



Ema-gined Community

Votive Tablets (*ema*) and Strategic Ambivalence in Wartime Japan

Ema 絵馬 is the generic Japanese word for “votive tablet.” This article explores the challenge of interpreting *ema* created and offered during World War Two, and argues that the meanings of an *ema* are multiple and layered. Whether actualized or not, or only in part, the potential of votive tablets both signifies the agency of popular consciousness and lies in transforming popular consciousness. The legibility of a presented tablet is informed by a reader’s symbolic literacy and structural relationship to the producer, subject, or ritual context. The ambivalence and ambiguity of wartime *ema* resist impositions of an official or true story, and their scarcity and ephemerality make moot interpretive approaches premised on a large data base. Also addressed, therefore, is the necessity of developing strategies for tapping the ethnographic, historical, and cultural richness of ephemeral artifacts, such as votive tablets, that were ubiquitous yesterday and scarce today.

KEYWORDS: *ema*—votive tablets—ritual—wartime—popular culture—ephemera

Those who gave their lives at Pearl Harbor and defended the country were splendid, but looking at the black marketeers and the like on the homefront, those who died look foolish. If people keep dying for the sake of the emperor, there will be no Japanese people left. The emperor is the same human being [as we], isn't he?

(antiwar graffito recorded in *Tokkō geppō* 特攻月報,¹ May 1943, 27–28; quoted in DOWER 1993, 145)

I SHALL begin by describing an artifact of everyday life in wartime Japan and then consider ways in which it can be read. The artifact in question is an *ema* 絵馬, the generic Japanese word for votive tablet. This particular *ema* (FIGURES 1 and 2), one of only a dozen or so votive paintings remaining whose main image is a uniformed soldier, was discovered by folklorist Ishiko Junzō 石子順造 in a temple, Myōhōji 妙法寺 (in Suginami Ward 杉並, Tokyo), built in the seventeenth century and known for its “pox warding” efficacy.² The hand-painted tablet, about eighteen inches square, was the only (remaining) “soldier *ema*” among the dozens of others clustered on a ledge along the side of the temple. A uniformed soldier is represented standing and bowing, hat off, in a temple courtyard. Behind the figure are hills, traditional-style houses, and a pine tree, over which is superimposed an opaque fan-like shape bearing the generic expression, *hōnō* 奉納, or “offering.” An opaque rectangular shape in the lower left-hand corner contains a name, Katō Shingorō 加藤新五郎, and a partial address, Ōizumi Village 大泉村 (in Nerima 練馬 Ward, Tokyo). Ishiko explains that the tablet was offered in “thanks for discharge from military service” (*jotai orei* 除隊御礼), although an inscription to that effect does not appear on the tablet—perhaps on the reverse side along with a date? Inscriptions are often found on the reverse side of votive tablets, detailing the occasion for and date of the offering, along with the name, age, and address of either the person who offers the *ema* or that of the person on behalf of whom the *ema* is offered.³

Let us now venture into the realm of interpretation, for there are several ways in which to read this particular *ema*. Although votive paintings may collectively constitute a medium of “crisis resolution,” (cf. LEPOVITZ 1990), anthropologist KUBOTA Yoshihiro 久保田芳広 (1978, 308) suggests that it is only individually, on a case by case basis, that their precise critical meaning and significance can be comprehended. Moreover, because of the ambiguous meaning of the image itself, all the more so when coupled with an inscription that is either clichéd or detailed yet



FIGURE 1. *Ema* (15.6 inches by 12.5 inches) of a bowing soldier. The name Katō Shingorō is evident in the lower left-hand corner (Image from ISHIKO 1974, 76).



FIGURE 2. The *ema* in FIGURE 1 shown in situ (right-hand side) at Myōhōji. (Image from ISHIKO 1974, 95).

ambivalent, any one *ema* may contain several readings and levels of significance. Kubota, who is critical of *ema* scholars whose zeal to classify leads them to impose singular definitions on generic images, makes an example of a votive tablet from Tsugaru 津軽 (western part of Aomori 青森 Prefecture) featuring the image of a spotted cat biting a writhing snake. He takes issue with folklorist MATSUNO Takeo 松野武雄 (1930) who explained that the cat-snake *ema* was offered to placate the possibly vengeful spirit of the snake, a sacred creature, killed by the supplicant's domestic cat.⁴ How Matsuno arrived at this explanation is not clear—was it the meaning supplied by the actual supplicant? By other local residents? Educated guesswork? In the absence of any specific ethnographic data, Kubota suggests an alternative reading: the snake represents a hateful opponent that the spotted cat is destroying. In other words, offering such a votive tablet might also be a medium

for cursing an enemy (KUBOTA 1978, 308), or by the same token, for thanking the addressee (usually a deity) for eliminating an opponent or obstacle. Or, to continue, such a tablet might be a request for protection now and in the future from such opponents or obstacles. Without knowledge of the alleged intentions of the supplicant, even if the *ema* includes a written expression or account of the occasion for its offering, scholars can only make informed guesses about the likely meaning or meanings of a generic motif. Such knowledge is neither always possible nor feasible to acquire, especially in the case of *ema* offered by persons no longer living or who are untraceable. Therefore, scholars who study such artifacts should, at the very least, acknowledge their pictorial and narrative polysemy.

The soldier *ema* in FIGURE 1 is more ambiguous or equivocal than Ishiko's simple explanation would suggest. Ambiguity and ambivalence insure that readings are kept in constant fluctuation. This does not mean that the meanings of an *ema* are infinite—they are not—but rather, as I argue, that they are multiple and layered. In the case of FIGURE 1, many scenarios are possible: a) the votive tablet was offered by Katō's mother (possibly a war widow) in anticipation of his conscription or shortly after he was conscripted in an effort to mobilize the deities to intervene and spare her son⁵ and thus to help insure the integrity of the household; or b) the mother could have offered it in gratitude for her son's safe return and discharge; or c) Katō himself offered it for one of these reasons. Other scenarios are not likely, for example, that someone offered the *ema* either to memorialize Katō's death in battle or to request a glorious battle death. It seems quite certain that the majority of votive paintings in Japan, like those in Catholic Europe, Mexico, and Latin America, were not used for either funereal purposes or to mark a death anniversary. Rather, votive paintings and objects in general seem to constitute a technique or mode of problem solving, crisis resolution, and/or thanks-giving.⁶ The few exceptions in Japan are *mizuko ema* 水子絵馬 offered to acknowledge a miscarriage or abortion, *mabiki ema* 間引き絵馬 that address infanticide, and *mukasari ema* ムカサリ絵馬 utilized as a vehicle for transacting "marriages of dead souls" (*shirei kekkon* 死霊結婚) a practice apparently limited to northeastern Japan and Okinawa (ARAKAKI 1993; MAKABE 1979; MATSUZAKI 1993a–c; SAKURAI 1993; TAKAMATSU 1993; see also SCHATTSCHNEIDER 2001). Thus, if Katō had hailed from the northeast—he did not—and had died an unmarried man, an *ema* representing him with a bride may have been offered to both commemorate his death and to offer him marital solace in the other world. I will return to these dead soul-related *ema* further on.

World War Two⁷ presented a major crisis for the Japanese people even as it fostered a spirit of patriotism and heady nationalism, especially before 1942, when the Allies began to firebomb the archipelago. The military machine necessary to secure and maintain Japan's Asian and Pacific colonies was also deployed domestically, unreservedly from the mid-1930s onward, through patriotic societies, neighborhood organizations, and the police, all of which enforced "proper thinking" (MITCHELL 1976, 21). Although, and because, the state forbade public expressions of dissent from the outset of the war, such took the form of both communist

and anti-military graffiti (refer to the epigraph), gossip and rumor-mongering, and the circulation of money and election ballots on which were scribbled anti-war slogans or feelings of disgruntlement and anxiety (DOWER 1993, 123 & 131).⁸ I include votive tablets and paintings among these ephemeral media through which “improper thinking” was expressed, often obliquely and through metaphor.⁹ Although theoretically any type of *ema* could serve as a means of communicating improper ideas, I will limit my analytical focus to the class of soldier *ema*, sometimes referred to more generally as *gunkoku ema* 軍国絵馬, or “military nation” *ema*, made and offered in connection to wartime exigencies. They are singular among votive tablets in featuring ordinary uniformed soldiers as pictorial subjects—as opposed to famous samurai, generals, or other historical figures, such as Nichiren 日蓮.¹⁰ Soldier *ema* are semiotically and semantically ambiguous, as I have already suggested, and represent both explicit and subtextual statements about sentiments and experiences which may appear to contradict each other.

