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National Anthem Controversy and the ‘Spirit of Language’ Myth in Japan

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the relationship between the national anthem controversy and the myth of the spirit of language in Japan. Since the end of the Pacific War, the national anthem of Japan, *Kimigayo* (His Imperial Majesty's Reign), has caused exceptionally fierce controversies in Japan. Those who support the song claim that it is a traditional national anthem sung since the nineteenth century with the lyrics based on a classical *waka* poem written in the tenth century, while those opposed to it see the lyrics as problematic for their imperialist ideology and association with negative memories of the war. While it is clear that the controversies are mainly based on the political interpretation of the lyrics, the paper will shed light on the myth of the spirit of language, known as *kotodama*, as a possible explanation for the uncommon intensity of the controversy. The main idea of the myth is that words, pronounced in a certain manner have an impact on reality. Based on this premise, the *kotodama* myth has been reinterpreted and incorporated into Japanese social and political discourses throughout its history. Placing a particular focus on links between music and the *kotodama* myth, the paper will suggest that part of the national anthem controversy in Japan can be explained by reference to the discursive use of the myth.

Keywords: National anthem, nationalism, Japan, language, myth

1. Introduction

Music can be an instrument to promote national identity or nationalism in various forms such as patriotic songs and military chants. Among them, the national anthem is the most evident form of national representation through music, being a symbol of the nation. In particular, the Japanese national anthem is a particularly interesting case as it is extremely controversial. Among many cases of controversy related to this issue, the most well-known case is the question of whether one should be obliged to stand up and sing the national anthem at official events in public

schools, such as entrance or graduation ceremonies, which developed into a legal case in 2011. The case opened when a former public high school teacher sued his former employer, a Tokyo metropolitan high school, for not renewing his contract in view of his refusal to obey the order of the school principal to stand up and sing the national anthem at a graduation ceremony. The case attracted substantial public attention with regard to the role of the national anthem and freedom of thought. The case was taken all the more seriously because it happened in a public school, the foundation of national education. Public opinion was split. Those who supported the idea of obligation to sing the national anthem claimed that it is a ritual habit which everyone should follow at official ceremonies and a way to foster the sense of national belonging, showing appreciation of the culture and the tradition of the nation. On the other hand, those who opposed the idea claimed that it was against Article 19 of the Japanese Constitution that protects freedom of thought and conscience to force an individual to stand up and sing the national anthem, as the song conveys a political and ideological meaning. In the end, the decision by the Supreme Court was 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 their official ceremonies (Urabe 2011). This decision dissatisfied many and the question remains controversial today.

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 and therefore some see singing the national anthem as a sign of returning nationalism. The lyrics of the national anthem are also seen as non-democratic and outdated, as it speaks of the imperial reign, which is seen by some as the manifestation of imperialist mentality. However, this does not explain the whole picture of the controversy on the Japanese national anthem as other national symbols such as the national flag, the imperial family, and the emperor himself, have proven less controversial even though they could be just as much associated with the imperial and wartime past. On this point, Tsujita (2015) points out the particularity of the national anthem in comparison to the national flag. While these two are often seen as a pair, he argues that the national anthem is more likely to be controversial as it involves an action of singing. While the essence of the national flag or other national symbols is a spatial presence which one could try to avoid or ignore by not looking at it, the essence of the national anthem is the action of singing in which one must actively participate. 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 Tokyo. This point can also be related to the theory of speech acts. Singing a song constitutes a linguistic utterance that can have a performative function. The national anthem is therefore different from the national flag in that singing it can be a political or ideological manifestation. Yet, it remains unclear why the issue is particularly controversial in Japan, because from a global point of view many national anthems have their roots in the imperialist or wartime past and their lyrics are not necessarily 'up to date' and it is not only in Japan that supporting such past ideologies can be seen as problematic. In order to offer an alternative

explanation to the Japanese controversy on the national anthem, this paper will shed light on the Japanese myth of spirit of language, *kotodama*, and its discursive use that can be related to the exceptional fierceness of the controversy.

