

## Letters to the Gods — The Form and Meaning of *Ema* —

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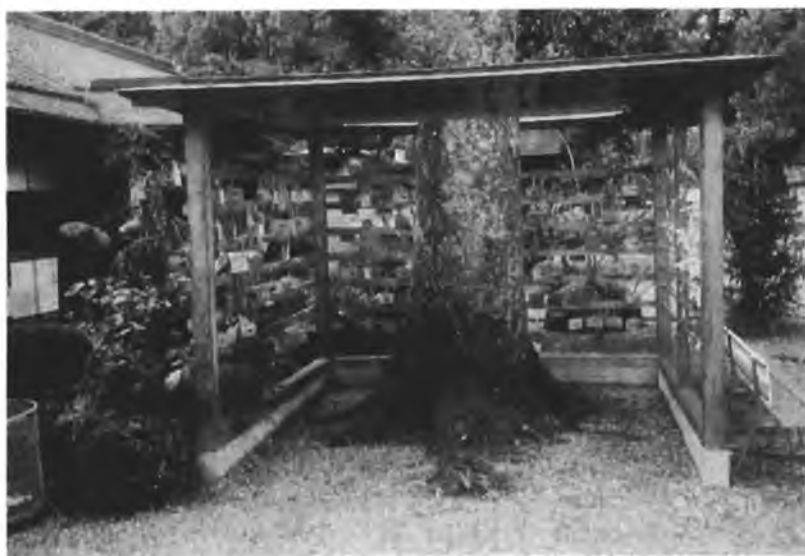
### *Introduction*

*Ema* 絵馬, the votive tablets upon which people write requests and imprecations to the deities and buddhas, are perhaps the most conspicuous and colorful of all the numerous talismanic and religious objects commonly found at Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples in Japan. Unlike protective amulets and talismans such as *o-mamori* お守り and *fuda* 札, which are considered to contain the sacred powers of the deities enshrined at the religious site and which are taken away as representations and symbols of that power, *ema* are left at the site to act as a medium through which the wishes and needs of supplicants may be made known to the figures of worship enshrined there. They are not the only objects to operate in this way, for various other objects, including round stones and the slender wooden sticks known as *gomagi* 護摩木, which are later consigned to the flames of the ritual fire ceremony known as *goma* 護摩 in Buddhism and *hitakisai* 火焚祭 in Shinto, also are used in this way. *Ema* are, however, the most prevalent of all these, found almost ubiquitously at temples and shrines throughout Japan.

Generally flat and made of wood, they come in all shapes and sizes, although probably the most common shape is of an irregular pentagon about 15 cms across and 8 or 9 cms high. The designs on them vary considerably, although usually they have some relevance to the religious institution at which they are sold. Common motifs include the figure of worship enshrined there and scenes from the site's *engi* 縁起, or foundation legend, as well as other popular religious and cultural images such as the appropriate animal in the 12-yearly zodiacal cycle. They generally also have imprinted on them the name of the institution concerned and, frequently, also the specific benefits (*riyaku* 利益) that may be acquired from or bestowed by the deity enshrined there.

There is usually a space on the *ema*, most commonly on the back,

where people may write requests, prayers, and wishes to the deities. Frequently space is provided for the supplicant to write in his or her name, address, age, sex, date of visit to the shrine or temple, and any other information that may be considered relevant. Sometimes, as with the *ema* from Fujii-dera southeast of Osaka, the institution's address may be stamped on the front along with a space where a postage stamp may be stuck, so that the *ema*, complete with request, may be posted to the temple if so wished, thus becoming, in the truest sense of the word, a letter directed to the world of the deities and buddhas.



**Photo 1:** A collection of *ema* hung within shrine precincts.

Because of their colorful nature *ema* have for long attracted the attention of scholars, particularly folklorists, and a reasonable amount of literature exists about their enormous varieties of style, shape, and motif, and about the interesting inscriptions that have been written upon them (see, for example, IWAI Hiromi 1974, 1980, 1983). Yanagita Kunio was one of the earliest folklorists to comment on *ema*, noting that one of the deepest impressions of his youth was seeing, at the age of 13 in 1877, an *ema* in a small wayside hut dedicated to Jizō that showed a woman killing the newborn baby she could not afford to keep, while Jizō stood weeping in the background. The *ema* manifested her pain and sorrow at having had, due to poverty and circumstances, to follow this practice of population control known as *kogaeshi* 子がえし (sending the child back) or *mabiki* 間引き (thinning out), that occurred in earlier ages in many areas of Japan, especially during years of famine. The pragmatic realities that

necessitated this action did not, as the *ema* showed, prevent those who performed it from suffering, or from making supplications to Jizō and other figures of worship in atonement (Iwai 1983, pp. 49–51).

*Ema* have also attracted the attention of some Western scholars, notably Frederick Starr and Daniel Holtom, both of whom have written about the nature, type, and historical development of *ema*, as well as noting some interesting inscriptions that are to be found on them (Starr 1920, Holtom 1938). Holtom's article deals particularly with one type of *ema* depicting a padlock superimposed over the ideogram *kokoro* 心 (heart / mind) and found at the temple Hōzan-ji at Ikoma near Osaka. He describes how those seeking the help of Kankiten 歡喜天, the Buddhist deity enshrined at Hōzan-ji, in upholding a vow of abstention that they have made, would write their vow on the *ema* and hang it up at the temple. And he provides translations of 28 such *ema* from the late 1930s that showed various supplicants asking help in abstaining from such things as alcohol, tobacco, gambling, and adulterous and other such sexual liaisons (pp. 154–63, esp. 161–63).

Although I share this interest in the diverse shapes and motifs of *ema* and have, like Starr, Holtom, and many Japanese folklorists, spent time collecting interesting and strange inscriptions, I wish here to consider *ema* as more than simply examples of folk art and objects of curiosity. As mediums for sending messages from their writers to the spiritual realms of the kami and buddhas they are, in the words of Morizaki Kazue, "letters to the gods and buddhas" (*shinbutsu e no tegami* 神仏への手紙) (1983, p. 82), written expressions externalizing and setting out in concrete form the inner wishes and volition of those who write them. It is with the contents and meanings of these letters that my major interest lies, and in this article my intention is to ask whether it is possible to decipher any general themes about these contents and about their meanings, and to ask what this in turn tells us about the general Japanese religious milieu within which they are found. This will involve asking such questions as: who writes *ema*, what sorts of things do they write and in what contexts, what expectations do people have in writing them, and what inner meanings may be found behind the inscriptions themselves? In other words, can reading *ema* be more than just a pleasant pastime, and provide messages that are helpful in the overall study of Japanese society and religion?

