

A Comprehensive Survey of Small Votive Prayer Tablets

Dale K. ANDREWS

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; Satô 2009, 2010; Yoshitani and Satô 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 Daishô’s *Ema junrei to zokushin*

no kenkyū 『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 Zenjirō, 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 Hōzanji Temple (宝山寺), popularly known as Ikomashōten (生駒聖天), in Ikoma City, Nara Prefecture. He comprehensively examined a total of 643 tablets (Tamura, 1977; Satō 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 hōnōjo* 絵馬奉納所) dramatically increased at shrines and temples throughout Japan (Satō and Tamura 1978, 164). While conducting his survey of Ikomashōten'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 (Satō 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 (Satō 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 (石切劔箭神社) in Higashi Osaka City, Osaka Prefecture (Morishita 1985). Examining 1,013 tablets, he classified 1,528 prayers into eleven categories. One category in particular, that of 'other' (*sonota* 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-shū

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.

Chōgōsonshi-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* 願掛け石) 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).⁴ 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

Ninomiya 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, 2,220 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 Ninomiya 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 Ninomiya 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 Ninomiya 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* 縁結び), 'marriage' (*kekkon* 結婚),⁵ 'reconciliation' (*fukuen* 復縁), 'infidelity prevention' (*uwaki fūji* 浮気封じ), and 'together forever' (*itsu made mo*

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 Ninomiya 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' (*musubu* 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 June of 2000 (Mabuchi 2001, 2003). From 1,219 tablets he was able to classify the prayers into 23 separate categories. Different from all 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’ (*ōen* 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 Hiroimi’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’ (*enmusubi* 縁結び),⁷ ‘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 bōgyo* 外難防禦).⁸ 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 (Ôta, 2000, 40). A thorough investigation of the shrine’s historically significant collection of *ōema* was conducted in 1999 (Ôta, 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

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 *enmusubi* likely includes ‘marriage’ differing from Nishigai’s use (reference footnote 5).

⁸ Detailed on the Ishiura Shrine’s homepage, <http://www.ishiura.jp/vuisho/index.html> (accessed September 25, 2018).

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.⁹ 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.

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 shrine-goers. 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),¹⁰ 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·fūfu 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’ (*ningen 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 heiyū* 病氣平癒) 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

¹⁰ 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’ (*kyōgi* 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’ (*shōbai 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’un* 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’ (*jiko 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.¹¹ Spoken from the heart, what specifically is desired

is often left unsaid.¹² 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’ (*heiwa* 平和), which corresponds to prayers for ‘world peace’ (*sekai heiwa* 世界平和) documented at other shrines.¹³ 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 oeraremasu yō ni* ■がよいい)

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’ (*negaigoto ippan* 願いごと一般).

¹³ Anime fans commonly write ‘world peace’ (*sekai heiwa* 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’ (*kôtsû 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), *rômaji* (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.¹⁴ 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* 花 (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 crudely 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 *kaomaji*-like ^v^ smiley face was added on. On an additional tablet written in Japanese, a *kaomaji* (3)/ was used to conclude a prayer for recovery from illness. In the end, only three examples

¹⁴ These tablets were transcribed and incorporated into the overall analysis.

of *kaomaji*-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, shrine-goers 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* (為), 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 *rômajji* 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 *rômajji*. And in another instance, despite writing the prayer in Chinese, one woman also penned her name in *rômajji*.

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生まれてきます様に" (*Baby-chan ga genki ippai ni umarete kimasu yô ni*), 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 *gôgaku* (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 kyōikubu fuzoku-chū ni zettai gōkaku shitai* 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 sazakarimasu 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 shrine-goer’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.

