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THE ACADEMIC REPRESENTATION OF JAPANESE KAMI BELIEF: CONCEPTUAL TRANSFER AND CULTURAL PERCEPTION ISSUES



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Abstract

Shintoism, which can be described as Japan's indigenous belief system, is based on the belief in numerous Kami (神). The concept of Kami, central to Shintoism, is one of the most difficult terms to translate into Western languages and Turkish. This study aims to examine the correct and incorrect forms of transmission of the concept, as well as its semantic tension with the concepts of "God" or "Spirit," through academic sources on Dergipark that address the concept of Kami. Kami, in Japanese thought, encompasses not only a supreme creator but also a broad concept that includes mountains, rivers, plants, animals, and even the spirits of ancestors – any "extraordinary" phenomenon that inspires awe or reverence in humans. The 18th-century scholar Motoori Norinaga defined Kami as "any phenomenon that inspires fear and respect without distinguishing between good and evil", emphasizing that the concept is an existential force rather than a moral category. However, research reveals certain problems in the transmission of the Kami concept. While in Western traditions God is a single power superior to everything, creating the universe, humans, and everything else, the Kami are productive forces present in everything in the universe and acting in cooperation. In Shintoism, there is no mention of a single creative power. The number of Kami is expressed in millions. The use of the word "God" to describe the pantheistic structure of the Kami, which are found in great numbers throughout nature, obscures the natural essence of the concept. Furthermore, while God is accepted as a perfect, supreme creative power, there are no Kami in Shintoism that are without flaws. Kami are beings that can die, become angry, or make mistakes, just like humans. In this context, equating the concept of Kami with the word "God" may lead to the loss of the pantheistic and naturalistic fabric of the Japanese belief system. This paper argues that the terms used in the transmission of Japanese beliefs should be approached without detaching them from the ontological grounding of that culture.

Keywords: *Turkish, Japanese, Shintoism, Kami, dergipark, cultural transmission, God, spirit, nature, faith.*

Shintoism is a belief system unique to Japan, with roots dating back to ancient times. As can be understood from its literal meaning, the core concept of this

belief, which can be translated as "The Way of Kami" (Kami no Michi), is Kami. While introducing a new concept to the literature, dictionaries traditionally serve as the primary reference source. However, it is not always possible to say that the short, translation-focused definitions found in dictionaries adequately convey the cultural and ontological depth of words. The word *Kami*, the main concept of the indigenous Japanese belief system, stands out as one of the most striking examples of this limitation.

In the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religions*, the explanation of the word *Kami* is given as "In Shintoism, God, Lord, deity, a God with power over good and evil" (Aydın, 2005, p. 357). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the concept of Kami as "in Japanese Shinto religion: an settled spirit". Japanese dictionaries provide more detailed and explanatory information about the concept, describing Kami as beings with extraordinary powers, natural, living alongside humans but generally belonging to the Heavenly Plain, believed to control the human world by acting in cooperation with each other.

When examining the differences in meaning given in dictionaries, it is observed that the word *Kami* is explained in Turkish and Western sources using simple and common terms found in the literature, without taking into account its usage in Japanese, Shinto ritual practices, and the non-theological nature of the concept. In this context, translations of the concept of *Kami* into other languages equate it with the concept of "God" in monotheistic religions, starting from dictionary meanings, which are seen as the primary reference source. However, in academic literature, the incorrect or incomplete translation of the concept of kami into other languages leads to a misunderstanding of the unique structure of the kami belief and the indigenous Japanese religion of Shintoism. This article was written to examine the fundamental problems encountered in the academic representation of the concept of Kami and its semantic tension with concepts such as "God" or "Sin" in Turkish, in light of data obtained from sources registered in the Dergipark database. Avoiding a critical approach based on articles, this study will address transmission problems in general terms. First, it is necessary to explain the concept of Kami, which is the subject of our study.