### *The History and Derivations of Ema*

In order to develop the foundations upon which this analysis can be made, it will first be necessary to provide a short historical discussion of their origins and development. The word itself is written with the ideograms *e* 絵 (picture, drawing) and *ma* 馬 (horse), and thus means simply

“horse picture,” and whilst contemporary *ema* may carry a wide variety of motifs, all the available evidence suggests that the earliest *ema* (which can be dated to the early eighth century) were, in fact, depictions of horses. This in turn is related to the important position of the horse in ancient Shinto and folk religious cosmologies, in which it was regarded as the mount and/or messenger of the kami and was thus seen as a special holy animal with a status approaching the divine (GORAI 1984, p. 184). They were regarded as especially important in transmitting messages between the human world and the kami concerning rain, transmitting requests either for rainfall in times of drought or for rain to stop in times of excess, but they also were important in other ritual and festival situations. To this day many major Shinto shrines in Japan keep one or more sacred horses that play important roles in ritual settings. (Indeed, the open-sided hall where people hang their *ema* at Izumo Taisha also houses a full-size model horse, which presumably acts as a symbolic medium for transmitting these requests to the spiritual world!)

Because of this exalted status, horses were prized ritual offerings to the kami, especially when seeking the kami's help in bringing rain, for which a black horse was most appropriate, or stopping it, in which case a white one would be used (Iwai 1983, pp. 14–16). Their value as an offering, however, was offset by their cost, which made them affordable only by the very rich. As a result, it is generally considered that the practice developed of substituting a horse figurine made of clay or, later, a picture of a horse painted on a wooden board (i.e., an *ema*) in place of a live horse.<sup>1</sup> This replica or substitute horse was simultaneously an offering and a means of conveying petitions that allowed people from all walks of life to transmit their wishes and needs to the kami.

Archaeological evidence tends to suggest that this practice was in existence by the early Nara (710–794) era, with clay and wooden horse figurines excavated from sites dating to the early part of the Nara period. In 1972 the discovery of an *ema* measuring 7.3 by 9 cms depicting a horse, and datable to the late Nara era (i.e., latter part of the eighth century), at Hamamatsu in Shizuoka Prefecture provided the first evidence that *ema* in the form of wooden board paintings were extant in that period (Iwai 1983, pp. 18–19). Subsequently, other archaeological discoveries provide evidence of still earlier *ema*. According to a report in the *Mainichi Shinbun* on 5 September 1989, an *ema* measuring 19 by 27 cms and depicting an ornately saddled horse, which had been recently excavated from a site near Heijō Palace in Nara and placed on display at the Nara National Research Institute of Cultural Properties, is cur-

<sup>1</sup> One might suggest, also, that it probably was not in the best interests of the shrines to receive live horses every time a major prayer was made, as this would have significant repercussions in terms of stabling and feeding.

rently considered to be the oldest example in existence and has been dated to the very early Nara period.

The practice of ritual substitution of an expendable object for a valuable one, with the expendable object being thereby transformed “into” the valuable one for the purposes of offering, can be found in other cultures besides Japan. Evans-Pritchard, for example, has described how the Nuer of the southern Sudan were wont to use cucumbers in sacrificial rites as surrogates for the economically less expendable oxen. When this was done (for reasons of convenience and economics, either because a suitable ox was not available or because the supplicant could not afford one), the Nuer would regard the cucumber as an ox. This did not mean that they confused the one with the other for, as EVANS-PRITCHARD wrote:

They do not, of course, say that cucumbers are oxen, and in speaking of a particular cucumber as an ox in a sacrificial situation they are only indicating that it might be thought of as an ox in that particular situation. . . . The resemblance is conceptual, not perceptual (1956, p. 128).

We can see here parallels with the practice of offering *ema* instead of horses. While a perceptual dimension is, unlike the Nuer case of oxen and cucumbers, clearly present in the Japanese use of horse figurines and *ema*, thereby implying a sense of suggestibility, I think it is fair to suggest that the conceptual perspective played a more vital role. The importance of the figurine or picture was that the donors (and presumably the ritual officiants of the shrines) conceived of it as a horse for the purposes of offering.

From the mid-tenth century onwards various references to the legitimacy of offering a wooden model instead of a real horse began to appear in Japanese texts and historical records. The first recorded use of the word *ema* occurs in the *Honchō bunsui* 本朝文粹 of 1013, where there is a reference to an offering at Kitano Tenjin shrine of *shikishi ema sanbiki* 色紙絵馬三匹 [three paper *ema* (pictures of horses)], and from this time onwards references to *ema* appear frequently in Heian literature in such texts as the *Honchō Hokegenki* 本朝法華驗記 and the *Konjaku monogatari* 今昔物語 (Iwai 1983, pp. 16–18). The use of the ideogram 匹 (read according to context as *hiki*, *biki*, or *piki*, and also written at times with the ideogram 疋) in the above textual reference is interesting because this ideogram is a counter for animals,<sup>2</sup> and this conveys the clear implica-

<sup>2</sup> In contemporary Japanese the word *hiki/biki/piki* has commonly come to be used for small animals, while *tō* 頭 is used for large animals such as horses. However, *hiki/biki/piki* used to be used, according to the major Japanese language dictionary *Nihon kokugo daijiten* 日本国語大辞典, as a counter for animals such as cows and horses in earlier ages, only gradually coming to refer primarily to small animals.

tion that the donor regarded the offering *as* an animal, and as a representation of a living entity rather than as an inanimate object. Thus it was—just as a horse or other animal might be—conceptually alive in the mind of the donor.

There are numerous examples from later ages that bear similar inscriptions indicating that they were regarded very much as living objects. IWAI gives examples from Narijima Hachiman shrine in Yamagata Prefecture, where *ema* depicting sacred horses and dated to 1553 and 1556 carry inscriptions describing them as *shinme ippiki* 神馬一疋 (one sacred horse), and from Mitsumine shrine in Saitama, where horse *ema* with the inscriptions *ema ippiki* 絵馬一疋 bear the dates 1639 and 1643 (1983, p. 17).

Such evidence tends to provide fairly conclusive proof that *ema* originated as substitutes for horses. Not all writers on the subject have subscribed entirely to this line of argument, however. Yanagita, for example, considered that they derived from the practice of seeking the kami's protection or help for a specific object or problem, and thought that the original *ema* were representational depictions of an object that was placed under the kami's protection by a petitioner. Thus, Yanagita argued, horse owners would offer a votive tablet denoting a horse (*their* horse) to ask the kami to protect and guard it, while those seeking, for example, help with health problems would draw pictures of the appropriate or afflicted part of their body on a votive tablet and offer it at a shrine. His suggestion is that the word *ema* was applied to all these votive offerings because the horse motif was originally the most predominant of such requests (YANAGITA 1970, pp. 341–43).

Yanagita, unfortunately, offers very little in the way of empirical evidence or solid argument to justify his assertions. As a result, especially with the hindsight of the concrete archaeological evidence cited above that has emerged since he wrote, his arguments appear rather insubstantial and speculative. Similar problems can be found with the idea put forward by Gorai Shigeru, who speculates that the origins of *ema* might be based not so much in the relationship between man, the Shinto kami, and horses, as in the world of Japanese folk customs concerning the spirits of the dead and in the world of Buddhism, the primary agency in Japan for dealing with the souls of the dead and with the relationship between the spirits of the dead and the world of the living. While Gorai acknowledges the importance of the horse as a holy animal in the realms of Shinto, he also points to a great degree of horse imagery in Buddhism, especially in Japan, citing, for example, Batō (“horse-headed”) Kannon 馬頭観音, who was especially popular with farmers and horse breeders in earlier eras.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Until comparatively recently (i.e., at least until the late 1950s), Batō Kannon continued

He discusses a popular custom followed at *o-bon* of making horse figurines out of vegetables (usually cucumbers and aubergines), which serve as offerings to and mounts of the souls of the dead. These horse figurines are considered to be the mounts on which the souls of the dead return to earth for the *o-bon* festival and on which they go back afterwards to the world of the dead. Gorai asks whether this custom of making a model horse out of vegetables to serve as the mount of the dead might not pre-date the use of horse figurines or pictures, and hence be the real origin of *ema* (GORAI 1984, pp. 183–94).