2. *Kimigayo* Controversy

While *Kimigayo* (His Imperial Majesty's Reign) has long been conceived as the national anthem of Japan, it was only relatively recent that it was officially recognised as such in the postwar context together with the national flag, *Nisshōki* (sun-mark flag) or *Hinomaru* (circle of the sun). Originally, *Kimigayo* was created in the wake of the modernization of Japan based on the suggestion by a Scottish-Irish musician, then the leader of the Japanese military band, who claimed that a nation should have a national anthem. A field marshal Iwao Ōyama chose lyrics from *Kokin Wakashū* from the Heian Period (794-1185), a collection of Japanese traditional *Waka* poems, each of which consists of thirty-one syllables. The lyrics of *Kimigayo* are thus among the oldest and shortest in the world and their author is unknown. The melody was composed by Yoshiisa Oku and Akimori Hayashi in 1880 and officially recognised as the national anthem of the Empire of Japan, *Dai Nippon Teikoku*, adding to the national flag that had been already officially adopted since 1870, until the end of the Pacific War in 1945. After the end of the war, Japan no longer had an official national anthem, but *Kimigayo* continued as a de facto national anthem throughout the postwar period. On 13 August 1999, the Act on National Flag and Anthem was ratified and *Kimigayo* was once again officially adopted as the national anthem of Japan alongside *Nisshōki* as the national flag of Japan. However, the ratification of this act was a controversial event with much debate over the appropriateness of *Kimigayo*.

Kimigayo was made to be the national anthem of Japan, following the European model at the time of the modernisation in the late nineteenth century in the same way as virtually every other nations in the world. It is therefore necessary to further examine debates surrounding *Kimigayo* in order to explain why it is particularly controversial. In general, the controversy on *Kimigayo* is based on two-intertwined factors mentioned in Section 1. Firstly, the song was used as part of nationalist propaganda during the war and is still used by ultranationalist far-right groups today. It is thus closely associated with the wartime past and nationalism. Secondly, the title of the song *Kimigayo* is often translated, although there is no official translation, as 'His Imperial Majesty's Reign' which is seen to suggest an imperialistic point of view. Etymologically, *Kimigayo* can be broken into three parts. *Kimi* referring to the emperor or the lord, *Ga*, possessive, and *Yo* referring to an era, age or reign. It can therefore be literally translated as 'the era of the emperor'. In the lyrics, the term *Kimigayo* plays an important role. The lyrics of the song is as following.

Kimigayo wa
Chiyo ni yachiyo ni

*Sazare-ishi no
Iwao to narite
Koke no musu made*

[Translation] (Hood 2001:166)

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

Thus, part of the controversy stems from the interpretation that *Kimigayo* refers to imperial Japan and having the song as the national anthem can be seen as a resurgence of nationalism. On this point, the Japanese government released an official interpretation of the lyrics upon ratification of the Act on National Flag and Anthem that *Kimi*, in the Constitution of the Empire of Japan (1889-1947, also known as Meiji Constitution), referred to the Emperor as the nation's supreme leader, while in the Constitution of Japan (1947-), it is appropriate to interpret that *Kimi* refers to the Emperor 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. The government further emphasised that it is meaningful to have the long-cherished traditional poem as the lyrics of the Japanese national anthem¹. Even though this explanation by the government did not mitigate the controversy among general public, it seems indeed a matter of interpretation of the term *Kimi* whether the lyrics are imperialistic. In the original *Waka* poem on which the lyrics is based, the expression *Wagakimi* (My Emperor/My Lord) was used instead of *Kimigayo* and it is not worthwhile to look for the political implication of the poem written in a historical context so different from today both at political and linguistic levels. It should also be pointed out that the term *Kimi*, in different context, could also be a familiar second person pronoun, the use of which remains in modern Japanese, according to which the title of the song could also be interpreted as 'your age'. It may therefore be a little farfetched to explain the whole picture of the controversy solely based on the interpretation of one word.