1. The Conceptual Framework of Kami

Shintoism is a belief unique to Japanese society, known since Japan's earliest historical periods, inherited from ancestors, and lacking a founder, sacred book, prophet, or doctrine. The concept of Kami forms the basis of Shintoism, which can be described as the indigenous religion of Japan. The concept that is the origin of Shintoism, a belief unique to the Japanese, also has a structure unique to the Japanese. Although the concept of Kami is often translated into other languages as God or Deity, these terms do not fully convey the meaning of the concept. The most elegant explanation of the concept of Kami was provided by Motoori Norinaga, a Japanese philologist known for his important works on Japanese classics, particularly the Kojiki and Nihon Shoki. According to Norinaga, Kami is anything that inspires awe or admiration, possessing superior, extraordinary qualities (Pehlivan, 2017, p. 368; Elçi & Yurt, 2020, p. 145).

Based on Norinaga's explanation, we can list the specific characteristics of the concept of Kami as follows.

The first requirement to become a Kami is to possess superior and extraordinary qualities within one's own group. In this context, people, animals, or natural objects that exhibit superior qualities compared to others in their own groups can attain kami status. The best examples of Kami in human form are ancestral spirits. Patriots who lost their lives defending their country, deceased emperors, and the spirits of family ancestors often attain kami status. It is believed that they continue to maintain their protective qualities as Kami after death (Gordon, 2020, p. 58). Although it is a common belief that the spirits of ancestors attain Kami status, there are differences regarding the environments in which they are active. Patriots and emperors believed to be descended from the Sun Kami Amaterasu are accepted as Kami by the entire nation after their death, while family ancestors are only the Kami of their own families (Ōno, 1962, p. 58). An example of animals attaining Kami status is a dog with the ability to run much faster than other dogs, which can become the Kami of dogs (Takemitsu, 2013, pp. 16-29).

As can be understood from the phrase "possessing characteristics that inspire fear or awe" in Norinaga's explanation, not all Kamis in Japanese Shinto belief are good Kamis that inspire awe. Just as there are good Kamis who are prayed to for the welfare of the country and society, there are also evil Kamis who are feared and prayed to for protection from their evil deeds. The best example of this is the belief that people who were bad political or religious leaders in life will continue to be bad Kamis after death, causing harm. Therefore, prayers are offered to them to avoid angering them and to be protected from disasters. This is because natural disasters such as earthquakes, storms, floods, or tsunamis that occur in Japan and negatively affect society are associated with the evil actions of these kami (Plutschow & O'Neill, 1996, pp. 16-17).

Another important characteristic of Kami is that they are regarded as living beings that live, work, and have emotions like humans. Not only humans or animals that have attained Kamis status, but also natural Kamis possess the characteristic of being alive. Indeed, Amaterasu, the Sun Kami who holds an important place in Japanese mythology and is regarded by the Japanese as the ancestor of their lineage, is not merely a source of light and heat; she is also a Kami who engaged in a power struggle with her brother and, as a result of this sibling conflict, withdrew to a cave in a state of estrangement (Gordon, 2020, p. 58).

In Japanese mythology, the creation myth mentions two kami named Izanami and Izanagi, who were tasked with creating the Japanese islands and race. Although these Kamis undertook the creative task, they are not seen as the sole and absolute kami. On the contrary, Japanese mythology believes that numerous Kami with different roles work together to govern the universe. Apart from the Kami working together to fulfill their duties and oversee the universe (the Japanese islands), another distinguishing feature of the Kami is that their number is significantly greater than the concept of gods or deities in other religious beliefs. While there

are approximately 337 Kamis in the Japanese mythological works Kojiki and Nihon Shoki, today the number of kami is expressed in millions. This is not due to any misunderstanding or exaggeration, but rather stems from the freedom of individuals and clans to create Kami, the belief that they are chosen people because they are descended from Kami, and the belief that after death, every individual will attain Kami status, leading to the spirits of ancestors being regarded as Kami (Ōno, 1962, p. 27). In this context, Kamis can be classified as follows: National Kamis, Provincial Kamis, Jinja (Shrine) Kamis, and Village Kamis.