While the use of vegetable horse figurines is certainly further testimony to the special regard accorded to horses in Japanese religious terms, and of the practice of replicating the horse, there appears to be no concrete evidence that this in any way predates the evidence of the use of horse figurines and pictures for votive purposes in the Nara age. The archaeological data tends to imply that the reverse is just as, if not more, likely. Like Yanagita, Gorai appears to have made the assumption that, just because a custom exists (as with the practice of making horse figures out of vegetables at *o-bon*), it must therefore possess great antiquity. In the light of the concrete evidence recently produced by excavations, however, I think it is safest to conclude that his ideas, whilst providing a further rationale for, and evidence of, the use of depictions of horses, do not offer any convincing arguments about the actual origins of *ema*.

#### *Proliferation and Development*

It would thus seem feasible to consider that the origins of *ema* are founded in the special relationship of the horse with the Shinto kami, with *ema* evolving as substitutes for horses while possessing the same symbolic meaning and nature as them, able to transmit human wishes and messages to the kami and to act as offerings to them. Their Shinto-esque derivations have not, however, restricted their usage to Shinto alone. As with so many phenomena in the Japanese religious world, they have come to be widely used as prayers and offerings at Buddhist temples as well, and, indeed, in virtually any circumstance in which people make petitions to and seek benefits and help from the spiritual world. The exact point at which their diversification into the Buddhist world began and when they started to be used at Buddhist temples as a means

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to be an important figure of worship in communities where the horse was of major economic importance. More recently, with the prevalence of automobiles, the horse has become increasingly marginalized and, along with it, the veneration of Batō Kannon has diminished. For a discussion of this cult and its contemporary decline in a rural area in which horse rearing used to be a major economic activity, see KYBURZ 1987, pp. 189–228.

of sending messages to the buddhas is uncertain, although this is generally agreed to have been sometime during the Kamakura (1185–1333) era. Several of the illustrated scrolls of this age, such as the *Nenchū gyōji emaki* 年中行事絵巻, depict the use of *ema* (predominantly portraying horses) in various locations, including Buddhist temples as well as Shinto shrines (Iwai 1983, p. 21).

The Muromachi (1338–1573) and Tokugawa (1603–1868) eras saw further proliferation and diversification, with the widespread appearance of many other motifs symbolizing the needs and requirements of those that erected them. Along with this diversification of motifs *ema* developed as a folk art form in their own right, offering scope for all those who so wished to express themselves and their wishes in pictorial form. The artistic dimensions of *ema* were expressed also in the emergence during the Muromachi period of *ōema* 大絵馬, large-sized *ema*, which were resplendent works of art in their own right, often a meter or more in width and height and painted by professionals commissioned by rich donors. They would be offered to a shrine or temple in furtherance of a request of some sort or as an expression of gratitude for a benevolence received. Some of the best-known examples of this genre may still be seen at shrines and temples throughout Japan. Kiyomizu-dera in Kyoto has several magnificent large *ema* from the seventeenth century. Depicting sailing ships returning to Japan laden with goods, these were offered to the temple by merchants grateful for the safe return of their ships from trade missions (KIYOMIZU-DERA 1987, pp. 130–32).

Special halls known as *emadō* were built for the purpose of storing and displaying these large *ema*. While there are references in documents to *emadō* in the mid-fifteenth century, the oldest verifiable one in existence is that constructed in 1606 at Kitano shrine in Kyoto under the patronage of Toyotomi Hideyoshi (Iwai 1980, p. 162). They became somewhat akin to public art galleries in their own right, as well as important arenas in which budding artists could display their talents; indeed, the extent to which the painting of large *ema* was a prominent element in the development of Japanese art is shown by the fact that *ema* painted by many of the famous names of Japanese art, including Hokusai, are still extant (Hickman 1983, p. 197).

The professionalization of *ema* painting led also to the emergence of a class of specialists who made their living painting and selling the ordinary small-sized *ema*. Although originally made and presented by members of the general populace (a practice that has not entirely died out to this day), they came, particularly in the Tokugawa age with the expansion of a monetary economy, to be produced more and more by professionals. Various references are found in descriptions of festivals, markets, and activities at shrines and temples in the Tokugawa era of such people hawking *ema* (Naoe 1986, p. 294).



The development of a professional class of makers contributed also to the formation of a common array of motifs and symbols used on *ema*. Besides the various *ema* depicting popular figures of worship, such as Jizō and Kannon, and other such designs, there developed an immense vocabulary of motifs containing implicit meanings specifying the purpose or intent for which they were put up. This vocabulary of symbols and motifs came to take on the form of a symbolic language in its own right, with its key symbols and meanings founded in the many and diverse activities, beliefs, and customs of the enduring Japanese folk religious tradition, in its concerns with problems and needs in everyday life, and in its underlying notions that by expressing and externalizing a need and putting it into concrete form one is taking the first steps towards its realization. Thus the “language of *ema*” centered especially in the sympathetic and graphic representation and depiction of desired results, and in picturing objects that in some way alluded to the problem requiring a solution or to the desired end result.

I can only give a brief synopsis of some of the better-known motifs and symbols in use here. The Hōzan-ji *ema* with its motif of the padlock with the ideogram *kokoro* is a good example of an *ema* whose illustration overtly symbolizes its purpose and the desires of its author. Another well-known motif, used as a prayer for the provision of sufficient milk to rear a baby, depicted two breasts spurting milk, while a whole range of *ema* with rather striking designs connected with sexual problems and the desire for potency and fertility appeared. Some of these are still found at religious sites in Japan today, as with the *ema* currently sold at Tagata shrine, the popular fertility shrine near Nagoya, which simply depicts a phallus and leaves few in any doubt as to the types of wish it symbolizes.

