# *KOTODAMA* AND *KIMIGAYO*: THE 'SPIRIT OF LANGUAGE' MYTH AND JAPAN'S NATIONAL ANTHEM

*Naoko Hosokawa*

**ABSTRACT**

This article discusses the relationship between *kotodama*, the 'spirit of language' myth, and the national anthem controversy in Japan from a sociolinguistic point of view. Since the end of the Pacific War, Japan's national anthem, *Kimigayo* (His Imperial Majesty's Reign), has caused highly contested debates within the national consciousness. Those who praise the song claim that it is a traditional national anthem sung since the nineteenth century with lyrics based on a classical *waka* poem written in the tenth century. Those who criticise it view the lyrics as imperialist and associate the song with negative connotations of the war. While it is clear that opposition is mainly based on a political interpretation of the lyrics, this article sheds light on the role of *kotodama*, the Japanese myth of the spirit of language, and its possible link to the uncommon intensity of the controversy. The main idea behind the *kotodama* myth is that words, pronounced in a certain manner, have an impact on reality through divine power. Based on this premise, the *kotodama* myth has been reinterpreted and incorporated into Japanese social and political discourses throughout history. Discussing the nature of national anthems and the discursive role of the ancient myth, this article provides original observation and new insight into the disputes about the national anthem in Japan.

*Keywords*: Japan, national anthem, language, myth, *Kotodama*, *Kimigayo*

## 1. Introduction

This article examines debates over the national anthem in Japan and the discursive role played by the Japanese myth of the spirit of language. Music can be an instrument to promote national identity through various forms, such as patriotic songs and military chants. Among them, the national anthem is the most evident form of national representation through music and serves as a symbol of the nation. The Japanese national anthem is a particularly interesting example as it has been extremely controversial. The

status of *Kimigayo* 君が代 as the national anthem has been questioned by public opinion, and the compulsory singing of the song has been a highly contentious act in contemporary Japan. Among the many disputes related to this issue, the most well-known instance is over the question of whether citizens should be obliged to stand up and sing the national anthem at official events in public schools, such as entrance and graduation ceremonies. In 2011, this developed into a legal case where public high school teachers sued the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, claiming that their contracts were not renewed because they refused to sing the national anthem at graduation ceremonies. This event attracted an enormous amount of public attention with regard to the role of the national anthem and freedom of thought, all the more because it occurred at a public school, the foundation of national education. Public opinion on this matter was split. Those who supported an obligation to sing the national anthem claimed that it is a ritual that everyone should follow at official ceremonies and a way to foster a sense of national belonging to show appreciation of national culture and tradition. Those who opposed, including the Japan Teachers' Union, claimed that required participation was against Article 19 of the Constitution of Japan (*Nihonkoku kenpō* 日本国憲法), which protects freedom of thought and conscience and, therefore, protects individuals from mandatory singing of the national anthem since the song conveys political and ideological meaning.[1] In the end, the Supreme Court decided that it was not against the Constitution for public schools to compel their members, both teachers and pupils, to stand up and sing the national anthem during official ceremonies.[2] However, this decision dissatisfied many, and the national anthem remains polemical.

One of the main reasons for the controversy surrounding the national anthem in Japan is that it is often associated with the wartime past. Both the national flag and the national anthem were used as part of nationalist propaganda by the Japanese government during the Pacific War. Therefore, some see singing

[1] Young, 2009, 165.
[2] Urabe, 2011.

the national anthem as a sign of returning nationalism.[3] The lyrics of the national anthem are also seen as non-democratic and outdated. They speak of imperial reign, which is seen by some as the manifestation of an imperialist mentality. However, this does not explain the whole picture. Many anthems of other countries have their roots in imperialist or military ideologies, reflecting the political environment of the nineteenth century, the time at which most national anthems were adopted. Furthermore, other Japanese national symbols such as the national flag have proven less controversial. Thus, further consideration of why the national anthem is particularly contentious in Japan, and in comparison with other national symbols, remains relevant. This article offers sociolinguistic observation in an examination of the debates surrounding Japan's national anthem. It specifically points to *kotodama* 言霊, the Japanese myth of the language spirit as an important and often overlooked force in shaping such strong and variant public opinions.