At this juncture, a brief review of the history of the *ema* genre followed by a discussion of the ritual practices and processes involved in offering a votive tablet will help to contextualize my thesis.

THE GENRE

Ema literally means “horse pictures,” which the earliest, eighth-century ones ostensibly were.¹¹ The term itself is said to have first appeared in an early eleventh-century text (ISHIKO 1974, 159), and *ema* appear in several scroll paintings from the early thirteenth century (for example, *Tengu zōshi emaki* 天狗草紙絵巻) (see KAWADA 1974). By the seventeenth-century, votive motifs and themes were as numerous as the number of supplicants, and continue to be so today. Most Japanese scholars of *ema* posit practical economy as the motive spurring the invention of the votive tablets. The images allegedly substituted for the live horses donated in ancient Shinto ceremonies held to commemorate departed leaders and also to beseech the deities (*kami* 神)¹² for, among other things, favorable weather (IWAI 1976, 3–28; ISHIKO 1974, 154–57; MESHIDA 1967, 18–21).¹³

Ema motifs other than horses seem to have been offshoots of the eighth-century Buddhist prayer-papers. These were printed with the portrait, name, and symbol or mantra of a particular deity, and distributed to different households by itinerant Buddhist personnel. The prayer-papers were regarded as protective charms believed to guarantee relief from illness, poverty, and other profound, secular concerns. As the Shinto and Buddhist epistemologies came to overlap and fuse, so did the use of horse images and prayer-papers, forming the *ema* genre as we recognize it today.

Sheer numbers aside, the growing popularity of votive paintings from the seventeenth century onward occasioned the use of multiple media and the creation of various tablet shapes. While rectangular and pentagonal *ema* continue to be the most prevalent, some of the more novel shapes invented include fan-, *torii* 鳥居- (gateway), and wreath-like images. They are variously decorated with colorful



FIGURE 3. A “large” *ema* (17.6 inches by 23.4 inches) commemorating the Sino-Japanese War. The tablet is dated April, Meiji 29 (1896). Image courtesy of Saitama Kenritsu Hakubutsukan.

paints, gold and silver lacquer, beaten copper, ceramic figures, fabrics, relief carvings, real objects, and combinations thereof.

Artistic and aesthetic innovations are especially characteristic of large votive paintings (*ōema* 大絵馬). While the “*ō*” in *ōema* literally means large, it also connotes a sophistication of design and professional artistry. Large *ema* measure up to and over one yard in length and width. Elegantly painted on wooden panels, they were developed from the late fourteenth century onward into a gallery genre monopolized by established painters (Iwai 1976, 73–99; Meshida 1967, 25–29). Today, large *ema*, old and new, are the prized possessions of art collectors, including temples and shrines, many of which have published glossy catalogues of their *ema* stock. Their subjects include horses, historical personages, Japanese, Portuguese and Dutch ships, illustrations of classical stories, and scenes of famous battles (FIGURE 3), as well as encyclopedic depictions of farming and manufacturing. Many of the more antique large panels have survived intact because they were hung indoors or in separate votive-painting pavilions (*emadō* 絵馬堂) constructed within temple and shrine compounds.

Contrasting with large *ema* are small votive paintings (*koema* 小絵馬). “*Ko*” literally means small—at least smaller than *ōema*—but also connotes rusticity and simplicity. Most, but not all, of the rectangular and pentagonal tablets are the size of a five-by-seven inch notecard, and are fashioned from and decorated in a variety of media, sometimes in a coarse, slap-dash manner (FIGURE 4). Small *ema* have long been produced and sold in great quantities by specialty artisans and itinerant peddlers, and have been available at shrines and temples, where they continue to be sold along with other votive paraphernalia, such as amulets and fortunes. Some supplicants even decorate their own tablets, referred to today as “my *ema*” マイ絵馬.¹⁴



FIGURE 4. Soldier *ema* (4.8 inches by 9.75 inches). The name Tano is evident in the lower right-hand section (Image from ISHIKO 1974, 75.)

FIGURE 5. Advertisement for *ema*. *Shūkan Bunshun* 1980, 158.

The small wooden plaques are displayed outdoors at temples and shrines on racks or shelves constructed for that purpose. Supplicants write their requests and messages on the tablets, usually on the undecorated side, and after hanging them, often read the tablets left by others. The popularity of *ema* and the public nature of presenting them figure significantly in my subsequent analysis of this ritual medium. (From hereon, I shall use *ema* and small *ema* (*koema*) interchangeably unless otherwise indicated.)

Ema have been offered by every sort of person for centuries, and recently have been celebrated as artifacts of a national popular culture centering on the reinvention of “traditional pastimes” (ROBERTSON 1994 and 1997). Most conspicuously since the “traditional culture boom” (*dentō būmu* 伝統ブーム) of the 1970s, large and small *ema* are collected and displayed privately and in museums as artifacts of cultural value and representations of an authentic living history. Shrines and temples capitalized on this “boom” by commodifying the ritual offering of votive tablets. For example, in 1979, Yūshima Tenjin 有島天神 in Tokyo and Kitano Tenmangū 北野天満宮 in Kyoto, two shrines dedicated to Sugawara no Michizane 菅原道真, a ninth-century imperial courtier enshrined as the deity of scholarship, were showered with criticism for profiting hugely from the sale of tens of thousands of “examination success” (*gōkaku* 合格) tablets priced at three hundred

yen each. Publicly chastened, the shrines quickly established modest scholarships funded by their *ema* profits (*Shūkan Yomui* 1979; ROBERTSON 1980). At the same time, *ema* specialty shops sprang up and advertisements of their deluxe sets of “examination success” tablets featuring either flat or high-relief images of Sugawara appeared in weekly magazines (such as *Shūkan Bunshun*; see FIGURE 5).

How these votive tablets are conceived and utilized is the subject of the next section.

THE RITUAL OF PETITION

The ritual of presenting a votive tablet, a process known as *ema hōnō* 絵馬奉納, has been theorized by Kubota as constituting a speech act (KUBOTA 1978). A speech act or an illocutionary act, such as a request, is a communicative activity that attempts to provoke or invite in someone, whether human or superhuman, a response or reaction of some sort (see AHERN 1979; AUSTIN 1962; KUBOTA 1978; SEARLE 1979).¹⁵ By extension, *ema* collectively form a popular genre of illustrated vernacular texts or petitions that are written, read, and reacted to. They are an interactive mode of timely and purposeful ritual and social discourse. Some *ema*, known as *kifuda* 木札 (wooden notices) consist only of an inscription (MESHIDA 1967, 77). Such tablets most obviously link *ema* to the historical and still current practice of posting official decrees or public notices on pentagonally-shaped boards. It seems that the pentagonal form itself possesses and conveys an illocutionary force, and during World War Two, state ideologues placed *kifuda* bearing war slogans and directives in neighborhoods throughout Japan as part of a spiritual mobilization cum “proper thinking” campaign.

Ritual, and its codification as “ritualism,” can serve, in some contexts, as an expression of resistance or dissent. Tsurumi Kazuko interprets rituals and ritualism as a passive form of resistance and dissent, insofar as nonconformist values and beliefs are preserved internally while official norms are conformed to outwardly (Tsurumi Kazuko in KOSCHMANN 1978, 20; see also TSURUMI 1970, 170–77). If we perceive *ema hōnō* as an illocutionary act, however, it follows that this ritual constitutes an active, redressive strategy, even though the resistance and dissent motivating this act are expressed through the strategically ambiguous image-text, rather than through inflammatory rhetoric. Of course, not all *ema* are as ambiguous or ambivalent as the soldier *ema*; that some votive tablets are capable of being read, and by association acted upon in several ways, has to do with the choice of a motif and the content of the inscription, including personal information. Thus, the circumstances and meaning of an *ema* offered by an elderly man, decorated with a painting of a pipe and a cigarette clamped in an old-fashioned padlock—a traditional version of the current “smoking prohibited” symbol of an encircled cigarette with a bar through it—and an inscription petitioning the *kami* to help him stop smoking, are quite clear (FIGURE 6).

The exigencies of war, which included thought control campaigns, were met with a variety of ingenious public expressions of dissent, as I noted above. Soldier



FIGURE 6. An *ema* offered by an elderly man who wishes to stop smoking (Image from ISHIKO 1974, 113).

ema were polysemic pictorially and textually—they had to be, for not only were expressions of opinions and motives at odds with official prescriptions not tolerated,¹⁶ but it is also the case that ordinary people held contradictory feelings about the war, which, on the one hand, was an occasion for national and cultural pride, and on the other, an occasion for great anxiety and hardship. Obviously, soldier *ema* were not the only types of votive tablets offered during the wartime period. People continued, as they always had, to enlist the cooperation of the deities to ensure, or to express their gratitude for, the safety and stability of the household, the birth and growth of healthy children, the complete recovery of an ailing family member, and other desirable situations of a general or specific nature. However, *ema* images and texts also reflect and respond to specific events in time and space, and thus soldier *ema* appeared during wartime, and were especially numerous at shrines and temples known for their efficacy in insuring longevity.

