A Comprehensive Survey of Small Votive Prayer Tablets

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Abstract

In Japan today, one of the most conspicuously public forms of prayer is the koema (small votive prayer tablet). At shrines and temples throughout the archipelago we can readily gain firsthand insight into the needs, hopes, concerns, fears and ambitions of contemporary people by simply perusing what they have inscribed on koema. This article attempts to add to our collective understanding of the practice of dedicating koema and their significance by showcasing the koema that were dedicated at the Ishiura shrine in 2008.

Keywords: Votive Prayer Tablets, Religious Practice, Material Culture, Japan

1. Introduction

Dedicated at shrines and temples throughout Japan, ema 絵馬 are comprised of large wooden plaques (ôema 大絵馬) and smaller wooden tablets (koema 小絵馬). They have long been used to petition for divine favor or to offer gratitude for the same. Through painted images, often symbolic in nature, and through the written word, they become “letters to the gods” (Ian 1999, title). The historical ôema, which feature scenes and images often painted by professional artisans, are generally greeted as works of art; however, the contemporary mass-produced smaller koema with their pre-printed illustrations are not. Nonetheless, what koema lack in terms of pictorial aesthetics is outweighed by their ability to offer a direct insight into the needs, hopes, concerns, fears, and ambitions that inhabit the psyche of ordinary people.

In recent years koema have seemingly faded out of view of the social scientist’s gaze. Yet this drift toward disinterest is seemingly at odds with the burgeoning popularity of koema being dedicated at shrines by today’s youth in connection with anime pilgrimages (anime seichi junrei アニメ聖地巡礼) (see Andrews 2014, 2015; Imai 2009, 2012; Satō 2009, 2010; Yoshitani and Satō 2014). Therefore, to address this gap and to build on the achievements of earlier research, I wish to add an early twenty-first century survey of koema. It is my aim to breathe new life into the research of koema, which, as Kimura Toshiaki pointedly reminds us, are one part of the body of prayer performed by people in Japan today (Kimura 2015, 6).

2. Overview of koema research

Prior to the end of the 1970s, when researchers studied koema they keyed in on the painted images. Meshida Daishō’s Ema junrei to zokushin
no kenkyû 『絵馬巡礼と俗信の研究』 (1967) and
Iwai Hiromi’s Ema 『絵馬』 (1974) exemplify how
researchers at that time sought to descriptively
analyze the images and decode their meanings.
However, led by Tamura Zenjirô, researchers
began to look at koema in a new light, that is,
they undertook a text focused approach by reading
the prayers written on the koema.

In October 1977, Tamura surveyed the tablets
at Hôzanji Temple (宝山寺), popularly known
as Ikomashôten (生駒聖天), in Ikoma City, Nara
Prefecture. He comprehensively examined a total
of 643 tablets (Tamura, 1977; Satô and Tamura,
1978). As Tamura has explained, during the ten
years or so prior to his koema survey, the number
of dedication spaces for koema (ema hônôjo 絵
馬奉納所) dramatically increased at shrines and
temples throughout Japan (Satô and Tamura 1978,
164). While conducting his survey of Ikomashôten’s
koema, he recognized that the symbolic meaning
ascribed to the koema’s illustrations did not
necessarily correspond to the written prayers.
Therefore, he determined it necessary to rely
on the written text to obtain the genuine purpose
of the supplicant’s prayer (Satô and Tamura 1978,
157-158). Tamura noted a shift taking place where
people chose to spell out their prayers in words,
rather than just relying on the pictures themselves
to communicate meaning (Satô and Tamura 1978,
166). Consequently, he classified the koema into
19 categories based on the written content of
prayers.¹ Noteworthy are both Tamura’s division
according to gender and examples of the actual
language used in the prayers. Somewhat problematic
though, when multiple prayers were placed
on an individual tablet, he chose what he himself
considered to be the “most central” prayer for
the overall categorization of the tablet (Tamura
1977, 162).² Nevertheless, his research laid the
groundwork for later investigations.

Following Tamura, a series of surveys continued
to comprehensively examine the inscriptions
written on koema. Re-examining the same temple
as Tamura, Nishiyama Toshihiko conducted two
surveys in August and December of 1982 (Nishiyama
1985). Nishiyama counted 3,500 tablets at the
temple but limited his examination to 998.³ He
divided the prayers into 33 categories, which he
further placed into 13 groups. Going beyond
Tamura’s analysis, Nishiyama attempted to
distinguish between first, second, and third prayers,
but as has been pointed out by Nobori Masao the
criterion for this division was left unexplained
(Nobori 2009, 60-61).

In November 1983, Morishita Shinya surveyed
the koema at the Ishikiri Tsurugiya Shrine (石
切鎌箭神社) in Higashi Osaka City, Osaka Pre-
fecture (Morishita 1985). Examining 1,013 tablets,
he classified 1,528 prayers into eleven categories.
One category in particular, that of “other” (sono-
ta その他), stands out for a sizable number of prayers
totaling 226 (14.7%) (Morishita 1985, 126). Apart
from classifying the prayers, no other analysis
was attempted.

In January and February of the following 1984,
Murata Michiya went to Shigisan Shingon-shû

¹ A comparison of the various categories used by koema
researchers to classify prayers is unfortunately outside
the scope of this article.
² This problem was first noted by Nobori (2009, 60).
³ No reason was provided.
Chōgosonshi-ji Temple (信貴山真言宗朝護孫子寺) in Heguri Town, Nara Prefecture (Murata 1985). Reading through 136 tablets dedicated at Sanbō Kōjin (三宝荒神), he divided the prayers into 17 different categories. Aside from classifying the prayers, Murata mentions only that 27.8% of the koema were dedicated by those in their teens and twenties (1985, 92). It should be noted, however, that he complemented his examination of koema with a look at prayers written on stones (gan-kake ishi 顔掛け石) and slats of wood that are burned (gomagi 神火木).