## 2. The Japanese National Anthem *Kimigayo*

While the song *Kimigayo* has long been conceived as the national anthem of Japan, it was only in 1999 that it was officially recognised as such. Originally, *Kimigayo* was proposed as the national anthem in the wake of modernisation, together with *Nisshōki* 日章旗 ('sun-mark flag', or *Hinomaru* 日の丸, 'ball of the sun') as the national flag. In the early Meiji period (1868-1912), a Scottish-Irish musician, John William Fenton (1828-1890), then leader of the Japanese military band, claimed that the nation should have a national anthem. In response to this call, field marshal Ōyama Iwao 大山巌 (1842-1916) chose lyrics from *Kokin wakashū* 古今和歌集 (Collection of Japanese Poetry Ancient and Modern), an anthology of Japanese poems compiled in the early tenth century. As a traditional *Waka* poem, it consists of thirty-one syllables. The lyrics of *Kimigayo* are thus among the oldest and shortest in the world while its author is unknown. The melody was initially composed in a Western style by Fenton himself, but was later replaced by a piece composed in a more traditional Japanese *gagaku* style by Oku Yoshiisa 奥好義 (1857-1933) and Hayashi

[3] Young, 2009, 163-164.

Hiromori 林広守 (1831-1896) and arranged by German composer Franz Eckert (1852-1916). The song *Kimigayo*, as it is known in the current form, was thus completed in 1880. Given that many European national anthems were also officially recognised in the nineteenth century, it can be said that the initial proposal to nominate *Kimigayo* as Japan's national anthem was based on the European model of establishing modern nation-states. The formation of national symbols was seen as important in order to invent "a common identity [for] the whole population",[4] although neither *Kimigayo* nor *Nisshōki* was officially recognised as a national symbol at this time.

In the 1930s and 1940s, ideologies shaped by the emperor system were reinforced, and *Kimigayo* was treated, in effect, as the national anthem of the Empire of Japan. In the context of colonialism and the Pacific War, the use of national symbols was intensified. Thus, following the end of the war in 1945, the Supreme Commander Allied Powers (SCAP) took control over Japan and restricted the official raising of *Nisshōki* due to its association with imperial nationalism.[5] However, the restriction was only partial and entirely lifted in 1949, and there was no restriction regarding *Kimigayo*, even in the immediate post-war period.[6] Thus, the song remained the de facto national anthem of Japan. On 13 August 1999, the Act on National Flag and Anthem (*Kokki oyobi kokka ni kansuru hōritsu* 国旗及び国歌に関する法律) was ratified, and *Kimigayo* was officially adopted as the national anthem of Japan alongside *Nisshōki* as the national flag. The Cabinet Office of Japan explained that it was deemed appropriate to recognise these national symbols in a written law before the beginning of the twenty-first century. The ratification of this act, however, provoked controversy over the appropriateness of *Kimigayo* as the Japanese national anthem.

Part of the controversy stems from *Kimigayo*'s connection to the history of imperial Japan. Although there is no official translation, the title of the song is often interpreted as 'His Imperial Majesty's Reign'. The phrase *Kimigayo* can be broken into three parts: *kimi* 君 refers to the emperor or the lord, *ga* が is a possessive particle, and

[4] Neary, 1996, 13.
[5] Cripps, 1996, 80.
[6] Cripps, 1996, 80.

*yo* 代 refers to an era, age, or reign. It can therefore be literally translated as 'the era of the emperor'. The lyrics of the song are as follows:

*Kimigayo wa*
*Chiyo ni yachiyo ni*
*Sazare-ishi no*
*Iwao to narite*
*Koke no musu made*

May your reign
Continue for a thousand, eight thousand generations,
Until the pebbles
Grow into boulders
Lush with moss

Upon ratification of the Act on National Flag and Anthem, the Japanese government released an official statement concerning the interpretation of the lyrics. It emphasises that under the Constitution of Japan, *kimi* should be understood as the symbol of the Japanese state and of the unity of its people, whose position is derived from the consensus-based will of Japanese citizens with whom sovereign power resides. This is in contrast to the Constitution of the Empire of Japan (*Dai-Nippon teikoku kenpō* 大日本帝国憲法, 1889-1947) in which *kimi* referred to the emperor as the nation's supreme leader.[7] The government further articulated that it was important to have the long-cherished traditional poem as the lyrics of the Japanese national anthem.[8] However, the song is still associated with nationalist propaganda from the war, and it is still used by ultranationalist far-right groups today.[9] Furthermore, opposition parties criticised that the lyrics to wish for an eternal imperial reign were inappropriate for a democratic nation.[10] On this point, Cripps analyses that "the close historical association of the anthem with the Emperor accounts to a considerable degree for the controversy which the song provoked in

[7] *Dai 145kai kokkai. Sangiin. Kokki oyobi kokka ni kansuru tokubetsu iinkai. Dai 4gō. Heisei 11.8.2. Kaigiroku jōhō.*

[8] *Dai 145kai kokkai. Sangiin. Kokki oyobi kokka ni kansuru tokubetsu iinkai. Dai 4gō. Heisei 11.8.2. Kaigiroku jōhō.*

[9] Young, 2009, 164.

