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How to turn the profane into the sacred

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Abstract

本論文は、仏教と神道のお守りに関する宗教的思考の違いに焦点を当てている。

This article focuses on the religious thoughts concerning the empowerment and issuance of Buddhist and Shintō lucky charms Omamori (御守り).

キーワード

“Religiös oder magisch motiviertes Handeln ist,
in seinem urwüchsigen Bestande, diesseitig ausgerichtet.”¹ (Max Weber)

1. Introduction

Omamori are lucky charms usually issued by Shintō shrines or Buddhist temples in Japan. They belong to a wider group of offerings and talismans called engimono (縁起物).

Many Japanese buy them at their first shrine or temple visit of the New Year, but as most are modestly priced costing just a few hundred Yen, they are also popular souvenirs. Omamori are meant to protect the wearer against bad luck, diseases or accidents, but they may also help with successfully passing an exam, finding a suitable partner, getting rich, having a safe delivery or any other desirable purposes.

Most people renew their omamori every year, or do so after the desired event came true. As omamori have to be treated respectfully, they are not just thrown into the trash, but rather returned to the issuing shrine and temple, were they are disposed of in the proper ceremonial way, usually in early spring during Setsubun (節分).

2. Forms of Omamori

The majority of omamori, affiliation to Shintō or Buddhism notwithstanding, are talismans, that seem to draw their power from written words, prayers or images, kept from sight by a small protective cover made from silk or brocade. Omamori are not meant to be opened, as they would supposedly loose their effect, but for the sake of science I looked into one issued by Chichibu Saikōji temple (秩父西光寺) in Saitama Prefecture. Mugenzan Saikōji belongs to the Shingon school of Buddhism and is the 16th station of a famous Kannon pilgrimage (観音

巡礼), which dates back to the 13th century. The omamori was issued together with three stickers (fig. 2), featuring:

- the name of Amida (阿弥陀), the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life;
- the name of the 11-Headed Kannon (Jūichimen Kannon, 十一面観音), one of the manifestations of the Kannonn Bosatsu, responsible for saving those in the Ashura realm of hell;
- and the name of Kannon (観音), the Goddess of mercy.

The names of the deities are not only written in Japanese, but also in mystical bonji characters (梵字)², thus reflecting the Shingon creed of the “Three Mysteries” (三密, sanmitsu), which holds that the true names of the deities written in bonji reflect the purity of body, speech and mind of the Cosmic Buddha (大日如来, Dainichinyorai).



fig. 1



fig. 2



fig. 3



fig. 4

The front side of the protective blue brocade satchel for the actual amulet features the bonji-written name of Amida, and the name of Daitokuten (大黒天), one of the 7 Lucky Gods (fig. 2). The deities' names are flanked by wishes for victory (shōun, 勝運) and advancement (jōshō, 上昇) to the right, and by wishes for business (shōbai, 商売) and prosperity (hanjō, 繁盛) to the left. The backside (fig. 2) bears the name of the temple. Inside was a small cardboard-cover containing a folded piece of washi paper (fig. 3). Unfolded, the paper showed the inscription ‘Omamori’ written over the temple's red ink seal, on the backside the name of the temple, and a small image of the temple's famous 1000-Armed Kannon (Senju Kannon, 千手観音), (fig.4).

The omamoris' contents clearly represents the temples' spiritual focus: Saikōji temples' main deity is an engraved 1000-Armed Kannon statue. The adjunct corridor is lined with 88 sculptures representing Shingons' holiest pilgrimage to the 88 temples in Shikoku. Going around this corridor, a believer supposedly accumulates the same merit as visiting the actual 88 temples, so visitors not only receive the blessings of the 1000-Armed Kannon, but also the blessing of Shingons' founder Kobo Daishi; hence an omamori from this temple is considered to be especially powerful. The above described omamori is by no means extraordinary in its overall appearance, as the outsides of omamori usually show the name of the issuing shrine or temple and their intended functions, like 'Traffic safety', 'Easy Childbirth', 'Academic Success', 'Health Protection' or others.

