

## The Etymology of Kami

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MANY authors writing in English on Japanese religion or culture have attempted to explain the meaning of the word *kami* 神 to readers in some detail. The obvious reason for this is that English translations such as "god" or "deity" are likely to be misleading unless supplemented by some such explanation.

In the past it was not unusual for such explanations to include information about the etymology of the word in the hope that this would help readers understand how it came to have the meaning it has. In the last few decades, however, etymological explanations have become increasingly hard to find. This paper will sketch the reason for abandoning the most popular etymological explanation and trace the peculiar path by which this knowledge found its way into Western scholarship.

As D.C. Holtom (1940) has pointed out, by far the most widely accepted etymology for "kami" was that it derived from the word *kami* 上, meaning "above." Consider the following example, from a postwar book on Japanese religion:

*Kami* is a word with such a variety of meanings that no accurate definition of it can be given. The literal translation of the character by which it is represented is "above," and it is generally used to imply superiority (Bunce 1955, pp.99-100).

The writer here has confused the issue by suggesting that the character 上, which means "above," is used to write the word *kami* meaning "god," but in any event it is reason-

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I would like to thank my good friend Itō Hiroko of Sagami Joshi Daigaku for the time and trouble she took to locate a copy of Yamamoto's book for me. This paper could not have been written without her generous help. I would like to also note that translations from Japanese sources in this paper are all my own work.

ably clear that the reader is supposed to understand the meaning "god" as being derived from the idea of "above." Other authors who have made this same claim—some more clearly than others—include Lafcadio Hearn (1904, p.54), G.B. Sansom (1931, p.25), and Ruth Benedict (1946, p.127).

Holtom's article was based to a large extent on work by Yamamoto Nobuya,<sup>1</sup> and Yamamoto (1933, p.36) cites a sixteenth century work by Yoshida Kanetomo as the earliest source for the "kami/above" etymology. The etymology has been accepted by other Japanese scholars, including Arai Hakuseki, Kamo no Mabuchi and Ise Sadatake (Holtom 1940, pp.17-18). Holtom (1940, pp.19-20) traces the spread of the etymology into Western scholarship via the work of Basil Hall Chamberlain and W.G. Aston.

In spite of its long history and the stature of its proponents, however, the "kami/above" etymology has all but disappeared from works on Japanese religion. The reason is simply that it is, beyond any reasonable doubt, incorrect. As a result, etymological explanations generally no longer appear at all, since none of the other proposed etymologies has ever had much support.

It is apparently Holtom who deserves the credit for first making English speaking readers aware of the doubt that Japanese philological studies has cast on the etymology, and it is instructive to compare the definition of "kami" in a recent book on Japanese religion by H. Byron Earhart (1982, p.8) with the 1955 definition quoted above. Earhart makes no mention of etymological connections or original meanings, and it is surely no accident that he lists Holtom's article in his annotated bibliography (Earhart 1982, p.236).

Not surprisingly, however, Holtom's article did not achieve its effect overnight. Even as late as 1973, at least one author appears to have subscribed to the etymology: "The very word *kami* has the connotation of "upper" or

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1. Holtom (1940, p.5) cites the given name as "Nobuki," but this is apparently an error.

"above," and not that of "transcendent" (Varley 1973, p.6). The use here of the word "connotation," however, makes this statement somewhat difficult to interpret.

It is also interesting to compare the definitions of kami in the 1969 and 1979 editions of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

...*kami*, usually translated as "gods" or "deities" but meaning "above," "superior," or "divine"...(1969).

...*kami* means "mystical," "superior," or "divine"...(1979).

Although the difference between these two definitions is small, it is significant. The absence of "above" in the second definition is particularly noteworthy.

AT THIS point it seems appropriate to consider exactly what led to the rejection of the etymological identification of "kami/god" with "kami/above." The entry for "kami/god" in *Nihon kokugo daijiten* will serve as a starting point. This reads in part as follows:

Supplementary Note: The theory that the origin of kami ["god"] is kami ["above"] was once prevalent, but since the *mi* of kami ["god"] is of the *kō* type, whereas the *mi* of kami ["above"] is of the *otsu* type, they are thought to be different words.