Water, sun, fire, storm, and moon, which play an important role in meeting people's basic needs, are recognized as national Kami. Additionally, natural spaces such as mountains and trees, depicted as the habitats of kami, are also included in the national Kami category. The Sun Kami Amaterasu, seen as the origin of the Japanese empire, is the most important and highest-ranking among the national Kami (Plutschow & O'Neill, 1996, pp. 11-12). Amaterasu's position at the top among the national Kami, and indeed among all Kamis, does not mean that she is the ruler or leader of the other Kami. As mentioned earlier, all Kamis in the Japanese Kami belief system have their own specific duties, which they perform in cooperation with each other. No Kami is seen as superior to or having authority over the other Kami (Ōno, 1962, p. 27).

Provincial Kamis are called Ujigami (氏神). These Kamis are not worshipped nationwide, but rather in specific regions. It is believed that provincial Kamis are the guardian Kamis of the sacred lands they rule over and the families living in these regions (Plutschow & O'Neill, 1996, pp. 11-12). There are special Jinja (shrines) built for these Kamis by the local people, and they usually take the name of the region where they are worshipped. During certain periods, the participation rate of the local population in the festivals held for the provincial Kamis at these Jinja is quite high (Ōno, 1962, pp. 29-30). Even Japanese people who choose to live far from their hometowns do not neglect to return home to participate in festivals held for the Ujigami. This is because participating in these festivals not only demonstrates respect for the family Kamis but also ensures the preservation of family unity without severing ties to one's roots.

The Kamis in the third category, as their name suggests, are specific to certain Jinjas. Among these Kamis, the most revered are the patriots who attained Kami status by sacrificing their lives for their country within the framework of ancestor worship. It is estimated that there are around 50 Jinja shrines built for them throughout the country. Yasukuni-Jinja (靖國神社), built during the Meiji period for patriots who attained Kami status, is quite popular. The popularity of this Jinja stems from the fact that it honors war heroes, including soldiers who were considered war criminals by foreign countries, who were honored with prayers throughout the country alongside the Imperial family, and that worship continues throughout Japan to keep nationalist sentiment alive, despite all external pressure and condemnation (Havlíãek, 2009, pp. 57-60).

Finally, there are Kamis, which are considered sacred by the villages. Prayers are offered to these Kamis in open fields or in simple Jinja shrines built by

villagers for the village's prosperity, peace, and protection from evil. Kamis and the Jinja shrines believed to house them usually share the same names as the villages. Since the state only provides financial support for Jinjas dedicated to national Kamis, villagers are also responsible for the maintenance and repair of the Jinjas they build (Fukuhara, 1996, pp. 241-268).

As can be seen, in Japanese thought, it is known that there are numerous Kamis from the national level down to the village level. In Japan, which has a nature-based culture, it is observed that the vast majority of Kamis are associated with nature, regardless of their recognition or size (Kawabata, 2010, pp. 100-102). Although the fire kami was considered the most important Kami in early Japanese history, with the development of agriculture, the sun and water Kami rose to the top rank (Takemitsu, 2013, pp. 16-29). Although the order of importance of the Kami has changed throughout history according to human needs, the Kami have always been influential figures not only in religion but also in the political and cultural life of the Japanese. They are beings who grant the emperor his sovereign authority, protect the Japanese people from enemies and evil, and express their anger through natural phenomena.

2. Problems of Conceptual Transfer

Although the concept of Kami, which is the origin of the Japanese Shinto belief, is attempted to be conveyed in dictionaries and academic texts in other languages with definitions such as spiritual being, sacred being, superior power, transcendent, sublime, or god, these words do not fully capture the depth and scope of the concept in Japanese thought. This is because it is possible to say that the supernatural beings of the kamil, which form the basis of the religion, are a general name encompassing humans and animals (Şenavcu, 2022, p. 77).