[10] Itoh, 2001.

post-war Japan where the Emperor is no longer the centre of the state but a constitutional symbol with no formal political power".[11] Yet, the two controversial natures of *Kimigayo*, its roots in the imperial system and its use in wartime and nationalist discourses, are shared by several different national anthems as well as other national symbols of Japan. This raises the question of why the controversy over the national anthem in Japan is so fiercely contested.

**3. National Anthems Beyond Japan**

As pointed out by Cripps, controversy over the national anthem is not unique to Japan.[12] There are instances in which a national anthem has been modified or replaced by another song due to its association with wartime discourses or a former political system. The German national anthem, *Das Lied der Deutschen* (The Song of the Germans), was officially declared the national anthem of the Weimar Republic in 1922. The lyrics were written by August Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben (1798-1874) in 1841 to communicate the desire for solidarity of the country and unite small principalities that existed at the time.[13] However, the first verse that starts with the phrase *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles, über alles in der Welt* (Germany, Germany over all, over all in the world) was later misused by the Nazis "to emphasize what they saw as Germany's superiority to all other nations".[14] In the post-war period, the song provoked heated debates over the association with Nazi Germany and its nationalistic discourse.[15] As a result, singing the song was prohibited until 1952 when it was reintroduced as Germany's national anthem with only the third verse of the original lyrics. Thus, it now begins with *Einigkeit und Recht und Freiheit für das deutsche Vaterland* (Unity and justice and freedom for the German fatherland), and the controversial first and second verses have been removed.[16] The case of Germany is comparable to that of Japan in that the national anthem provoked a controversy based on an association with the wartime past.

[11] Cripps, 1996, 78.
[12] Cripps, 1996, 79.
[13] Bleiker, 2017.
[14] Bleiker, 2017
[15] Feinstein, 2000.
[16] Bleiker, 2017.

From 1861 until 1946, the official national anthem of the Kingdom of Italy was the hymn of the House of Savoy, *Marcia Reale* (Royal March). The lyrics of the song start with *Viva il Re! Viva il Re! Viva il Re!* (Long live the King! Long live the King! Long live the King!), with a similar character to those of *Kimigayo*. After the Second World War, the song was replaced by *Il Canto degli Italiani* (The Song of Italians) to mark the birth of the Italian Republic, though the song was not legally recognised as the national anthem until 2017.[17] In the case of Italy too, the change of the national anthem was particularly important because *Marcia Reale* was used as a national symbol by the fascist government,[18] while it was also based on the country's shift from a kingdom to a republic. The examples of Germany and Italy confirm that an association with wartime discourses is a major factor in the cause of controversy over national anthems.

However, it is important to note that there are a number of national anthems made as tribute to monarchy still in use today, including those of Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.[19] For example, the national anthem of the United Kingdom, *God Save the King* was first used in 1746 during the time of George II. The term 'King' and male personal pronouns are replaced by 'Queen' and female personal pronouns when the reigning monarch is female. Being a constitutional monarchy, as is the case with Japan, the lyrics of the United Kingdom have a similar characteristic to *Kimigayo* in calling for a long-lasting reign of the monarch. The original lyrics of the song had militaristic attributes in the second verse with a reference to the fall of its enemies and confounding their politics. Yet today, *God Save the King* is used as the national anthem of the United Kingdom, although the song is sung most commonly with only the first verse, cutting out the more problematic second verse.[20]

Furthermore, many countries use a martial hymn as their national anthem. According to Petronio, one hundred sixty-four national anthems in the world belong to the category of a march, often characterised by their martial lyrics.[21] Such national anthems in

[17] Cloet, Legué, Martel, 2013, 33.
[18] Pivato, 2003, 12.
[19] Cloet, Legué, Martel, 2013, 4.
[20] Cloet, Legué, Martel, 2013, 28.
[21] Petronio, 2015, 21.