Figure 1. Place of Residence

Description	Number	Detail
Residence & name given	27	
Residence only	3	
Place of residence		
Kanazawa City	10	
Ishikawa Prefecture	17	(outside Kanazawa)
Other prefecture	2	Osaka, Kanagawa
Foreign residence	1	Hong Kong

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

Description	Number	Detail
Year, month, day (年月日)	36	
Year, month (年月)	1	二十年一月
Month, day (月日)	6	
Year only (年)	1	平成十九年

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 Years. 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

Month & Year	Number
May 2007	2
June 2007	1
July 2007	1
Aug. 2007	3
Sep. 2007	3
Oct. 2007	1
Nov. 2007	3
Dec. 2007	2
Jan. 2008	10
Feb. 2008	4
Mar. 2008	3
Apr. 2008	3

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

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

Category	Prayer count	Joint (male & female)	Male only	Female only	Gender unknown	For benefit of others
Pregnancy 子授け祈願	8 (1.2%)	4 (50%)	0 (0%)	3 (37.5%)	1 (12.5%)	2 (25%)
Safe childbirth 安産祈願	109 (17%)	103 (94%)	0 (0%)	4 (4%)	2 (2%)	2 (2%)
Child safety 子育て祈願	160 (26%)	156 (97%)	1 (1%)	3 (2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Success in love 恋愛成就	14 (2.2%)	0 (0%)	5 (36%)	7 (50%)	2 (14%)	0 (0%)
Marriage 結婚	13 (2%)	5 (38%)	0 (0%)	4 (31%)	4 (31%)	2 (15%)
Couple congeniality カップル・夫婦円満	4 (0.6%)	2 (50%)	1 (25%)	0 (0%)	1 (25%)	0 (0%)
Family harmony 家族円満	15 (2.3%)	6 (40%)	1 (7%)	2 (13%)	6 (40%)	0 (0%)
Social relations 人間関係	10 (1.5%)	1 (10%)	0 (0%)	7 (70%)	2 (30%)	0 (0%)
Household protection 家内安全	14 (2.2%)	2 (14%)	2 (14%)	5 (36%)	5 (36%)	0 (0%)
Health and vitality 健康・元氣	54 (8.6%)	12 (22%)	9 (17%)	16 (30%)	17 (31%)	6 (11%)
Health recovery 病氣平癒	23 (3.6%)	3 (13%)	1 (4%)	9 (39%)	10 (44%)	8 (35%)
Academic achievement 学業成就	8 (1.2%)	1 (12.5%)	1 (12.5%)	3 (37.5%)	3 (37.5%)	1 (12.5%)
Passing examinations 合格祈願	102 (16%)	5 (5%)	34 (33%)	39 (38%)	24 (24%)	16 (16%)
Competition 競技・大会	9 (14%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	6 (67%)	3 (33%)	2 (22%)
Finding employment 就職	2 (0.3%)	0 (0%)	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Work success 仕事成就	11 (1.7%)	0 (0%)	4 (36%)	2 (18%)	5 (46%)	4 (36%)
Business prosperity 商売繁昌	4 (0.6%)	0 (0%)	1 (25%)	1 (25%)	2 (50%)	0 (0%)
Good luck 開運	11 (1.7%)	0 (0%)	1 (9%)	4 (36%)	6 (55%)	1 (9%)
Monetary fortune 金運	10 (1.5%)	6 (60%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	3 (3%)	0 (0%)
Happiness 幸福	26 (4%)	3 (11.5%)	3 (11.5%)	12 (46%)	8 (31%)	8 (31%)
Self-improvement 自己啓発	6 (1%)	1 (16.7%)	2 (33.3%)	2 (33.3%)	1 (16.7%)	0 (0%)

Category	Prayer count	Joint (male & female)	Male only	Female only	Gender unknown	For benefit of others
Peace 平和	1 (0.1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	0 (0%)
Weather 天候	1 (0.1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	0 (0%)
Heartfelt prayer 心願祈願	5 (0.8%)	1 (20%)	2 (40%)	1 (20%)	1 (20%)	0 (0%)
Gratitude お礼・感謝	2 (0.3%)	0 (0%)	2 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Other その他の祈願	4 (0.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (100%)	1 (25%)
Total	626	311	72	131	112	53

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 jôju*) 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 jôju*', 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