Appeals to local-person and local-place consciousness were typical expressions of dissent against the Imperial state during the wartime period (KOSCHMANN 1978, TSURUMI and ICHII 1981). State Shinto notwithstanding, local temples and shrines served as the affective core of wartime village life, and religious media such as *ema* were produced as expressions of local autonomy, even as they could also be read as supportive of nationalism and imperialist ventures.¹⁷ Religion and religious media are inseparably linked to the issue of how asymmetrical relations of power are both sustained and transformed (WOLF 1984, 3). The ambiguity and ambivalence of soldier *ema* meant that what they communicated could be manifold and even contradictory—at once dissenting and accepting, refusing and capitulating. Any one votive tablet is an ensemble of images, texts, and subtexts. A reader-suppliant must be both visually and textually literate in order to negotiate a tablet's symbolic terrain and its strata of multiple connotations. By the same

token, the illocutionary effectiveness of an *ema* in mobilizing a response from a reader-suppliant is contingent upon its “legibility,” which operates on at least two connotative levels. Moreover, I submit, the strategic ambiguity and ambivalence of an *ema* corresponds with the “double consciousness” of the supplicant-reader. A double consciousness “arises from the fact that to survive, one must understand how those who dominate define the world and oneself. One must be able to know what they think and what they expect...” (ADDELSON 1982, 181).

This digression on double consciousness and the different levels of connotation paves the way for an exploration of the layers of meaning enabling but also complicating the perception of the efficacy of soldier *ema* as an expression of disgruntlement and dissent during a time of war and repression.

Ema are a medium through which power is pursued; power in the sense of “the capacity of an agent or agents to secure specific outcomes through their intervention (or non-intervention) in the course of events” (THOMPSON 1984, 68). The agents in question may be both supernatural or divine and human. The power, or illocutionary (or perlocutionary) force, of *ema* comes not only from the language of oblation itself (that is, the inscriptions and symbols), but also from, on the one hand, the conscious and serious act of making a public request or petition, and on the other, the empathy of individuals and groups mobilized by the request or petition. A person who offers an *ema* at a temple or shrine presumably believes that there is an agent or agents capable of acting on the petition and carrying out the request (cf. AHERN 1979, 9). The this-worldly orientation of Japanese religious beliefs augments the ritual performance of *ema hōnō* insofar as one’s or a group’s present needs and concerns “are not negated in favor of a transcendent, other-worldly principle or deity” (KOSCHMANN 1978, 7).

Small *ema* most often are presented as requests or petitions and sometimes as thanks; large *ema* are too, but they are also offered to commemorate or mark the anniversaries of felicitous events. The more numerous small tablets are referred to generically in the literature as *ogami ema* 拝み絵馬, from *ogamu* 拝む, which means to pray and to persuade. The incantatory nature of presenting *ema* is apparent in the illocutionary expressions associated with this ritual. The writing of *hōnō* (offering) on the front of the tablet distinguishes it as a religious medium and establishes the frame of reference for the speech act itself. Either or both the expository *kigan* 祈願 and the more colloquial *onegai* お願い (or the more polite *onegai itashimasu* お願い致します) are used to preface or conclude, respectively, the message inscribed by the votary. The former means “prayerful request” and the latter implores one to “act upon and fulfill this request.”¹⁸ The former (*kigan*), moreover, is recognized as a mode of oblation that is distinctive in not being the province of religious specialists; rather, ordinary people themselves initiate the supplicatory action (MIYAKE 1980, 194–95). It is also important to note that the focus of prayerful requests is on improving or maintaining life in the present material world; such requests are not a vehicle for salvation (CHIBA 1970, 301–302; FUJII 1972, 219–20). Ethnologist Inoguchi Shōji 井之口章次 suggests that *kigan* constitutes a “positive step humans can take toward making manifest their

intentions and desires” (INOUCHI 1980, 154). Likewise, the phrase *onegai* (or *onegai itashimasu*) is used to conclude a request or a presentation of information with the expectation that its illocutionary force will compel a reader to identify with and assume responsibility for the predicament or situation in question. Both expressions are intended to or expected to produce results to make a difference in the way things are (INOUCHI 1980, 155).

The basic strategy of a prayerful petition or request in the form of *ema* is to elicit an empathic response from as many readers as possible, be they deities or humans. Related to this strategy is the widespread belief that a specific petition or entreaty is not just for the benefit of the supplicant alone, but that many people—friends, relatives, consociates, and strangers alike—may also benefit from the effort. As Kubota notes, the ritual of offering an *ema* “produces various kinds of social relationships and constructs a social world” (KUBOTA 1978, 294–95). Thus, an individual supplicant’s prayerful request can be extended and augmented by votive tablets offered in empathy by others. The special terms for this strategy of engagement are “collective requests” (*kyōdo kigan* 共同祈願), “combined efficacy requests,” (*gōryoku kigan* 合力祈願) and “accumulated or compounded requests” (*ruiseki kigan* 累積祈願) (INOUCHI 1977, 7, and 1980, 159, 161, & 164; MIYAKE 1980, 194, 95).

Also compounding the efficacy of votive tablets is the usual, but not universal, practice of ritually burning them in an annual memorial service (*kuyō* 供養). This service not only makes room for new tablets to be presented, especially in the case of shrines like Yūshima Tenjin, noted earlier, which attract tens of thousands of *ema* presenters, but also is believed to pacify the indwelling spirit of the tablet and to symbolically liberate the request and its supplicatory merit (cf. READER 1991, 179).¹⁹ It is sometimes the case, however, that the tablets are considered to be more efficacious the older and more weather-beaten they are, the idea being that they have thoroughly absorbed both the numinous virtue of the deity to which they were presented and the prayerful requests of empathic supplicant-readers, and are left hanging (cf. HOLTOM 1931, 14).²⁰ And in some regions, it is the practice of persons to hang their *ema* at home instead, and return them to a temple or shrine the following year to be burned and replaced with a new tablet (KOBAYASHI 1941). This, in fact, is one reason for the dearth of soldier *ema*.

Like Kubota and unlike MIYAKE (1980), I do not limit the performative potential of prayerful requests to the mediation of human-deity transactions, but also interpret *ema* presentations as a mode of interpersonal communication, the quality and quantity of which can compound the illocutionary force of the requests. The following account from my (now yellowed) fieldnotes illustrates my point.

About ten of the fifty or so *ema* hanging at Kumano Shrine 熊野神社 in Kyoto, all of which I read during a summer fieldtrip to Japan in 1979, were presented over the course of several years by a mother whose young daughter was gravely ill with, among other horrible symptoms, bone deformities and internal hemorrhaging, requiring her confinement for two years (as of July 1979) in a hospital near the

shrine. All of the *ema* bore as a decoration the image of a black crow, the shrine's symbol. The text from one of the tablets offered by the mother reads as follows.²¹

Lives in Osaka-fu, Hirakata-shi.... Eldest daughter of the Minakawas. Minakawa Kazumi, 8 years old. She is currently hospitalized at Kyoto University Hospital, Surgical Ward, Third Floor, Room.... I deeply request that Minakawa Kazumi's renal arterial blockage is fixed and her esophageal hemorrhaging stopped, her bone deformities and splenic diseases cured, and that the bones in her hands and feet bind successfully.

Other *ema* offered by Mrs. Minakawa, whose inscriptions amounted to a heart-rending chronicle of her daughter's ordeal, included her own name, age, address, and telephone number. Pilgrims and visitors reading these tablets could not help but empathize, as I did, with the mother's desperate grief and her daughter's suffering. Several supplicants, in fact, mentioned the girl in their own *ema*, requesting recovery and happiness on her behalf. At the very least, reader-suppliants were left with the sobering realization of the tragedy, anxiety, and suffering in life, and in some lives more than others.