Europe include those of France, Ireland, Poland, Portugal, and Romania.[22] For example, the French national anthem was written by army engineer Claude Joseph Rouget de Lisle (1760-1836) in 1792 as *Chant de guerre pour l'armée du Rhin* (War Song for the Rhine Army). The song was reintroduced as *La Marseillaise* (The Song of the People from Marseille) and was sung during the French revolutionary wars. Reflecting the political climate of the time at which the song was written, the lyrics are described as 'bloodthirsty' in evoking brutal images of cutting the throats of the sons and women of the enemy and 'watering' the fields with their 'impure blood'.[23] Even though the song was temporarily banned by Napoleon (1769-1821) and Louis XVIII (1765-1824) due to its revolutionary lyrics and the tempo of the music was slowed to make it less militaristic during the presidency of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (1974-1981),[24] it has been serving as the national anthem of France since 1795 without any change to its lyrics.

The above examples show that national anthems tend to have lyrics based on outdated values that reflect the historical background of the time in which they were written. Controversies have led some national anthems to be replaced, as in the case of Italy, or to be partially modified in an attempt to adapt to the current political environment, as in the cases of Germany and the United Kingdom. In this context, the controversy over *Kimigayo* is not exceptional, especially when compared with Germany and Italy, which both share a history of belonging to the Axis Powers. However, the level of engagement over *Kimigayo* is particularly significant in Japan, and it attracts more public attention than other national symbols.

**4. National Symbols in Japan**

*Nisshōki*, the Japanese national flag, has also caused some controversy due to its association with the war, as many military flags shared common features with it. The most well-known example is the sun-ray design, also known as *Kyokujitsuki* 旭日旗 ('rising sun flag'), which was used by the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy. Although the Japanese Self-Defence Force still uses this flag, the sun-ray design has caused polemics due to its association with Japanese imperialism.

[22] Cloet, Legué, Martel, 2013, 5.
[23] *Evening Standard*, 17 November 2015.
[24] Godin, 2015.

For example, in 2014, the uniform of the Japanese national team for the FIFA World Cup provoked controversy due to its resemblance to the Rising Sun Flag. This developed to a level at which a Korean university professor asked FIFA to erase the sun-ray design printed on the Japanese uniforms, claiming that it was "the shape of the 'rising sun' flag of Imperial Japan" that is a "war criminal symbol".[25] In the end, the design of the uniform was kept unchanged. Similarly, in 2017, there was a case in which Japanese supporters used the 16-ray rising sun flag in a football match during the Asian Champions League (ACL) in South Korea. This resulted in a post-match riot ("AFC Charges"), and the Asian Football Confederation charged the Kawasaki Frontale team with discrimination. While the use of national symbols is often seen as less problematic in sporting events, these instances developed into political debates. This risk has been raised by Seippel who warns that sport can "very often involve overtly nationalist dimensions; these are apparent during international sports events such as the Olympics and World Cup".[26]

It is of note, however, that the majority of disputes over the Japanese flag are related to the sun-ray variant and not the official national flag itself. The official flag *Nisshōki* has been used for various sporting and cultural events without causing much controversy. Indeed, the national anthem attracts much more public attention than the national flag, despite the fact that they are often coupled in the same context, as is represented by the name of the Act on the National Flag and Anthem. According to a survey conducted in 1985 by the then Ministry of Education (renamed Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology), 92.5% of elementary schools, 91.2% of middle schools, and 81.6% of high schools hoisted the national flag at graduation ceremonies. In 1992, the percentage rose to 98.0%, 97.6%, and 93.4% respectively.[27] In the same survey, only 72.8%, 68.0%, and 53.3% sung *Kimigayo* as part of the official event at graduation. Compared with *Kimigayo*, *Nisshōki* had been more widely accepted as a national symbol before the ratification of the Act on the National Flag and Anthem. Similarly, according to a 1985 survey carried out by *The Asahi*

[25] Jun & Nam, 2014.
[26] Seippel, 2017, 44.
[27] Tsujita, 2015.