Sometimes decorative elements can be found woven into or embroidered onto it. Popular are the images of auspicious animals like phoenixes or dragons (left picture, fig. 5), but images or the name of the enshrined deity (fig.7) may be also found. The picture in the middle (fig. 6) shows an image of an omamori featuring General Maresuke Nogi, who was honored for his bravery in battle but also for showing his eternal loyalty by committing suicide to follow emperor Meiji in death.

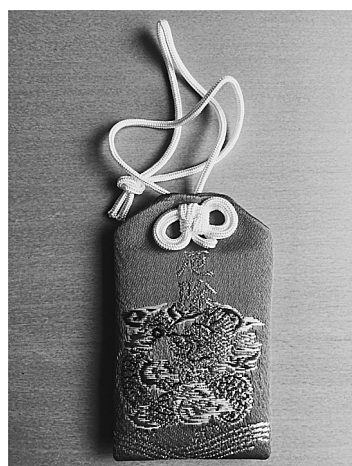


fig. 5



fig. 6



fig. 7

Morphic omamori often come in the shape of auspicious objects, like the Evil-dispelling Suzu-Bell from Ise Shrine (fig.8), or are shaped like objects or animals, that are homonyms of an auspicious word.

For example a certain omamori meant to protect ones' fortunes issued by the Tōdaiji in Nara (fig.9), is shaped like a waterbubble containing a frog or 'kaeru' in Japanese, which also means 'to come back', thus expressing the wish to see money return to ones' pocket.



fig. 8



fig. 9

Owl-shapes are also popular, as the bird's Japanese name 'fukuro' contains the word 'fuku', meaning good luck. Among auspicious objects, the evil dispelling Suzu-bell, the mallet of fortune, or the wealth-bringing Hyotan-gourd are frequently found.³

The little octopus omamori (fig. 10) is supposed to help you recover from illness, while the origami-crane (fig. 11) is related to the legend, that folding 1000 cranes makes your wish come true.



fig. 10



fig. 11



fig. 12

Combinations of different morphic elements are also possible, like this evil-dispelling bell, shaped like the crane-crest of warrior god Hachiman in Kamakura (fig. 12).

Omamori from Buddhist temples generally feature a miniature of the main statuary, like the before mentioned omamori from Saikōji. Here is another example featuring the Daibutsu in Kamakura (fig. 13). Instead of a full-figure Buddha statue, Buddhas' footprints are also frequently found motives (fig. 14 and fig. 15).



fig. 13



fig. 14



fig. 15

In Buddhist iconography the different deities are associated with certain ritual objects. Also in esoteric Buddhism ritual objects⁴ are used for ceremonies and as teaching tools. Meant to be tools of salvation and to represent the indestructible power of the dharma, objects like the Vajra weapon (金剛 kongō) also appear as pictorial elements of omamori (fig. 16 and fig. 17).

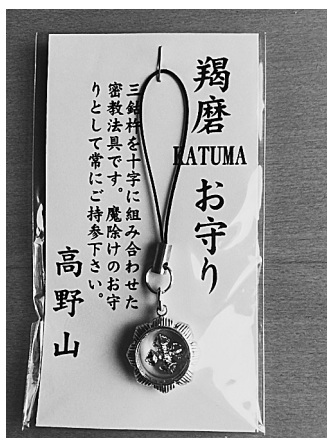


fig. 16



fig. 17

Deities guarding the Buddha or the dharma are a frequent choice when it comes to protective talismans. Here are two omamori, one morphic (fig.18) and one shaped like an ema (fig.19), both depicting the deity of treasure and warfare, Bishamonten (毘沙門天):