This account underscores the point that the votive tablets mediate relations between and among humans by initiating dialogues between presenters and readers, both of whom are at once supplicants and interlocutors engaged in an *ema* performance, which is a preeminently public ritual.²² The tablets are hung in the open, accessible for anyone to read—and they are meant to be read and responded to. In fact, at some shrines and temples *ema* are specifically written with human readers in mind. The prime example of one such shrine is the garishly painted “love match” shrine (Jishu Jinja 地主神社, also known as Musubi no Kamisama 結びの神様) within the otherwise austere Kiyomizu Temple 清水寺 compound in Kyoto. There, literally thousands of tablets are inscribed and hung by women and men of all ages, but mostly young adults, in search of a suitable partner or spouse. Although some of the inscriptions are generic requests for a suitable partner, most include such specific information as the age, weight, height, educational history, occupation, hobbies, musical tastes, favorite foods, future plans, address, and telephone number of the supplicants, along with an “act upon this request” command (*onégai*) to the reader. I have stood next to many individuals busy jotting down such vital statistics in their notebooks as they riffled through the countless hanging “personal ads”—a shrine-sponsored dating and matchmaking service, as it were.

SOLDIER *EMA*

Over the centuries, supplicants have increased the symbolic lexicon of votive tablets by modifying the meaning of a motif or by creating new images in response to the exigencies of their individual or collective situation. Soldier *ema* exemplify this phenomenon of socio-historically mediated and inflected iconographic change within generic continuity. While votive tablets for all types of predicaments were offered during times of war, soldier *ema* deal with subjects of a

specifically military nature—namely, conscription, repatriation, victory, and death in battle—and their ramifications. The Hakodate War (1869), the military expedition to Taiwan (1874), the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), and the Pacific War (1931–1945) all occasioned the production of soldier *ema* (see FIGURE 3), although the majority of those that have been preserved are the large ones. Given the dearth of extant war *ema*, both large and small—whether from wartime destruction, fragility in the face of environmental forces, indifference, and/or from regular memorial services in which the small tablets in particular were burned—I have had to rely on photographs of tablets from this period, some of which are reproduced here. I address the challenge of working with ephemeral data in the conclusion.

Not only were *ema* motifs influenced by wartime exigencies, but votive tablets themselves were adapted during the wartime period as a motif by advertisers seeking to promote the use of health tonics and vitamins in a state sanctioned effort to improve the *kokutai* 国体 (*Volkskörper*, or “national body”). FIGURE 7 is a vitamin advertisement appearing in the 11 September 1940 issue of *Shashin Shūhō* featuring a farm woman, outfitted in traditional gear, above and to the right of whom hang *ema*, drawn, off-scale, to look as though they were dangling from a string. The smaller tablet features a picture of a medicine bottle, and both *ema*



FIGURE 7. Wartime advertisement with an *ema* motif for Wakamoto yeast pills (*Shashin Shūhō* 1940, 25).

are printed with copy advertising the virtues of Wakamoto yeast tablets. Like the petitions or requests inscribed on votive tablets offered in a religious context, these ads also exert an illocutionary force in soliciting customers. Moreover, whereas both *ema* connect the yeast pills with improved nutrition, hematogenesis, and resistance to disease, the larger one also conjures up a more comprehensive scenario linking healthy bodies with “bountiful fall harvests on the home front.” In place of the formulaic expression *hōnō* found on religious *ema*, the large “ad *voto*,” as it were, carries the bold proclamation: Harvest of health (*kenkō no shukaku* 健康の収穫). This advertisement presumes the public’s familiarity with votive

tablets and their long history as a ritual medium. It also rhetorically absorbs the local community into the nation-state while simultaneously inserting commercial and industrial values into an agrarian economy.

The appeal to tradition (that is, *ema hōnō*) in the service of the wartime nation was also a strategy employed by the military government, whose agents perceived the rural population as “selfish” and “self-centered,” and worried that the violence and hardship occasioned by war would germinate an impending class struggle (DOWER 1993, 113–14). Thus, *Ie no Hikari* 家の光 [Light of the household], a government approved, popular and widely circulated “infotainment” magazine aimed at farm householders, published articles and stories that represented the rural population as both inherently virtuous *and* in need of re-socialization and modernization. At the same time, *ema* were a regular feature of the ethnology journal, *Minzoku Bunka* 民族文化 [Ethnic culture], during the wartime period, and their collection by local historians and folklorists was regarded as a form of “salvage anthropology” (KOBAYASHI 1941, 9; TSURUOKA 1940, 12).

With these observations in mind, let us review and analyze several salient motifs that characterize soldier *ema*.

“TIE-CUTTING”

One of the standard motifs of the *ema* genre in general is that of “tie-cutting” (*enki* 縁切り). Tablets with this motif are offered whenever one seeks to sever ties with, or dependency on, someone or something: a spouse, lover, illness, vice, and the like. The most typical pictorial format features a nettle tree (*enoki* 榎) flanked on one side by a person (the supplicant or benefactee) and on the other by the person or thing from which the supplicant seeks separation. Around the trunk is tied a *shimenawa* 締め縄, the straw rope used in Shinto to mark off extraordinary things and spaces. The choice of the nettle tree as a symbol of and for “tie-cutting” is based on wordplay: *enoki* may be read as *en no ki* 縁の木, or “the tree (*ki*) of obligatory ties (*en*)” (IWAI 1976, 181–82). The rope serves as a metaphor for the gravity of the request, and also demarcates the exceptionality and unity of whatever it symbolically encloses and sanctions—marriage, village, nation, and so forth.

The rebus-like tie-cutting motif was adopted for soldier *ema* (FIGURE 8). Two men, one in civilian dress, the other in a military uniform, were portrayed turned away from each other while standing or kneeling on either side of a nettle tree. In some of the tablets, the nettle tree is suggested by a branch, and the men occupy the center of the tablet. The two figures were ostensibly dual aspects or identities of the same individual; identities which were as incompatible as a married couple seeking divorce, divorce being a frequent motive for offering *ema* of the tie-cutting theme. Many soldier *ema* of this type were hung at the two major “tie-cutting” shrines in the Kanto region: the Enkiri Enoki 縁切 in Itabashi Ward 板橋区, Tokyo, and the Kadota (or Monden) Inari 門田稲荷 in Ashikaga City 足利市 (IWAI 1976, 102).



FIGURE 8. A tie-cutting soldier *ema* featuring the civilian and soldier aspects of one man. The wall text was missing in 1979 and had been replaced by 1986 when I photographed it a second time. (Photograph by author, *Ema* Museum, Konpira Shrine, Kyoto, 1986.)

The most general connotation of this motif is of tie-cutting or estrangement: the soldier has been forced to leave his home and village to serve in the armed forces.²³ As for more nuanced and less obvious connotations, *ema* scholar Iwai Hiromi suggests that the tie-cutting motif in a soldier *ema* symbolizes a desire on the part of the supplicant or subject, who are not necessarily the same person, to avoid military service. It is well known that many men resisted the conscription system, although Iwai implies that they did so through a form of dissent that stemmed from the purity of their *honno* 本音, or innermost temperament and feelings, which apparently clashed with state policies. Throughout the wartime years, Japanese ideologues and pundits coined phrases and propounded slogans—printed in the margins and on the covers of newspapers and magazines, and published in pocket anthologies—in an effort to promote proper thinking, and to suppress negative gossip and sensational rumors (DOWER 1993, 110). Whether the dissenting conscripts were successful in their resistance is beside Iwai's point. We can extend his interpretation and suggest that at the very least the tie-cutting motif represents ambivalence: the simultaneous existence of contradictory, incompatible, and mutually exclusive positions, feelings, and identities. Therefore, Iwai proposes that the civilian figure in the scene symbolizes the relative autonomy of everyday life and that the uniformed figure symbolizes life in the service of the military state.

Ever since the promulgation of universal conscription in 1873 the desire of young men to evade conscription hounded the authorities (HANE 1986, 96–97). Such a desire is not necessarily the equivalent of a clearly articulated antiwar or antigovernment stance. However, the avoidance of, and even the thought of avoiding military service was tantamount to a rejection of state policies, policies which dis-

rupted civilian life and compromised local autonomy. It is therefore quite germane to interpret the civilian and soldier figures in the tie-cutting soldier *ema* as representing two antagonistic identities of one individual who is reluctant to leave civilian life and the local community for army service, as opposed to representing two brothers or two unrelated men.