*Shimbun*, 86% of respondents affirmed that *Nisshōki* was appropriate as the national flag while only 68% thought *Kimigayo* was appropriate as the national anthem.[28]

Concerns related to national holidays in Japan have also provoked controversy. There have been objections to holding national holidays on the birthdays of the two main emperors of Imperial Japan while other past emperors' birthdays are not recognised. Meiji Emperor Mutsuhito's birthday (3 November) is celebrated as Culture Day, though officially the holiday is to commemorate the announcement of the post-war Japanese constitution in 1946 and is arguably less problematic as it focuses on the end of the Empire. Whereas the strongly contested birthday of Emperor Hirohito (29 April) is celebrated as Shōwa Day. Opponents of this national holiday claim that there is no justification for honouring the head of state during the Pacific War. This is despite the fact that the Act on National Holidays (*Kokumin no shukujitsu ni kansuru hōritsu* 国民の祝日に関する法律) defines the day as an occasion to look back at the Shōwa era, when Japan went through significant turbulence and finally achieved reconstruction for the future of the country.[29] Yet, the national holidays did not develop the same level of protestation as the national anthem. Thus, while sharing a similar historical and ideological background, debates on other national symbols of Japan have not been attracting as much public attention as the *Kimigayo* controversy.

**5. Myth of Kotodama**

In considering the particularity of the national anthem controversy, it is worth exploring the role of *kotodama* as a discursive background to the linguistic and political discourses of Japan. The compound word *kotodama* literary refers to the 'language spirit' (*koto* = 'language/word' + *dama/tama* = 'soul'). According to Kamata, the essence of the *kotodama* myth is that language has spiritual power that can influence or alter reality.[30] It is said to be derived from a prehistoric ritual in Shintō called *kotoage*. According to this ritual, a divine power resides in language with which

[28] Tsujita, 2015.
[29] *Act on National Holidays*.
[30] Kamata, 2017, 274.

"beautiful words, correctly pronounced, were believed to bring about good whereas ugly words or beautiful words incorrectly pronounced were believed to cause evil".[31] *Kotoage* is thus considered to be a form of vocal prayer, which is mentioned in a poem found in the anthology *Man'yōshū* 万葉集 (Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves, *post* 759).

*Man'yōshū*, Book 13-3253/3254

The Rice-Abounding Land of Reed Plains
Is a land where things fall out
As will the gods, without lifted words of men,
Yet I must lift up words:
"Be fortunate, and travel safe and sound!"
If you be free from evils,
Then shall we meet once more;
So I lift up words [*Kotoage*] over and over again
As the waves roll a hundredfold, a thousandfold![32]

In *Man'yōshū*, one can also find the earliest written record on *kotodama* in the following three poems.

*Man'yōshū*, Book 5-894

From the age of the gods
it has been told and retold
that the sky-vast
land of Yamato
is an august land,
its rulers of divine descent,
a land blessed
by word spirit [*kotodama*][33]

*Man'yōshū*, Book 13-3254

The land of Yamato
in the region of Shiki
is a land

[31] Kitagawa, 1987, 68.
[32] Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkōkai, 1065, 59, underline and annotation added
[33] Thomas, 2012, 6, underline and annotation added.

aided by word spirit [*kotodama*]
may good fortune be with you[34]

*Man'yōshū*, Book 11-2506

At the intersecting roads
of word spirit [*kotodama*]
I do evening divination
the true oracle tells me
I shall see my beloved[35]

There is no explanation of what *kotodama* exactly refers to in the above poems and with the reference to *kotodama* in *Man'yōshū* only, it is not possible to know whether *kotodama* was linked to the Japanese language or to language in general.[36] However, Konishi has pointed to the frequent association of *kotodama* with the 'Land of Yamato' (the ancient name for Japan) as is observed in the two poems above.[37] He speculates that *kotodama* was believed to lodge only in the "correct language of Yamato correctly pronounced".[38] On this point, Kamata argues that the two fundamental ideas behind the *kotodama* belief are animism and nationalism. He explains that the belief was initiated as a form of linguistic animism, while by the time of the writing of *Man'yōshū*, the belief was made part of the Japanese national identity through Japan's contact with the Tang Dynasty (618-907).[39] Similarly, Konno identifies two essential concepts, *kami* 神 ('deity') and *kuni* 国 ('country/nation'), in the discourse on *kotodama*.[40] In Japanese classical literature, reference to the spiritual power of language is found not only in *Man'yōshū* but also in other works such as *Kojiki* 古事記 (An Account of Ancient Matters, 712), *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 (Chronicle of Japan, 720), an ancient record of the features of Izumo titled *Izumo no kuni fudoki* 出雲国風土記 (Record of the Province of Izumo, 733), *Ise monogatari* 伊勢物語 (The Tales of Ise, circa 900), as well as *Genji monogatari* 源氏物語 (The Tale of Genji, circa 1000). All these texts