fig. 18



fig. 19

According to legend the famous patriarch of Zen Buddhism, Bodhidharma, in Japan known as Daruma (達磨), removed his eyelids to prevent himself from sleeping and sat in meditation until his arms and legs fell off. Round, usually white or red tilting dolls shaped in Bodhidarmas' image symbolize perseverance and the power to see something through until the end. It is customary for the wishmaker to paint one eye when receiving the daruma-doll, and painting the second eye, when the wish came true. Such an auspicious motif is naturally a good choice for a good luck omamori (fig. 20):



fig. 20

The above examples show, that there are no limitations concerning materials, shapes and sizes. For the issuing shrines or temples it pays off to pay attention to the designs and make them look attractive, as omamori-sales are often a major source of revenue⁵.

3. Omamori – The Beginnings of Shintōist and Buddhist Lucky Charms

Lucky charms, amulets and talismans have been around since the earliest days of mankind and can be found all over the world. Initially just some random objects chosen for their unusual color, shape or material, they may have been associated with the lucky circumstances of their discovery and hence be seen as tokens of good fortune or divine intervention. However, with the formation of organized religions, spiritually trained holy men or women started to use their extraordinary powers to turn any suitable object, natural or manmade, into magically enhanced amulets. These sacred objects were thus believed to confer protection upon its owner. Other desirable qualities, like curative or defensive powers, love and fertility charms and many others were also often expressed with these amulets.

In Japan, the origins of talismans go back to the early Jōmon period⁶. With the influx of Chinese culture and Buddhism during the Kofun period the tradition of charms and talisman further evolved. Initially, the new religion was not received well, until during the Asuka period the powerful Soga clan successfully promoted its acceptance. During this period many legends about the magical powers of the Buddha were spread and later recorded in historiography and literature. According to one legend, there was an attempt to destroy one of the first Buddhist relics in the country in 552. When it was hit by a hammer onto an anvil, the tools were destroyed but the relic was not, thus proving the superior powers of the new religion. Stories of wondrous healings and other incidents of good fortune were also often connected to the inexplicable appearance of Buddhist deities, the presence of

powerful relics or statuary or the spiritual power of Buddhist monks, banning the forces of evil with powerful tantric rituals and recitations or writing of holy texts. The lore was so convincing that the rich and powerful of the country started to commission Buddhist rituals and supported the temples.

Buddhism had arrived in Japan in a package with other aspects of Chinese culture, so temples quickly emerged as intellectual centers, where studies of Chinese medicine, astronomy, astrology and divination were conducted. Priests of onmyōdō (陰陽道 Chinese yin-yang divination) or the clergy of Buddhist temples performed protective rituals and issued talismans as tokens of Buddhas' mysterious power to protect and heal the people.

The oldest still existant omamori (懸守 kakemamori) are preserved at one of the country's oldest Buddhist temples, the Shitennōji (四天王寺) in Osaka. They were little 3.3 cm Buddha-Statues protected by a silk-cover and were worn as necklaces by the nobility of the Heian period⁷.

Meanwhile Shintō shrines continued to honor the spirits (kami, 神) and to cater to the needs of mostly agriculture-based communities, however they eventually absorbed and adapted some of the newly imported concepts and cultural techniques, first of all writing. The earliest Japanese records were commissioned by the emperor and the nobility. The narrative of the emperors divine origin was meant to establish legitimacy to his rulership and also to document the value and power of the pre-Buddhist cults, later summarily referred to as Shintō. Tales about deities giving out protective amulets can be found in the earliest written records, the Kojiki (古事記, completed in 712), the Nihonshoki (日本書紀, completed in 720), and the Engishiki (延喜式, completed in 927)⁸, which in the absence of a 'holy book' are all counted as sacred Shintō texts. The narrative of these myths is meant to describe the strong ties between the spiritual realm of the kami and their human offspring, inhabiting the Japanese islands. By emphasizing the deep bond (engi 縁起) between the spirits and the humans, who were entrusted with governing the country, these stories helped to give credibility and reputation to the featured shrines and in extension to the services and amulets provided⁹.