A few years later, Yamanoi Daiji entered a three year project, beginning in 1988 and ending in 1990, to examine the koema dedicated at Zenkōji Temple (善光寺) located in Nagano City, Nagano Prefecture (Yamanoi 1991, 1992, 1994). Employing a random sampling method, he inspected 10,000 tablets out of a total of 34,905. Yamanoi classified the prayers into 18 categories. Similar to Tamura, he noted the gender of the dedicator. Moreover, he significantly expanded the analysis by introducing date of dedication, the dedicator’s place of residence and age group, as well as the recipient of the prayer (e.g., oneself, a family member, a friend). Additionally, he provided a percentage breakdown comparing single prayer tablets with multiple prayer tablets.

In 1992, Nishigai Kenji conducted surveys of koema at two separate shrines in Odawara City, Kanagawa Prefecture. One shrine was the Sugawara Shrine (菅原神社) and the other was the Hōtoku Nominomi Shrine (報徳二宮神社). Nishigai chose these two shrines because they are both known for their efficacy in passing examinations and for academic achievement (Nishigai 1999, 3). Both surveys are said to have been conducted in 1992, but the specific dates of the surveys were not made known. In the Sugawara Shrine survey, 2220 tablets were examined with 136 unreadable tablets subtracted for an adjusted total of 2,084. Likewise, Nishigai originally came across 1,386 tablets at the Hōtoku Nominomi Shrine, but after eliminating 20 unreadable tablets was left with 1,366 tablets for analysis. Although stating that he chose these two shrines for their comparative value, the categories used for classifying prayer content differ slightly, with the prayers from the Hōtoku Nominomi Shrine survey being more defined. For example, whereas in the Sugawara Shrine survey there was a single category for ‘good match’ (ryōen 良縁), in the Hōtoku Nominomi Shrine survey, under the group name ‘prayers concerning love’ (renai ni kansuru kigan 恋愛に関する祈願) this was further divided into a ‘good match’ (ryōen 良縁), ‘matchmaking/marriage’ (en-musubi 結び), ‘marriage’ (kekkon 結婚), ‘reconciliation’ (fukuen 復縁), ‘infidelity prevention’ (uwaki fūji 浮気封じ), and ‘together forever’ (itsu made mo

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4 Nobori explained that Yamanoi republished in 1992 and then again in 1994 his findings from his 1991 publication (2009, 76).

5 Nishigai may have simply classified the Hōtoku Nominomi Shrine’s prayers as written. Thus, the three prayers ryōen, en-musubi, and kekkon, which overlap in meaning, are separately listed. Still, they all bring to mind two people being ‘tied’ (musubi 結ぶ) together. Reader and Tanabe translate ryōen as “making a good marriage” (1998, 65) and Swanger translates enmusubi as “acquisition of a mate and marriage” (1981, 239).

It might be possible to distinguish between the terms based on a degree of finality: ryōen being ‘to find someone to be with’, en-musubi ‘to find someone for engagement or marriage’ and kekkon ‘simply as to marry.’
naka yoku いつまでも仲良く). In his Hōtoku Nino-
miya Shrine survey, Nishigai newly introduced a
category for ‘prayers of foreigners’ (gaikokujin
kigan 外国人祈願) (Nishigai 1999, 38). Unfortunately
however this categorization does not identify the
actual content of the prayers. And finally, worth
noting, his addition of a category for multiple prayers
delivered for the first time a concrete count of
the various prayers used in combination.

Mabuchi Ryōgo conducted a survey of the koema
at Kasuga Taisha Shrine (春日大社) in May and
tables he was able to classify the prayers into 23
separate categories. Different from the researchers
mentioned above, Mabuchi eliminated the category
of ‘other’ by establishing separate categories even
for solitary examples. For instance, there was one
tablet each for ‘support’ (ozen 応援) and ‘euthanasia’
(anrakushi 安楽死) (Mabuchi 2001, 33). He also
included an analysis based on prayer recipients
that was more detailed than Yamanoi’s analysis.

Critical of past studies in which researchers did
not document all the displayed tablets or performed
sampling without established criteria, Nobori Masao
performed three surveys starting in 1983 at Sumiyoshi
Taisha (住吉大社) in Sumiyoshi Ward, Osaka City,
Osaka Prefecture (Nobori 2009). Similar to Yamanoi,
he performed three separate surveys, but unlike
Yamanoi they were not performed in consecutive
years, rather he surveyed at ten-year intervals.
The first survey in 1983 was of 5,109 tablets, the
second survey in 1993 was of 4,592 tablets, and
the third survey in 2003 was of 4,334 tablets. Thus,
he examined a total of 14,035 tablets. In the process,
Nobori put forth the most compartmentalized list
of prayer categories seen in any study, numbering
31 in all. On the other hand, differing from Yamanoi,
he offered only a straight percentage breakdown
of the prayer categories with no further analysis.
Of interest though, he included eight photos of
selected tablets that illustrate writing styles for
koema (Nobori 2009, 73).

Above, I have presented an overview of the
surveys that have framed the analysis of written
prayers on koema. To further the discussion, I
will point out a few issues. To begin with, among
the researchers following Tamura, only Nishiyama
and Nobori cited other surveys preceding their
own which had similarly examined the written
prayers on koema. Nishiyama, working at the same
site as Tamura, definitively references Tamura
in his own research (1985, 57), and Nobori for a
presentation of his own findings, reviewed the
research of Tamura, Nishiyama, Morishita, Murata,
and Yamanoi (Nobori 2009, 60-61). All of the other
aforementioned researchers did not specifically
refer to the surveys focusing on koema’s written
text, although they may have cited general ema
research such as Iwai Hiromi’s Ema (1974). Lastly,
all the surveys mentioned above, except for Murata’s
and Nishigai’s, took into account gender in their
analysis of prayers.

