

## *Kotodama* in Ancient Sociolinguistic Concepts

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### Abstract

*Kotodama*, the spirit of language, and its mysterious powers were believed in ancient times as revealed in *Man'yōshū* (759) poems. People's belief in *kotodama* is evident in the practices of name taboo, divination, avoidance of tabooed expressions, and various cultural aspects of their life. *Man'yōshū* poems were written in the Yamato language, the Old Japanese in which *kotodama* was considered to dwell. This paper draws on poems from the *Man'yōshū* and other classical literature to explore how *kotodama* is evinced in name taboo practices and *norito*, ritual invocations.

*Keywords*: *kotodama*, *Man'yōshū*, name taboo, *norito*

キーワード: 言霊、万葉集、名前の禁忌、祝詞

### Introduction

People in ancient Japan firmly believed in the power of *kotodama*, “the spirit of language”. It was thought that simple verbalization of words with *kotodama* could invoke that power and influence events in the world.

As Yakushi (2008) has illustrated, the ancient anthology of Japanese poetry known as *Man'yōshū*<sup>(1)</sup> (759) contains references to *kotodama*. *Man'yōshū* poems were written in the Yamato language which was intertwined with *kotodama* of ancient times. The word appears in poems composed by Kakinomoto Hitomaro (Vol.13, No.3254) and Yamanoue Okura (Vol.5, No.894), which wish a safe journey to the Ambassadors to China and employ *kotodama* in a worshipful attitude toward the deities and the sovereigns. The poem of *yūke* (evening divination) by Hitomaro (Vol.11, No.2506) demonstrates the common practice among the Man'yō people of seeking the mystic power of *kotodama*. *Kotodama* also figures prominently in the poems of the *Kokinshū*<sup>(2)</sup> (905) anthology. These 31-syllable odes are composed in plain Yamato words, and according to tenth-century compiler, Kino Tsurayuki's

preface of the *Kokinshū*, *kotodama* resides in *waka* poetry.

This paper further explores the notion of *kotodama* in the *Man'yōshū* and other classical literature, focusing in particular on its realization in name taboo practices and *norito*, ritual Shintō invocations.

### ***Kotodama***

People in the *Man'yo* age thought that spirits or mysterious powers affected their daily life. Lands, mountains, rivers, and even people's speech were made objects of reverence or dread. They believed that the uttered words possessed spirits of their own, and their wishes would be fulfilled. The practice of name taboo, charm and divination that are referred to in the *Man'yōshū* poems evince a belief in the mysterious powers of *kotodama*.<sup>(3)</sup>

*Kotodama* is often expressed as “the spirit of language” in English translation. Other renderings are “word soul,” “word spirit,” “the spiritual power within words,” and “the miraculous power of language (a phrase, a spell).”<sup>(4)</sup> Picken (2006, p.125) defines “*kotodama*” from a religious perspective: “Pleasant sounding words that are thought to please the *kami*”<sup>(5)</sup> and that also have a power similar to words found in many religious traditions, but particularly in Shinto and in *norito* (liturgical invocations) of the *kami*.”

The word *koto* is represented by characters “言” word and “事” thing, event, or fact in the *Man'yōshū*, and both of them are pronounced the same and are etymologically similar; according to Toyoda (1980), the *Man'yōshū* contains sixty-four tokens of “事” used when “言” is actually meant (p.36). Ancient people seem to have believed that when “言” word was uttered, it could be realized as “事” thing (Toyoda 1980, 1985).

The second character, *dama* or *Tama* “靈”, is considered to be a mysterious or divine power residing in certain persons or objects, and could accurately be interpreted as soul or spirit.<sup>(6)</sup> The compound “言靈” automatically changes the pronunciation of the initial consonant of the second morpheme from [t] to [d], an instance of *rendaku*, or sequential voicing. It should be noted that Miller describes that there is no basis in Old Japanese texts for deciding whether the initial consonant of the second morpheme in this compound (the modern -d- in *dama*) is to be understood (and transcribed) as Old Japanese -t- or -d- (1977, p.262).

*Tama* was believed to be capable of many different activities or operations. The activities of *Tama* were generally considered benign. People thought the forces of *kotodama* should be used with discretion and caution for the purpose of good, rather than for evil (Toyoda, 1980, p.76).

### Name taboo

The practice of name taboo indicates people's belief in *kotodama* and the mystic power of names. People believed that words—particularly prayers and curses—had mysterious powers, and that their utterance could affect occurrences in reality. Since people dreaded that their names might be used for curses, they did not disclose them easily. Revealing names between a man and a woman was particularly significant. If a woman told her name to a man, it was considered to be acceptance of a proposal of marriage.

The first poem placed in Volume I of the *Man'yōshū* was made by Emperor Yūryaku (reigned 456 – 479). In this poem, the Emperor is proposing to a woman by asking her abode and name while the Emperor himself is telling her both his own name and residence with a statement of his identity as the sovereign.<sup>(7)</sup>

Similarly, the following is a poem of a proposal by Yamabe Akahito.

