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“Lucky” Charms

Japanese culture, throughout its history of over 2,300 years, has been replete with colorful folklore. Each of their beloved legends connects itself to one of their beliefs regarding talismans and amulets provided to meditate on the lesson. In this modern and busy world, the visit to a shrine can be difficult to plan, but travel-friendly or home décor options have become available for those who practice Shintoism and Buddhism alike. It is imperative to know shrine customs, and what kind of gods are revered before revealing details about sacred spaces and objects. Shintoism also thrives on purification and ritual restoration as a way to reconcile with common matters of contention. Many of these talisman mentioned below give the modern day sense of cleanliness for the soul.

Before one can study how each of these famous amulets are perceived by those who practice Shintoism, one must determine what and how the civilization worships. Because the two main religions in Japan, Shintoism, associated with life, and Buddhism, connected with death and the afterlife, walk beside each other for the Japanese (in most cases), the Shinto believe living in harmony with nature and all living creatures is vital. Japanese folklore contains the combined beliefs of both of these main religions as well. “The land of the rising sun is where people learned to coexist with their natural counterpart and allow for the religious heritage to evolve into spirituality.”¹ They “coexist” by becoming familiar with the kami surrounding them.

¹ Cory Varga, “Japanese Religion: A New Way Of Life.” *You Could Travel* (5 Feb. 2019).

The kami, otherwise known as “life energy,” surrounds anything in the world perceived with awe or virtue. One blog describes it as, “everything in the natural world.”² This means it can be in the form of nature (or something found in nature), a person, the dead, or even a moral principle.³ These objects of focus enveloped in kami become deities to the observer. And how are these deities worshipped? By the visitation of shrines located all over Japan. In fact, there are more shrines in Japan (about 80,000) than there are cities in the United States (about 35,000). The reason why they worship is to gain virtuous kami and to respect and honor the gods.

A Shinto shrine is a place for worship – a place for honoring and recognizing the holiness of the kami, and also keeping sacred objects hidden from the rest of the secular world. A shrine’s main focus is for you, as the worshipper, to pay your respects. After a series of steps to purification, you are deemed worthy enough to give an offering, pray, make wishes, or expel demons. A shrine’s peaceful and quiet atmosphere summons tranquility, encouraging each individual to recognize their own perception of the kami. Each shrine is also dedicated to a certain god.

Shrines, however are not visited daily or even weekly. In fact, many only visit during festivals, holidays, or when a major life event has happened or is about to happen (getting married, having a child, taking an important test, etc.). Because of this, many cherish the tokens, amulets, and trinkets they purchase from the place of worship in remembrance of their prayers and wishes. Most of the pieces acquired are taken back to homes, but some are left hanging at the shrine. The ornaments kept by the Shinto serve both as a prompts to pray and pay respect, to go back to the shrine (or any) at another time. They also remind them of their wishes and requests

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

made when they visited the shrine, and help them recall if they have been answered or not. Other objects laid in the home connect with the balance, good fortune, and pride of the household, and the worshippers give thanks to the kami in return for these blessings. After you exit the shrine's closing *torii* gate (this separates the rest of society from the gods inside the sacred shrine), there are many forms of talisman to buy in-between the time of this visit to the shrine and the next one.⁴

There are many amulets that bring appeasement to the Shinto people, however, there are five that seem to be the most common. Each of these popular items are used, seen, prayed over or about, and cherished throughout Japan often. Many individuals take these items very seriously, believing their faith in the kami surrounding the item can fulfill whatever wish they have, but others simply think of them as "lucky charms." These five tokens are: the *Omamori*, *Maneki-neko* (or The Beckoning Cat), *Ema*, *Omikuji*, and a multitude of sacred animals. Respect regarding these objects of worship is essential, because they do not want to offend the gods, or kami, and forfeit their good fortune. For some objects, they simply believe owning it will signal the gods to provide them blessing, but some amulets are said to hold the gods' powers and the one who purchased it will be the one who benefits from it. To fully understand the meaning and significance of each of these talisman, one must take a look at each of them in close observation, answering a few of these questions: how, when, and why is it used? How do they relate to their beliefs? Is there an origin story or legend about them? For what purpose do they exist? Are they common or rare? How often are they purchased or renewed? And finally, how, when, where, and why are the items worshipped? These questions will answer what one knows about how the Shinto worship, and how culture and these amulets meet in the middle.

⁴ Lara Neuman, "Navigate Your Way Around a Shinto Shrine in Japan." *Go! Go! Nihon* (17 Mar. 2018).