3. A survey of Ishiura Shrine’s koema

3-1. Survey site

The site of investigation for the research at
hand was Ishiura Shrine (石浦神社), located in the
city center of Kanazawa, Ishikawa Prefecture.6
The enshrined seven deities are attributed with efficacy toward 'matchmaking and marriage' (emunusubi 線結び), 'household protection' (kanai anzen 家内安全), 'removing evil' (yakujo 厄除), 'safe childbirth' (anzan kigan 安産祈願), 'law' (hōritsu 法律), 'wisdom' (chie 智慧), and 'protection from outside attack' (gainan bōgyō 外難防禦).

Established in the latter half of the 18th Century the shrine, which is located adjacent to the famous Kenroku-en Garden and across the street from the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, quite naturally attracts both local visitors and outside tourists alike. People come to pray as well as view Ishiura Shrine’s cultural antiquities (Ōta, 2000, 40). A thorough investigation of the shrine’s historically significant collection of ōema was conducted in 1999 (Ōta, 2000). This is, however, the first known survey of the shrine’s koema.

3.2. Survey method

On May 2, 2008, I conducted a survey of all the koema displayed at the ‘dedication rack’ (emakake 絵馬掛け) of Ishiura Shrine. At that time 547 tablets were hanging on display for public viewing directly in front of the main shrine building and in close proximity to the shrine office (see Photo 1). Using a digital camera, I photographed all tablets on display, without exception. All written information from the tablets was recorded in Microsoft Excel for analysis.

The Ishiura Shrine provides koema to visiting shrinegoers. Ranging from ¥300 to ¥1000, most tablets are available for ¥500. The tablets have a variety of colorful, auspicious illustrations printed on one side. Like other shrines throughout Japan, some illustrations are prayer specific, while others are more general purpose. At Ishiura shrine a design depicting a papier-mâché dog (hariko no inu 張子の犬) considered efficacious for a child’s health and safety is used for both unborn or newborn children. A pink heart design is popular for those in love, looking for love, or hoping to get married. As Traphagan has explained “a picture of the appropriate animal for one’s birth year on the Chinese zodiac” (2004, 118) would be an all-purpose, although person specific design. On the unillustrated side of the tablets is a space reserved for the writing of prayers by shrinegoers. In only two instances, however, did the person dedicating the tablet write on the illustrated side.

Photo 1. Votive prayer tablets displayed at Ishiura Shrine.

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6 The author wishes to express his deep gratitude for the kind assistance offered by the custodians of Ishiura Shrine.
7 Here the definition for emunusubi likely includes 'marriage' differing from Nishigai’s use (reference footnote 5).

9 One shrinegoer, however, did in fact dedicate a tablet not furnished by the Ishiura Shrine. It was purchased elsewhere and brought to the shrine.
3.3. Prayer categories

I will now introduce the prayer categories used to classify the prayers found on the koema of Ishiura Shrine. The categories have been formulated after a careful reading of the written messages inscribed by shrinegoers. I have drawn on certain conventional categories applied in previous koema research. However, some categories such as ‘social relations’ (explained below) are ostensibly the author’s own. Moreover, I have attempted to group prayer categories together, as others have done (e.g., Nishigai 1999), to highlight the interconnectivity of prayers and the line of thought that produces them.

First, there is a group of prayers that centers on children. Prayers concerning children consist of prayers for ‘pregnancy’ (kosazuke kigan 子授け祈願), ‘safe childbirth’ (anzan kigan 安産祈願), and ‘child safety’ (kosodate kigan 子育て祈願). These prayers can be made as a singular request or in combination. The order generally reflects the progressing stages of having and raising a child. Kosazuke kigan is the first step in having a child. Next follows anzan kigan in which the child is carried to term and safely delivered. Lastly comes kosodate kigan for the safety and health of the child, kosodate meaning ‘to raise a child’.

A number of prayer categories concern the forming and maintaining of relationships between people. The categories that deal with the ties between two people are ‘success in love’ (ren'ai jōju 恋愛成就), ‘marriage’ (kekkon 結婚), and ‘couple congeniality’ (kappuru ōpu enman カップル・夫婦円満). A related category is ‘family harmony’ (kazoku enman 家族円満), which speaks of a desire to preserve or restore the social integrity of the family unit. This concerns not only the relationship between parents and children, but also the unity of siblings. In this study ‘social relations’ (niingen kankei 人間関係) refers to prayers made to resolve problems that arise in relations with people outside of the family. One can imagine that the stage for such social frictions are the school, workplace, and community.

The prayers in several categories are simply guided by the notion of keeping people safe and sound. The category ‘household protection’ (kanai anzen 家内安全) serves to protect people from incident, accident, injury, and illness, and has been translated as “family safety” (Reader and Tanabe 1998, 65). Another category that seeks to safeguard a person’s condition is ‘health and vitality’ (kenkō 健康, genki 元気). Here, the word genki means not only health, but also vigor and energy. ‘Health and vitality’ is analogous to ‘health recovery’ (byōki heiyyu 病気平復) as these two categories are both concerned with physical and mental fitness. Generally speaking, rather than material things, we see represented in these categories a desire to keep people safe.

There are also prayers that primarily concern students. ‘Academic achievement’ (gakugyō jōju 学業成就) and ‘passing examinations’ (gōkaku kigan 合格祈願) are two prayer categories connected to education. The latter is heavily associated with entrance examinations, which are mainly identified with high school and university, but also include

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20 Swanger translates anzan as “healthy pregnancy and easy delivery” (1981, 239). These two aspects are seemingly incorporated into ‘safe childbirth’.

entrance examinations for junior high school, elementary school, and even kindergarten. 'Competition' (kyōō 競技) is an additional category that is strongly associated with students, but is not necessarily limited to students. Prayers in this category are mostly concerned with sports activities such as entering tournaments (taikai 大会); however, other non-athletic activities are grouped into this category as well.

