

Kotodama in Ancient Times

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Abstract

Kotodama, word-spirit, or the spiritual power of language, was believed in in ancient times as revealed in *Manyōshū* (759) poems. People's belief in *kotodama* is evident in the practices of name taboo, divination, avoidance of tabooed expressions, and various aspects of their daily life. The poems composed by Kakinomoto Hitomaro (701) and Yamanoueno Okura (733) wish Ambassadors to China a safe journey, expressing the word, *kotodama*, with great respect toward the deities and the sovereigns. *Manyōshū* poems were written in the Yamato language, the Old Japanese in which *kotodama* was considered to dwell. The *Kokinshū*, the first imperial anthology of *waka*, Japanese poetry, clearly states in the preface that *kotodama* resides in *waka*. The belief in *kotodama* has been maintained in the long tradition of *waka*.

Key Words : *kotodama*, *Manyōshū*, Yamato words, *waka*

Introduction

Kotodama, word-spirit, or the spiritual power of language, first appeared in the *Manyōshū*,⁽¹⁾ the oldest and greatest of ancient Japanese anthologies. These poems with the word, *kotodama*, reveal that ancient Japanese people were familiar with this expression and that they believed in the spiritual power residing in words. They firmly believed that the spirit of the language was capable of making things happen and that simple verbalization of words with *kotodama* could help matters be realized. The belief in the spiritual power of language was common not only in ancient Japan but also in other countries and communities of primitive cultures as described in detail in the *Golden Bough* (Frazer, 1998). The practice of name taboo also shows people's belief in *kotodama* and the mystic power concerning names. 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 greatly significant. If a

woman told her name to a man, it was considered to be acceptance of a proposal of marriage. The following poem by Emperor Yūryaku (reigned 456-479) is the first piece placed in Volume I of the *Manyōshū*, which contains some 4500 ancient Japanese poems in twenty books.

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)⁽²⁾

In this poem, the Emperor is proposing to a woman by asking her home and name while the Emperor himself is telling her both his own name and home with a statement of his identity as the sovereign. *Manyōshū* poetry was written in the Yamato language, or the Old Japanese language. The spirit of the Yamato language is expressed by *kotodama* and reflected in *waka* (31-syllable odes) poetry. The belief in *kotodama* has been maintained in the long tradition of *waka* (Saigō, 1958, p.1590). The preface to the *Kokinshū*,⁽³⁾ the first imperial anthology, clearly delineates how highly the *kotodama* belief is respected in *waka* poetry. In this paper, the concept of *kotodama* and the *kotodama* belief in ancient Japan will be examined by reviewing classical literature and its analyses.

Definitions of *Kotodama*

The term *kotodama* is seen three times in the *Manyōshū*, vol.5, no. 894, vol. 11, no. 2506, and vol. 13, no. 3254. *Koto* is represented by two characters, “言” word, and “事” thing, and both of them are pronounced koto. “言” and “事” are etymologically similar; therefore, ancient people seem to have believed that, when “言” word was uttered, it could be realized as “事” thing (Toyoda 1980, 1985). *Dama* or *tama* “靈” means soul or spirit.⁽⁴⁾ The compound automatically changes the pronunciation of the initial consonant of the second morpheme from [t] to [d], an instance of *rendaku*, or sequential voicing. *Tama* “靈” was considered to dwell in various natural objects as *nakayado*, “mid-inn”-- an inn to stay at on its

way to the destination before *tama* enters the human body. It is important to note especially that beautiful stones (玉 *tama*) with spirit (霊 *tama*) were valued by people and often worn as personal ornaments (Origuchi, 1991, p.565). Origuchi states that “*Kotodama* is the language spirit, and this spirit demonstrates the power”. He also refers to *Manyōshū* texts, “The language spirit brings fortune” and “The language spirit helps” (1984, p.245). Origuchi (1954, 1955 a, b, c, 1956) describes his interpretations on *kotodama* as follows: (1) Expressions which had been passed on from ancient times had mysterious powers. When they were verbalized, powers were demonstrated. (2) These mysterious powers became forces to defeat opponents. (3) Those special expressions existed as the medium of magic. (4) Divination was also related to the belief in *kotodama* (as cited in Toyoda, 1985).⁽⁵⁾

Levy explains *kotodama* and *katashiro*⁽⁶⁾ as examples of magical adherence: “*Kotodama* is an expression of the relationship of identity between spirit and its particular imprint in language. The relationship is an example of magical adherence in a physical medium of particular power, but it operates under the same principle as magical adherence in other physical media, in the visual image of *katashiro* as well as the sound images of language (1984, p.15).”⁽⁷⁾

Words with *kotodama* were used for a blessing or a curse. The avoidance of evil words or taboo expressions and the use of substituted terms such as *Saikū imikotoba* were based on the *kotodama* belief (Umegaki 1977, Yakushi 2008). In the next chapter, three *Manyōshū* poems will be examined with particular reference to *kotodama* written by two important poets in the beginning of the 8th century.

