The Concept of Kami

In order to understand the concept of Kami of the Japanese, it is important to wipe off a preconception caused by the word, god, an English translation which is often used for the word Kami. In Shinto, there is no faith in the concept of the absolute one god who is the creator of both nature and human beings. The ancient Japanese had never divided material and spiritual existence, but considered that the both were inseparable, seeing everything to be spiritual. In other words, they did not draw a border between a certain object and the work of that object. According to the Shinto myth, there was one thing in the beginning of this universe. Later that thing was divided into two things: Heaven and Earth. From Heaven, Kami appeared and a couple of Kami who were male and female appeared last gave birth to the various Kami, the land of Japan and her nature as well as people. The Shinto faith starts with a belief in this mythology. Therefore, Shinto does not acknowledge the existence of the substantial difference or discontinuation between Kami and man, nature and human beings. It can be said that Shinto is basically the faith in the life-giving power.

However, Shinto is not pantheism which sees all the existence on this world as Kami itself. If it is necessary to define its concept, it might be the best to refer to the opinion of Motoori Norinaga, a scholar in the late 18th century, which is now widely accepted. He wrote, "Whatever seemed strikingly impressive, possessed the quality of excellence and virtue, and inspired a feeling of awe was called Kami." Here "the quality of excellence" means an enormous power which gives great influence on many things. It is beyond the human power or human works. It brings a good luck and happiness to man but at the same time it could bring a misfortune or an evil as well. On the other hand, both natural elements (or phenomenon) and man are given a possibility to become Kami, because both the land and the people of Japan were given birth by Kami. So, they are all children of Kami.

Nevertheless, all of them are not Kami by themselves. The principle of the polytheism is reflecting here that the only thing that has a great influence on human life could be Kami. For instance, relating to natural phenomenon, Kami of Rain, Kami of Wind, Kami of Mountains, Kami of Seas, Kami of Rivers, Kami of Thunders are worshipped. Thus, objects of worship are limited to those which are closely associated and have great influences on human life. In the case of human beings, all people are revered after their death at their home as ancestral Kami. However, people whose spirits are enshrined after death are limited to those who have had a great contribution to a community or the state. People who
are enshrined during their lifetime are especially limited to those who have enormous spiritual power over human life.

Occidental theologians have long regarded the human attitude of having an awe towards the mystical power of nature as 'Nature Worship'. Shinto, however, does not impersonate nor divinize nature itself, which is the physical existence that works according to its own system. Shinto considers that people feel awe to some natural elements which have especially great influence to human life, and worship their spirituality and pray for their blessing. In the case of animals, their spirits are called 'mono', a kind of spirit. Because they were considered sometimes to do mischievous to human beings, people performed rites in order to console animal spirits. This faith is still observed nowadays. In a medical faculties of some universities, for instance, Shinto or Buddhism rites are performed in order to console the spirits of animals which were killed for experimental purposes. There are another cases of performing a rite to console the spirits of some tools which were made and utilized by men in everyday life such as needles, knives, shoes; or to purify buildings before inaugurating them including even nuclear power stations or factories of computer machines, wishing that all the labour works and productions involved in there would be done properly and safely. The same attitude is applied to Shinrei (or divine spirits). Since people worship divine spirits as they have great influences to their life, the spirit which brings evils to human beings called 'Magatsuhi Kami' is also awed as Kami. According to Shinto, Kami in general also gets angry and brings some misfortunes to people although Kami usually guards and blesses people. Accordingly, it is very important to practice the faith by performing rites for Kami.

It is necessary to call attention to a fact that Shinto is polytheism in order to understand the concept of Kami. At the same time, it might be useful to shift the question of the Kami concept to the question of the Japanese value system, so that we could be able to avoid unnecessary misunderstanding. In the case of Monotheism, which worships one absolute god, it seems that the concept of the absolute truth is dominating. If there is any conflict between two people or groups, one of them is considered to be right and the other is wrong and untrue. On the other hand, polytheism which is based on pluralism does not consider the existence of the absolute truth, and accordingly there is distinctive difference between the two. If there are two things which contradict each other or cause a conflict between the two, both of them are wrong and right at the same time. Any quarrels or disputes are not judged by the one-value orientation. As the result, both sides will be punished equally. Also it can be said that people who believe the absolute truth tend to think that coexistence is possible only among those who share the same value. People who stand on the pluralism, on the other hand, consider that coexistence is possible even among those who have different opinions or ideas because each individual has a truth in its individuality, so they have to give tribute to each other. It is coexistence by harmony. Shinto based on the pluralism takes up the plural-value orientation, It can be said that Shinto - in this case, the Japanese had accepted foreign religions such as Buddhism,
Confucianism and Yin-Yang thought, as the Japanese always have followed according to this plural-value orientation. In fact, the Shinto mythology does not mention about the omniscient and omnipotent Kami. Kami who gave birth to this land had failed at first, and they requested other Kami in heaven to show them the right way. Then, Kami in heaven responded that one may search the answer through practicing divination. Even the supreme Kami, Amaterasu Ohmikami, once failed at judging her brother's inner mind. In the case of Kami called Kuebiko who is believed to have an exceptionally great power, for example, he knows everything happening in the world, yet, he can not move even a step because he has no leg. Thus, according to Shinto, there is no Kami who has no defect.