Initially the progeny of the kami, who were living under the protection of such divinely blessed leaders, were thought to enjoy their share of spiritual protection through their relation with them and through their residence within reach of the sacred locality of their realm. The space in the vicinity of a shrine but also other spiritual spaces, are marked by sacred ropes (shimenawa, 注連縄), to draw a distinction between the profane and the sacred. These religious spaces gave the believers room to make offerings, celebrate festivals to honor the gods, announce individual or communal occasions, pay due respect to ancestors and deities and in return ask for the fulfilment of wishes, blessings and protection. In order to tie individual residents to these places of interaction between the profane and the sacred, shrines started to emit thaumaturgic talismans (ofuda 護符 or shinpu 神符). Shintō has only limited statuary, so ofuda were usually not featuring images, but were rather inscribed pieces of paper or wood, thus showing the reverence and respect for writing as an advanced cultural technique. The dedication consisted of the name of the issuing shrine, the name of the dedicatory deity, and sometimes also the name of the recipient of the blessing. These amulets were meant to be affixed inside the house. However, historical developments, like the establishment of remote manors or the outbreaks of wars, increasingly demanded that people leave the blessed environment close to their tutelary, hence the need to carry with them some form of individual protection arose, so eventually shrines, too, started to hand out portable amulets to those in need.

4. Shintō Omamori

Shintō beliefs are centered around the concept of kami, spiritual entities that have the power not only to permanently or temporarily inhabit living creatures or natural phenomena, but also any natural or manmade objects. Although kami are not perceived as omnipotent, they are believed to respond to human prayers and to be capable of altering the course of events:

‘Kami can refer to beings or to a quality which beings possess. So the word is used to refer to both the essence of existence or beingness which is found in everything, and to particular things which display the essence of existence in an awe-inspiring way. But while everything contains kami, only those things which show their kami-nature in a particularly striking way are referred to as kami. Kami as a property is the sacred or mystical element in almost anything. It is in everything and is found everywhere, and it is what makes an object itself rather than something else¹⁰.’

Based on this concept, omamori are considered not only to be the vessel of a kami, but rather an offshot of the kami itself. This notion is reflected in the respectful manner omamori are treated with, starting with the language used: The word ‘omamori’ itself consists of the honorific ‘o’ attached to the base word ‘mamori’, meaning protector. When asking for an omamori at a shrine, it is considered most disrespectful to use words related to normal business transactions, like ‘buy’ or ‘sell’, instead more polite verbs like ‘receive’, ‘obtain’, or ‘be presented with’ an omamori are recommended.

The counting word for omamori, tai (体) is the same as that used for counting bodies, namely the goshintai (御神体), the spiritual body of the enshrined deity¹¹.

Shintō omamori are usually hidden inside an ‘omamoribukuro’, a small brocade-bag, containing a miniature ofuda, or pictures or objects related to the shrines’ main deity.

However, as an effect of syncretism of kami and Buddhas (Shinbutsu-shūgō, 神仏習合), originally Buddhist deities were quickly adopted into the Shintō pantheon, hence deities like Hachiman, the protector of warriors, any or all of the 7 Lucky-Gods (Hotei, Jurōjin, Fukurokuju, Bishamonten, Benzaiten, Daikokuten, Ebisu), and others may also appear.

5. Buddhist Omamori

The issuance of Buddhist omamori is closely related to the concept of engi (縁起)¹², which refers to the karmic connection of causes and conditions and the connection to a numinous appearance at the issuing temple:

Tales of supernatural events connected with the founding of a certain temple are grounds for the belief in the effectivity of the spiritual powers contained in an omamori.

The belief, that Buddha reached enlightenment is reason for the conjecture, that Buddha is willing to reach out to everyone, and that Buddhahood is possible for anyone.