Work has been a central tenet of Japanese society. Therefore, we should expect to find prayers addressing the need to find work and then succeed at it. Work-related prayers include ‘finding employment’ (shūshoku 就職), ‘work success’ (shigoto jōju 仕事成就), and ‘business prosperity’ (sbōhai hanjō 商売繁昌).

In addition, people write prayers in the hope of being favored with good fortune. Some related categories are prayers for ‘good luck’ (kaiun 開運), ‘monetary fortune’ (kin’in 金運), and ‘happiness’ (kōfuku 幸福).

Next, I will explain the categories formulated from the prayers in this survey that do not readily fit into the groups listed above. Prayers that concern improving or correcting one’s self, I classify as ‘self-improvement’ (jikō keihatsu 自己啓発). Such things as making decisions, strengthening character, and striving toward self-enlightenment fall into this category. Another category named ‘heartfelt prayer’ (shingan jōju 心願成就) literally means to petition a deity with a prayer from the heart. Spoken from the heart, what specifically is desired is often left unsaid. Consequently, I also place into this category several tablets on which a person wrote only their name and nothing else. It seems that these too are unwritten prayers. Also, there was a single prayer for ‘peace’ (heīwa 平和), which corresponds to prayers for ‘world peace’ (sekai heīwa 世界平和) documented at other shrines. Additionally, there is a category for ‘weather’ (tenkō 天候). That is, a person made a prayer requesting good weather or a change in the weather. Further, as it is not uncommon for petitioners whose prayers were answered to come and offer their thanks on a tablet, a category of ‘gratitude’ (orei お礼, kansha 感謝) is also included.

The final category used to classify prayers is titled ‘other’ (sono-ta その他). Following Mabuchi’s example (2003), it is my thinking that the category of ‘other’ (sono-ta その他) should be used sparingly, limited to when the prayer’s classification is difficult to discern due to ambiguity. In this survey, for example, one person wrote, ‘I pray that I can write a lot’. This might suggest that the person was about to take an entrance examination, but they also could have been writing a book. One woman wrote that she hoped her son would return home, which might suggest that he was estranged, or it could be that he was hospitalized, and she prays for his recovery. The final prayer that I placed into the ‘other’ category was a prayer asking for another person’s life to come to a good end [person’s name] ga ii isshō wo e raremasu yo ni ■がいい

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11 Reader and Tanabe translate shingan jōju as “accomplishment of all one’s heart’s wishes” (1998, 65). What should be emphasized is the all-encompassing aspect.
12 Yamanoi (1994, 60) similarly refers to the unspecified prayers of daigan jōju (大願成就) as a ‘general prayer’ (negaijō o isshō 願いごと一致).
13 Anime fans commonly write ‘world peace’ (sekai heīwa 世界平和) on koema (Yoshitani and Satō 2014, 123-126).
一生を終えられますように). This prayer begs for further explanation, but nothing more was written.

The categories used herein specifically reflect the prayers made by shrine-goers at Ishiura Shrine. The fact that prayer content will show variation from shrine to shrine should not come as a surprise. Differences will emerge based on what efficacy the shrine is believed to provide. Yet, an element of chance is also at play concerning whether or not certain prayers will be observed. For example, the category of ‘traffic safety’ (kōtsū anzen 交通安全), which consists of prayers that serve to protect people from accident and injury while operating a vehicle, commuting, or traveling, despite being frequently noted in other surveys (e.g., Mabuchi, Morishita, Murata, Nishigai, Nishiyama, Nobori, and Yamanoi), was not encountered at Ishiura Shrine.

3-4. Koema analysis

Out of the 547 tablets, two tablets were void of any writing, possibly placed on the dedication rack by the shrine as a demonstrative example of how to hang the tablets. An additional four tablets became unreadable due to weathering. Therefore, the total number of tablets available for analysis stands at 541. At Ishiura Shrine, aside from the unreadable tablets or tablets having only a person’s name, there were no tablets without prayers.

Script commonly found on koema consists of hiragana and katakana (Japanese syllabaries), kanji (Chinese characters), rōmaji (Western alphabet), and Arabic numerals. Although most tablets were written in Japanese, seven tablets were written in other languages: five in Chinese, one in English, and one in Korean. Text was written both horizontally and vertically, with more written vertically, 381 tablets (70.4%), then horizontally, 152 tablets (28.1%). Eight tablets (1.5%) mixed horizontal and vertical text. Prayers were mostly penned by supplicants with a marker or pen, the preferred color being black.

Various symbols, marks, and drawings were employed for decorative purpose as well as to visually communicate certain aspects of message content. Diamonds and heart marks were drawn for decorative effect, and exclamation points for emphasis. Petitioners made drawings on twelve tablets. For a prayer to enter a national baton competition a stick figure with a baton was outlined. On one tablet with a prayer to pass an entrance examination into art school, a male student sketched a picture of a dog. Parents who prayed for their daughter named Hana 華 (flower) traced an image of a flower to accompany her name. On a tablet offered by parents for the health of their newborn, an apparent older sibling cruelly drew a baby’s face. In this way, the drawings seem to compliment the prayer content.

Not surprisingly, the language and style of writing used in computer-mediated communication was spotted in the messages on the tablets. In two instances, both on tablets with prayers written in Chinese, a kaomoji-like ^v^ smiley face was added on. On an additional tablet written in Japanese, a kaomoji (3/) was used to conclude a prayer for recovery from illness. In the end, only three examples

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11 These tablets were transcribed and incorporated into the overall analysis.
of kaomoji-like communication were identified.