Many of the symbols centered on curing or helping by association: an *ema* depicting a dog stood for easy childbirth, the dog being traditionally associated with easy and safe birth in Japan. Sometimes plays on words and flashes of humor were included in this “*ema* language.” An *ema* showing an octopus, for instance, was a request for a cure for warts, for the word *tako* 蛸 (octopus) was a homonym for *tako* 胼胝 (wart). A stingray pictured on an *ema* represented a wish for relief from piles, largely, from what I can decipher, because both are equated with a poisonous sting in the tail.<sup>4</sup>

### *Styles, Types, and Themes in Contemporary Japan*

This diversity of styles and designs continues in the present day, contrib-

<sup>4</sup> For further examples of common motifs and symbols see HICKMAN (1983, p. 197); these have largely been drawn from the writings of Iwai.

uting to the attractive and eye-catching nature of *ema* in general. The general patterns of production and sale of *ema*, however, have altered somewhat. One no longer sees *ema* vendors and hawkers, for *ema* are nowadays sold almost entirely at and by the temples and shrines themselves. Quite when this shift occurred is unclear; although HOLTOM in 1938 wrote of the disappearance of many of the famous and traditional *ema* shops of Tokyo as a result of the "competition of a modern age" (pp. 156–57), he does not imply that this is a result of the assimilation of this role by the shrines and temples themselves. Indeed, later in his account he shows that visitors to Hōzan-ji still acquired their *ema* from shops outside the temple and on the roadway leading up to it, seeking out an appropriate *ema*, discussing with the vendor what should be written on it, and then taking it to the temple to be hung up (p. 161).

At Hōzan-ji at present, however, *ema* are purchased inside the temple precincts, at offices operated by the temple itself; purchasers thus acquire, write on, and hang up the *ema* within the temple confines. A similar pattern holds true for virtually every shrine and temple I know. With the contemporary dominance of the *ema* trade by the temples and shrines, the numbers that are handmade by the supplicants themselves have become minimal; while one may occasionally see one or two that have been handmade by the petitioner, these have become very much the exception. This is not, I should add, because the religious centers discourage individuals from making their own; rather, the convenient accessibility of contemporary *ema* that can always be purchased at the site tends to dissuade people from the time-consuming task of making their own.

Sometimes officiants at the shrines and temples produce their own *ema*, although it appears more common either to commission them from a professional *ema* painter or to buy them from a specialist company.<sup>5</sup> Since companies may distribute their *ema* over a wide area, or to a number of shrines and temples, it is not uncommon to find the same designs appearing at different places. None the less, there is still much variety to be found amongst *ema*, with even some of the smallest shrines changing their designs periodically, and with many popular shrines and temples offering a choice of many designs. The sale of *ema* (and of other religious trinkets and talismans) plays a part in the economies of religious centers, and this in itself acts as a spur encouraging shrines and temples to offer attractive and eye-catching designs that will tempt even casual visitors to purchase them.

<sup>5</sup> I base this remark on observations at numerous temples and shrines throughout Japan, and on various conversations with officiants at such places over the past four years. The pattern for *ema* thus appears to be virtually the same as that reported by SWANGER (1981, p. 240) for *o-mamori*.



Photo 2: *Ema* sold at Shijo shrine using arrow and target symbol.

Many of the images found on contemporary *ema* have remained constant with earlier eras. Yet it seems to me – especially when I examine the descriptions of earlier writers such as Yanagita and Starr, and compare the writings of *ema* historians such as Iwai with my own observations at religious centers over the past few years – that there is, in the present age, a less pronounced emphasis on pictorial symbolism than in earlier eras, and a greater focus on the use of words to transmit the inner meanings of *ema*.

This is not to suggest that signs and symbols have become entirely redundant. One common design found on *ema* today shows a target, usually with an arrow (on which words such as *shogan jōju* 諸願成就, “successful completion of all requests” are often written) embedded in its center. Such *ema* denote the desire of the writer to succeed in a task, and are especially prevalent at shrines and temples where the kami or buddha enshrined is prayed to for help in passing examinations. Sometimes the use of signs and symbols continues to be underpinned by the utilization of homonyms or near-homonyms, a practice made more accessible by the high levels of contemporary literacy in which people are able to read the ideograms that are used. It is quite common, for example, for *ema* designed to relay prayers seeking educational success to be pentagonal in shape, for the word for pentagon, *gokaku* 五角, is a near-homonym of *gōkaku* 合格, the word used to denote educational success. An *ema* sold at Shijo shrine at Kinosaki in Hyōgo Prefecture shows an arrow striking a target [see photo 2]. On the arrow are the ideograms

*gōkaku kigan* 合格祈願 (prayer for success in education), while underneath it are written the ideograms *gokaku ema* 五角絵馬 (pentagonal *ema*). The theme of the *ema* is thus expressed by its shape and by its symbolic picture, although one notes that, perhaps because of the preoccupation of the age and of those enmeshed in the Japanese educational system with the written word, the point is emphasized in writing as well.

The pictures on *ema* can tell a story and express a meaning not dependent on words in other ways as well. Figures such as Daruma, the legendary founder of Zen Buddhism who is, in Japan, a popular folklore figure symbolizing endurance and determination to succeed (a theme also epitomized by the Daruma doll that is seen throughout Japan), may serve as a symbol of meaning and intent on *ema*, especially those concerned with educational success.

Sometimes, too, Buddhist temples use their *ema* as a medium to represent a moralistic tale, story, or teaching from the Buddhist scriptures. Several of the *ema* I have seen on sale within the Tōdai-ji complex in Nara are of such a sort: one some years ago at Tōdai-ji's Nigatsudō depicted the famous Buddhist parable preaching the importance of selflessness, sacrifice, compassion, and service in which the Buddha (in a previous incarnation) offered his body as food to a starving tigress and her cubs so that they might live. The *ema*, then, can operate not simply as a "letter to the gods and buddhas" but also as a medium through which religious teachings and symbolic messages may be relayed and transmitted to the general public.

Despite the continuing existence of *ema* whose symbolic designs express their meaning, it is far more common in contemporary Japan to find that the aims and requests of the *ema* have been expressed in verbal form by the supplicant him/ herself. This focus on the written medium can largely be attributed to the effects of universal education. In earlier ages when literacy was by no means as widespread as today, there was a far greater need for an "*ema* language" that expressed its meanings through visual symbols and pictures than there is in an age where virtually everyone can read and write satisfactorily. Literacy removes the need to rely on figurative symbols and enhances the scope for self-expression. This in turn is a contributory factor in the decline of *ema* made by the supplicants themselves: when one possesses the ability to put across one's message in writing there is less need to express it in figurative terms by creating one's own *ema*. Now all that is required is to purchase one of the *ema* offered for sale at the shrine or temple and adapt it to one's own requirements by filling in, in the space provided, one's own particular and personal plea or request. In such ways words have generally taken over from signs as the key element of contemporary *ema*.

*Ema: Contemporary Messages and Meanings*  
— *Who Writes What and When?* —

The writing of one's personal request on the *ema* has, as I have already suggested, led to a general diminution of the importance of the picture as a means of transmitting messages. If this perhaps diminishes the scope of interest for those primarily interested in *ema* as expressions of folkloric art, it none the less provides more opportunity for the collection of empirical data. It is often easier to decipher the true intent of the petitioner from the words he or she has written than from a symbolic picture. Since many people also write further information such as their name, age, sex, and address as well, this, coupled with the evidence of the inscriptions themselves, can provide a basis on which to start examining some of the questions I posed in the introduction.