Kotodama in the Manyōshū

A: Vol. 13, no. 3254

Shikishima no Yamato no kuni wa kotodama no tasukuru kuni zo
masakiku arikoso (NGS, p. 341)

The land of Yamato is a land
Where the word-soul gives us aid;
Be happy, fare you well! (NGS, p.59)

This *hanka*, or envoy (a repeating poem after *chōka*, a long poem) was made by Kakinomotono Hitomaro in 701. Hitomaro was Japan’s first major poet who served the imperial family, and he wrote most of his poems during the reign of Empress Jitō (reigned 690-697). In his *chōka* (no. 3253), Hitomaro expresses: Without lifted words (*kotoage*) of

people, things happen owing to the will of gods; however, I must lift up words. Then, in the *hanka* (no. 3254) he repeats the content of the *chōka* with more directness and intensity, making his wish more explicit. It is said that this poem was probably dedicated to the official missions to China including Yamanoueno Okura (Higashi, 2005, p.44). Hitomaro wished the missions' safe journey, celebrating Japan which is helped by *kotodama's* power.

B: Vol.5, no. 894, *Kōkyokōraika* (好去好来歌)

A wish for safety at the departure of Tajih Hironari, ambassador to China, in the fifth year of Tempyō (733).

*Kamiyo yori iitsutekuraku soramitsu Yamato no kuni wa
 Sumegami no itsukushiki kuni kotodama no sakihau kuni to
 kataritsugi iitsugaikeri ima no yo no hito mo kotogoto
 me no mae ni mitari shiritari
 **hito sawani michitewa aredomo
 takahikaru Hi no Mikado kamunagara mede no sakari ni
 amenoshita mōshitamaishi ie no ko to erabitamaite
 ōmikoto itadakimochite Morokoshi no tōki sakai ni
 tsukawasare makariimase unabara no he ni mo oki nimo
 kamuzumari ushihakimasu moromoro no ōmikamitachi
 funanohe ni michibikimōshi ametsuchi no ōmikamitachi
 Yamato no Ōkunitama hisakata no ama no misora yu
 amagakeri miwatashitamai koto owari kaeran hi wa
 mata sarani ōmikamitachi funanohe ni mite uchikakete
 suminawa wo haetarugotoku achikaoshi Chika no saki yori
 Ōtomo no Mitsu no hamabi ni tadahate ni mifune wa haten
 tsutsumi naku sakiku imashite haya kaerimase (NGS, pp.403-404)

*Since the age of the gods⁽⁸⁾ it has always been said
 That the Land of Yamato is
 A land where Sovereign-Gods hold solemn sway,
 A land where the word-soul brings us weal;
 Not only has it been so told from mouth to mouth,
 But all of us see and know it now.

**Though many are the worthy men,
 Our Sovereign, like the sun of heaven,
 Out of his godlike love and favour,
 Has chosen you, my lord,
 A scion of a minister's house.
 Now you go upon your journey
 To China, the distant land,
 Faithful to his dread commands.

All the gods who rule the shores
 And wide seas far away
 At the prow will pilot you.
 And the gods of heaven and earth
 And the 'Great-Land Spirit' of Yamato,
 Will look down from the sky,
 As they soar through heaven.

When you return, your duties done,
 The gods again, with their hands upon the prow,
 Will speed your journey home,
 Straight as the drawn ink-line,
 From Chika's cape to Ōtomo
 Where your ships will harbour at Mitsu's shore.

Be safe and well, my lord,
 Quickly come back home! (NGS, pp.207-208)

This *chōka* was composed by Yamanoueno Okura, who visited Tang Dynasty's China as a member of an official mission in 702 and safely returned to Japan in 704. Therefore, Okura himself knew that the voyage to China was fraught with difficulties and dangers. The poem could be divided into two parts as asterisks put by the author indicate. In the first section, Okura sings the praises of Japan which is governed by imperial deities and is blessed by *kotodama* that brings good fortune; and he also declares proudly that this fact is well known all over the country for generations. In the second section, Okura admires the ambassador by saying: "Our sovereign has chosen you as ambassador to China" and then assures him; "all