1 st prayer	2 nd prayer	Gender of supplicant
Academic achievement (M)	Happiness (F)	U
Academic achievement	Health	F
Business prosperity	Health	F
Family harmony	Health	J
Family harmony	Health	U
Family harmony	Health	U
Good luck	Health	U
Good luck	Health	U
Gratitude (passing exam)	Academic achievement	M
Happiness	Family harmony	F
Happiness (M)	Household protection	U
Health (M)	Competition (M)	U
Health	Family harmony	J
Health	Family harmony	U
Health	Good luck	U
Health	Happiness	F
Health	Happiness	F
Health (M) (F)	Happiness	F
Health	Happiness	M
Health	Monetary fortune	J
Health	Pregnancy	F
Health recovery	Monetary fortune	U
Health recovery	Pregnancy	J

1 st prayer	2 nd prayer	Gender of supplicant
Health recovery (F)	Work success (F)	U
Health recovery	Work success	U
Household protection	Gratitude (health)	M
Household protection	Health	F
Household protection	Health	F
Household protection	Health	F
Household protection	Health	M
Marriage	Family harmony	U
Marriage	Pregnancy	J
Monetary fortune	Household protection	J
Monetary fortune	Household protection	J
Passing exams	Marriage	F
Safe childbirth	Child safety	J
Work success (M)	Happiness	M
Work success	Success in love	M
Work success	Success in love	M

Legend: (M) male (F) female (J) joint dedication by male & female (U) gender unknown

Figure 6. Three prayers on single tablet

1 st prayer	2 nd prayer	3 rd prayer	Gender of supplicant
Child safety	Family harmony	Health	J
Couple congeniality	Academic achievement	Passing exams	J
Couple congeniality	Work success	Happiness	M
Family harmony	Health	Social relations	J
Finding employment	Health	Family harmony	M
Health	Business prosperity	Household protection	M

1 st prayer	2 nd prayer	3 rd prayer	Gender of supplicant
Household protection	Business prosperity	Academic achievement (M)	U
Health	Other	Family harmony	J
Health recovery (M)	Marriage (F)	Happiness	U
Household protection	Health	Happiness	F
Passing exams	Health	Success in love	M
Monetary Fortune	Health	Happiness	F
Safe Childbirth	Health	Happiness	J

Legend: (M) male (F) female (J) joint dedication by male & female (U) gender unknown

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

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 (ex., ㊦, ㊧, ㊨) 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.¹⁵ Among tablets with

¹⁵ Nishigai introduced this technique for presenting prayer combinations (1999, 38).

Figure 7. Multiple prayer combinations

1 Pregnancy	2 Safe childbirth	3 Child safety	4 Success in love
5 Marriage	6 Couple congeniality	7 Family harmony	8 Social relations
9 Household protection	10 Health & vitality	11 Health recovery	12 Academic achievement
13 Passing examinations	14 Competition	15 Finding employment	16 Work success
17 Business prosperity	18 Good luck	19 Monetary fortune	20 Happiness
21 Self-improvement	22 Heartfelt prayer	23 Peace	24 Weather
25 Gratitude	26 Other		
1, 5...1 4, 16...2 7, 20...1 9, 25...1 10, 18...3 11, 19...1 2, 10, 20...1 6, 12, 13...1 7, 10, 26...1 10, 19, 20...1 7, 10, 18, 20, 26...1	1, 10...1 5, 7...1 9, 10...4 10, 12...1 10, 19...1 12, 20...1 3, 7, 10...1 6, 16, 20...1 9, 10, 17...1 4, 10, 11, 20...1 7, 10, 20, 23, 24...1	1, 11...1 5, 13...1 9, 19...2 10, 14...1 10, 20...4 12, 25...1 4, 10, 13...1 7, 8, 10...1 9, 10, 20...1 10, 11, 18, 20...1	2, 3...1 7, 10...5 9, 20...1 10, 17...1 11, 16...2 16, 20...1 5, 11, 20...1 7, 10, 15...1 9, 12, 17...1 13, 18, 20, 21...1

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* いなくなれ) 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" (*ijjwaru 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" (*ijjwaru* 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* 天バツ) 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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