The Japanese words "kō" and "otsu" are used to give arbitrary labels to things to keep them separate. The expressions "type A" and "type B" might be preferable to "kō type" and "otsu type" in an English text, but "kō" and "otsu" are usually retained unchanged in English discussions of this particular topic. In order to understand what they refer to it is necessary to consider how the Japanese language was written during the Nara period.

The poetry collection *Man'yōshū* and other documents of the Nara period were written in Chinese characters used for their phonetic values, now referred to as "man'yōgana." The man'yōgana system was the forerunner of the modern

*hiragana* and *katakana*; each Chinese character in the system represented one Japanese syllable. The meanings of the characters were completely irrelevant, and only their sound values were important.

One feature of the man'yōgana system which differentiates it in an important way from *hiragana* and *katakana* is that each Japanese syllable could be represented by any one of several Chinese characters. For example, any of the characters 加, 可, 賀, or 迦 could be used to write the syllable *ka*.

The pronunciations of the syllables written in man'yōgana can be determined by first using the available evidence to determine how the characters were pronounced in the Chinese of the time.<sup>2</sup> Since the writers of Japanese during the Nara period presumably chose characters with Chinese pronunciations as close as possible to the pronunciations of the Japanese syllables they wished to render, it is thus possible to determine with a fair degree of accuracy the pronunciation of each syllable in Nara period Japanese. Though this is true in theory, in fact it was not until the twentieth century that anyone actually went through this painstaking process. One reason is simply that the sophisticated techniques necessary to determine the contemporary pronunciation of Chinese were not developed until the nineteenth century. Another reason is that modern ideas about historical change in languages are also the result of nineteenth-century scholarship.

The real impetus for going through this process, however, was provided by a tremendously exciting discovery. Until this century there seemed to be no reason to doubt that the man'yōgana represented the same set of syllables which Heian period authors wrote with the newly-invented *hiragana* and *katakana*. In the early part of this century, however, it became clear that the number of distinct syllables represented by the man'yōgana system was larger

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2. Exactly how this is done is outside the scope of this paper, but the interested reader can find details in Lange 1973, pp. 34-47; pp. 71-98.

than the number represented by hiragana or katakana. In other words, Nara period Japanese had more distinct syllables than did Heian period Japanese.

Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801), the famous National Learning scholar of the Edo period, laid the foundation for this discovery. He studied the use of man'yōgana in Nara period work, especially *Kojiki*, and noticed some peculiarities in the distribution of some of the Chinese characters. A single example should serve to clarify the exact nature of these peculiarities.

I will draw my example from the modern Japanese words *sode* ("sleeve") and *sono* ("that"). When writing these words in hiragana the first syllable of each would be written as そ. Both "sode" and "sono" appear in Nara period texts, as do many other words containing syllables which would have been written with そ during the Heian period. The set of man'yōgana used to write syllables which were later represented with そ include 素, 蘇, 則, 所, 曾 and 增.<sup>3</sup>

This was actually two mutually exclusive sets, however, and not simply a set of six interchangeable characters. The syllable corresponding to what was later written as そ in any given word could only be written with characters from one set or the other. The first syllable of "sode," then, could only be written with 素 or 蘇, but on the other hand, the first syllable of "sono" could only be written with the characters 則, 所, 曾 or 增. It was Motoori who, in the eighteenth century, first discovered that and several other Heian period syllables each corresponded to two distinct sets of man'yōgana characters in this way.

Motoori's disciple, Ishizuka Tatsumaro (1764-1823), took up this problem, and by the end of the eighteenth century had written a detailed work on distinctions of this kind in the man'yōgana of the works *Kojiki*, *Nihon shoki* and

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3. These six characters do not constitute the entire set of man'yōgana used in Nara period works to represent "so." They are the subset found in the *Man'yōshū* and listed by Lange (1973, p.162).