Like the gulfweed,  
The “name-telling weed,”  
That grows on the osprey-rooked  
Inlets in the rocky shore,  
Tell me your name—  
Even if your parents find out. (No.362, IHL<sup>(8)</sup>)

There are numerous love poems in the *Manyōshū* and some of them clearly indicate people's belief in name taboo. These love poems must be viewed against the social backgrounds of the *Man'yō* period. In *Man'yō* days, men and women did not live together even after marriage. Marriage relations took the form of men visiting women at their homes. Children were raised in the mother's household and daughters' marriages were arranged by the mother. Since the mother had authority in the family, a suitor had to obtain the mother's permission to marry her daughter. The following poems demonstrate the strong bond between mother and daughter, and also the strict surveillance under which the daughter was kept.<sup>(9)</sup>

Scolded by your mother,  
I have to leave,  
Like a blue cloud in the sky,  
Come out, my maid,

Let me have just one look. (No.3519) <sup>(10)</sup>

Come to me,

Passing through the jeweled blinds.

If my mother asks

What the sound is

I will tell her it's the wind. (No.2364) <sup>(11)</sup>

If you so always think of your mother,

You and I,

Will never be able to marry. (No.2517) <sup>(12)</sup>

The following poems show *Man'yo* people's belief in name taboo.

No.2407 and No.3374 also demonstrate that divination was common in those days.

You think it is all right

Now that the years have trailed away

Like a strand of rough games.

But no, my man, don't do it!

Never reveal my name! (No.590, IHL) <sup>(13)</sup>

As if a large ship

Of hundreds of tons, Mother

Asks a hundred times

His name of soothsayers and me,

Yet I would never tell it. (No.2407, Suga) <sup>(14)</sup>

Even though I lie

In a nook concealed deep

In the deep water

Surrounded by rocks, and die,

I will never tell your name. (No.2700, Suga) <sup>(15)</sup>

No fortune-teller

Even in Muzashino

Nor bone-prophecy  
 Could make me tell my lord's name,  
 Yet it is shown clear by them. (No.3374, Suga) <sup>(16)</sup>

It was too heavy  
 To bear the burden of love;  
 Without any way  
 I confessed my dear man's name,  
 Full aware it was wrong. (No.2947, Suga) <sup>(17)</sup>

The following poem points to people's fear that a mountain *kami* (deity) might bring a curse on the person whose name was revealed. In it, a traveler who had crossed mountains without mentioning the name of his beloved wife tells how, in his longing for her, he finally said it inadvertently. <sup>(18)</sup>

It is dreadful,  
 To Reveal my maid's name to a mountain deity,  
 At Koshi Pass,  
 I finally said it. (No.3730) <sup>(19)</sup>

These poems offer clear evidence that *Man'yo* people were seriously concerned that they could offend *kami* by uttering the names, and feared that they could be cursed or controlled by someone who knew their names.

### **Norito : A Shintō prayer**

Today, in Shintō ceremonies, an indispensable ritual element is a prayer called *norito*, which is read before *kami* by a chief or presiding Shintō priest. The prayer is written out and read in ancient classical Japanese. *Norito* is expressed in the elegant, classical language with emphasis on *kotodama* (Yamaguchi, 2012, p.104). <sup>(20)</sup>

The origin of *norito* is considered extremely old. The description, "Amenokoyane no mikoto *futo-noritogoto hokimōshite*" is found in the *Kojiki*, or "Records of Ancient Matters," which was completed in 712. Nishimiya delineates in his notes that *norito-goto* means *norito* and that *hokimōshite* purports to speak auspicious words, praying for the realization of matters by the spiritual power of *kotodama* (1979, p.51).

The *Engishiki*, published in 927, contains a number of beautifully written and rhythmic

ritual prayers, as well as information on early Shintō, and the manner of administering divine affairs (Ono, 1962, p.11).

Picken (2006, p.163) refers to common characteristics of *norito* that seem to suggest how they were created. First, they are addressed to the *kami* of heaven, the *kami* of earth, and the myriad *kami*. Second, they go into great descriptive detail. Third, they clearly state a date on which an offering is to be made, when the purification (*harai*) is to take place, and when the *norito* is to be recited. It is crucial to create an aesthetically pleasing offering to the *kami*. “This is the total context of the idea of *koto-dama*, sounds that are pleasing to the *kami*” (Picken, 2006, p.164).