Whereas the tablets of some shrines may include descriptors for information thought to be necessary (by the shrine), such as name, address (residence), age, or gender, Ishiura’s tablets generally do not. Therefore, as Traphagan (2004, 118) has suggested when researching koema on display at other shrines, shrinegoers are given free rein to write as they see fit. Adhering to convention, 491 tablets (91%) had some form of personal identifier. On 410 tablets (83.5%), people wrote both their given name and surname. When choosing between writing their given name or surname, the given name was more widely used. Whereas three people (0.6%) gave only a surname, in contrast people wrote just their given name on 49 tablets (10%). Other identifiers included initials (nine instances), a nickname or pen name (four instances), and a group name (one instance). In correlation with the 160 prayers for ‘child safety’, in 158 instances the child’s name was written. Moreover, tame (てま), meaning ‘for the sake of’, was written before the child’s name on 156 tablets.

I have come across fifteen examples of descriptors referring to the familial relation of the person making the prayer. Females were more representative than males: father (one instance), mother (five instances), father and mother (two instances), grandmother (six instances), and family (one instance). The use of these identifiers immediately signals that the prayer is likely being made on behalf of or for the benefit of someone else. Interestingly, the only occasions when the word ‘from’ was attached to a personal identifier, as in ‘from so and so’, was with ‘from mother’ (haha yori 母より), ‘from mom’ (mama yori ママより), ‘from father’ (chichi yori 父より), and ‘from father and mother’ (chichi-haha yori 父母より).

Aside from the writing of a person’s initials, some supplicants used rōmai when writing out names. This practice was in evidence on four tablets. In all cases, they left only their given name with no surname. Three out of the four were written by women. And in one instance, a group of three women all wrote their given name in rōmai. And in another instance, despite writing the prayer in Chinese, one woman also penned her name in rōmai.

Relatedly, a few examples of English words injected into sentences written in Japanese surfaced while examining the tablets. One prayer was written, “Babyちゃんが元気いっぱいに生まれてきます様に” (Baby-chan ga genki ippai ni umarete kimasu そない), which translates as ‘May a very healthy baby be born’.

Writing down one’s date of birth or age on the tablets is another convention when offering koema. No one, however, wrote their date of birth and only one person wrote their age among all the tablets examined in this survey. The 76-year-old man who wrote his age made a prayer to be healthy enough to go traveling. Perhaps he was verbalizing what he saw as his primary concern, his age.

The writing style used by supplicants to petition the deities bespeaks individual preferences as well as established conventions. The simplest prayers inscribed on the tablets were written as two or four kanji combinations. A prime example of a two kanji prayer is gōgaku (合格). For example, one person wrote only ‘Pass (the entrance examination
for) high school” (kōkō gōkaku 高校合格) as their prayer. Some examples representing four kanji combinations seen in this survey are kanai anzen (家内安全), shōbai hanjō (商売繁盛), and shingan jōju (心願成就). This is a succinct way to communicate the prayer. On the other hand, most prayers are communicated by writing them out in sentence form. Further citing examples of ‘passing examinations’ (gōkaku kigan), we find examples of a more conversational style, such as “I definitely want to pass (the entrance examination for) Kanazawa University’s School of Teacher Education’s Junior High School” (Kanazawa daigaku kyōiku bu fuzoku-chū ni zettai gōkaku shitate 金沢大学教育部附属中に絶対合格したい). Still, the convention of forming a prayer by writing yō ni ように, meaning ‘in order to’ or ‘that’, is the dominant way of writing prayers. A typical example would be as follows: “(I pray) that my daughter and her husband can have a baby!” (musume fūfu ni akachan ga sazukarimasu yō-ni 娘夫婦に赤ちゃんが授かりますように!). The vast majority of prayers employed this linguistic formula. Out of 534 tablets, which does not include the seven tablets written in languages other than Japanese, 429 (80%) conformed to this manner of writing prayers. In most cases, the prayer sentence simply ends with yō ni. The unwritten ‘I pray’ is inferred. On occasion, however, it too is written out as with “I pray that my grandchild’s university entrance exam goes well, and that they can go to the school of their choice” (mago no daigaku juken ga umaku deki, nozomeru tokoro he ikeru yō ni inorimasu 孫の大学受験がうまくでき、望める所へいけるように祈ります). In this survey, 27 prayers were written out in this manner. Specifically, 24 ended with variations of “I request” (onegai shimasu お願いします) and three ended with “I pray” (inorimasu 祈ります).

One further convention in the dedication of prayer tablets is the writing of the petitioner’s residence or address (see Figure 1). In this survey, 27 tablets had both the supplicant’s name and residence, while only three people wrote where they were from without leaving their name. Of these 30 tablets, ten were individuals or couples from Kanazawa where the shrine is located, 17 from within Ishikawa Prefecture but outside of Kanazawa, two from outside the prefecture (Osaka Prefecture and Yokohama City), and one from overseas, specifically Hong Kong. If these tablets inscribed with the shrinegoer’s domicile are representative of the whole survey, then we can posit that although people from outside the prefecture do dedicate tablets, the majority of supplicants are locals.

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<tr>
<th>Description</th>
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<th>Detail</th>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Residence only</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of residence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kanazawa City</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>(outside Kanazawa)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ishikawa Prefecture</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Osaka, Kanagawa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other prefecture</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign residence</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Place of Residence

Recording the date of visit is yet another convention when writing prayers (see Figure 2). 44 tablets had the date written in some form. Concretely, 36 had the day, month, and year; one had the year
and month; six had the day and month; and one had the year alone. It is worth noting that the majority of shrine goers dedicating tablets did not feel the need to affix the date.

**Figure 2. Date Inscription**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Detail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year, month, day</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>年月日</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year, month</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>二十年一月</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Month, day</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>平成十九年</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year only</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>平成</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On review of the tablets, it was determined that the tablets were dedicated over a period of twelve months (see Figure 3), from May 2007 through April 2008 (again, this survey was conducted on May 2, 2008) One to three dated-tablets were offered every month between May and December of 2007. A spike of twelve dated-tablets appeared in January of 2008 which reflects the custom of visiting shrines at New Year. The rate of dedicated tablets in the first few months of the year, particularly January and February, is likely influenced by students praying to pass entrance examinations, which are mostly held from January through March in Japan. This survey’s data from January, where half of the tablets had prayers for passing exams, appears to support this presumption. Looking at the four from February we find that one was for success in passing an exam. The others were represented by a prayer for a successful surgery, finding a job, and one was left unstated with only the name and residence given. Lastly, noting that 19 women, eleven men, and two couples wrote the date, we see that women were more inclined than men to date their tablets.