the gods protect your journey and watch over your safe return home.” Since there were extreme hazards in overseas travels in those days, some ambassadors over a period of two centuries either died or were lost in the sea. They prayed to *kodama* (tree spirit) and mountain god when they started construction of a ship, and then worshiped Sumiyoshi Shrine before they departed from Japan. It is only natural that Okura should admire Japan blessed with *kotodama* and make a strong wish for the safety of the mission (Saigō, 1958, p.1588). While this *kōkyokōrai-ka* (literal translation is “good-departure-good-return song”) is interpreted as Okura’s sincere presentation of a wish for a safe journey, some scholars have a different perspective on the use of the term, *kotodama*. For about two hundred years during which Japanese ambassadors were sent to China, China’s overwhelmingly advanced culture strongly influenced Japan in many respects. It is argued that the spiritual power of the Japanese language was particularly emphasized in the poem because Okura unconsciously might have reacted against China’s advanced literary culture including the Chinese language compared to Japan’s less developed writing system (Saigō, 1958, p.1588; Kawamura, 2002, p.14).

Iida (1984) provides a significant interpretation concerning “A land where the word-soul brings us weal.” Iida delineates that “A land where the word-soul brings us weal” has the similar meanings to two other expressions, “A land where Sovereign-Gods hold solemn sway” and “Out of his godlike love and favour.” All these descriptions could have been used for admiring the Emperor who successfully brought Japan under unified rule rather than for expressing Okura’s thought toward China (p.40).

Higashi’s profoundly insightful analysis should also be noted (2005). Higashi surveyed Chinese classical documents that described the superb manners, wide knowledge, and intellectuality of Japan’s two official missions sent to China in 702 and 733. Actually, these Japanese were highly respected by the then Chinese officials. Higashi concludes that about that time Japan seemed to have established the nation with its own literary culture. This sense of the identity of Japan as a steadily unified nation in East Asia is symbolized in “A land where Sovereign-Gods hold solemn sway” and “A land where the word-soul brings us weal (p.60).”

In those days, both the Yamato language and Classical Chinese were used for communication. The *Manyōshū* was written by the adaptation of Chinese characters to the Old Japanese. “Although Yamanoueno Okura was well versed in the Chinese language, he endeavored to use the Yamato language by transcribing the sounds of the Japanese in Chinese characters word by word (Toyoda, 1985, p.139).” His pride and blessing toward Japan are genuinely represented in *kōkyokōrai-ka* written in the Yamato language.

C: Vol. 11, no. 2506

Kotodama no yaso no chimata ni
 yūke toi
 ura masa ni noru
 imo wa ai yoran⁽⁹⁾

On the forked-road full of language spirits
 Tried evening divination
 The oracle foretold that
 My love would see me⁽¹⁰⁾

The other poem by Hitomaro associated with the *kotodama* concept shows how *yūke* (夕占), evening divination, was common among the *Manyō* people. Early evening hours were regarded as the beginning of magical time, and a forked road was perceived as the place where various spirits gathered to demonstrate their mysterious powers. In the evening, people waited on a forked road, sometimes hiding themselves, until passers-by came along. Overhearing the conversations of passers-by, they used the uttered words as an oracle. Besides “evening divination” which uses passers-by’s language, fortune-telling by dream, birds, water, or stones were popular among them (Toyoda, 1985, p.185).

The poems in the *Manyōshū* were written in the Yamato language, which completes the anthology, “a monumental collection of native verse in the purest Yamato speech.”⁽¹¹⁾ The ancient chronicles, *Kojiki*⁽¹²⁾ and *Nihonshoki*⁽¹³⁾ illustrate an intriguing fact concerning the language described in these works. Ōno Yasumaro, the author of the *Kojiki*, devised the way to represent Japanese sounds by using Chinese characters phonetically even though he was an authority on the Chinese language. In the *Nihonshoki* written mostly in the classical Chinese, the poems were not translated into Chinese by the compiler. Since Yamato words were interwoven with *kotodama*, the poems could not be put into a foreign language. This shows Japanese people’s special feelings toward *waka* with the *kotodama* concept (Watanabe, 1974, p.12).⁽¹⁴⁾

Kotodama in the Kokinshū

The *Kokinshū* was the first anthology of *waka* compiled at the behest of the emperors. The compilation of the *Kokinshū* was greatly significant in that it was the first major anthology of Japanese poetry in over 150 years since the *Manyōshū*. Poets in the Japanese

court had turned to *kanshi*, Chinese poetry, until the beginning of the tenth century.⁽¹⁵⁾ While compositions in the Chinese language had reached their peak with great prestige, *waka* steadily declined and lost its status in the court.