[34] Thomas, 2012, 7, underline and annotation added.
[35] Thomas, 2012, 7, underline and annotation added.
[36] Konno, 2020, 92.
[37] Konishi, 1991, 114 and 461.
[38] Konishi 1991, 114 and 461.
[39] Kamata, 2017, 6.
[40] Konno, 2020, 44-45.

describe ancient customs of using language to curse others or to make particular events happen.[41] With this association between the nation and *kotodama*, the myth is considered to have become a popular reference in linguistic, cultural, and political discourses in Japan throughout its history, especially at times when Japanese identities are redefined.[42]

For example, the *kotodama* discourse was employed by *Kokugaku*, the nativist movement of the Edo period (1603–1867) that called for the appreciation of Japanese literature without dependence on the Chinese classics. It has been pointed out that at the time of *Kokugaku*, the idea of *kotodama* was used as "an expression of an awareness among early Japanese that their language and society were essentially different from others like Chinese and Korean, and not only different but blessed by a spirit all their own" and thus "a solution to an identity crisis thrust upon the Japanese by their contact with foreign civilization".[43] It can therefore be said that the reinvention of the *kotodama* myth was motivated by contacts with the external world, stimulating a desire to seek values in what is originally Japanese. *Kokugaku* scholars developed the myth into the so-called *kotodama* theory (*kotodamaron* 言霊論) through their studies on the Japanese language. In particular, the phonetic element of the language was intensively studied since Japanese was defined by *Kokugaku* scholars as a 'spoken language'. This is in contrast to the Chinese language, which was characterised as a 'written language'.[44] Kamo no Mabuchi 賀茂真淵 (1697-1769), one of the leading figures in *Kokugaku* studies, described in his book *Goikō* 語意考 (Considering the Meaning [of Words], 1789): in Japan, everything is only spoken, while in China everything is written, and in India the spoken language is recorded in written texts.[45] Based on this idea, a group of scholars including Hori Hidenari 堀秀成 (1820-1887) formed the so-called *Kotodama ongi* 言霊音義 school in the late-Edo period. They sought meaning in the Japanese syllables and connections between the spoken language and natural world in a manner comparable to that of European

[41] Konno, 2020, 32-40.
[42] Hosokawa, 2015, 380.
[43] Poulton, 1996, 191.
[44] Kamata, 2017, 275.
[45] Kamata, 2017, 97; Konno, 2020, 104-105.

symbolism and metonymy.[46] Substantial importance was placed on onomatopoetic expressions, which are frequently used in Japanese, as they demonstrate the significance of the interrelationship between sounds and language.[47]

The *kotodama* myth is said to have been reinvented again as a political ideology during the Second World War.[48] As part of military discourse, *kotodama* was defined as "a kind of mystical spirit in some way inherent in the Japanese language and intimately linked to the national polity".[49] English loanwords were criticised and censored as they were derived from *tekikokugo* 敵国語, 'the language of the enemies'.[50] Whereas Sino-Japanese language and Chinese characters were reinterpreted as the core of *kotodama* because they were considered useful by the Japanese government in its advancement of the Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, bolstering common linguistic identity in the region.[51] While the interpretation of the myth had little in common with previous narratives, the reconstruction of *kotodama* was again motivated by a strong consciousness of the 'Other', this time mainly represented by the Western Allied Powers.

In the post-war period, *kotodama* remained important, encapsulating the Japanese attitude toward their language. Miller argues that the myth was once again reinterpreted as "the idea that this somehow unique Japanese language [is] inextricably bound up with the essence of the Japanese national spirit and must never be tampered with on that account".[52] Today, the popularity of *kotodama* discourse throughout Japanese society can be confirmed by the number of references in news and social media. With its meaning reinvented yet again, *kotodama* is still typically related to the consciousness of the other nations. For example, the term *kotodama* is often used in criticism opposed to the overuse of foreign (English) loanwords, as is shown in extracts from *The Asahi Shimbun*, a nation-wide newspaper in Japan.

[46] Konno, 2020, 170-171.
[47] Konno, 2020, 112.
[48] Miller, 1982; Gottlieb, 1995; Dale, 1986.
[49] Gottlieb 26-27.
[50] Miller, 1982; Gottlieb, 1995.
[51] Seeley, 1991, 41.
[52] Miller, 1982, 127.