The Buddha himself is said to facilitate this through his capacity to appear as avatar, realizing the essence of Buddhahood in innumerable manifestations at the surface of any this-worldly presences. It is believed, that someone, protected by such an omamori is brought into close proximity to the real Buddha. Temple-issued omamoris’ iconography reflect this believe, as they usually feature visible on the outside or hidden inside the amulett-satchel

- a miniature image of the enshrined gohonzon (御本尊), or
- an image of one of the many manifestation of Buddha, or
- an image of Buddha's feet or footprints, or
- an image of a bodhisattva like Kannon, or
- a symbol representing the dharma, like the Dharma Chakra, or
- a ritual object, like a vajra, or
- an abstract icon representing the faith, like the Buddhist wheel.

To bestow Buddhas' mysterious power upon a profane object, an act of empowerment or blessing, (kaji, 加持) is required. Originally translated from the Sanskrit word *adhithana*, kaji may refer either to the act of spiritual possession or the amulet itself. Various methods are performed within the different Buddhist schools, but usually the process of empowerment consists of any or all of the following steps:

- the spiritual preparation of the clergy, who is performing the empowerment,
- a prayer to the Buddha,
- the recitation of a relevant sutra,
- the performance of esoteric ritual gestures,
- the incantation or visualization of mantras and mystical 'seed syllables' *bonji* (梵字) or *bijā* (種子 *shuji*),
- and the writing of sacred syllables or (short) sacred texts.

In contrast to Shintō omamori, it is not necessary to hide the image or inscription away, although some esoteric sects prefer to do so.

6. Conclusion

In Shintō, the power of the omamori comes from the enshrined kami, *goshintai* (御神体). In fact omamori are considered to be kami in their own right. Buddhist omamori draw their power from the temples' gohonzon (御本尊), the dedicatory manifestation of Buddha. Omamori's popularity depend on the power of the *engi* (縁起), the narrative of a numinous or miraculous occurrence at or near the site. When omamori are commissioned, painting images or writing the names of the deity or other sacred texts are required. The strong emphasize on writing again emphasizes the reverence for scripture and is a remarkable difference to Christian amulets, which gain their power through an oral blessing, given by an authorized member of the church.

Notes

- ¹ Weber, Max: *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. Tübingen 1948, Bd. 1, S. 227, translation: 'The most elementary forms of behavior motivated by religious or magical factors are oriented to this world.' by Roth / Wittich (Ed.): *Max Weber Economy and Society*, <https://archive.org/details/MaxWeberEconomyAndSociety/page/n507>
- ² Bonji characters are a formal variety of a medieval Sanskrit abugida. In esoteric Shingon and Tendai practice bonji are used to write 'seed syllables' (*bijā*, Jap.: 種子).
- ³ See Swanger pp. 243
- ⁴ See Schumacher, M.: *Objects, Symbols, and Weapons Held by 1000-Armed Kannon & Other Buddhist Deities*; <https://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/objects-symbols-weapons-senju.html>
- ⁵ See Reader / Tanabe: *Practically Religious: Worldly Benefits and the Common Religion of Japan*. Honolulu 1986, p. 206 ff.
- ⁶ See Naumann, N.: *Die Einheimische Religion Japans*. Vol. I, Leiden 1988, p.1 ff.

- ⁷ About the oldest existing omamori see <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20180209/k00/00e/040/285000c>
- ⁸ About mythical talismans see Aston, pp. 334ff.
- ⁹ See Reader / Tanabe, p. 209 ff.
- ¹⁰ The BBC page gives a concise summary of Edo-period scholar Motoori Norinaga's (本居宣長) definition of kami, see: https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/shinto/beliefs/kami_1.shtml
- ¹¹ About the proper use of language concerning omamori see Yorisou Group: <https://yorisou-group.com/お守りの歴史/>
- ¹² See Swanger: The Omamori Phenomenon. pp. 241

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