Another more complicated reading of the tie-cutting motif would recognize it as a pictorial representation of *tenkō* 転向, the term for the conversion of anti-government activists to the ideological position promoted by the state. The about-faces were occasioned by force, by threats to an individual's family, or just by force of circumstances (HUNTER 1984, 225; TSURUMI 1986, 12). In such a case, the soldier represented the converted civilian—or perhaps, to complicate matters, the uniformed figure camouflaged the dissenting civilian who gave the appearance of having converted.²⁴ The mother-son relationship was one exploited by the state in efforts to coerce *tenkō*. Tsurumi relates the following Thought Police technique for inducing an about face:

The police stationmaster should have a prisoner brought from the cell to the stationmaster's room, should sit him down in the stationmaster's chair and from his own pocket buy him a bowl of *oyako donburi* (chicken and eggs on rice). The name of this dish means, literally, "parent-child bowl," and was intended to remind the prisoner of the parent-child relationship. The policeman should say nothing about ideology, but only "Your mother is worried about you." He should not mention the father, as this might encourage the student's defiance of authority.... In the end the young man...would feel his ideological superstructure melt away." (TSURUMI 1986, 12)

Yet another connotation of the tie-cutting motif is that the two figures represent a repatriated soldier returning to civilian life who desires to put his military experience behind him. This explanation was provided in the wall text of a tie-cutting soldier *ema* exhibited at the *Ema* Museum in Kyoto (on the premises of the Konpira temple 金毘羅寺, on the occasion of my visit in August 2000).

It is not plausible to interpret the tie-cutting motif as an expression of eagerness to leave one's family and community to serve with joyous delight in the armed forces. The tie-cutting motif and its referents are overdeterminedly negative; one is either forced to separate, or the separation alludes to the unbearable situation that occasioned the event. Significantly, in this connection, some conscripts were investigated by the Thought Police for having "written poems that spoke of sorrow upon being separated by a loved one" (*Tokkō geppō*, April 1942, 30; in DOWER 1993, 133). Soldier *ema* which did glorify straightforwardly martial values and patriotism are primarily large votive boards depicting famous battle scenes (for example, FIGURE 3). Of course, there is always the possibility that the theme of military heroism or the image of a famous warrior was adapted and read by some as a symbolic expression of the strength of their antiwar resolve and defiance of authority.²⁵ More common, in this connection, were small tablets featuring the image of an

intrepid samurai presented by apparently underprivileged individuals praying for worldly success (ISHIKO 1974, 222).

In the event that a tie-cutting soldier *ema* was presented by someone other than the man depicted, it may have expressed the reluctance of a parent, spouse, friend, relative, co-worker, or supplicant-reader to see him leave the community to fulfill his obligatory military service. Had a mother offered the *ema* on behalf of her son, a different complex of attendant emotions may be extrapolated, especially in light of the historical tenacity of the interdependent mother-(eldest) son relationship in Japan (see LEBRA 1985, 158–216). Kazuko Tsurumi and other historians have noted that the state, through textbooks and other popular media, encouraged mothers to dedicate their sons willingly to the Emperor and the nation (TSURUMI 1970, 257; MIYAKE 1991; NAGAHARA 1986; SHIINO 1994). However, many married women felt a conflict between the state's construction of the patriotic “good wife, wise mother” (*ryōsai kenbo* 良妻賢母) and the emotional reality of being the mother or wife of a conscripted soldier. Offered by a mother, then, a tie-cutting soldier *ema* could connote simultaneously both loyalty to the “family-state” (*kazoku kokka* 家族国家)²⁶ and the protection of family members.

A wartime story recounted by Tsurumi supports this ambivalent reading of the tie-cutting *ema*. In the story, a mother publicly wishes for her son to die a glorious death for the emperor and to thereby distinguish the family in the eyes of the nation. Privately, however, the mother, distressed by her son's conscription, wishes him to return home safely (TSURUMI 1970, 253). Wives of soldiers experienced equally conflicting roles: ideally, they “were expected to encourage their husbands to die bravely on the battlefield; in reality, they wished them to return home soon and in good health...” (260). As distress and anxiety were tantamount to unpatriotic behavior, a slogan common to soldier *ema*, “request for eternal military success” (*bu'un chōkyū kigan* 武運長久祈願), for example, would have effectively marked the tablet as a patriotic gesture, thereby concealing its (possibly) contradictory subtext. The necessity for secrecy and duplicity was paramount, for, as recorded in the *Tokkō geppō*, a parent was arrested after he was overheard saying, “I learned that my child was killed in Singapore [captured by the Japanese in February, 1942]. However much one may speak of the country, can a parent help but weep?” (*Tokkō geppō*, January 1942, 13; in DOWER 1993, 133).

Similarly, Tsurumi tells of the habit of “talking to pebbles” shared by mothers of soldiers:

They said that if we pick pebbles on the riverside, wash them, offer them to the gods and pray, a soldier may be saved from getting a corn on his foot. Hearing this, I used to pick pebbles every day, cleaned them and offered them to our family altar and prayed to our ancestral gods.... I...embraced them [while] talking to them, “Now let's go to sleep together.”...These rituals were performed in secrecy and kept secret for almost twenty years after the end of the war.

(TSURUMI 1970, 258–59)

It is important to keep in mind that soldier *ema* do not deal directly with the roots and causes of war, but rather with the disruptions war provokes in everyday life through conscription and other burdens, including protracted misery, fear, hunger, and exhaustion. In contrast, much anti-state graffiti was sharply and unequivocally critical of the war: “Commoners die for the glory of a few” and “Ridiculous to be a soldier—35 *sen* [0.35 *yen*] a day” (DOWER 1993, 127–28). The legibility and intelligibility of soldier *ema*, in contrast, operated on many, often contradictory, levels as I have just shown in the case of the tie-cutting motif.

“PRAYING SOLDIER”

Another type of soldier *ema* produced during World War Two was noted by the folklorist Arai Tomizō 荒井富三, who, writing in 1940, described the tablets offered at the Enmei (longevity) Jizō shrine 延命地藏尊 on the island of Shikoku.²⁷

[These *ema*] resemble children’s drawings—spontaneous and unaffected. Like the brave soldiers shown bowing, absorbed in their prayers for military success, [the tablets] bear not even a trace of ostentation or pretentiousness.

(ARAI 1940, quoted in ISHIKO 1974, 186)

Invoking the polysemous character of soldier *ema*, Ishiko insists that the patriotism eulogized by Arai is but the defensive facade of a motif whose subtextual meaning is less than supportive of the war effort. He argues that precisely because these soldier *ema* were offered at a longevity shrine within a military parade



FIGURE 9. Soldier *ema* (9.5 inches by 8 inches) (Image from ISHIKO 1974, 68).

ground, their symbolic meaning is that of safe repatriation regardless of whether the war was won or lost. What motivated the production of these tablets, he posits, was neither patriotism nor the hope of military success, but rather an individualistic, private desire for a safe return and subsequent longevity (ISHIKO 1974, 186). Social historian Sakuta Kei'ichi elaborates on the latent, smoldering individualism to which Ishiko alludes:

Individuals were faced with the obligation to lay down their lives if so ordered by the state. When they felt the desire to live welling up from deep within them, they became acutely aware that it must be rooted in their own individual being.

(SAKUTA 1978, 225)

Ishiko's pacifist interpretation of this type of votive image may have been informed by his retrospective projection of the widespread revulsion for war in postwar Japan, just as Arai's explanation in 1940 may have been ventured out of a sense of patriotism or with wartime censors in mind. Nevertheless, both folklorists inadvertently demonstrate by their different interpretations the basic ambiguity and ambivalence characteristic of soldier *ema*.

Although images of the Enmei Jizō *ema* in question are not available, Arai's description suggests that they resembled FIGURE 4. In this tablet, a soldier, hat on and arms at his side, is shown bowing in prayer in front of a Shinto shrine or Buddhist temple, symbolized by the divided curtain above the uniformed figure's head. The characters for *hōnō* (ritual offering) appear at shoulder level, and on the figure's left side is a last name, Tano 田野. FIGURE 9 is similarly executed, but the two soldiers are posed with their right arms raised in a gesture of salutation which bears a striking resemblance to the canonical Buddhist hand gesture known as *Abhaya-mudrā* ("do not fear"). The soldier in FIGURE 10 is similarly posed. The two conscripts in FIGURE 9 stand between a shrine or temple (curtain) on their right and a pine tree on their left. Directly beneath the character for "offering" is the name of a town, Ōmiya-chō 大宮町 (Saitama 埼玉 Prefecture) followed by two (now mostly illegible) last names.

FIGURES 1, 10, 11, and 12 are somewhat larger and more detailed versions of the "praying soldier" motif, and share in common several iconographic elements: praying soldier(s), a section of a shrine or temple building and/or compound, and a pine tree. Like the tie-cutting motif, that of a figure or figures bowing in front of a shrine or temple is a stock theme and was not limited to soldier *ema*. However, whereas civilians were virtually always portrayed in a kneeling position, soldiers were almost always drawn standing, perhaps indicative of their stalwartness, or more likely, immanent departure. Only on FIGURE 10 is a date (Meiji ?9) partially visible, although, because that section of the tablet is abraded, it is unclear as to whether this represents a birth date, the date on which the *ema* was presented, or an anniversary date of some sort. (If the date was Meiji 29 [1894], this could have been an *ema* offered during the Sino-Japanese War, like that in FIGURE 3). The two kneeling men are wearing formal kimono; the soldier's uniform (and hat in particular) resembles that worn in the late nineteenth century (see FIGURE 3 for



FIGURE IO. Soldier *ema* (14.4 inches by 11.3 inches) (Image from ISHIKO 1974, 68).



