

What Constitutes Religious Activity? (I)

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Ian Reader's article "Letters to the Gods: The Form and Meaning of *Ema*" (*JJRS* 18/1, pp. 23–50) is a good introduction for anyone unfamiliar with *ema* in Japan. As a folklorist interested in modern Japanese society, however, I am uncomfortable with one aspect of the paper, that is, Reader's claim to the "religious" nature of the act of buying and inscribing an *ema* at a temple or shrine. Near the end of his article Reader states:

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* (p. 46; emphasis added).

My question is: what makes buying and inscribing an *ema* a religious activity?

Like Reader I have talked informally with many Japanese people throughout Japan at various temples and shrines about buying and inscribing *ema*. The vast majority of the people I talked to would not characterize that activity as *shūkyō* 宗教 (religion) or *shinkō* 信仰 (belief). When asked if the words *fūzoku* 風俗, *shūkan* 習慣, *kanshū* 慣習, or *shūzoku* 習俗 (custom, habit, manners, or life patterns) better described their activity, the most common response was *shūkan*. *Shūkan* probably best translates as "custom" or in this case "habit." In other words, it is an activity that they have seen others do and/or have done themselves for a number of years and so they continue doing it. But they do not view it as a religious activity, nor, as Reader states (and I agree), do they view *ema* in any mechanistic way.

This criticism could, and I feel should, be broadened to include the

oft-cited NHK surveys on Japanese consciousness that Reader also cites (p. 43). Just what do such surveys tell us? One of the major problems with these surveys is that the respondents are asked to respond to questions like: Do you use charms—often—sometimes—never? What this tells us is whether the person buys or possesses charms or not. It does *not* tell us anything about an individual's beliefs or the religious nature (if any) of this activity from the viewpoint of the informant.¹ Research that may directly contradict the assumptions about the possession of charms and belief in their efficacy also exists. Miyata Noboru, one of Japan's leading folklorists, using information collected by the *Yomiuri Shinbun*, has written a short article entitled "Folk Beliefs and Japanese Society" (MIYATA 1981). In this survey young people were asked what folk beliefs they felt actually could affect the outcome of events. The wearing of an *omamori* (charm) ranked tenth but was only believed in by 16.8% of the respondents. I realize that the samples were different and comparisons may be difficult, but such data seem to suggest that there may be a wide gap between possession of an object and belief in its religious nature or powers.²

The fundamental problem we are dealing with is the interpretation of objects that have a long historical tradition and connection to Japanese religion and culture. The difficulty that arises in the Japanese context was first brought to my attention by Ōtsuki Takahiro when we were jointly preparing a paper on present-day Japanese folklore research at the request of the American Folklore Society (which I read at the 1990 annual meeting). Ōtsuki and other young scholars are now criticizing some Japanese academics for ignoring major changes in worldview in modern Japan. Briefly stated, some Japanese academics investigate whether a family has such things as *butsudan* (Buddhist altar), *kamidana* (god shelf), or *ihai* (ancestral tablet), and on the basis of the mere possession of such objects make statements about the vitality of traditional Japanese religion. What they fail to appreciate is that possession of an object does not, in and of itself, indicate or represent a religious belief or activity. The people's thoughts and perceptions of these objects must

¹ For example, what are we to make of the fact that on the page following the information about charms we learn that 83% of the respondents often or sometimes buy Christmas cakes (NHK YORON CHŌSABU 1984, p. 31)? Does this fact tell us anything about the strength or depth of Christian beliefs in Japanese society—or maybe more about the marketing ability of some confectionery companies?

² I presently live and work at the largest Buddhist temple complex in Tokyo. During the past New Year I was assigned to work in the main temple building (Daidō) selling *omamori* and *ofuda*. During the two weeks (31 December 1990–15 January 1991) I had literally thousands of "informants." While I naturally could not conduct a rigorous survey I can safely say that a large number of people bought *omamori* based on the color, style, and cost—some people even used the word "accessory" to describe them.

be ascertained. Ōtsuki and others feel that there have been major changes in the underlying belief system in the last forty years, so that while certain objects continue to exist in Japanese homes the beliefs and attitudes toward the objects have changed radically (see, e.g., ŌTSUKI 1986).

The view from the temple or shrine is also of interest. The large-scale selling of *ema* by temples and shrines is a rather recent phenomenon. Reader mentions that companies now specialize in the production of *ema*, *omamori*, *ofuda*, and other kinds of “religious” objects for temples and shrines. A glance at the catalogs of these companies reveals that there is usually about a 100% markup in price when sold by the temple or shrine. What this means at the larger temples and shrines is a not insubstantial income, as they sell 60-80,000 *ema* per year of each kind of *ema* they offer for sale.³ Many of the priests (both Buddhist and Shinto) I have talked to about the religious nature of *ema* just smile and say selling *ema* has nothing to do with “real” religion, but the people who come to the temple or shrine expect such objects to be offered for sale, so they cater to their wishes. Many priests view *ema* as a source of revenue and nothing more.

So again we return to the question: What makes an activity or object religious? Is place important? Does buying an *ema* at a religious site (temple or shrine) make the action religious? If so, then what about buying a set of postcards? Or is it the object itself? I have a friend who paints and sells *ema* for a living. He appears in major department stores in Japan when they have folk craft festivals. He is an artist, not a priest. When someone buys an *ema* from him can that be considered a religious activity? Another friend owns two restaurants in Tokyo and has an excellent collection of *ema* on the walls of his restaurants. He also has some *ema* that he occasionally gives away to customers as presents. Is this a religious activity? It seems to me that the most important point, and the one that is often overlooked, is the attitude of the person who chooses to buy, inscribe, or possess some object that outwardly appears “religious.”

Finally, Reader claims that the symbolic designs on *ema* are on the decline and that the focus is now “on the written medium [which] can largely be attributed to the effects of universal education” [p. 34]. My own feeling is that the present generation does not understand the symbolic designs and therefore cannot “read” more traditional *ema*. The friend I mentioned earlier, who sells his *ema* in department stores, usually sets out a display of *ema* with traditional motifs and an explanation of their meaning. He claims most Japanese today do not understand the

³ I have been given specific figures by a number of temples and shrines, and also by the producers of *ema*.

motifs and therefore cannot “read” them. The Temple and Shrine Investigation Group of the Tokyo Adachi-ku Education Committee has come to the same conclusion. In their report on *ema* they state that post-war education has changed so drastically that most younger Japanese now cannot understand the scenes and motifs that appear on older *ema*. They make this claim for all *ema* but emphasize that it is especially true for most of the legendary and mythological motifs (TÖKYŌ-TO ADACHI-KU KYŌIKU IINKAI 1985, pp. 34-35).

In conclusion, I would like to propose that objects and actions cannot, in and of themselves, be considered “religious” without investigating the intent or feelings of the person who chooses to possess an object or perform an action. My own feeling—and, I might add, many of my Japanese folklore colleagues are in agreement—is that many, if not most, of the people who buy, inscribe, and leave an *ema* at a temple or shrine today are not involved in a religious activity. Many of the people inscribing the *ema* do not judge it a religious activity, the temple or shrine does not view it as a religious activity, and we should not. I do not mean to imply that such actions are not and cannot be religious in nature for some people, but today these people are in the minority.

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