**Figure 3. Date of Dedication**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month &amp; Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May 2007</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2007</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2007</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug. 2007</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep. 2007</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct. 2007</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 2007</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec. 2007</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan. 2008</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb. 2008</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar. 2008</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr. 2008</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4 shows the analysis for 626 prayers found on 541 prayer tablets. In the table, ‘prayer count’ refers to the number of prayers in any given category. As can be seen, the three highest categories are ‘child safety’, ‘safe childbirth’, and ‘passing examinations’. Percentages in the ‘prayer count’ column are based against the total 626 prayers. Prayer counts are further broken down according to gender as follows: ‘joint’ dedication (a male & female couple), ‘male only’, ‘female only’, and in the case the gender is not discernable, ‘gender unknown’. The percentages in these columns are based against the prayer count in any given prayer category. We can see that most prayers for ‘safe childbirth’ (94%) and ‘child safety’ (97%) are jointly made as couples. While those for ‘pregnancy’ have a distinctly
A high number dedicated by women alone (37.5%).

Of interest, prayers for 'marriage' were either made jointly or only by women. In contrast, the prayers for 'couple congeniality' were either made jointly or by men alone. Of course, the unknown percentage is considerable in both prayer categories.

**Figure 4. Prayer categories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Prayer count</th>
<th>Joint (male &amp; female)</th>
<th>Male only</th>
<th>Female only</th>
<th>Gender unknown</th>
<th>For benefit of others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>(12%) 4 (50%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>3 (37.5%)</td>
<td>1 (12.5%)</td>
<td>2 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe childbirth</td>
<td>109 (17%)</td>
<td>103 (94%) 0 (0%)</td>
<td>4 (4%)</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child safety</td>
<td>160 (26%)</td>
<td>156 (97%) 1 (1%)</td>
<td>3 (2%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success in love</td>
<td>14 (2.2%)</td>
<td>0 (0%) 5 (50%)</td>
<td>7 (50%)</td>
<td>2 (14%)</td>
<td>2 (0%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>13 (2%)</td>
<td>5 (38%) 0 (0%)</td>
<td>4 (31%)</td>
<td>4 (31%)</td>
<td>2 (15%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple congeniality</td>
<td>4 (0.6%)</td>
<td>2 (50%) 1 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (25%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family harmony</td>
<td>15 (2.3%)</td>
<td>6 (40%) 1 (7%)</td>
<td>2 (13%)</td>
<td>6 (40%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social relations</td>
<td>10 (1.5%)</td>
<td>1 (10%) 0 (0%)</td>
<td>7 (70%)</td>
<td>2 (30%)</td>
<td>2 (0%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household protection</td>
<td>14 (2.2%)</td>
<td>2 (14%) 2 (14%)</td>
<td>5 (36%)</td>
<td>5 (36%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and vitality</td>
<td>54 (8.6%)</td>
<td>12 (22%) 9 (17%)</td>
<td>16 (30%)</td>
<td>17 (31%)</td>
<td>6 (11%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health recovery</td>
<td>23 (3.6%)</td>
<td>3 (13%) 1 (4%)</td>
<td>9 (39%)</td>
<td>10 (44%)</td>
<td>8 (35%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic achievement</td>
<td>8 (1.2%)</td>
<td>1 (12.5%) 1 (12.5%)</td>
<td>3 (37.5%)</td>
<td>3 (37.5%)</td>
<td>1 (12.5%)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passing examinations</td>
<td>102 (16%)</td>
<td>5 (5%) 34 (33%)</td>
<td>39 (38%)</td>
<td>24 (24%)</td>
<td>16 (16%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>9 (1.4%)</td>
<td>0 (0%) 0 (0%)</td>
<td>6 (67%)</td>
<td>3 (33%)</td>
<td>2 (22%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding employment</td>
<td>2 (0.3%)</td>
<td>0 (0%) 1 (50%)</td>
<td>1 (50%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work success</td>
<td>11 (1.7%)</td>
<td>0 (0%) 4 (36%)</td>
<td>2 (18%)</td>
<td>5 (46%)</td>
<td>4 (36%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business prosperity</td>
<td>4 (0.6%)</td>
<td>0 (0%) 1 (25%)</td>
<td>1 (25%)</td>
<td>2 (50%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good luck</td>
<td>11 (1.7%)</td>
<td>0 (0%) 1 (9%)</td>
<td>4 (36%)</td>
<td>6 (55%)</td>
<td>1 (9%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monetary fortune</td>
<td>10 (1.5%)</td>
<td>6 (60%) 1 (1%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>3 (3%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness</td>
<td>26 (4%)</td>
<td>3 (11.5%) 3 (11.5%)</td>
<td>12 (46%)</td>
<td>8 (31%)</td>
<td>8 (31%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-improvement</td>
<td>6 (1%)</td>
<td>1 (16.7%) 2 (33.3%)</td>
<td>2 (33.3%)</td>
<td>1 (16.7%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Prayer count</td>
<td>Joint (male &amp; female)</td>
<td>Male only</td>
<td>Female only</td>
<td>Gender unknown</td>
<td>For benefit of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace</td>
<td>1 (0.1%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (100%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>天候</td>
<td>1 (0.1%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (100%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heartfelt prayer</td>
<td>5 (0.8%)</td>
<td>1 (20%)</td>
<td>2 (40%)</td>
<td>1 (20%)</td>
<td>1 (100%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td>2 (0.3%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (100%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4 (0.6%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>4 (100%)</td>
<td>1 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>626</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The prayers recorded in this study have also been examined to ascertain the number made on behalf of or for the benefit of other people. I did not include prayers when the supplicant used wording such as ‘family’ (kazoku 家族), because such prayers can also include the petitioner as well. On the other hand, certain prayers were unlikely to be made for the sake of someone else. ‘Family harmony’ and ‘household protection’ were such examples. Looking at the data, we can see that ‘work success’ was notably the highest (36%). Of interest though, ‘health recovery’ (35%) exceeds ‘health and vitality’ (11%). And although the number of tablets for pregnancy was scant, 25% were made on someone else’s behalf.