FIGURE II. Soldier *ema* (13.6 inches by 11.7 inches). The name Maeda Ryōsuke and a rank, Army Infantry Superior Private (*Rikugun hobei jōtōbei*), are written in the lower left-hand corner. The slogan, “anniversary of triumphant return” (*gaisen kinen*) appears in the upper right-hand corner (Image from ISHIKO 1974, 77).



FIGURE 12. Soldier *ema* (15.6 inches by 11.7 inches). The names of four individuals with the same family name, Nagazuka, are evident in the lower left-hand corner (Image from ISHIKO 1974, 76).

comparison), although clothing styles *per se*, whether civilian or military, are not reliable indicators of an *ema*'s date. While a uniform may correspond in a general way to a particular phase of military fashion, it may simply signify “military” or “soldier.”

FIGURE 1, the subject of my opening story, includes a cluster of thatch-roof farmhouses in the background signifying a village, community, and by association, local autonomy. In the foreground is a comparatively detailed view of a shrine or temple compound and assorted structures, including incense and water containers, lanterns, and a covered trough for rinsing one's hands and mouth—acts of purification—before praying. As in the slightly less detailed FIGURE 11, the soldier has removed his hat and is bowing toward the sanctuary. Noteworthy of soldier *ema*, and the more detailed ones in particular, is the fact that soldiers appear to be positioned at some remove from an altar or sanctuary, perhaps in recognition of their new liminal status as conscripts (that is, outsiders) relative to everyday life in their villages.²⁸ The four soldiers, all brothers, in FIGURE 12 are similarly placed at a distance from the shrine or temple.

Shrines and temples represent and sanctify the integral, autonomous world of the village, and historically, as in wartime Japan, formed the affective core of village life. Likewise, an enshrined deity does not transcend the village but is “concerned solely with the welfare of the members of the group for which it is an object of worship” (SAKUTA 1978, 223; see also the discussion in ROBERTSON 1994, Chaps. 2 and 4). Although there may not have been any physical barriers protecting the integrity of the village against the outside world, an invisible, affective boundary nevertheless existed (cf. TARUMI 1982, 198). The ritual performance of presenting

and reading soldier *ema* was, I would argue, one means of drawing an affective boundary. The tablets likely helped to foster a sense of collective estrangement—symbolized by the praying soldiers—as an ontological defense against the unfamiliar, indeterminate outside world.²⁹ The corollary to this posture is that “villagers should not share their life with outsiders” (198).

Anthropologist Tarumi Minoru 垂水稔 draws attention to the ritual or symbolic cutting of ties to the outside world, a process known as *michikiri* 道切. Literally, *michikiri* means to “cut off or close off a path” so as to keep someone or something from either exiting or entering a bounded space. It is an exercise in boundary drawing, insofar as boundaries, whether affective or physical, involve (en)closures (TARUMI 1982). Not only does this concept suggest another connotation of the tie-cutting motif, but it also proposes that an insistence on local autonomy could be read as a form of anti-state dissent. The official “concentric ideology” placed (or rather, submerged) the individual in the center of a series of concentric circles of containment and restraint, growing outward from the household to encompass the nation-state. Drawing a boundary by simultaneously closing off (*kiri*) a path (*michi*) or cutting (*kiri*) an obligation (*en*), symbolically disengaged the village from the nation and made it a distinct part of the otherwise undifferentiated whole schematized in the concentric ideology. The drawing of boundaries symbolically rendered the relationship between village and nation both discontinuous and discontinuous.

The praying-soldier *ema* thus signified the durability of the village and its peculiar history; shrines and temples symbolized this durability, and villagers acknowledged the primacy of communal life through their oblations. This motif also conveys recognition of the indispensability of individual members of the community. Young men must either avoid conscription or if recruited and sent to the front, return to the village alive so that the community may continue in perpetuity.³⁰

The pine tree (*matsu* 松), which appears in many of the soldier *ema* discussed, is a symbol of and for longevity and perseverance. One homonym, *matsu* 待つ, means to wait for, or to look forward to, someone or something. This same ideograph also means to turn to or to count on another person for help or support; both homonyms allude to the interpersonal context and illocutionary force of votive tablets. Through their fluency in vernacular symbolism and conditioned by socio-historical circumstances, the supplicant-readers were able to negotiate multiple connotations of the praying-soldier *ema*. *Matsu* (the pine tree) signified, on one level, that life (longevity) takes precedence over valor and heroic death. *Matsu* (to wait) drew attention to the mother, friends, and villagers awaiting the soldier’s return. Finally, readers were implored (*matsu*) to identify with the predicament encoded in these tablets as made more concrete by the textual components—name, occupation, date, address, slogan and supplicatory message.

The slogan brushed in the upper righthand corner of FIGURE II, *gaisen kinen* 凱旋記念, or “anniversary of a triumphant return,” can be construed in several ways. From an official standpoint, “triumphant return” may have indicated the return of the ashes of a soldier who had died gloriously in battle. However, this reading is most atypical since *ema* as a genre do not celebrate death and dying per se, as

I noted early in this essay. Alternatively, it may have indicated that the tablet was actually offered on the occasion of a (living) soldier's return. Or, the slogan may have simply expressed someone's request for the soldier's safe return alive; that is, the tablet "voiced" a wish to commemorate his return. Whether "triumphant" describes the outcome of a battle or the war, or a soldier's survival against the odds, or both, remains ambiguous. Ishiko claims that FIGURE I was offered to "give thanks upon discharge from the service" (*jotai orei*), and that FIGURE IO was presented as a "request for eternal military success" (*bu'un chōkyū kigan*) (ISHIKO 1974, 218). Since the photographs of these tablets do not reveal any visible inscriptions indicating such, Ishiko is perhaps speculating or referring to notations on the backs of the tablets. Motoyasu Hiroshi 本康宏史 suggests that although soldier *ema* often included slogans like "eternal military success" and "victory" (*senshō* 戦勝), they were offered as requests to avoid conscription and death (MOTOYASU 2002, 322–23)

To digress for a moment on the point that *ema* as a rule do not celebrate death and dying, it is important to consider the special category of *mukasari ema*, introduced earlier. These are generally "large," but not necessarily artistically sophisticated, votive tablets that constitute a religious practice apparently limited to Yamagata 山形 Prefecture and that do address the fact of death, but only for the purposes of serving as a medium for the transaction of "marriages between dead souls." *Mukasari*, which is written in the *katakana* syllabary, apparently means "marriage" in the Yamagata dialect. The term is now used to identify such *ema* found in northeastern Japan in general. Parents of an adult son or daughter who died unmarried (from causes other than suicide (MATSUZAKI 1993, 20) will provide him or her with a spouse by offering an *ema* either decorated with a scene from a wedding ceremony or a photographic collage showing him or her in wedding regalia. Thus, one *mukasari ema* hanging at the Wakamatsu Kannon 若松観音 temple in Tendō City 天童市 (Yamagata Prefecture) was offered by a mother whose two soldier sons died in New Guinea during World War Two (FIGURE I3). Both sons and their brides are seated in front of gold screens on either side of the *tokonoma* (alcove), in which is hanging a painting of two cranes and a pine tree, both symbols of longevity. A red sun hovers behind them, with obvious allusions to the Japanese flag. In front of each couple, who appear in formal wedding attire, is a tray bearing the three cups of sake that, when sipped, seal the marriage (MORI 1981, 16; see also MATSUZAKI 1993a, 62–95).³¹ Also hanging at the Wakamatsu Kannon is a medium-size *ema* featuring a soldier standing slightly in front of a tall stone lantern on his right and a young woman in a long-sleeved black and red kimono on his left. She sports a red ball-and-tassel hair decoration and appears to be holding something in her left hand. Both kimono sleeves are decorated with green and brown pine trees against a white background. The uniformed soldier wears a hat and is holding a dark object in his right hand, and a flatter and bigger red object in his left hand. (Not only is the drawing rudimentary, but the only photographic image I have found of this *ema* is too blurry to make out further details, including a name or slogan. The date, Shōwa 18 (1943), is clearly legible on

the left side of the tablet. The two figures are standing in the courtyard of a shrine or temple—a similar but more tightly focused space than in FIGURE I—with two pine trees behind them. White cloud-like and blooming shrub patterns overlap the trees. The anonymous website on which I located this image separates it from the *mukasari ema* but questions whether this *ema* commemorates a deceased soldier (ANON). I disagree for reasons argued earlier, and suggest that this was likely an *ema* representing the polysemous *matsu* theme explained above, offered perhaps by a relative or fiancée.