Before I do so I should add a few words of reservation and caution, for it is not all that feasible to carry out much long-term research on the contents of *ema*, because of the custom followed at most shrines and temples of periodically burning the *ema* that have been offered. This fulfills a dual function founded in a typical Japanese religious union of the symbolic and the pragmatic: by ritually burning them the wishes of the writers are symbolically liberated and sent up to the kami and buddhas (just as they are in the *goma* rite), while at the same time the racks upon which they are hung can be cleared to make space for fresh ones to be put up. The time of the burning depends on the institution; just before New Year is a common time, as this is a general period of transition that symbolizes the eradication of the old and welcoming of the new, and hence it is widely seen as an appropriate season to burn those *ema* that represent wishes belonging to the dying year. As the New Year period is also a major *ema* buying and writing season, many places are also keen to remove the previous year's *ema* so as to make space for new purchases.

Many major shrines associated with education, such as the network of shrines across the country dedicated to the education deity Tenjin 天神, burn their *ema* in October, usually just after the Tenjin festival and prayer day that occurs on the 25th day of every month. At Kitano Tenmangū shrine in Kyoto, for example, the annual *ema* burning takes place on 27 October; in 1981 approximately 80,000 *ema* were consigned to the flames in a five-hour ritual conducted by the shrine's priests. It is from around this period onwards (reaching a peak in late January and early February, the examination season when university and school entrance examinations take place) that the Tenjin shrines sell the bulk of their *ema* (TENJIN SHINKŌ HENSHŪ IINKAI 1981, pp. 146–47).

This rapid turnover of *ema* means that contemporary research is dependent on evidence that may disappear at any time and hence might not be verifiable by subsequent researchers. This also makes it difficult

to make any real comparisons, in terms of content and prevalent themes, between different eras, a problem compounded by the fact that most of the evidence about *ema* of earlier ages has come from folklorists who, as I have already noted, were concerned more with apparently exceptional and interesting inscriptions than with carrying out a methodical collection of data or even analyzing apparent trends and overall themes. To put it in a nutshell, most of those who have written about *ema* in the past have not been concerned with *ordinary ema* (i.e., with the mass of *ema* bearing common designs) but with exceptional ones.

Holtom's study of the Hōzan-ji *ema* in 1938, which lists the inscriptions on 28 *ema* at the temple, is a case in point. He does imply that other themes and requests were to be found on other *ema*, and that these 28 were not the only ones expressing vows of abstention, but he does not provide any comments on the overall themes reflected within them. When a team of Japanese researchers carried out a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the *ema* at Hōzan-ji in 1983 they found that only 19% of requests and imprecations on the 998 *ema* at the temple at the time they did their research sought the support of Kankiten in upholding a vow. The vast majority centered on seeking success in education, on family safety and happiness, and on other such issues concerned with welfare in the present existence (SHŪKYŌ SHAKAIGAKU NO KAI 1985, pp. 57–61). Whether this represents any form of change in the perspectives of the *ema* and of the writers, or whether the *ema* connected with vows of abstention were, even in the 1930s, only a minority, is impossible to say.

As is commonly the case with aspects of popular religious culture, there are few, if any, hard-and-fast rules concerning the ways that people deal with *ema*. The inscriptions written on *ema* are generally directed to the figure(s) of worship enshrined in the religious center where the *ema* are placed. This does not mean that they are *not* meant to be read by anyone else: the written plea made by a young boy whose *ema* I read at the Kannon hall at Ichijō-ji temple near Himeji, which bore the words *kozukai UP shimasu yō ni* こづかい UP しますように (more pocket money) was probably designed as much for his parents' eyes as for Kannon's. Equally, some of the *ema* at Jishu shrine, the famous lovers' shrine in the precincts of Kiyomizu-dera in Kyoto, where young people (predominantly young girls, it seems) ask the kami to link them up with a particular person they are keen on, signing their names in the process, can be seen as a Japanese form of graffiti designed to be read not just by the kami but by the desired partner as well.

There is a widely perceived understanding that it is probably more efficacious to write one request on each *ema*, as this more clearly expresses the sincerity of the writer and removes any suggestion of greed than would the writing of several wishes at once. However, while most

*ema* probably do carry just one request, it is by no means uncommon to see them with two or more; the only practical limit that exists is one of space. I have seen *ema* carrying as many as five requests, and even separate requests by different people on the same *ema*. The boy demanding more pocket money also asked Kannon to assist him in his studies and to help the Hanshin Tigers win that year's baseball championship. Baseball is, incidentally, a common theme for *ema* writers, at least in the Kansai region, with the Hanshin Tigers, the most popular team of the region, being mentioned frequently. *Ema* can thus provide a scope and setting whereby fans can bear witness to their support for a favorite team; it is possible, too, that cynics might, considering the fluctuating fortunes of the Tigers in recent years, simply comment that they obviously were in need of the prayers!

#### *Ema: Some Inscriptions and Examples*

I will briefly provide here some examples of requests and imprecations written on *ema* that I have collected over the past few years. This is not intended as a comprehensive survey but as a way of illustrating the types of request and issues that motivate those who write *ema*. This will also demonstrate some of the areas of concern that are seen as being within the provenance of the kami and buddhas.

*Ema* provide a medium through which people are able to externalize and express their innermost fears and worries, and to seek solace and support in times of trouble. Such nuances are clearly exhibited in the following despairing plea from a woman who wrote:

May I soon be able to pay back the money I owe and get some peace of mind, and also may I overcome my illness. (Seen at Kokawa-dera, Wakayama, 17 June 1988)

Similar unease comes through from the couple who, giving their ages as 32 and 30, externalized and gave expression to an inner sense of need by writing, at Yoshimine-dera, near Kyoto, that they wanted a baby *soon* (the word *hayaku* 早く, "quickly," being emphasized). Several other *ema* at this temple expressed other concerned pleas to Kannon, including one by a man of 36 who sought a wife *soon* (*hayaku*), and many who pleaded for the amelioration of various ailments for themselves or family. One man of 38, for example, wanted his blood pressure to go down, while two children aged 7 and 5 asked for their mother's foot to get better (inscriptions recorded at Yoshimine-dera, 10 October 1987).

Besides expressing fears and somewhat desperate worries, *ema* may also be used to bring forth a sense of joyous optimism, ambition, and hopes for the future, as with the following three *ema*, all seen at Chion-in at Amanohashidate (27 September 1987):

(1) May I quickly get a lot of money and go to London. May I meet a really great guy. (Written by a female aged 19)

(2) May we all get married and be able to bring up happy families. (Written by three young women, names and addresses given)

(3) May we always live together harmoniously and in good health. May we have a healthy baby. (Written by a couple, names given)

Success in examinations and entry into particular high schools and universities, among the most prevalent wishes to be found on *ema*, often combine this sense of ambitious optimism with the somewhat fraught insecurities that are endemic to the Japanese education world with its immense competition and famed “examination hell.” Those who write such *ema* may make general requests (e.g., May I study better) and sometimes extremely ambitious ones, as with “May I get 100% in every examination I take” and “May I have the best brain in the world” (both seen at Kasuga Taisha, Nara, 5 October 1987). Many ask for help in getting into specific institutions or even, as with the following, into specific departments of such institutions:

May I enter International Christian University’s education department. (Seen at Chōgosonshi-ji, Ikoma, 18 September 1988)

The implications of this *ema* are clearly that the writ of the kami and buddhas may extend also to Christian institutions! Further requests in connection with education may extend to the acquisition of artistic accomplishments, such as learning the violin and, a request that appeared several times at Yoshimine-dera, playing the piano.