*Man'yōshū*. The research by Motoori and Ishizuka was the basis for the work in this area by the great Japanese linguist Hashimoto Shinkichi (1882-1945). It was Hashimoto (1917) who first proposed (perhaps with a hint from a nineteenth century commentary on Ishizuka's work by Kusakado Nobutaka; see Lange 1973, p.23, n.11) that the mutually exclusive sets of man'yōgana represented distinct sounds.<sup>4</sup>

Hashimoto devoted much of his life to this problem and is responsible for coining the terms "kō type" and "otsu type" (Hashimoto 1931). For each case in which two mutually exclusive sets of man'yōgana were discovered, Hashimoto labeled one set kō and the other otsu. The kō-otsu distinction is found only in syllables corresponding to Heian period syllables containing the vowels "i," "e" and "o," and it is generally agreed that the distinctions between the kō and otsu syllables in Nara period pronunciation were distinctions in the vowels, although this view is not universal (Lange 1973, pp.28-32). Exactly how the otsu vowels differed is not clear, and there are several competing theories about how they were pronounced (Lange 1973, pp.34-69). In any event, it is generally agreed that Nara period Japanese had eight distinct vowels, as opposed to the five found in the Japanese of the Heian period.<sup>5</sup>

At this point the dictionary entry quoted above should be readily understandable. The word "kami/above" contained a kō type "i" in Nara period Japanese, whereas "kami/god" contained an otsu type "i." The two words were thus pronounced differently during the Nara period, and this makes it virtually certain that they are etymologically distinct.

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4. Yamamoto (1933, pp.36-37) says that Ishizuka had already come to the conclusion that the Nara period spelling conventions reflected differences in pronunciation, but most scholars disagree. See, for example, Furuta and Tsukishima 1972, pp.288-289 and Lange 1973, p.23.
  5. It would actually be more precise to say that Nara period Japanese had eight distinct "vowel nuclei." A vowel nucleus forms the nucleus of a single syllable, but it may be a diphthong (or even a triphthong) rather than a simple, steady-state vowel.

It might be useful to consider a similar example from English at this point. Most English speakers feel that "meal" in the sense of "repast" and "meal" in the sense of "ground grain" are two related forms of a single word. Etymologically, however, the two have different origins, and they were pronounced quite differently in Old English. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives "mæ!" as Old English for "meal/repast," and "melo" as Old English for "meal/ground grain." Just as in the case of "kami/above" and "kami/god," the semantic resemblance between these two English words makes the etymological identification quite plausible, though no less wrong.

It should be noted, incidentally, that it is not absolutely inconceivable that "kami/above" and "kami/god" do derive from the same source, and were in fact pronounced identically at some time before the Nara period. It sometimes happens that when a word is used in two distinct senses, two distinct pronunciations develop over time. For example, the English words "off" and "of" are both descendants of a single earlier word. This earlier word could be used either as an adverb or as a preposition, and it was generally stressed in the former use and unstressed in the latter. Subsequent changes in English pronunciation applied differently to stressed and unstressed syllables, and at some point the difference in pronunciation was interpreted as signalling the difference between two words, one an adverb and one a preposition. The two forms have continued to diverge in pronunciation, and "off" has reacquired a prepositional use, although it is quite distinct from "of."

It is important to keep in mind, however, that to maintain the etymological identification of "kami/god" with "kami/above" one must assume that the difference in pronunciation triggered by the ancient semantic distinction was just the sort of difference that would later be undone by the change from the vowel system of the Nara period to that of the Heian period. While this is not impossible in theory, the probability of such a series of events is surely extremely low.

HASHIMOTO (1950, p.192) mentioned the etymology of "kami/god" in a lecture delivered in 1937, and to my knowledge this is his earliest reference to it. Although he did not reject the identification with "kami/above" outright, he did warn that the difference in pronunciation in the Nara period makes it necessary to consider very carefully whether there is any connection between the two words. What is somewhat curious about Hashimoto's remarks is that he attributed the etymological identification of the two words to Motoori, whereas Yamamoto, whose book appeared in 1933, had already traced the etymology back to the sixteenth century, more than a century before Motoori was born.

An earlier reference to the Nara period pronunciations of the two words is found in a 1931 article by the renowned Japanese linguist Arisaka Hideyo (1908-1952). Arisaka (1931, p.62) simply mentions the difference in the Nara period spellings of the two words as a part of an argument in support of Hashimoto's conclusion that Nara period spelling differences must have represented pronunciation differences. Although Arisaka says nothing one way or the other about any etymological connections, it is still clear that Japanese scholars were aware even before Yamamoto's book appeared in 1933 that the Nara period pronunciations of "kami/god" and "kami/above" were different. In fairness, however, it must be pointed out that a note at the end of Yamamoto's book says that it is based in part on a lecture given in 1928.