Of course, there is no limit to the number of tablets that any individual can dedicate. Thus, I discovered that within a one-year period, in 16 cases, individuals or couples dedicated multiple tablets. All were identified by their names. The number who dedicated two tablets stands at twelve. Looking at the content of these prayers, most concern childbirth and were dedicated by married couples. Seven couples first dedicated a tablet for safe childbirth, and then revisited the shrine after the child was born to offer another tablet to protect the child (‘child safety’). Two couples each repeated the same prayer on two separate tablets asking for a safe childbirth. Another couple offered two tablets, one to raise a healthy child, and another for both the couple’s and the child’s good health. The two final examples of two tablets were individual dedications. A male student twice asked to pass an entrance examination and a woman twice prayed for the recovery of another person’s illness. There were also two instances in which people dedicated three tablets. In the first case, a woman wrote on two tablets her wish to be able to meet with a man, who she specified by name. And on a third tablet she penned a wish that her oldest son would return home. The second case of three tablets concerned a married couple who first wrote a tablet for the safe birth of expected twins. After the birth of the twins, they returned to dedicate a separate tablet for each child, praying for protection of their children. In one case, a woman produced six tablets in which she wrote the same prayers for household protection, good health, and happiness. Seven tablets were
the most observed: a married couple prayed for the wife’s health (one of seven tablets), household protection (three of seven tablets), and to win the lottery (six of seven tablets). Interestingly, people who dedicated more than one tablet rarely wrote the date. Consequently, it is difficult to determine if they dedicated tablets at set intervals. I might add that there were instances of possibly related individuals, for example siblings, who dedicated separate tablets. They were however counted as individual dedications.

There is no rule as to the number of prayers a person can write on any single tablet. Conceivably, people are limited only by the physical surface of the tablet, the size of their lettering, and their own aesthetic sensibilities. Still, some conventional prayers such as ‘heartfelt prayer’ (shingan jōjū) have an indeterminate quality that leaves open the possibility that the supplicant may be soliciting for more than one request to be answered. ‘Heartfelt prayer’ was not made in conjunction with other prayers though, likely because it retains an all-encompassing aspect. In this survey, two tablets had the wording ‘shingan jōjū’, one written by a female and another written by a male and female (who had differing surnames). As stated previously, I placed into this category an additional three tablets, which did not include this wording or any other explicitly written prayer, only the offering individual’s name or name with address. I consider these silent prayers to be in align with the intent of the ‘heartfelt prayer’.

The number of prayers made by supplicants of course varied. Most people wrote a single prayer on their tablets however. Out of 541 tablets, 484 tablets (89.4%) had only a single prayer, 39 tablets (7.2%) had two prayers (see Figure 5), 13 tablets (2.4%) had three prayers (see Figure 6), three tablets (0.6%) had four prayers, and two tablets (0.4%) had five prayers.

Figure 5. Two prayers on single tablet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1st prayer</th>
<th>2nd prayer</th>
<th>Gender of supplicant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic achievement ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Happiness ¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic achievement ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Health ¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business prosperity ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Health ¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family harmony ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Health ¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family harmony ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Health ¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family harmony ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Health ¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family harmony ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Health ¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good luck ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Health ¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good luck ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Health ¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gratitude (passing exam) ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Academic achievement ¥¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Family harmony ¥¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Household protection ¥¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Competition ¥¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Family harmony ¥¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Family harmony ¥¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Good luck ¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Happiness ¥¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Happiness ¥¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health ¥¥¥ ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Happiness ¥¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health ¥¥¥ ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Happiness ¥¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health ¥¥¥ ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Monetary fortune ¥¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health ¥¥¥ ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Pregnancy ¥¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health recovery ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Monetary fortune ¥¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health recovery ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Pregnancy ¥¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health recovery ¥¥¥</td>
<td>Pregnancy ¥¥</td>
<td>¥</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As concerns tablets with multiple prayers (see Figures 5 & 6), the listed order of prayers for each tablet reflects the order in which they were written. It is difficult to say which prayer may have been deemed more important; however, a prayer such as ‘health recovery’ hints as to which prayers might be emphasized in the thoughts of the supplicant. Prayers for ‘health recovery’, whether for oneself or for another person, were always written first. This makes sense in that a person’s poor health may preclude them from pursuing other activities. On the other hand, this may simply reflect a logic of proceeding one step at a time. In this survey, ‘safe childbirth’ and ‘child safety’, although frequently written separately on different tablets, in one instance were written in that order on a single tablet. In the case of a combination of ‘marriage’ and ‘passing examinations’, it turns out that they were made for the benefit of others, possibly the dedicator’s children, and thus the order did not necessarily

![Table of Prayers](image)

**Figure 6.** Three prayers on single tablet
reflect an emphasis of one over the other.

‘Gender of the supplicant’ in Figures 5 & 6 refers to the gender of the person making the prayer. Further gender markings (e.g., ♂, ♀, ♂♀) placed next to the prayer name indicate the gender of the individual on the receiving end of the prayer.

I also observed three tablets with four prayers. The first was written by a woman who first made a prayer for her own recovery from illness, then further prayed for her continued health, happiness, and finally for success in love. The second tablet with four prayers was written by a mother who prayed for her children’s recovery from illness, health, and happiness. Her fourth wish was that they would be fortunate enough to have their dreams come true. The third tablet was dedicated by a group of four females, likely friends, who individually offered prayers for self-improvement, passing examinations, happiness, and good luck.