General requests for safety of all sorts and for prosperity are further very prominent themes on *ema*, often occurring together, as with the following:

For family safety, and may our business company prosper. (Names of 4 family members appended; Ishikiri shrine, Osaka, 22 June 1987)

Such concerns for safety, prosperity, and success, which reflect both the insecurities and the competitiveness of Japanese society, may also be expressed by companies or business organizations, as with the following:

May we win the company production prize for the 5th time. (From all members of the Matsushita Electric Company Publicity Department; Chōmei-ji, Shiga Prefecture, November 1987)

Illness and the desire for healing remain common areas of concern, especially at religious centers commonly associated with the powers of healing, such as Ishikiri shrine in Osaka, where I saw the following:

My hip hurts: please help make it better. (29 May 1987)



*Ema* are not written only for the benefit of the writer but may also express feelings and aspirations for others as well, a practice particularly prominent in connection with illness and healing. I surveyed the *ema* at Kengaigohō shrine, a shrine associated with healing and located in the precincts of Chōgōsonshi-ji in Ikoma, on 18 September 1988. There were 101 *ema* hanging up at the shrine; 58 sought some form of amelioration for illnesses and physical pains, 26 of these being for the benefit of the writer. The other 32 were for someone else, 19 of them clearly being for family members since they referred to the afflicted person by title (father, mother, etc.); it was unclear whether the others prayed for (who were referred to by name) were family members or not.

While such expressions of social love and caring are probably most common in connection with healing, they occur in other areas besides, such as education, as with the following:

May Jun-chan somehow get into university. (Signed Mami; seen at Zōjō-ji, Tokyo, 6 June 1988)

Discussions with various friends and students in Japan have further suggested to me that it is quite a common practice for older brothers and sisters—especially sisters—to write *ema* on behalf of their younger siblings, especially their brothers, before their examinations. Such actions serve both as tokens of sisterly (or brotherly) love and as means by which to encourage the sibling to keep up with his or her studies and to perform well, not just for his or her own sake but for the family's as well. Similar expressions of familial love and the projection of aspirations onto family members can be seen in the *ema* that parents frequently hang up when they take their babies to the shrine for their first shrine visit and blessing (*hatsu miyamairi* 初宮参り); such *ema* generally express the hopes that the baby will grow up to have good health and a long and happy life.

As a rule, all these inscriptions are primarily concerned with human health, prosperity, and happiness in this world. Perhaps the one area of exception to this involves *ema* concerned with *mizuko* 水子, fetuses that have died in the womb, usually as a result of an abortion. At temples that specialize in performing memorial services for *mizuko* there is often a special place where such *ema* may be hung, frequently presided over by a statue of Jizō, the Buddhist figure who is most commonly associated with caring for the souls of dead children. Unlike other *ema*, whose inscriptions and requests are aimed at the figure of worship at the shrine or temple, those concerned with the *mizuko* speak directly to the spirit of the child and rarely if ever ask for benefits for the writer. The inscriptions make poignant reading, expressing the sadness and regret of the writer (usually the mother, but at times both parents). Probably the most common inscription on these *ema* is a simple *gomen ne* ("I'm sorry . . ."),

with perhaps a short explanation of why the abortion was necessary and an invocation asking that the aborted child sleep in peace. There are clear continuities and parallels here with the *kogaeshi* or *mabiki ema* of earlier days, with the writer(s) being able to express some of their inner feelings and sorrows, and to put into context the circumstances that caused them to act as they did in the first place.

#### *Ema: Some Statistical Analysis*

It is common, when a shrine or temple is noted for a specific form of benefit (*riyaku*), as with, for example, the Tenjin shrines and their connections with education and learning, for most of the *ema* to be directed towards that particular area. None the less, as a rule one finds quite a degree of diversity in the types of requests and inscriptions at any religious site, with the notable exception of *mizuko* sites, where it is unlikely that one would find an *ema* for anything other than the spirit of the fetus.

To give some examples of this diversity I will next cite two small surveys I have done, one at a shrine where the primary form of benefit was healing, and the other at a temple where the chief benefit bestowed by the buddha there was concerned with education. As I noted earlier, Kengaigohō shrine in the precincts of Chōgōsonshi-ji in Ikoma is primarily associated with healing, and of the 101 *ema* there when I surveyed the shrine's *ema* in September 1988, 58 specifically mentioned healing of an illness or pain. Of the others, 33 *ema* contained requests for the prevention of some problem (e.g., *yaku yoke* 厄除け, or prevention of danger) or for the promotion of safety and prosperity. A further seven, one of them being for someone other than the writer, centered on educational improvement and success. The other three were unclear: on one the ink had run, making it illegible; one just had a name and no request; and the third simply had the ideogram *kokoro* on it.

At the temple Chion-in at Amanohashidate in northern Kyoto Prefecture, I surveyed, on 27 September 1987, the contents of one of the racks of *ema*. Since this temple enshrines Monju, the buddha of wisdom who is widely associated with education, it was no surprise to find that the most prevalent request made there was connected with the pursuit of educational success. Of the 71 *ema* on the rack in question, 40 (58%) were directly connected with educational success and study, four of them being for someone other than the writer. The rest were evenly distributed over a number of areas, but were largely concerned with the pursuit of happiness, family safety, and business prosperity, including the three cited earlier of the couple pledging affection and seeking a child, the three women seeking marriage and happy families, and the girl wanting money to go to London. Thirty-eight (53%) were written

by females, 29 (41%) by males, and 4 (6%) by couples. Everyone here had written down their date of birth under the Japanese system, i.e., using Shōwa dates rather than Western ones, and the ages of the writers, analyzed by decades under the Japanese system, were as follows:

Year of birth	Age	F	M	Total	%
Shōwa 10–19	43–52	2	2	4	5.5%
Shōwa 20–29	33–42	1	3	4	5.5%
Shōwa 30–39	23–32	4	4	8	11%
Shōwa 40–49	13–22	30	16	46	63%
Shōwa 50–59	3–12	5	6	11	15%

(Two of the 71 did not give a date of birth and have been excluded:  
in the cases of the four couples I have recorded both their ages.)

Besides the predominance of females, probably the most striking fact is that by far the largest number were born in the decade from Shōwa 40 (1965) to 49 (1974), i.e., those between the ages of 13 and 22 at the time, with the next largest group those of the decade below. This correlates well with the position of the temple as a place to pray for help in the field of education, for this period from the age of about 13 until 22, when students graduate from university, is precisely the time when the Japanese are most firmly locked into the competitive maelstrom of the education system.