Watanabe (1974, 1980) points out that various studies on these great anthologies, the *Manyōshū* and the *Kokinshū*, tend to focus on differences rather than on similarities. However, the most remarkable aspects of these anthologies are their common characteristics: The poems in the *Manyōshū* and the *Kokinshū* consist of Yamato words. They are composed under the principle of “people are equal before *waka*.” The following is the first sentence of the Japanese preface to the *Kokinshū* by Kino Tsurayuki: “The seeds of Japanese poetry (*Yamato uta*) lie in the human heart and grow into leaves of ten thousand words” (Rodd & Henkenius, p.35).⁽¹⁶⁾ A more profound thought is proclaimed: “It is poetry which, without effort, moves heaven and earth, stirs the feelings of the invisible gods and spirits, smooths the relations of men and women, and calms the hearts of fierce warriors” (Rodd & Henkenius, p.35). There can be little doubt that this manifests Kino Tsurayuki’s belief that *kotodama* resides in Yamato poems.

Summary

Kotodama, the spirit of the language, and its mysterious powers were believed in in ancient times as revealed in *Manyōshū* (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. The poems composed by Kakinomotono Hitomaro (701) and Yamanoueno Okura (733) wish a safe journey to the Ambassadors to China, expressing the word, *kotodama*, in a worshipful attitude toward the deities and the sovereigns. Sending a mission to China was an enormous national project commanded by the Emperor. The fact that both Hitomaro and Okura used the expression, *kotodama* with a sense of awe and respect on the occasion is indicative of the great significance of the language spirit. The poem of evening divination by Hitomaro accounts for the general practice of seeking for the mystic power of *kotodama*. The *Manyōshū*, the *Kojiki*, and the portions of the poems in the *Nihonshoki* were written in the Yamato language in which *kotodama* was considered to dwell and thus imply the mind of Japanese national identity.

The *Kokinshū* (905) is a monumental imperial anthology in that it provides an important insight into the nature of Japanese poetry, *waka*, which is composed in plain Yamato words. It is clearly stated in the preface that *kotodama* resides in *waka*. In composing *waka* of 31 syllables which is invigorated by the language spirit, every single syllable has to be seriously selected. *Waka* poetry with the concept of *kotodama* is one of the

great traditions in Japanese literature.

[Notes]

- (1) The *Manyōshū*, literally “the collection of ten thousand leaves”, is the oldest Japanese anthology. The *Manyōshū* 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) *Manyōshū* texts (both the texts in Romaji and English translation) in this paper except for the poem, vol. 11, no. 2506, are cited from *The Manyōshū* (1965) translated by the Nippon Gakujyutsu Shinkōkai (NGS). The Hepburn system is followed in the Romaji transcription.
- (3) The *Kokinshū*, or *Kokinwakashū* (ca. 905), is the first imperial anthology of Japanese poetry. It consists of 1,111 poems, all but nine in the thirty-one syllable form, or *waka*.
- (4) 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*.”
- (5) Origuchi’s analysis is summarized by Toyoda (1985, p.647). Toyoda also notes that Origuchi’s clear statement concerning the *kotodama* belief and divination represents an insightful viewpoint.
- (6) *Katashiro* is a physical object used as emblem of the presence of a spirit in Shinto rites of worship. The word also means an object representing the human figure used in rites of purification (*Encyclopedia of Shinto*, Kokugakuin University).
- (7) Miller, a scholar with the background of Western culture, gives his definition and argument on *kotodama* in Miller (1977, 1982). Miller provides an analysis mainly on *kotodama* and *Kokutai no Hongi* from the perspective of modern history.
- (8) Although *kami* is translated as gods in NGS *Manyōshū*, Japanese *kami* (deities) are both gods and goddesses including the supreme deity Amaterasu Ōmikami.
- (9) The text in Japanese is from the *Manyōshū III* by Nakanishi (2007, p.41). Romaji is supplied by the author.
- (10) English translation is based on Miller (1977, p.267) and is modified by the author.
- (11) NGS, Introduction, p. xix.
- (12) The *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Matters) was edited and transcribed by Ōno Yasumaro and presented to the imperial court in 712. *Kojiki* is the oldest surviving Japanese book and it is in essence mythology.
- (13) The *Nihonshoki* (Chronicles of Japan) was compiled by Prince Toneri and presented to the court in 720. It is Japan’s first official history written in classical Chinese.
- (14) Citing Emperor Jomei’s poem (*Manyōshū*, no. 238), Watanabe asserts that Japanese people’s souls get stirred by the poem because there is *kotodama* at work (1974, p.16).
- (15) *Kanshi* is poetry written in the Chinese language by Japanese people.
- (16) The preface by Kino Tsurayuki is from the *Kokinshū*. (Rodd & Henkenius, 1984) Underlined words are supplied by the author.

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