The most prayers written on a tablet numbered five. Two such examples were found. The first was jointly written by a couple, who requested family harmony, health, and happiness. They then indicated that they hoped to overcome difficulties in the upcoming year through aesthetic practice (shugyō 修行). What is more, they asked to be able to buy video games. The second tablet, written anonymously, contained the following prayers in this order; personal happiness, family harmony, family health, world peace, and good weather. The last two prayers represented the only such examples in the entire survey.

Figure 7 shows all the prayer combinations documented in this survey. Among tablets with

---

Nishigai introduced this technique for presenting prayer combinations (1999, 38).

---

**Figure 7. Multiple prayer combinations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>6 Couple congeniality</td>
<td>7 Family harmony</td>
<td>8 Social relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Household protection</td>
<td>10 Health &amp; vitality</td>
<td>11 Health recovery</td>
<td>12 Academic achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Passing examinations</td>
<td>14 Competition</td>
<td>15 Finding employment</td>
<td>16 Work success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Business prosperity</td>
<td>18 Good luck</td>
<td>19 Monetary fortune</td>
<td>20 Happiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Self-improvement</td>
<td>22 Heartfelt prayer</td>
<td>23 Peace</td>
<td>24 Weather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td>26 Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1, 5…1</th>
<th>4, 16…2</th>
<th>7, 20…1</th>
<th>9, 25…1</th>
<th>10, 18…3</th>
<th>11, 19…1</th>
<th>2, 10, 20…1</th>
<th>6, 12, 13…1</th>
<th>7, 10, 26…1</th>
<th>10, 19, 20…1</th>
<th>7, 10, 18, 20, 26…1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1, 10…1</td>
<td>5, 7…1</td>
<td>9, 10…4</td>
<td>10, 12…1</td>
<td>10, 19…1</td>
<td>12, 20…1</td>
<td>3, 7, 10…1</td>
<td>6, 16, 20…1</td>
<td>9, 10, 17…1</td>
<td>4, 10, 11, 20…1</td>
<td>7, 10, 20, 23, 24…1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1, 11…1</td>
<td>5, 13…1</td>
<td>9, 19…2</td>
<td>10, 14…1</td>
<td>10, 20…4</td>
<td>12, 25…1</td>
<td>4, 10, 13…1</td>
<td>7, 8, 10…1</td>
<td>9, 10, 20…1</td>
<td>10, 11, 18, 20…1</td>
<td>13, 18, 20, 21…1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2, 3…1</td>
<td>7, 10…5</td>
<td>9, 20…1</td>
<td>10, 17…1</td>
<td>11, 16…2</td>
<td>16, 20…1</td>
<td>5, 11, 20…1</td>
<td>7, 10, 15…1</td>
<td>9, 12, 17…1</td>
<td>13, 18, 20, 21…1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
multiple prayers, we find that those with two prayers were the most numerous. Prayer combinations that included prayers concerning health (‘health & vitality’ or ‘health recovery’) were overall the most numerous, written on 35 of the multiple prayer tablets. Also, of interest are prayers for ‘happiness’, which were found on eighteen of the multiple prayer tablets.

3.5. An unexpected truth

Prayers that are linked with the idea of ending a relationship held with someone or something are classified as tachi (断ち) or enkiri (縁切り). While there is some overlap of the two in actual practice, tachi can perhaps be understood as abstaining from doing something and enkiri as the severing of a connection. Both have been recorded in the surveys conducted by Tamura (1977, 164) and Nishigai (1999, 58-59). In this survey, one woman used expressions that fit with a desire to cut negative social connections, which consequently I classified under the category of ‘social relations’. Her wishes that those causing her distress would “go far away” (tōku he sare 遠くへ去れ) and “disappear” (inakunare になくね) were demonstrative of this. In fact, she publically displayed seven undated tablets in which her conflict with two females and one male was revealed. Over the course of seven tablets, one female was named twice, while the other two were named three times. She wrote the full names for both herself and those she wrote about suggesting that she was not concerned about disclosure. On one occasion she penned, “Don’t be mean to me” (ijīwaru shinaide ne いじわるしないでね). On another tablet, writing a prayer for herself she asked that “everyday end without incident” (ichi nichi ichi nichi buji ni owaremasu yō ni 一日一日無事におわれますように). On the tablets, the single words “bullying” (ijime いじめ) and “mean” (ijīwaru いじわる) exposed the cause of her anxiety. However, her wishes went beyond a simple ‘severing of a connection’. Her composing “(May they be) stricken by misfortune” (ma ga sasaru 魔がささる) and the repeated use of the phrase “(May) the wrath of heaven (come down)” (tenbatsu 天下つ) in conjunction with the others’ names underscored the intensity of her feelings. Daimon Tetsu (2005) had investigated the use of ‘black magic’ practices in Kanazawa from the Meiji Period up through the Showa Period noting how shrines often became the stage for such ritual acts. Representing one percent of the prayers documented in this survey, these expressions of personal pain and petitions for divine retribution were thus not without historical precedence. However, what I wish to call attention to is that, like all the other tablets in this survey, they provide a tangible and immediate insight into the psyche of ordinary people today. An authentic and perhaps unexpected truth about the human condition may manifest itself within the prayers written on koema.

4. Conclusion

In this article, I have explored the koema that were on display at the Ishiura Shrine. Following in the footsteps of earlier researchers, I have attempted to delve into an analysis of the prayers written on the koema. Although any survey of prayer tablets is only a snapshot of a particular place and time,
the readily accessible *koema* have the potential to communicate a great deal regarding the currents people navigate in their lives. In this way, I feel, *koema* become a social barometer of immense value.

Comparing this survey with earlier research such as Nobori (2009) and Yamanoi (1999), what is unfortunately lacking is a series of surveys carried out over an extended period. I hope to address this shortcoming in future research.

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