The first religious object is very common and is believed to grant consistent good luck to the worshipper. In fact, most Japanese own at least one.⁵ This token is called the *omamori* – which are pocket-sized protective amulets sold at Shinto shrines. The suffix for the word, *mamori*, means “to protect.”⁶ These come in a wide variety of colors and designs, bearing distinct meanings. For example, a design of constellations on an *omamori* may be a symbol for “finding your way home.”⁷ They come looking like tiny bags and are usually tied at the top to hide a piece of wood, or paper of some kind that contains a blessing, prayer, or good fortune. Upon receiving it, one should never open the pouch and look at the inscription left for them. This is disrespectful of the sacredness found inside the *omamori*, and disrupting this space can cause the kami or good fortune to be relinquished.

These talisman do expire, and they are purchased yearly because it is well noted that in one year the luck will be exhausted. Many purchase them on the first day of the New Year because then it is easy to remember when to replace them for continued prosperity. One is supposed to carry it around with them daily, whether in their pocket, tied to their wallet or phone, in a bag, etc. This ensures the kami will surround them and good fortune will come to them. There are a few different designs, shapes, textures, etc. and all bring luck to different areas of life. For example, there are *omamoris* designed for a healthy sex life, to pass your exams, to find love, or simply good fortune in general. Usually people place them close to their source of worry, such as one for blessings in traffic safety might be attached to their car keys.⁸ The power

⁵ Mark Magnier, “Good Luck Comes in Small Packages.” *Los Angeles Times* (23 May 2003).

⁶ Sacred Space Japan, *Omamori*. *YouTube* (30 Jan. 2019).

⁷ Akamaru, “The Memories in Each Omamori.” *Akamaru’s Blog* (14 Mar. 2019).

⁸ *Ibid.*

of the shrine they originated from links to the *omamori* when purchased – giving a sense of sacredness and need for respect.⁹ In generations past, people carried around pieces of nature with them to symbolize protection and approval by the kami. Hisami Nakahara, a local in Japan, interviewed by Mark Maigner, states "In the old days, Japanese believed there were spirits in rocks, trees and nature."¹⁰ The *omamori* date back to the 8th century and were used to ward off evil. "Japanese warriors carried miniature protective swords...into battle, while women and children back home adorned their kimonos with more decorative *omamori*."¹¹ The beautifully designed *omamori* are a much more pleasing, soft, and travel-friendly amulet for Shinto people to use to assist in worship. According to Akamaru, a blogger living in Japan, many friends handmake them and trade them with each other, or buy them for one another.¹² Many return them to the shrine when the year is up and the luck from them has vanished, but some hold onto them because they believe that sacredness can never run out as long as you have a little faith in them.

Second, the *Maneki-neko* or The Beckoning Cat or sometimes called The Prosperity Cat, is a very common symbol of good fortune and success. These cats often greet guests at the front of restaurants, shops, homes, or even schools and especially temples (there is even a temple dedicated to this talisman) by waving their paws. "In Japan, a beckoning gesture is done by holding the hand up, palm down, and waving their hand downwards toward them...this may look like waving (or even shooing away) to some Westerners."¹³ There are many stories involving

⁹ OsawaKimie, "The Basics Of Japanese Talismans, Courtesy Of Sensoji." *MATCHA* (4 Mar. 2019).

¹⁰ Maigner.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Akamaru states this in an email interview we held on March 5, 2019.

¹³ Cornelius Phanthan, "Maneki Neko: The Lucky Cats of Japan." *Go! Go! Nihon* (9 Jan. 2018).

cats in Shinto folklore, which is why this religious object is so popular. The most famous legend is about a wealthy lord named Naotaka, who ran under a tree to escape a storm, but a priest's cat from a temple nearby beckoned him, and he followed it away from the tree. Suddenly, he heard a crash of thunder and realized the tree he had just been standing under was destroyed by lightning. The cat had saved him, and he befriended the priest at the temple and brought it great prosperity.¹⁴ Even though this religious object is Buddhist in origin, it is often put in Shinto shrines, and is used in a large number of Japanese households.

There is also a Japanese belief that because the cat is lifting its paw to its face, it is washing in preparation visiting guests. This also has a connection with washing yourself for the sake of appearing pure when visiting sacred spaces. This talisman is often detected in places of business, making patrons feel welcome, as if they have walked into a space where kami resides (in no way to they intend to deem their space sacred, but they want to make guests feel comfortable there).

Maneki-neko first began appearing in the Edo Period around the mid-1800s in Tokyo (which is why the temple dedicated to these friendly felines is located there).¹⁵ Similar to the *omamori*, there are multiple colors and accessories embellishing the talisman that bring varied forms of serendipity. For example, the calico cat design is considered the luckiest form because the white simultaneously brings purity, while the black spots ward off evil spirits. Another famous color is gold, which rubs off evil misfortune.¹⁶ Some representations have mechanical moving arms and display embellishments like bells or bibs – a few even act as piggy banks.