Probably the most comprehensive statistical data on *ema* available come from the research done at a number of temples in the Ikoma region by a group of Japanese researchers under the guidance of Shiobara Tsutomu of Osaka University. On 24 August and 18 December 1983 they surveyed the *ema* at Hōzan-ji, examining 998 in all. Of these, 40% were written by males, 37% by females, and the rest did not say; 51% had the writer's age on them, and the survey notes (though does not provide any age breakdown) a predominance of young people (SHŪKYŌ SHAKAIGAKU NO KAI 1985, p. 60). The researchers also examined the *ema* at Sanbō Kōjin shrine, which, like Kengaigohō shrine, is located within the precincts of Chōgosonshi-ji. Not all the 136 *ema* put up at the shrine during the first two months of 1984 gave the writer's age, but a tally of those that had, showed that 58% were written by people under the age of 30 (p. 92). At Ishikiri shrine 1012 *ema* were analyzed in November 1983, the majority of which (52%) were put up by people between the ages of 10 and 29 (p. 126).

Overall, the most prevalent request was concerned with education, something that is not especially surprising, given the apparent predominance of young *ema* writers at these places; clearly one can deduce from

these figures that education is both a primary concern of young people in general and a central preoccupation of their religious activities. Although Ishikiri shrine is well known as a healing center, the highest number of requests on the *ema* (341, or 22% of all the 1528 wishes recorded) were connected with education, more than healing (319, or 20%), maintenance of good health (157, or 10%), family safety (110, or 7%), traffic safety (84, or 5%), or success in finding a job (83, or 5%) (p. 126). Amongst the 187 requests recorded on the 136 *ema* at Sanbō Kōjin shrine in Chōgōsonshi-ji, the largest category, 62, or 33% of the total, were for success in examinations and education; a further 6 requests (3% of the total) asked for strength in studying. The next most common were the prevention of danger (44 requests, or 23% of the total), and family safety (31, or 16%) (p. 92). At Hōzan-ji the picture was a little more complex, since a greater proportion of the *ema* appeared to have multiple requests or vows on them, but of the primary requests expressed, the most common were educational success (205 requests, or 20% of the total), abstinence of some sort (196, or 19%), business prosperity (129, or 13%), family prosperity/happiness (111, or 11%) and good health (79, or 8%). When taking secondary and tertiary requests into account, those seeking abstinence were the most numerous, with 252 (or 17%) of the 1477 requests recorded in all (pp. 58–60).

A survey of these figures also suggests that there may have been some changes in the contents of those *ema* seeking Kankiten's help in abstaining from something or in upholding a vow, when compared with the contents reported by Holtom in his 1938 article. Then, if we are to accept his reporting, the four major preoccupations were with alcohol, tobacco, gambling, and sexual relations (usually adulterous). The last of these categories was the most commonly mentioned, occurring in 16 of his 28 examples. The first three of these abstentions (alcohol, gambling, and tobacco) still scored well in the Ikoma survey, but the last, abstention from sexual liaisons and severance of adulterous relations, was far less prominent, being mentioned in only 18 (under 2%) of the 998 *ema*. A new category that seems to have appeared, however, were those (21 in all, or just over 2%) in which the writer sought help in giving up drug habits, including glue sniffing (pp. 58–59).

While the Hōzan-ji *ema* reflect a continuing human struggle and preoccupation with the potentially addictive demons of alcohol, tobacco, and gambling, they also appear to illustrate how new and very contemporary problems, in this case drugs and glue sniffing, may emerge as areas of turmoil in which people may feel unable to cope or break their habits without recourse to spiritual assistance. It is possible, too, that the apparent diminution of those expressing their concern in the field of sexual affairs may also be connected to changing social patterns and

reflects an apparent liberalization of sexual mores between the 1930s and the 1980s.

### *Context and Meaning*

From the above data one can deduce that *ema* are largely connected with pragmatic and everyday matters of concern in the lives of their writers. It is rare, except at a few places such as Hōzan-ji, to see *ema* expressing vows of abstinence; even where such cases exist they are, as we have seen at Hōzan-ji, very much in the minority. Nor are themes such as expressions of gratitude and thanks to the kami and buddhas, and prayers for non-personal matters such as world peace, much in evidence. They are, apart from the case of *ema* connected with the *mizuko*, almost invariably for the benefit of the living.

*Ema* are expressive elements reflecting the all-encompassing nature of Japanese religiosity, in which all human needs and desires are regarded as legitimate issues for which to call upon the spiritual help of the kami and buddhas. They provide a blank slate upon which all may express themselves and their wishes directly and personally to the deities, either for their own benefit or for that of someone close to them, at any level they wish, from the light-hearted and humorous vein of boys seeking spiritual support for their favorite baseball teams, to the more grave pleas of women driven to despair by their debts.

This focus on pragmatics and everyday needs places *ema* very much in the mainstream of the Japanese religious world. The acquisition of various talismans and amulets, and praying for “this-worldly benefits” (*genze riyaku* 現世利益), are activities that, according to surveys, show constantly high levels of participation among all ages. While there is a high rate amongst all ages in the acquisition of charms of various types, the young (especially those in their teens and early twenties) tend, according to the 1981 NHK survey of Japanese religious consciousness, to have higher rates of occasional use of these items than any other group. A subsequent NHK survey has suggested that the *only* religious activities participated in by almost 60% of these age groups are those connected with seeking *genze riyaku*.<sup>6</sup>

The data I have cited concerning *ema* accord with such patterns: the young are generally the most active group of *ema* writers in Japan, while

<sup>6</sup> The 1981 NHK survey on Japanese religious consciousness showed that 29% of those in their late teens and early twenties used charms “often,” with 77% doing so “often and sometimes”; a higher percentage among older generations (56% of those aged 70) acquired charms “often,” although only an extra 16% did so “sometimes” (SWYNGEDOUW 1986, pp. 3–4). The 1983 NHK survey of Japanese consciousness showed that activities centered on the acquisition of this-worldly benefits were the *only* religious activities of 56% of those in their late teens and 59% of those in their early twenties (NHK YORON CHŌSABU 1986, p. 116).

their concern with education suggests both why this should be so and why, perhaps, their religious participation should be involved with little else outside the pragmatic realms of immediate benefits. I have already alluded to the immense pressures that students are placed under by the competitive nature of the Japanese education system, and it is probably fair to say that the need for success in this system is perhaps the major demand placed on young people. Many of the students I have taught in Japan have stated that, even if they normally would not go to temples and shrines or regard themselves as religious in any way, they would visit such places to acquire a talisman or write *ema* asking for success before important examinations.

Much *ema* writing, as in the case of students before examinations, fits into the patterns of Japanese religious behavior summed up in the phrase "turning to the gods in times of trouble" (*kurushii toki no kamidanomi*). It is at such liminal points in life, when a situation appears to be not entirely within the control of the individual, when a potential crisis occurs in life, or when the person concerned feels unsure of his or her abilities to fulfill a series of needs or requirements, that many individuals call on the entities of the religious world to give them help and support, and turn to religious modes of expression to give vent to their problems. In this situational framework *ema* are one of the numerous means available whereby a person, without prior commitment, may call on the powers of the spiritual world for psychological support and reassurance, and through which he or she may attempt to assert control and order over events and circumstances.