### The etymology of *norito*

There are some theories concerning the etymology of *norito*. *Norito* is a compound word. As Bock explains:

The first part, *nori*, is the conjunctive stem of the verb *noru*—to tell, recite, command (superior to inferior), reveal (as the divine will), decree—and the second part is *to*, a noun. *To* has been taken by some scholars of the past to stand for *koto*, but that would be redundant in this case. The theory of modern scholars...is that *to* means a spell or magical device. Thus the compound *norito* would mean the chanting or reciting of the spell. The combined form of *norito-koto* then is “words for reciting a spell” (Bock, 1972).<sup>(21)</sup>

Sentences in *norito* are long and loosely-connected and the meaning of words is difficult to understand. Moreover, semantic clarity is sacrificed to sonority (Philippi, 1990, p.1). Philippi elucidates the sentiments expressed in *norito* and reports that “The Japanese scholars love to dwell on the role of the *koto-dama*, the mystical power believed to dwell in words, or in words arranged in certain magical formulas” (1990, p.3). Pronunciation and intonation in reading *norito* are important, for *kotodama* dwells in the words recited to *kami*. Every word of the *norito* has significance in its sound as well as in its interpretation. The sonorous sound of the *kotodama*, the chanting in Japanese, will reach people’s mind (Evans, 2001, p.xv). It is clearly understood that *kotodama* has existed in *norito* since ancient times.

### Summary

Evidence of the Man’yō people’s belief in *kotodama*, the spiritual power of language, is clearly revealed in *Man’yōshū* poems. *Waka* poetry with the concept of *kotodama* is also clearly stated in the preface of the *Kokinshū*. This paper furthers our understanding of

*kotodama* in ancient Japan based on evidence from early literature. Love poems in the *Man'yōshū* confirm that name taboo was common among people in the Ma'nyō period. In addition, *norito*, compiled in the *Engishiki*, show that sonorous recitations have been used to invoke the *kami* since early times. From ancient times to the present, *kotodama* has remained a key element of ritual practice.

### [Notes]

- (1) The *Man'yōshū*, literally “the collection of ten thousand leaves”, is the oldest Japanese anthology. The *Man'yōshū* was compiled by Ōtomo Yakamochi during the latter half of the eighth century. It comprises 4516 poems in twenty books. The variety of poets ranges from emperors and empresses to frontier guardsmen and beggars.
- (2) The *Kokinshū*, or *Kokinwakashū* (ca.905), is the first imperial anthology. It consists of 1111 poems, all but nine in the thirty-one syllable form, or *waka*.
- (3) NGS (Nippon Gakujyutsu Shinkōkai) 1965, xxxviii.
- (4) Watanabe et al. (2003).
- (5) The word *kami* (deity, deities) is an indigenous Japanese term. The *kami* of Shintō are often called a myriad of *kami*. Amaterasu Ōmikami is considered to be symbol of the myriads of *kami*.
- (6) Miller (1982, p.130) points out that “unfortunately, neither of these two English equivalents does very well by this significant Japanese term, nor does either give a fully adequate idea of the implication of the word *Tama* in the expression *kotodama*.”
- (7) The translation of the poem is as follows:  
 Your basket, with your pretty basket,  
 Your trowel, with your little trowel,  
 Maiden, picking herbs on this hill-side,  
 I would ask you: Where is your home?  
 Will you not tell me your name?  
 Over the spacious Land of Yamato  
 It is I who reign so wide and far,  
 It is I who rule so wide and far,  
 I myself, as your lord, will tell you  
 Of my home, and my name. (NGS, p.3)  
 This poem is translated by the Nippon Gakujyutsu Shinkōkai (NGS). The Hepburn system is followed in the Romaji transcription. This poem is cited in Yakushi (2008).
- (8) Abbreviation for Ian Hideo Levy. The English translation is by Levy (1981, p.193).  
 A variant for No. 362,  
 Like the gulfweed,  
 the “name-telling weed,”  
 that grows on the osprey-rooked  
 inlets in the rocky shore,  
 come now, tell me your name—  
 even if your parents find out. (Levy, 1981, p.193)
- (9) Nakanishi (1998). Kojima (1995).

- (10) The English translation is by the author. The poem in Japanese is in Nakanishi (1981).
- (11) The English translation is by the author. The poem in Japanese is in Nakanishi (1981).
- (12) The English translation is by the author. The poem in Japanese is in Nakanishi (1981).
- (13) Levy (1981, p.282).
- (14) Suga (1991, Part 2, p.257).
- (15) Suga (1991, Part 2, pp.297–298).
- (16) Suga (1991, Part 2, p.493).
- (17) Suga (1991, Part 2, pp.355–356).
- (18) The interpretation of this poem is based on Nakanishi (1981, III, p.333).
- (19) The English translation is by the author.
- (20) Satoshi Yamaguchi is a Senior Shintō Priest of Mishima Jinjya in Nara Prefecture. It should be noted that John Nelson, the author of *A year in the life of a Shinto shrine*, similarly states that *kotodama* animates “the words of a *norito* prayer delivered by the chief priest to the Kami during Shinto rituals” (1996, p.259).
- (21) Cited by J. Kitagawa in D. Philippi (1990, p.xxiv).

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(平成24年11月9日受理)