> Western loanwords threaten the country of *kotodama*.[53]

> *Inobēshon* [Innovation], *terewāku* [tele-work], *ajia gētouei* [Asia gateway], *raibu tōku* [live talk], *kantorī aidentitī* [country identity] … What on earth do they mean? Abe's speech is not beautiful. Mr. Prime Minister, Yamato is the land 'protected by *kotodama*.'[54]

> In any case, I wonder if we can do something about the meaningless words and Western loanwords that are copied from professional jargons that are inundating these days. It is said that a spirit resides in language as is expressed as *kotodama*. I would like to be a citizen who uses language with care.[55]

Despite the dramatic re-contextualisation, it can thus be said that the two essential elements of the *kotodama* myth, spiritual power and the nation, have remained unchanged. The common objectives for the appropriation of the myth have been an attempt to define Japanese linguistic identity in relation to 'foreign' languages and a desire to protect the alleged sacred 'Japanese' language, even though the interpretation of 'foreign' and 'Japanese' continues to vary. It is also noteworthy that many poems included in *Kokin wakashū*, the original source for the lyrics of *Kimigayo*, were written in approximately the same period as the ancient literary works with reference to *kotodama*. Furthermore, in *The Yomiuri Shimbun* and *The Asahi Shimbun*, two nation-wide newspapers with the largest and second largest number of copies printed daily, reference to the *kotodama* myth has become more prevalent since the 2000s. The term *kotodama* was mentioned 206 times between 1991 and 2000, while it was mentioned 367 times between 2001 and 2010 and 391 times between 2011 and 2020. The frequency of mentioning *kotodama* started to increase roughly at the same time as the ratification of the Act on National Flag and Anthem. While there may be no direct causal relationship between the *Kimigayo* controversy and the popularity of the *kotodama*

[53] *The Asahi Shimbun*, 16 April 1997.
[54] *The Asahi Shimbun*, 30 September 2006.
[55] *The Shimbun*, 22 April 2008.

discourse, the early 2000s marked a pivotal moment in which discussion about the Japanese language started to attract more attention in Japanese society, which is believed to be an important factor in understanding the *Kimigayo* controversy.

### 6. *Kotodama* as the 'Spirit of Language' and the Power of Spoken Words

The belief that language holds spiritual power is not unique to Japanese culture. From a comparative point of view, Kamata points to the fact that language plays an important role in many religions, raising the example of Christianity where God created light by saying "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3).[56] More generally, the myth of *kotodama* can be viewed as in line with animism. Sasaki explains that *kotodama* is part of the ancient animistic belief that every being has a special spirit possessed only by God.[57] The idea of *kotodama* can be compared with those of *kodama* 木霊 ('spirit of trees', 'echo') and *yamabiko* 山彦 ('man of mountains', 'echo') that existed in ancient Japan.[58] Konno also points to the fact that the first morpheme of the word *kotodama*, *koto* 言 ('language') has the same etymological origin as its homonym *koto* 事 that refers to 'things', which would make the word *kotodama* refer not only to 'spirit of language' but more generally to 'spirit of things'.[59]

Thus, in the *kotodama* myth, language is closely associated with the natural world, and a particular importance is placed on the vocal utterance of words. As previously discussed, in early writing on *kotodama*, it was believed that special power came through *kotoage* 言揚 or 言挙 ('lifting of words'), which referred to the action of uttering words "in a significant and stylized way".[60] Similarly, the *Kokugaku* 国学 scholars defined Japanese as a phonetic language to distinguish it from Chinese as a written language with its logographic characters. Belief in the special power of spoken language remains in Japanese linguistic practice today. An example is *imi kotoba* 忌み言葉, which refers to a word with a negative meaning, believed to bring

[56] Kamata, 2017, 37-38.
[57] Sasaki, 2013, 17.
[58] Konno, 2020, 43-44.
[59] Konno, 2020, 22.
[60] Poulton, 1996, 191.

bad luck when pronounced. The use of such words is seen as taboo, and they are replaced by an antonym to avoid misfortune. This practice is particularly important in ritual ceremonies such as weddings or funerals, though it is also widely observed in daily life. For instance, the word 'closing' (*shimeru* 閉める) should be avoided, as it contains a negative meaning, and replaced by the word 'opening' (*hiraku* 開く). Thus, in order to end an event, one must say 'to make it an opening' (*ohiraki ni suru* お開きにする). Another example is the word for 'dried squid' (*surume* 鯣), which is also to be avoided as it contains a homonymous part with the verb 'to fail in business or to lose money' (*suru* 擦る), albeit with a different etymological origin. Therefore, the dried squid is often referred to as *atarime* 当りめ, replacing *suru* with *ataru* 当たる, which is the verb 'to succeed in business'. It is therefore important to emphasise that in addition to the animistic and nationalistic nature of *kotodama*, vocal utterance is an essential element that is considered to have a discursive link to the *Kimigayo* controversy.