*Ema* thus provide a cathartic function, serving as an emotional release mechanism whereby those under duress can externalize their inner desires, fears, and worries, and can thus rationalize and place within a manageable framework events and situations that appear to be outside the normal control of the individual. Furthermore, by defining and bringing into the open an inner feeling, that wish or need is structuralized and given form, and as such its realization as an actuality is set in motion; *ema*, along with talismans and amulets, represent a medium through which such volition and will may be channelled and given external form by being explicitly and outwardly stated. Such expressions of inner feelings (i.e., *honno*) may run counter to the prevailing social ethic of the time. Thus, as Iwai has shown, it was common during the Second World War for large *ema* seeking war victory to be placed at most shrines and temples; but behind these large *ema*, many people, especially the wives of soldiers, would often put up small *ema* asking for soldiers' safe return from the battlefield. Such *ema* were thus placing their personal preference for survival before the general and socially accepted desire of victory (Iwai 1983, p. 54). The tense relationship between the essential and intrinsic competitiveness of Japanese society

today, which is nowhere more evident than in the education system and the fight to enter universities, and the much vaunted ideals of social harmony and group cohesiveness, provides a setting for a similar dynamic. While paying lip service to the prevailing ethics of harmony and cooperation, individuals may, through the means of an *ema*, give voice to their true intent and to desires for personal advancement. In other words, *ema*—and other forms of prayer and activity in religious centers—offer a channel whereby Japanese people may therapeutically liberate their feelings in an individual way that enables them to transcend the restrictions of their social milieu.

It should be stressed that *ema*—like *o-mamori* and other religious amulets and talismans—are not magical in the sense of being in and of themselves coercive. Starr and Holtom have suggested that *ema* often have a coercive and magical dimension (STARR 1920, pp. 6–7, HOLTOM 1938, p. 158), and there is no doubt that the use of sympathetic symbols, as was common in the Tokugawa period and which still, as with the *ema* showing an arrow embedded in a target, may be found today, displays some vestigial nuances of magic. However, I have not found any evidence, at least from those that use *ema*, that any magical effect is ascribed to them in contemporary usage. Whilst I have talked to many people who put up *ema*, I have yet to find anyone who considers that they act in a mechanical or coercive way so as to guarantee success.

Many of those I have talked to have expressed some degree of faith in the kami or buddhas, and feel confident that their prayers will be listened to, but this does not mean that they believe that the *ema* will work in any mechanistic way. Success does not come just from writing something on an *ema*, as a Japanese student I used to teach informed me. She stated that she often purchased amulets and wrote requests on *ema*, and that she had faith in their efficacy. However, she clarified this statement by saying that she would never depend on an *ema* for, for example, passing an examination, for further concrete action (i.e., study) was required as well. The efficacy of the *ema* was in providing a way for her to express her true intent, and hence liberate rather than suppress her feelings, and in getting her into the right frame of mind for the examination. It served as a reminder of her obligations in the matter for, in writing it and asking for the cooperation of the deities, she also was undertaking a commitment, indeed virtually a contractual obligation entered into with the deity, which, in this case, involved studying and doing her best.

This attitude is well illustrated by an *ema* for educational success sold at Iwashimizu Hachiman shrine in Yawata, Kyoto Prefecture. This pentagonal (*gokaku*) *ema* for educational success (*gōkaku*) depicts on its face, in a wonderful display of the assimilative dimensions of Japanese religion, a picture of Thomas Edison. On its back, besides a space for the purchaser to fill in a request, are the words *gōkaku kigan* (prayer for

educational success) along with Edison's well-known saying (translated into Japanese on the *ema*) that genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration – a worthy piece of advice for would-be scholars and students preparing for examinations [see photos 3 & 4]. The *ema* expresses clearly what Japanese students well know, and what my student told me: an *ema* can symbolize that the accomplishment of human needs contains spiritual dimensions, and can help express inner wishes and act as a reassurance in the face of worry or as a symbol reinforcing one's obligation to study. However, it does not represent a licence to success. Without study and without the determined resolve of the individual, all the *ema* and talismans in the world are useless.

A further point to be made about the purchase and use of *ema* is that to a very great degree this is casual and motivated by the circumstances of one's surroundings. It is probably true to say, for example, that many students buy *ema* because of peer-group pressure. Seeing their classmates going to the shrine or temple before an examination, or visiting such places with their friends, plays a part in persuading many to pray for help and to acquire the symbols of such benefit in the form of *ema* and talismans. There is, of course, an "insurance factor" at work here, too, with many reasoning that it is safer to follow suit even if one considers that such actions are probably not efficacious, than to risk the possibility that they might be.

The casual and ludic nature of much shrine and temple visiting also plays a part in *ema* buying, and the underlying sense of humor and vibrancy manifested in some of the *ema* inscriptions I have cited bears testimony to this. A certain amount of *ema* buying and writing is influenced by these themes (a point that is easily verified by watching the crowds at festivals such as New Year), which owe perhaps more to impulse than to predetermined action. I have, for instance, often seen people, especially small groups of schoolgirls, huddling together to decide what to write on an *ema* after it has been purchased, and children, having successfully petitioned their parents to buy them an *ema*, then requiring their assistance in determining what to put on it.

The humorous and ludic dimensions to *ema*, often emphasized in their colorful designs and styles, provide a further reason why they are a popular means of expression for those who, like many of the students who pray for help with their examinations, may not as a rule participate in other religious activities. Their accessibility and the blank check they provide to the writer to determine the extent and nature of his or her request, further help to make *ema* a flexible and undemanding means of religious expression.





**Photo 4: Back of same ema as photo 3, with Edison's famous adage, "Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration."**



Photo 3: *Enma* depicting Thomas Edison.

### Conclusions

The variety of uses, motifs, meanings, and inscriptions on *ema* provides an object lesson in the rich diversity of the Japanese religious world and expresses the parameters (or perhaps more aptly, the lack of parameters) and areas of concern that are judged to be in the province of the religious world. As the *ema* inscriptions I have cited in this article demonstrate, such areas of concern are, very broadly, contiguous with every sphere of human activity. That it is seen as permissible to petition the gods and buddhas for such things as more pocket money, skill in playing the piano, entry into university, good health, freedom from worry, success for one's favourite baseball team, relief from personal grief, and the recovery of a loved one demonstrates amply the extent to which the orientations of the Japanese religious world are with this world and with the extension of human happiness within it.

Because they so clearly express human concerns of the moment, *ema* are able to provide a window on contemporary attitudes and shifting social perceptions in Japan. The Hōzan-ji *ema* manifest in their inscriptions the shifting patterns of social mores and problems, while the huge emphasis on education (itself stimulated by the growth of literacy, which, as we have seen, has had an impact on the content of *ema*) spotlights a matter of immense contemporary concern and even obsession for large numbers of people. Moreover, their continued, and perhaps increasing, use in so apparently rationalized a world as education and examinations further illustrates the extent to which traditional views of causation, in which spiritual entities have a part to play in the course of events, continue to exert an influence in contemporary Japan.

*Ema*, then, are not simply objects of interest to folklorists and casual visitors to shrines and temples, while reading what is inscribed on them is more than just a pleasurable pastime. Through their inscriptions they provide an accessible lens through which to decipher some of the underlying parameters and perceptions of the Japanese religious world and its dynamics, and through which to read about issues that are of contemporary social and religious concern to the Japanese.

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