The biggest obstacle to correctly understanding the concept of Kami is the tendency to confine it within the absolute and flawless God templates of monotheistic religions (Karaoğlu & Acar, 2024, p. 82). God is the creator of all existence, the sole supreme being who is eternal and everlasting. Kami, on the other hand, are sacred beings who do not possess the qualities of being creators or rulers on their own, but who play a collaborative role in preserving the peace and prosperity of the Japanese people. The 18th-century scholar Motoori Norinaga defined Kami as "any kind of extraordinary phenomenon that inspires fear and awe, without distinction between good and evil", emphasizing that the concept is an existential power rather than a moral category (Pehlivan, 2017, p. 368; Elçi & Yurt, 2020, p. 145). As can be understood from this explanation, the notion of the existence of good or bad angels is another point that contradicts the concept of God. For in monotheistic religions, God is absolute and flawless.

In Shintoism, however, no Kami is perfect; Kami can die, decay, or make mistakes just like humans (Pehlivan, 2017, p. 369). This situation symbolizes a fundamental break from Semitic religions, which draw a clear ontological boundary between the Creator and the created. The fact that Kami possess human characteristics, that deceased individuals can become Kami, and that not only humans but also animals and natural objects can be considered Kami (Şenavcu,

2022, pp. 79, 82, 85) reveals the different perspective on the Creator and the created in Shinto belief. The disregard of this fluidity in academic representations, however, leads to the simplification of Kami as merely mythological figures (Acar, 2024, p. 206).

It is believed that the Kamis reside in the mountains, rivers, trees, and even in natural phenomena such as storms. This pantheistic and animistic structure in Japanese belief expresses the vitality of nature itself rather than a transcendent power over nature. In this context, the reduction of Shintoism to nature worship in modern academic literature can also be seen as an inaccurate misrepresentation. Such representations fail to adequately reflect the depth of Shintoism, which views nature as a sacred space and a living entity (Pehlivan, 2017, p. 368; Elçi & Yurt, 2020, p. 145).

Shintoism is not a monotheistic religion and has a belief in numerous Kamis. The number of Kamis is often expressed as 8,000, 80,000, 8 million, or even 88 million. These expressions containing the number 8, which are mentioned in relation to the number of Kamis, are not so much a mathematical figure as a metaphor representing that the Kamis are too numerous to count, that sacredness is everywhere and boundless (Ōno, 1962, p. 27). Furthermore, before interpreting these numerical expressions merely as exaggerated markers, it is important not to overlook the belief of the Japanese, who consider themselves descended from Kami, that they will become Kami after death, (Şenavcu, 2022, p. 79) nor to disregard people's freedom to create Kamis.

3. Cultural Transmission Issues

One of the words used to convey the concept of Kami in other languages is the concept of the sublime. In Western aesthetics, the expression of the sublime is generally based on a distant fear and human helplessness in the face of nature. In contrast, the Japanese understanding of Kami is built on integration with the reality of nature and perfection, rather than distancing oneself from nature. While the sublime in the West is usually associated with extraordinary magnitude, in Japanese aesthetics, the perfection of a single cherry blossom can also possess the same sublimity. In this context, attempts to explain the Kami experience within the framework of Western aesthetic understanding in academic texts cause the essence of Japanese aesthetics to be lost (Elçi & Yurt, 2020, pp. 144-146).

People who wish to attain the divine nature bestowed upon humans, animals, and natural objects must possess a pure heart. In Shinto belief, the purification ritual (harai) performed to cleanse the heart of evil and impurity, generally conducted by Shinto priests, is a practice that has led to misinterpretations in different cultures. According to a field study cited in the sources, 60% of university students in Turkey interpreted Shinto purification scenes as cleansing from sins and evil. These results show that the harai ritual was intended to be based on moral foundations. However, there is no concept of sin in Shintoism. The purpose of the purification ritual is to renew mental confusion and a defiled heart. In this context, representing this fundamental distinction with the "sin" terminology of monotheistic religions leads to a misinterpretation of Japanese culture's unique understanding of ethics and ontology (Pehlivan, 2017, p. 369).