Generally speaking, the ambiguity or indeterminacy of these soldier *ema* motifs resides not only in the multiple referents of the slogans, but also in the indistinct nature of the relationship between the image and the text. Does the image illustrate and amplify the text, or contradict it? Does the text elucidate the image or distance the content of the image? Are both image and text to be read independently of the other or as a dialectic of signification? As Barthes discovered, “there is never a real incorporation [of text and image] since the substance of the two structures (graphic and iconic) are irreducible, but there are most likely degrees of amalgamation” (BARTHES 1982, 205). The degrees of amalgamation are evident in the sometimes contradictory but coeval texts and subtexts of soldier *ema* motifs, which include nationalistic poses and antiwar and anti-state sentiments in the guise of self-interest and local autonomy.

COMPARATIVE LOCAL GENRES

The bowing soldiers in the soldier *ema* appear humble and subdued in contrast to the arrogant and resolute pilot of the Army Day poster (FIGURE I4). Like votive tablets, war posters were a popular and public medium; but unlike the soldier *ema* which requested their readers to participate in the ritual processes of supplication and redress, war posters bluntly demanded an unequivocally affirmative reply from their readers, if not an immediate conversion to militarism. Not even the large *ema* that celebrated military campaigns were so baldly hortative.

The literary and pictorial elements of the Army Day poster seem to work in unison to exploit most efficaciously “the mechanisms of volition for commercial ends” (BERNHEIMER 1961, 205). Wars, after all, consume as much (or more) money as they do blood, and the Army Day poster was a mandate for the human capital with which to fund military campaigns. The pilot thrusts a samurai sword at the viewer-reader, compelling males and females alike to “take hold” of it. For males this means to assume the valorous duty of military service as a state warrior. For females, in view of the sexual symbolism of the sword in Japanese mytho-history and the cult of sanctified motherhood propagated by the State along with fecundity prizes (ROBERTSON 2001, 2002), “taking hold” of a sword may have implied bearing (male) children.

The viewer’s response to the poster, like a *tenkō* conversion, was coerced in several ways. First, by means of the sword, an instrument of force, and second, by the pilot, whose grim expression bespeaks compulsory obligation unto death. The



FIGURE 13. A *mukasari ema* offered by a mother whose two sons died in New Guinea during World War Two (Image from MORI 1981, 16).



FIGURE 14. Army Day poster, 1944 (Image from HARA 1967, 217).

image likely served as a potent reminder of the suicidal kamikaze fighters, who were first organized as a special squadron in 1944, the year the Army Day poster was issued. Finally, a response was provoked by the forcefully brushed Chinese character *dan* 断, whose meaning—judgment, decision, cutting—reverberates throughout the poster, animating the formally phrased slogan urging readers to “smite the foe to the finish.” This slogan, *uchiteshi tomamu* 撃ちてしまむ, which appears below the brushed character and to the left of the pilot, was taken from the eighth-century mytho-historical text, *Kojiki* 古事記, in which it is uttered by Jimmu 神武, the originary emperor, and adopted in 1942 as a war cry on the occasion of the thirty-eighth anniversary of Army Day. As stated in a newspaper article at the time, “Every one of the people must be imbued with a fighting spirit. Company managers, wage earners, industrial workers, farmers, must all burn with the determination to crush the United States and Britain” (*The Mainichi* 1942).

The selection and design of text and imagery in this poster were undertaken purposefully by Kishi Nobuo 岸信男, a professional poster art ist commissioned by the propaganda division of the Imperial Rule Assistance Association (Taisei Yokusankai 大政翼賛会), a powerful national organization founded in October 1940 as an instrument of national mobilization and control. Contrarily, most soldier *ema* were painted by anonymous and modestly talented artisans with crayons and water colors (ISHIKO 1974, 185). By inscribing or customizing their own votive tablets, supplicants could achieve a more individualized yet ambiguous entreaty within a conventionalized iconography. Soldier *ema*, unlike the Army Day poster, imposed no harsh commands to which the reader was ordered to submit. As I have noted, their illocutionary force comes from both the performance of prayerful request or petition and the empathy of readers mobilized by the request.

A popular religious art form, soldier *ema* were the product of specific socio-historical practices and circumstances and bore the imprint of the identifiable individuals and groups who made and offered them. Like popular culture itself, the soldier *ema* genre was a complex dialectic of resistance and acceptance, refusal and capitulation—a dialectic manifested in the polysemous readings of the various motifs we have analyzed. These particular votive tablets were deployed as expressions of self-interest and local autonomy, even as their symbolism could also be construed as favoring the imperial state. It is important to keep in mind that soldier *ema* do not deal directly with the roots and causes of war, but rather with the disruptions and ambivalent attitudes war provokes in everyday life. In contrast, much anti-state graffiti was sharply and unequivocally critical of the war. The illocutionary force of soldier *ema* as a medium and mode of popular dissent and “improper thinking” issues from both the performance of a prayerful request and the empathy of those reader-suppliants mobilized by the request.

Whether actualized or not, or only in part, the potential of votive tablets both signifies the agency of popular consciousness and lies in transforming popular consciousness. The ambiguous yet concrete referents of soldier *ema* mean that a single meaning cannot be fixed to a particular image or text; nor, as I have argued, are infinite meanings either plausible or possible. The legibility of a presented tablet

was informed by a reader's symbolic literacy and structural relationship to the producer, subject, or ritual context. Soldier *ema* do not simply reflect the influence of war on votive—or popular cultural—motifs, but signify and symbolize the asymmetrical and contested relations of power and community during the wartime years. Their ambivalence and ambiguity resist impositions of an official or true story, and their scarcity and ephemerality make moot interpretive approaches premised on a large data base. Do not *ema*, in this connection, represent the difficulty of accounting not only for historical popular rituals but also for ephemeral things, the very stuff, or “imponderabilia,” of everyday life? In the same spirit, Natalie Zemon Davis voices her agreement with Hayden White that “the world does not just ‘present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends’” (DAVIS 1987, 3). By exploring the boundaries and terrain of *ema*-gined communities, I wish to augment the initiative of scholars such as Davis in developing strategies for tapping the ethnographic, historical, and cultural richness of ephemeral artifacts, such as votive tablets, that were ubiquitous yesterday and scarce today.

NOTES

* Acknowledgments: Since 1976, I have been doing fieldwork and library research on *ema*, as well as photographing and collecting *ema*. The thanks I owe to many friends, artisans, scholars and generous strangers stretch back over a thirty-year period, and I offer here a heartfelt collective thank you. I presented earlier incarnations of this essay at the University of Copenhagen (1996) and the University of Vienna (1999) and wish to thank my colleagues and members of the audiences for their stimulating questions and suggestions. Many thanks also to Scott Schnell for his encouragement and to Benjamin Dorman for tracking down permissions.

1. The *Tokkō geppō* was the monthly bulletin of the Special Higher Police, or Thought Police (Tokkō).

2. Information about Myōhōji, the location of this votive tablet, is from a Japanese geography dictionary (SANSEIDŌ HENSHŪSHO 1975, 1081–1082). I visited this temple on 8 May 2000 at which time *ema* related to ophthalmological health were numerous.

3. These features are quite similar to those of votive tablets and paintings produced over the course of centuries in Catholic Europe, Mexico, Central and South America, for which there is a large and growing literature. Unfortunately, spatial constraints preclude a detailed comparative analysis here of non-Japanese votive tablets, although I draw comparisons when relevant.

4. Although Kubota cites the publication date of Matsuno's article as 1965, the latter's article actually appeared in 1930.

5. The strong affective bond between Japanese mothers and sons is well documented in the anthropological literature, and even wartime propaganda films show kamikaze pilots and other categories of soldier shouting out “Mother” as they nose their planes into lethal dives or lead battlefield charges. During World War Two, the first sons of farm households were usually exempted from military service. One strategy employed by farmers to spare their younger sons from conscription was to have them adopted by households lacking sons, who could then claim a “first son” exemption.

6. I deliberately avoid referring to *ema* as *ex votos*, as the latter rubric defines the genre as a performance of thanks-giving after the fact of a miraculous intervention by a saint or deity.