Furthermore, there are two unanswered questions regarding the *Kimigayo* controversy: (1) Why does the national anthem provoke so much more controversy than other national symbols, such as the national flag or the imperial family? and (2) Why has the controversy become so fierce in Japan despite the fact that there are other national anthems with similar natures that do not cause controversy to the same degree?

¹ Minutes of the plenary session No. 41 of the House of Representatives in the 145th Diet term. Available at <http://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/SENTAKU/sangiin/145/0044/14508020044004a.html>

3. Why the National Anthem?

Firstly, it is worth pointing out that the *Kimigayo* controversy seems much more fierce compared to other symbols such as the national flag or the imperial family. It should be admitted that *Nisshōki*, the Japanese national flag (Fig. 1)², has also caused some controversy due to its association with the war, particularly because many military flags were based on its design, the most well-known example of which is the sun-rayed flag also known as *Kyokujitsu-ki* (Rising Sun Flag) (Fig. 2)³ that was used as the war flag of the Imperial Japanese Army as well as the naval ensign of the Imperial Japanese Navy. Even though the flag is still in use today by the Japanese Self-Defence Force, the sun-rayed design is particularly controversial due to its association with the Japanese imperialism and the military nationalism during the Pacific War. For example, in 2014, the new uniform of the Japanese national team for the FIFA World Cup (Fig. 3)⁴ provoked a controversy due to its resemblance to the Rising Sun Flag and the situation developed to a level at which a Korean university professor asked the FIFA to erase the sun-rayed design printed on the Japanese uniform, claiming that it is “the shape of the “rising sun” flag of Imperial Japan” that is a “war criminal symbol”⁵. Similarly, in 2017, there was a case in which Japanese supporters used the Rising Sun Flag in a football match in South Korea during the Asian Champions League (ACL) games that caused a post-match riot⁶. In response to this case, the Asian Football Confederation charged Kawasaki Frontale, the Japanese team that the supporters were cheering for, with discrimination.

Fig. 1 *Nisshōki*

² Cabinet Office, Government of Japan. On National Flag and Anthem. Available at: <http://www8.cao.go.jp/chosei/kokkikokka/kokkikokka.html> (accessed May 30 2018)

³ Japan Maritime Self Defence Force website. Available at: <http://jmsdf.info/?mode=permalink&no=03850> (accessed May 30 2018)

⁴ Japan Football Association Website. Available at: http://samuraiblue.jp/newscenter/press_release/news_000614.html (accessed May 30 2018)

⁵ “Korea publicist calls on FIFA to change Japan's uniform”. *Korean Times*, 2 June 2014. Available at: http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2014/06/116_158351.html (accessed May 30 2018)

⁶ “AFC charges Frontale with discrimination”. *Japan Times*, 27 April 2017. Available at: https://www.japantimes.co.jp/sports/2017/04/27/soccer/j-league/afc-charges-frontale-discrimination/#.Ww_p-6FOUk (accessed May 30 2018)

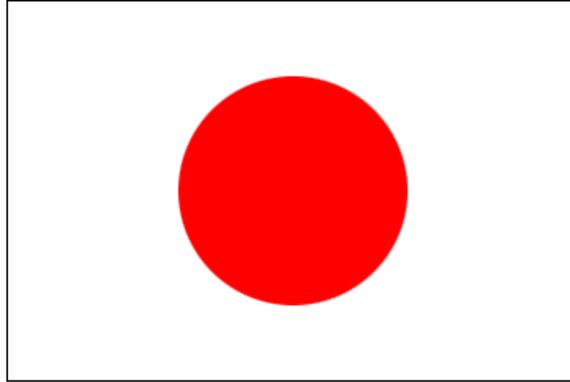


Fig. 3 *Kyokujitsu-ki* used by the Japanese Self-Defence Force



Fig. 3 Uniform of the Japanese National Team for FIFA World Cup Brazil



Thus, the Japanese national flag is not free from controversy. However, the majority of the controversies are related to its sun-rayed variant and not the official national flag itself. The official *Hinomaru* flag has been used for various sporting and cultural events. Indeed, it seems that the national anthem issue 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. Some survey results confirm the peculiarity of the national