The linguistic choices used in the transmission of concepts have shaped perception. The cultural problems that arise in the transmission of the concept of Kami to other languages are also seen in sources translated from other languages into Japanese. For example, in the first Japanese translations of the Quran in the 1920s, the word "Jōtei" (Emperor), which refers to the Japanese imperial cult, was used as the equivalent of the word "Lord," while "Kami" was preferred when referring to Allah. Such translation decisions led to the Kami concept being detached from its original theological context and adapted to the political and different religious norms of the time (Abidoğlu, 2023, p. 301).

Conclusion

Articles in the Dergipark database that directly or indirectly address the Japanese Kami belief system have been found to examine the concept from theological, ritual, or philosophical perspectives. In theologically focused studies, the Kami concept is often addressed in an explanatory manner, but the term "god" is frequently used in parentheses. This situation, while showing a partial sensitivity towards presenting the concept without translation or explaining it more easily to the reader, demonstrates that dictionary-based equivalence has not been completely overcome. In ritual-focused studies, the concept is evaluated in a practical-social context, and the relationship established by Kami with natural events, ancestors, and social life is revealed through ritual elements. Philosophical studies, on the other hand, reveal that the concept can be interpreted not only in terms of its religious nature but also as a cultural and aesthetic experience.

Comprehensive analyses based on available sources clearly reveal that the academic and cultural representation of the Japanese Kami belief suffers from a profound ontological reductionism and cultural filtering problem. The most striking finding of the research is that confining the concept of Kami to the absolute and flawless God patterns of monotheistic religions has destroyed the intrinsic and vital fabric of Shintoism. In Shintoism, no Kami is absolutely flawless; on the contrary, the fact that they, like humans, can make mistakes, get angry, and even die and decay is diametrically opposed to the Western-centric definition of God. At this point, rather than simplifying the concept of Kami as merely a spirit or deity, it is essential for the accuracy of academic representation to use the original meaning of the word, as emphasized by the 18th-century scholar Motoori Norinaga, defining it as "any extraordinary phenomenon that inspires awe and fear in humans, without distinction between good and evil."

The most fundamental misconception in cultural transmission is the association of purification rituals with the concept of sin. Field studies presented in the sources show that a large majority of students in Turkey, around 60%, interpret Shinto purification scenes as moral cleansing. However, from a Shinto perspective, impurity is not so much a moral sin as a temporary cloudiness that obscures the clarity of the mind and heart. Purification is performed not to escape the wrath of the gods, but to reunite with the universe and achieve harmony with nature. Ignoring this fundamental distinction leads to a misunderstanding of the tolerant nature of Japanese religion and, indirectly, its culture, by casting it in a punitive mold.

Furthermore, while the concept of the sublime in Western aesthetics is based on a distant fear, the Japanese understanding of Kami is based on direct contact with the reality of nature and perfection, proving the aesthetic gap between the two worldviews. Today, popular culture tools such as anime and manga carry these religious phenomena around the world, while viewers continue to decipher these codes through their own cultural frameworks (such as ablution in Islam or baptism in Christianity).

In conclusion, the correct interpretation of the concept of Kami requires removing this term from the theological filters of monotheistic religions and approaching it within its own cultural context as a sacredness present in every part of life, in every river, mountain, and in the spirits of ancestors. Academic studies should view concepts not as "terms" (fixed contents) but as 'sources' that must be constantly rediscovered, and should deconstruct the animistic structure of the Japanese belief system on its own ontological ground. Only then can the Kami belief, which is at the heart of Japanese culture, be represented in its true sense, beyond a reductive definition of "God."

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