Although the Japanese also offer “thanks-giving” *ema*, the vast majority are offered in an effort to resolve a crisis, bring about a change for the better, or protect one from danger.

7. For Japan, World War Two began with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria (the Manchurian Incident) in September 1931. This war is also referred to in the Japanese literature as the Fifteen Years War, the Pacific War, and by the imperialist rubric, Greater East Asian War.

8. As Dower reports, the Special Higher Police or Thought Police collected and published graffiti collected from the walls of public and private places in *Tokkō geppō* between December 1941 and early 1944 (DOWER 1993, 124). Regarding rumors, Dower provides statistics showing that “in Tokyo alone, the metropolitan police investigated 2,020 “rumors” between 1941 and 1945, while the military police found themselves inundated with over six-thousand “sensational rumors” nationwide in 1944 alone, approximately fifteen to twenty cases a day...” (131).

9. In this connection, following SCOTT (1990), SCHNELL (1995) eloquently demonstrates how the “rousing drum” ritual in Hida, Gifu prefecture, was employed as a medium of political resistance during Japan’s early modernization. The effectiveness of this rambunctious ritual as a form of protest is acknowledged in its suspension during the heyday of World War Two.

10. The monk Nichiren (1222–1282) founded a Japan-centered millennial sect of Buddhism that spawned over the centuries many nationalist offshoots. His apocalyptic view of Japan’s destruction gained credibility when Mongols attempted, unsuccessfully, to invade Japan in 1274 and 1281—they were repelled both times by typhoons, or *kamikaze* 神風 (“divine winds”).

11. In 1989, the oldest *ema* thus far discovered was unearthed from a site south of the ancient Imperial Court in Nara (710–784). The votive tablet, made of cypress, measured 7.6 inches wide, 10.5 inches long, and a quarter of an inch thick, and featured an ornamented and saddled horse rendered in red and white pigments (“From the Japanese Press” 1990). For basic, introductory information in English on *ema*, see HOLTOM (1931, 1938), READER (1991), ROBERTSON (1980), and STARR (1920).

12. “Deity” is an inadequate but convenient translation of *kami*, the generic term for both ancestral spirits and the vital essence infusing animate and inanimate phenomena alike.

13. See also READER’S (1991) article on *ema*, which focuses on the tablets as “letters to the gods.”

14. The prefix “my” is most popularly associated with the 1960s neologism “my home” (*mai hōmu* マイホーム) which signaled the trend toward nuclear-family as opposed to extended-family households. Coupled with *ema*, “my” indicates an individualized entreaty. The Konpira temple near Gion 祇園 in Kyoto includes a “my *ema*” section among the racks of hanging plaques. Supplicants, who buy a blank tablet from the temple, use the crayons and colored pens provided to draw an image that expresses visually their need(s) or prayer. The temple compound also includes an *ema* museum where hundreds of large and small votive paintings are exhibited.

15. I use “speech act” in the spirit of scholarly poaching and not out of an investment in speech act theory and the swirl of academic debate accompanying it (see CULLER 1984, 110–28). The selective aspects of the concept of speech act which I find convenient and useful with respect to *ema* are the notion of performance, which is contingent upon the possibility of failure, in which an utterance performs the act it denotes (114, 112); the dependence of illocutionary force upon context, the necessary features of which (words, persons or entities, circumstances) must be specified (121) but to which the meanings of an *ema* are not limited, by virtue of its public, “productively” qualities (cf. 123–24); and the seriousness in which the performer (in this case a supplicant) consciously engages in the ritual of offering a votive tablet (122).

16. A system of neighborhood associations, or *tonarigumi* 隣組, modeled after an Edo-Period system, was organized around the concept of mutual or collective culpability and activated to enforce compliance and encourage interhousehold surveillance.

17. State Shinto refers to direct government patronage of Shinto as a means of promoting national unity and an imperialist ethos among the Japanese people. Local shrines (and temples) and religious beliefs alike fell under the jurisdiction of the home minister, whose office oversaw the financing of national (and some local) shrines. Most scholars recognize that the actual religious life and practices of the people at large changed relatively little (HUNTER 1984, 202; see also HARDACRE 1989 and MURAKAMI 1980, 41–42, 110–115).

18. In colloquial terms, the latter expression implies that, “I have put the ball in your court,” or “The ball is in your court.”

19. Memorial services are staged for any number of people and things in Japan, from deceased relatives (see SMITH 1974) to “inanimate objects that have been part of [people’s] lives in some especially intimate way” (LAFLEUR 1992, 144), such as sewing needles, tea whisks, clocks, chopsticks, spectacles, dolls, calligraphy brushes, Buddhist household altars (*butsudan* 仏壇), and even brassieres (ibid.: 145). A cartoon in the *Asahi Shimbun* 朝日新聞, one of the three largest daily newspapers, spoofed the “memorial-mania” of the Japanese by showing a memorial service for lost golf balls (*bōru kuyō* ボール供養) in progress at the edge of a lake (SATO 1985, 23). More profound are the memorial services for aborted or miscarried fetuses and stillborn infants (*mizuko*), characterized by a strong apologetic tone (LAFLEUR 1992, 146–50; HARDACRE 1986, 151–52).

20. Daniel Holtom reported in the 1930s on the practice of borrowing and re-dedicating *ema* at the Ichō 銀杏 (Gingko Tree) Shrine in Sendai. The bilobed Gingko tree is worshipped as a symbol of motherhood and lactation, and the shrine’s oldest *ema* were thought to be “impregnat[ed] with milk-giving *mana*.” Such tablets were borrowed by expectant mothers, who took them home and placed them in their household shrine (*kamidana* 神棚) where their requests could be more directly activated. In the event of a successful birth and plentiful lactation, the old tablet would be returned to the shrine together with a new one offered in thanks (HOLTOM 1931, 14).

21. The *ema*, written in an abbreviated manner, has several grammatical errors. Although *ema* are displayed publicly, they are not widely circulated outside of their ritual context, and therefore I have substituted a pseudonym for the last name to insure a modicum of respect for the family, even though several decades have elapsed since the *ema* was offered. I have also left out the actual street address and hospital room number. All other references are as in the original *ema*.

22. Apparently the aspect of interpersonal communication has yet to be pursued in detail by scholars of Catholic European votive paintings. Lepovitz remarks that “surprisingly little attention has been paid to the positive role that humans played in the context of miracles” (LEPOVITZ 1990, 774 note 23).

23. My use of “connotation” draws in a general way from Roland Barthes’ discussion of levels of signification in “Myth Today” (BARTHES 1982, 93–149).

24. Kusumi Fusako (1890–1980), for example, underwent *tenkō* but continued to resist militarism by participating in anti-government activities (TSURUMI 1986, 88).

25. The association of famous warriors with an intrepid spirit of resistance is related to the figure of a patriarch as an anti-authority authoritarian.

26. In the wartime period, the “family system” (*kazoku seido* 家族制度) was formally adopted as the dominant domestic ideology delineating the proper place of all Japanese. By 1940, the family metaphor was extended to the global sphere where all nations would assume their proper place under a paternalistic Japan (DOWER 1986, 279–81).

27. The shrine was located within the then military parade grounds attached to Zentsūji 善通寺, the seventy-fifth temple-station on the Shikoku 四国 pilgrimage route, which became a military outpost in 1896 (SANSEIDŌ HENSHŪDŌ 1975, 674).

28. In this respect, note the spatial relationship among the figures in FIGURE 10. Whereas the two kneeling men are incorporated into the temple's architecture, the soldier is positioned behind them and outside of the temple proper.

29. Sally Falk Moore, for example, has observed that "ritual is a declaration of form against indeterminacy, *therefore* indeterminacy is always present in the background of any analysis of ritual" (MOORE 1978, 48; quoted in TURNER 1982, 77).

30. Mikiso Hane writes that the universal conscription law promulgated in January 1873, which affected all twenty-year old males, with certain exceptions, sparked widespread uprisings in different parts of the country (HANE 1986, 97). With reference to associated fears of rural insolvency and the disruption of village life, Ronald Dore notes that during the Pacific War, surplus population was siphoned off the farms and into the war industries. He reports that for the first time in modern Japanese history, there were complaints of a shortage of agricultural labor (DORE 1959, 22).

31. See MAKABE (1979), MATSUZAKI (1993), and SCHATTSCHNEIDER (2001) for detailed analyses of "marriages of dead souls." Whereas Matsuzaki discusses the folkloric aspects of *mukasari ema* and bride-doll (*hanayome ningyō* 花嫁人形) and groom-doll (*hanamuko ningyō* 花婿人形) offerings, Schattschneider focuses on bride-doll transactions as commodified exchange relationships between the living and the dead.

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