anthem issue. According to the survey conducted by the then Ministry of Education (current Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) in 1985, 92.5% of elementary schools, 91.2% of middle schools, and 81.6% of high schools answered they hoist the national flag at their graduation ceremony. The percentage rose to 98.0%, 97.6%, and 93.4% respectively in 1992. On the other hand, in the same survey, only 72.8%, 68.0%, and 53.3% respectively answered that they sung *Kimigayo* at their graduation ceremony as part of the official event. This indicates that the *Nisshōki* has been widely known and used as the national flag even before the ratification of the Act on the National Flag and Anthem, while *Kimigayo* has remained controversial. Similarly, according to the survey carried out by Asahi Shimbun Newspaper in 1985, 86% of the respondents answered that *Hinomaru* is appropriate as the national flag while only 68% answered that *Kimigayo* is appropriate as the national anthem (Tsujita 2015).

Issues related to the Japanese emperor are also often controversial. For example, there was a controversy surrounding the fact that the birthday of Emperor Hirohito is a national holiday, along with the birthday of the Emperor Meiji (Mutsuhito), while other past emperors' birthdays are not. Opponents of this national holiday claim that it is justified to celebrate the birthday of the person who was the head of the state during the Pacific War, while the National Holidays Act of Japan define the day as an occasion to look back the period of Shōwa, in which Japan went through significant turbulence and finally achieved its reconstruction, reflecting on the future of the country⁷. However, this issue did not provoke the same level of controversy as the national anthem. It can thus be said that the national anthem issue is a particular case.

4. Why Japan?

Secondly, looking at the national anthems of other countries, there are lyrics that can lead to a similar controversy. The national anthem of the United Kingdom, God Save the Queen, is one such example, the first part of the lyrics of which are shown below.

God Save the Queen

God save our gracious Queen
Long live our noble Queen
God save the Queen
Send her victorious
Happy and glorious
Long to reign over us

⁷ G-Gov, Official Web Portal of the Government of Japan. *Act on National Flag and Anthem*. Available at: http://elaws.e-gov.go.jp/search/elawsSearch/elaws_search/lsg0500/detail?lawId=323AC1000000178&openerCode=1 (accessed 30 May)

God save the Queen

The song was made in 1745 in England as *God Save the King*, with the name of the King of the time George II. The term *King* and male personal pronouns are replaced by *Queen* and female personal pronouns when the reigning monarch is female.

The lyrics of the United Kingdom have a similar characteristic to *Kimigayo* in calling for a long lasting reign of the monarch. Even though the country is a constitutional monarchy as is the case with Japan, the lyrics of *God Save the Queen* are not seen as controversial as *Kimigayo*.

It should also be mentioned that the lyrics *God Save the Queen* has bellicose elements in its second part, referring to the fall of its enemies and confounding their politics, as is shown below. This part can also be seen as too bellicose in the current political climate.

O Lord, our God, arise,
Scatter her enemies,
And make them fall.
Confound their politics,
Frustrate their knavish tricks,
On Thee our hopes we fix,
God save us all.

Similarly, the lyrics of the French national anthem *La Marseillaise* have a similarly bellicose character. The lyrics were written by army engineer Claude Joseph Rouget de Lisle during the French revolutionary wars and its lyrics shown below have been described as “bloodthirsty” in evoking brutal images of cutting the throats of the enemy and “watering” the fields with their “impure” blood”⁸. This bellicose nature of the lyrics can be explained by the fact that it was originally written as a war song, *Chant de guerre pour l'armée du Rhin* (War Song for the Rhine Army).