Tsujita points to the particularity of the national anthem in comparison to the national flag. While these two symbols often appear together, he argues that the national anthem is more likely to be controversial as it involves the vocal action of singing.[61] While the flag and other national symbols are a spatial presence that one could try to avoid or ignore by not looking, the essence of the national anthem is the required action of singing. Therefore, if one is against the national anthem, one must overtly refuse to take part in the action, as was the case of the aforementioned high school teacher in Tōkyō. Tsujita argues that the most striking difference between the national anthem and the national flag lies in the fact that *Kimigayo* is a song that is to be sung aloud, while *Hinomaru* can be hoisted but not be looked at or discussed.[62]

Urabe further argues that enforcement of the act of singing can be interpreted as the enforcement of a thought, which, according to him, is the most problematic part of the *Kimigayo* controversy. This explains why debates about *Kimigayo* have become so contentious—while the national anthem must be actively accepted or denied, the national flag can be passively accepted or denied. Given that the act

[61] Tsujita, 2015, 30.
[62] Tsujita, 2015, 30.

of singing involves vocal utterance, the dissension over *Kimigayo* is embedded within the Japanese linguistic attitude that places greater focus on spoken language and is represented by the *kotodama* discourse. Furthermore, since the *kotodama* myth has always been strongly associated with the Japanese nation, it is possible that the public may be even more sensitive about uttering the controversial lyrics of *Kimigayo*.

**7. Conclusion**

This article has examined the heightened controversy surrounding Japan's national anthem through the scope of myth and discourse on the spiritual power of language. Thus, even though the *kotodama* discourse is not directly discussed in the *Kimigayo* controversy, the historical analysis of shifting attitudes towards the *kotodama* myth contributes to a broader understanding of the key role played by language in debates over the national anthem. There is a clear link among concepts in the narratives surrounding both *Kimigayo* and *kotodama* such as identity, nation, and vocal utterance. As the Japanese language itself is one of the most important national symbols for Japan, cultural values raised in the *kotodama* discourse can offer meaningful insight into various issues involving identity in contemporary Japan. This includes the question of why the national anthem in Japan ignites so much discord in comparison to other national symbols domestically and national anthems in other countries.

Debates over Japan's national anthem have been discussed from various points of view, all of which are indirectly informed by the *kotodama* myth. From a historical standpoint, the controversy is explained by the fact that the national anthem was used as imperialist propaganda during the Pacific War and is still negatively associated with Japan's wartime past. From an ideological perspective, there has also been concern about the lyrics of the song that wish for the eternity of the world of *kimi*, the emperor. From a legal vantage point, the controversy is also discussed in terms of Article 19 of the Constitution, which guarantees the freedom of thought and conscience, though the courts have arguably not protected this right where there is an obligation to sing the national anthem at certain occasions.

The sociolinguistic assessment presented in this article provides an additional interpretation on the arguments about the national anthem in Japan. There are several parallels between the idea of *kotodama* and

the controversy on *Kimigayo*. First, they both have roots in classical Japanese literature influenced by Chinese civilisation, which led to consciousness of the Self and the Other in Japan. Second, both cases involve the vocal utterance of words. Kamata and Konno have emphasised the phonetic nature of the Japanese language promoted by the *Kokugaku* scholars, while Tsujita has explained the particularity of the national anthem controversy through the act of singing. Third, the idea of the nation is central to both instances. While the national anthem is an obvious symbol of the nation, scholars of *kotodama* argue that the spirit of language plays a pivotal role in the construction of Japanese national identity. From eighth century poetry to the nativist movement of the Edo period, from the wartime propaganda to the recent discussion on the use of loanwords, the term *kotodama* has always been associated with 'Japaneseness'. The *Kimigayo* controversy can therefore be understood with reference to the *kotodama* myth.

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