements perceive religion as more restrictive, impersonal, and institutionalized, three traits which are not associated with KH. Even when discussing divine will, it is hard to tell where to draw the line between its religious context and the cultural-secular treatment of 'a supernatural force beyond our control'. Therefore,

with no prior scholarly research to decide which definition is best suited to KH, it is beneficial to examine its similarities to other spiritual groups that have long been studied and defined.

XII. SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Spiritual development that aims to improve the individual's well-being is at the center of the goals and practices of KH members. Only when individuals get over their ego can they form a harmonious atmosphere and contribute to the creation of a better world. They are trying to do so through two channels. The first is mental: releasing all attachments and getting over their ego while listening to divine will. The second is physical: perfecting their work, chanting, hand gestures, participating in rituals like *sei misogi*, living as a community, and donating all their money and assets to the community. This division is based on what an external observer *can see* and *cannot see*. Both channels are based on a belief in self-improvement for the sake of society and the world.

Rituals that aim to improve the world through individual practice are common in NNR and can be seen in Agonshū (Reader, 1988, p. 256), and both Sukyo Mahikari and Sekai Mahikari Bunmei Kyodan that strive for an individually-based salvation (Tsukada, 2012, p. 143). The notion that the individual is at the center is common among NNR, as opposed to NRM, as mentioned in (Prohl, 2012), but unlike spirituality per se, in NNR, the group is the means through which the individual is improved, whether it is by spiritual guidance, work, ceremonies, or other practices. In this sense, KH is somewhat different: while in NRM, the desire is to improve the welfare of the group, and in the NNR, the motivation is to improve the individual's well-being, in KH, the basic idea is that individuals improve themselves in order to forget about their own 'self' and live solely for the sake of the group. Therefore, the community not only functions as a means for the individual to achieve an improvement in their spiritual level, but also as an entity to strive for its own welfare, with the faith that it will, in turn, improve the spiritual level of the whole of society. And as in other groups, Japanese society will be the savior of global society.

Japanese centralism is present in different religious groups in Japan, such as Sukyo Mahikari, Agonshu, Byakko Shinkokai, and Kofuku no Kagaku, to mention a few. While KH's nationalism stands in line with other groups, its innovation is in the development and belief of a divine mission as the descendants of an ancient civilization that is neither Shintoist nor Buddhist - the Katakamuna civilization. As KH's nationalism is based on an ancient mythological Japan, with the purpose of reviving this civilization's cosmic rules, members believe they are on a mission to transmit these values to wider Japanese society, not because they are the chosen people (as no divine entity has chosen them), but because they are the offspring of this utopian society and are the only nation that can possibly revive its settings. Nevertheless, belief in the Katakamuna is just one of a few beliefs held by KH that mutually support and complete one another in their justification for the existence of the community.

The combination of a given religious group's hybrid teachings is one of the elements that makes them unique in the eyes of their members. The familiar Japanese folklore and beliefs taken from existing religions and traditions pave the way for new interpretations of familiar customs. None of KH's beliefs or practices were first seen in KH, and all of them have similarities with prior beliefs and practices. The same applies to KH's communal living: Shimazono (1996, p. 175-176) identifies three features of NNR, one of which is to form a commune or distinctive lifestyle which deals with thought and behavior in every aspect of members' daily lives. Although this feature is not common to all NNR, it is evident in the Unification of World Christianity and in

Aum Shinrikyō. This also applies to the Yamagishi Movement (which has not been defined as a religious group, although some of its practices could be considered religious, see Spiri, 2008). It takes a charismatic leader to unite members around a variety of ideas and a distinctive way of living, a role that Jijji plays successfully. Although some of its concepts might be complex, participating in rituals and adopting beliefs that one does not comprehend completely is common in NRM and NNR (Prohl, 2012). Therefore, having familiar words and terms like kami and karma might serve as a bridge between partial understanding and beliefs and practices related to these misunderstood concepts. Narrowing down these ideas to simple slogans such as ‘getting over the ego’, ‘polishing the heart’, and ‘listening to the divine’s will’ help members remember the purpose of their membership and the community’s significance.

KH is a representative of the margins of Japanese society, as a spirituality-based group practicing communal living under one leader. Yet, the margins of any given society can shed light on the nature of the wider society that it is a part of as it offers solutions to the problems that some individuals in the society are struggling with. Nonetheless, estimates show that ten per cent of the Japanese population are members of NRM and NNR (Inoue, 2009, p. 18). Given the fact that some of the members of such groups do not consider themselves religious when surveyed, the number is likely to be higher than ten per cent. Hence, such groups are made up of not a negligible proportion of Japan’s population. KH does not define itself as an ecovillage and the GEN also refrains from defining it as such; indeed there is a discordance and discrepancy when examining the environmental objectives of the community in the face of its environmental practices, therefore ‘ecovillage’ is not a fit term to describe KH. The community also dismisses the definition of a religious group, as it sees itself as a community of individuals seeking to attain personal spiritual growth for the sake of society. Furthermore, KH is not restrictive, impersonal, or institutionalized as religious groups are perceived to be (see Shimazono & Graf, 2012). Therefore, given that the community presents many of the characteristics of NNR, some of which are very rare, such as communal living, KH should be considered an NNR, despite the era it was established in, which is not in line with older NNR. Finally, one of the difficulties in characterizing KH is the fact that no comparable spiritual groups from the post-bubble economy era have been thoroughly researched or defined. Therefore, the utmost effort should be made to investigate similar groups to gain a better understanding of KH and of Japanese society’s religious groups that are active and growing at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

XIII. CONCLUSION

Although KH is highly reluctant to be defined as a “religion”, they show the same characteristics as various other NNR active in Japan since the 1970s. Their purification rituals, beliefs in divine entities, chanting, praying, and mythological beliefs are redolent of many other religions, and their hybrid teachings, the focus on individual salvation and on *polishing one’s heart* points to its classification as Neo-new religion. It would be beneficial to study more spiritual groups which operate in Japan today to see if such groups share the same qualities as KH, and to gain more knowledge about current religious movements in Japan.

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- [2] In this article, karma indicates what KH members refer to as karma.
- [3] Name analysis in Japan is not unique to KH, and is known by the name kanji no kakusū ni yoru seimeihanda, judging the first name and last name by counting the kanji strokes).
- [4] The story is documented in the community and is often referred to on the community’s website, in meetings, and in daily conversations.

- [5] “The whole land under the sun” is a translation of hinomotono kuni. At first Jijji thought the meaning was “everyone in Japan”, but later he admitted he was wrong in his interpretation, and noted that the meaning was that he should preach to “the whole world”.
- [6] All names in this paper, except that of Jijji, are pseudonyms.
- [7] Shinto Shaman woman.
- [8] “Learning the personality” is a term KH members often use.
- [9] The community has a book that all the 80 Katakana chants are written in. Each chant has a number.
- [10] When asking Jijji if he would mind my publishing this topic in an academic paper, he replied: “You have the freedom to do whatever you want, that’s how open we are. Originally the story about sex – I’m not manipulating information here. You understand that. We are determined to be open publicly because we recognize its importance.” (February 20, 2018).
- [11] Omiki is the sake that is offered to the kamis in Japanese Shintoism
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