La Marseillais

*Allons enfants de la Patrie,
Le jour de gloire est arrive!
Contre nous de la tyrannie,
L'etendard sanglant est leve,
Entendez-vous dans les campagnes*

⁸“La Marseillaise lyrics: the meaning and translation of the French national anthem”, *Evening Standard*, 17 November 2017. Available at: <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/world/la-marseillaise-lyrics-the-meaning-and-translation-of-the-french-national-anthem-a3116306.html> (accessed 30 May)

*Mugir ces feroces soldats?
Ils viennent jusque dans vos bras
Egorger vos fils, vos compagnes!
Aux armes, citoyens,
Formez vos bataillons,
Marchons, marchons!
Qu'un sang impur
Abreuve nos sillons!*

[Translation]

Arise children of the fatherland
The day of glory has arrived
Against us tyranny's
Bloody standard is raised
Listen to the sound in the fields
The howling of these fearsome soldiers
They are coming into our midst
To cut the throats of your sons and consorts
To arms citizens
Form your battalions
March, march
Let impure blood
Water our furrows

Even though the song has been banned by Napoleon and Louis XVIII as the lyrics are revolutionary, it has been serving as the national anthem of France since 1795⁹ despite its origin as a war song. Thus, both cases of *God Save the Queen* and *La Marseillaise* show that lyrics reflect the historical background of the time in which they were written and therefore do not correspond to the political situation or value system seen today. This applies to the case of *Kimigayo*, perhaps even more so as its lyrics are almost a thousand years older than the above two. There are cases in which lyrics of national anthems are changed for various reasons, a recent example of which is Canada which changed the lyrics of its national anthem *O Canada* into a gender neutral form, replacing “all my sons” by “all of us”. However, it is not surprising that national anthem lyrics are kept longer than constitutional or legal texts because of their role as a national symbol. From this point of view as well, the *Kimigayo* controversy seems to need further examination of its fierceness.

5. The act of Singing and the Myth of Kotodama

⁹ *ibid.*

With regard to the first point discussed in Section 3, Tsujita (2015) points to the particularity of national anthems. He explains that the fierceness of the national anthem controversy is based on the fact that the essence of the national anthem is the act of singing. Comparing the characteristics of the national flag and the national anthem, he admits that there are many similarities between *Hinomaru* and *Kimigayo*, such as that they were used to promote military nationalism during the war and they were both adopted as official national symbols in the ratification of the Act on the National Flag and Anthem in 1999. However, he argues that the striking difference 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. He points to the role of songs played at the time of Japanese modernisation, quoting the fact that the Japanese government, following examples in European countries, used music to create national unity in the entire territory of Japan that was previously divided into many clans and villages. However, this unity can be seen as top-down enforcement that can lead to totalitarianism. Urabe (2011) argues this to be the most problematic part of the *Kimigayo* controversy, as the enforcement of the act of singing can be interpreted as the enforcement of a thought.

This point raised by Urabe can also be related to the idea of speech acts and performative utterances (Austin 1962). In other words, singing the national anthem itself has a function of a declaration of an opinion on this controversy, which has led some school staff members to refuse to stand up and sing the national anthem as a statement of their beliefs. While the national flag can be passively accepted, the national anthem can only be actively accepted through singing. Thus, it may be better compared to the action of burning a national flag rather than the national flag itself, as it is also an active statement of a political opinion, and can cause a sensational controversy. The focus on the active characteristic of singing the national anthem therefore offers meaningful observation on the first question: Why the national anthem?

Nevertheless, the second question remains unanswered. While many other national anthems have similar characteristics, why is *Kimigayo* particularly controversial? There are many ways to respond to this question. This paper offers a cultural and linguistic observation surrounding this issue, pointing to the myth of spirit of language, also known as *Kotodama*. The compound word *Kotodama* literary refers to ‘Language Spirit’ (*Koto* = Language/Word + *Dama/Tama*=Soul). It is said to be derived from a prehistoric ritual in Shintoism called *Kotoage* (Language Raising) although the “the original content of the *Kotodama* myth and what remains today are largely reconstructed narratives” (Hosokawa 2015). According to this myth, a divine power resides in language with which “beautiful words, correctly pronounced, were believed to bring about good whereas ugly words or beautiful words incorrectly pronounced were believed to cause evil” (Kitagawa 1987: 68). With this interpretation of the myth, *Kotodama* has been a popular reference in linguistic, cultural, or even political discourse in Japan throughout its history, although its signification was reinvented in each context.