There is no indication in Holtom's article that Yamamoto acknowledged any debt to Hashimoto. Quite to the contrary, in fact, Holtom attributes the discovery of the eight-vowel system in Nara period Japanese to Yamamoto, and a look at Yamamoto's book makes it easy to see how this happened. Yamamoto did, in fact, refer to Hashimoto's work, as the following passage demonstrates:

Some years ago my fellow student Hashimoto (Shin-kichi), B.A., published in the November issue of *Teiko-*

*ku bungaku* an article entitled "Kokugo kanazukai kenkyūshijō no ichihakken," in which he reported his research on Ishizuka Tatsumaro's *Kanazukai oku no yamamichi*. According to this article, the region in which opened and closed<sup>6</sup> sounds were clearly distinguished in the kana used for the thirteen sounds *e, ki, ke, ko, so, to, nu, hi, he, mi, me, yo, and ro...* was the central part of the country. The region may have extended to areas farther west, but not to the eastern provinces. This is the reason for the great abundance of confused kana usage in the "Azuma uta" in Book 14 of the *Man'yōshū*, and especially in the "Sakimori uta" in Book 20. Tatsumaro used these poems as examples, but Hashimoto considered this a very great flaw and treated them as exceptions. This is the theory that Hashimoto developed (Yamamoto 1933, pp.38-39).

Yamamoto (1933, p.39) then went on to say that whatever the case may be with other words, "kami/god" and "kami/above" are consistently differentiated in the orthography of the "Azuma uta" ("Songs of the East"). Given this account, it seems unlikely that anyone not already familiar with Hashimoto's work would have even suspected the real significance of the 1917 article. One can hardly blame Holtom for crediting Yamamoto with the discovery of the true nature of the Nara period spelling conventions, although the lack of communication among scholars in different fields is certainly lamentable. In any case, the story of the etymology of kami turns out to be a very curious

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6. Yamamoto (1933, pp.37-38) used the terms "open sound" (*kaion*) and "closed sound" (or "rounded sound"; *gōon*) to describe the differences in pronunciation between the *kō* type "mi" and the *otsu* type "mi." These terms are from the Chinese *Yün Ching* (Japanese reading *Inkyō*) sound tables, and the upshot is that "kami/god" was pronounced something like "kamwi" in the Nara period. Lange (1973, pp.45-47) gives a short account of how study of the *Yün Ching* led Miyake Takerō, Yasuda Kiyomon and Kikuzawa Sueo to propose in 1933-35 that something like a "w" differentiated all *kō*-*otsu* pairs. Holtom (1940, pp.24-25) recounts Yamamoto's discussion in detail.

Timothy J. VANCE

chapter in the history of the study of Japanese religion in the West.

SOME readers may feel at this point that the most important question raised here has been left unanswered. If "kami/god" does not derive from "kami/above," then, what does it derive from?

Unfortunately, I am unable to offer any satisfactory etymology. Both Yamamoto (1933, pp.33-42) and Holtom (1940, pp.5-16) discuss other proposed etymologies, but none, as I have noted above, is at all persuasive. The entry for "kami/god" in the *Nihon kokugo daijiten* lists thirteen etymological explanations, and the only important one that does not appear in the surveys by Yamamoto and Holtom is the suggestion that the word derives from an Altaic root.

This suggestion can be interpreted in either of two ways. It may be that Japanese borrowed the word from some Altaic language at some time in prehistory, but this is probably not what the compilers of the dictionary meant to suggest. The more likely interpretation involves the claim that Japanese and the Altaic languages (Mongolian, Manchu, Turkish, etc.) are related, all changed forms of a single "parent" language which was spoken at some time in the remote past. Some scholars, such as Miller (1971, 1980), have argued vociferously that Japanese and the Altaic languages are related in this way, but as Street (1982, p.432) points out, the claim is by no means universally accepted.

In any event, if "kami/god" is Altaic under either of these interpretations, it will not have any etymology within Japanese. In other words, whether borrowed or inherited, it would have entered the language as an unanalyzable whole. Given these considerations, then, I believe the only reasonable conclusion is that the question of the etymology of "kami" remains open.

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Timothy J. VANCE

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