The earliest written record on *Kotodama* is found in three poems included in an anthology of poetry, *Man'yōshū* (c. 759), which was published slightly before the anthology *Kokin Wakashū* (c. 920) in which the original poem for the lyrics of *Kimigayo*, *Waga Kimi*, was included. The three poems are shown below.

- 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*]
(Yamanoue no Okura, *Man'yōshū* Vol.5, No. 894 in Thomas 2012, 6, underline and annotation added)
- The land of Yamato
in the region of Shiki
is a land
aided by word spirit [*kotodama*]
may good fortune be with you
(Kakinomoto no Hitomaro, *Man'yōshū* Vol. 13, No. 3254 in Thomas 2012, 7, underline and annotation added)
- At the intersecting roads
of word spirit [*kotodama*]
I do evening divination
the true oracle tells me
I shall see my beloved
(Kakinomoto no Hitomaro, *Man'yōshū* Vol. 11, No. 2506 in Thomas 2012, 7, underline and annotation added)

While there is no explanation of what *Kotodama* exactly refers to in the above poems, it can be seen that the idea of *Kotodama* was often associated with 'Land of Yamato' (the ancient name for Japan), as *Kotodama* was believed to lodge only in the 'correct language of Yamato correctly pronounced'. Ever since, *Kotodama* has been seen as a symbol of the Japanese language. For this reason, Miller (1982) also suggests that the term *Kotodama* encapsulates the Japanese attitude toward their language. The *Kotodama* discourse was thus employed for example in the movement of nativist studies in the seventeenth century that called for the appreciation of the Japanese native literature rather than the dependence on Chinese classics as well as during the Pacific War with criticism against loanwords derived from the languages of the enemies (*Tekikokugo*) (Miller 1977, Gottlieb 1995, Hosokawa 2015). It can therefore be pointed out that despite the diversity of contexts in which the *Kotodama* discourse is employed, the commonality

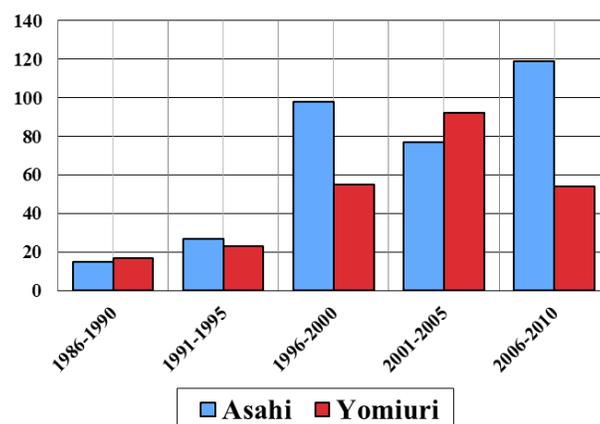
among these cases is a refusal of ‘foreign’ language and a desire to protect the alleged sacred ‘Japanese’ language, even though the interpretation of ‘foreign’ and ‘Japanese’ continues to vary.

Today, the popularity of the *Kotodama* discourse remains in the Japanese society. For example, it is easy to find references to *Kotodama* in news and social media. The following shows extracts from Japanese newspapers *Asahi Shimbun*.

- Western loanwords threaten the country of *kotodama*.
(A reader’s poem, 16 April 1997)
- *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*’.
(Editorial, 30 September 2006)
- I see danger in the psychological state of the person who refers to one’s mother as *mama* [mum] in the third person in one’s youth. The suspects of frequent juvenile delinquencies all have in common an immature personality, and I wonder if it is too much to say it is the result of undervaluing language, *kotodama*.
(Letter to the editor, 23 August 2008)

The above extracts show that now the *Kotodama* discourse is often used with the criticism against the over use of foreign (English) loanwords. Furthermore, while the term derives from an ancient ritual, the reference to the *Kotodama* myth has been more frequent since the 2000s compared to the 1980s and 1990s (Fig. 4). This corresponds to the timing of the ratification of the Act on National Flag and Anthem.

Fig. 4 Use of the term *Kotodama* 1986 – 2010 (Hosokawa 2015)



Based on the above points, two intertwined links between the *Kimigayo* controversy and the *Kotodama* myth can be observed and the article suggests that the combination of these two factors can offer a response to the second question: Why Japan? Firstly, as is shown by the

example of the popular reference to the *Kotodama* myth, uttering certain words out loud has a significant importance. This can also be confirmed with the linguistic practice in which a word homonymous to another word with a negative meaning (*Imi Kotoba*) is considered to be taboo, and tends to be replaced by another expression to avoid any bad luck caused by the use of such words. For example, to end an event, the word ‘closing’ is avoided, as it contains a negative meaning, and therefore the word ‘opening’ is used as in the expression ‘*Ohiraki Ni Suru*’ (To make it an opening). There are numerous other examples of *Imi Kotoba*, some of which are only used in certain contexts such as a wedding or a funeral, while others are used for all occasions such as *Ohiraki* (Opening). Given such characteristics of the Japanese linguistic attitude, it is understandable that the singing of the national anthem, uttering the controversial lyrics without having an agreed definition of *Kimi*, can be seen as particularly problematic in the Japanese society. Secondly, because of the strong association between *Kotodama* and the Japanese nation, it is possible that the public becomes even more sensitive about uttering the lyrics when they are for the national anthem, another national symbol paralleled with the Japanese language, which itself is, according to Miller (1982), the modern myth of Japan.

6. Conclusion

This article has thus examined the particularity of the *Kimigayo* controversy in Japan from a sociolinguistic and cultural point of view. The *Kimigayo* controversy is an actively debated subject and interpretations and explanations surrounding this issue have been offered from various fields of study including law, political science, international relations, sociology, and anthropology. From the point of view of international relations, for example, the controversy is explained by the fact that the national anthem was used in the war time discourse and is still associated with the wartime past. From the legal point of view, the controversy is related to the interpretation of Article 19 that guarantees the freedom of thought and conscience and its relation to the obligation to sing the national anthem at certain occasions. There is also a question of the interpretation of *Kimi*, the Emperor used in *Kimigayo*. The discussion surrounding *Kimigayo* is very fierce both in academic and public arenas.

In order to contribute to the examination of this controversy, this paper first focused on the fact that the *Kimigayo* controversy is fiercer than controversies surrounding other national symbols of Japan as well as the fact that the *Kimigayo* controversy is fiercer than controversies surrounding other national anthems. In other words, the paper sought general traits of a national anthem as well as factors specific to Japanese society to account for the fierceness of the debates. Building on the observation that the national anthem can be more controversial as it involves the act of singing as its central focus, the article then investigated the role of the national anthem as performative utterance. Based on this idea, the *Kotodama* myth was introduced as one of the examples that demonstrate the Japanese linguistic attitude. The myth can be related to the

Kimigayo controversy though its two essential elements: (1) national symbol and (1) vocal utterance. Even though the interpretation of the myth has been constantly reinvented throughout history, these two concepts remained at the centre of the *Kotodama* discourse. Firstly, in the Japanese discourse, as is the case with the national anthem, *Kotodama* is closely associated with the distinct Japanese language and culture. From eighth century poetry to the nativist movement in the seventeenth century, the war time propaganda to the recent discussion on the use of loanwords, the term *Kotodama* has been used synonymously to ‘Japaneseness.’ Furthermore, the essence of *Kotodama* is, like that of the national anthem, vocal utterance. It has thus been suggested that the popularity of the *Kotodama* discourse in Japan can be compared to the fierceness of the *Kimigayo* discourse.

It should not be taken that the *Kotodama* discourse is directly involved in the *Kimigayo* controversy. What the paper has underlined is that the comparison of the two commonly discussed subjects shows that the close entwining of the key concepts surrounding these two issues, such as nation, language, and utterance. As has been suggested by many scholars including Miller (1982) and Gottlieb (1995), the Japanese language itself is one of the most important national symbols for Japan, and in observing the *Kimigayo* controversy, this has been confirmed through its proximity to the *Kotodama* discourse.

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