¹⁴ Phanthan.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Some people leave coins for the cat, or the building it stands in to feed it good kami or to express gratitude. Simply they are displayed to bring good fortune by giving the space a warm and friendly feeling, reflecting with balance and *fengshui*, which in turn makes the kami residing there feel tranquil as well.¹⁷ This silly cat has been around for generations, and does not seem to be fading in popularity whatsoever.

The *ema*, a small wooden wishing plaque, is often procured any time one desires fulfillment of a deep longing. The buyer purchases one that displays a drawing on one side and they are supposed to write their name, address, and their wish on the other. The plaque is sometimes hung at the shrine, leaving it behind for the gods and kami to take care of the request. The history of these tiny plaques goes back to the Nara Period (710-784).¹⁸ The rich donated horses to the shrines so that the gods might be more likely to listen to them with stronger messengers. However, not everyone could afford a horse, so the simple folk made horse figurines, which in turn became a drawing of a horse on a wooden board, and finally it appeared into exist with a painting or a drawing on the other side of anything the worshipper wished for. In the Edo Period (1603-1868) these ornaments became convenient commonplace communication with the gods.¹⁹

The *ema* often request asking for success and blessing in the next life event, whether that be a sporting event, marriage, safe childbirth, etc. Many well-wishers will burn their slab in a sacred fire to ensure its content reaches the gods. Apparently, there are no strict rules when it comes to filling out *emas*. On some, one can write on the front or the back to establish wants, but

¹⁷ Akamaru also mentioned this as a possibility in our email interview.

¹⁸ “Ema: Wooden Wishing Plaques.” *Zooming Japan* (21 May 2012).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

others forbid marking up the picture side leaving only the blank reverse for script or picture. These tokens allow free range of design – such as a cartoon drawings, a religious animal or picture of what you love or wish for, however most of them are used for prayerful purposes.²⁰

One talisman very similar to the *ema* are the *omikuji*. These random slips of paper are purchased at shrines to cast fortunes upon the consumers. On each sample, there is a lot of valuable information and advice. Long ago, the Japanese looked to fortune-telling, which was helpful as a means to choose the next leader or ruler. A Buddhist priest named Daishi, also known as *Ryogen* (a common nickname for someone who could use supernatural power) invented them at the temple of Mt. Hiei.²¹ There are five levels of luck that may be attained when being dealt an *omikuji* from Great Fortune to Great Bad Luck. You shake a box, usually shaped in a column or pentagon prism which contain numbered sticks. After drawing one, there is a shelf nearby where you pick the fortune in the drawer that corresponds with the number you drew. You don't know whether you will get a bad or good fortune until you see it. The advice on the slip of paper does not necessarily reveal your future, it simply prepares you for receiving good, bad, or great luck with helpful advice. Such as (for bad luck): “Dwelling over the trifle things disturbs you. Instead of being worried, try to avoid careless mistakes.”²² For good luck fortunes, it usually includes some encouraging words.

But what do you do with them once you've drawn them? Similar to the *ema*, and dependent upon whether the fortune is good or bad, you leave it at the shrine. In the case of good fortune, you leave it behind so the gods might “multiply the good”; in the case of bad fortune, it

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Hiroko Matsuyama, “Omikuji: Fortune Slip at Shinto Shrines and Temples in Japan.” *Patternz* (4 Jan. 2017).

²² Ibid.

is left in hopes that the gods take on the burden and the bad luck does not follow. Another option is to take it with you as a reminder until the omen is fulfilled, then return it as a “thank-you” once the luck has dissipated. Some choose to purchase an *omikuji* in every visit to the shrine, but some don’t. Participants often believe that good fortune comes and goes flowing in and out of their lives. Many take the written advice very seriously and act upon it hoping it prepares them to tackle life’s situations, both good and bad.²³

Statues surrounding the temples and shrines of Japan depict animals believed to be sacred. These guardians hold fast to the holy space, and stand as a symbol of various good fortunes. One in particular is called the *Komainu*, the lion-dog. These creatures are the protectors and messengers of that particular shrine to the gods. Although many speculate their influence was from China, it is debatable whether that was the case or they may have come from a representation of a mythological creature.²⁴ Foxes are also widely recognized as shrine guards. It is said that the messenger of the harvest god, *Inari* resides within the fox. Another animal is the sacred cow, which are usually depicted as unintelligent in westernized culture, but in Japan they are connected with the god of scholars. The monkey is a symbol of fertility and safe childbirth, providing parenting symbols for the worshippers.²⁵ Beyond these few mentioned, there are many more religious connections to animals in Shintoism such as finding fortune in the frog, owl, and the koi fish. This reverence for living things reflects their love and veneration of nature above everything else.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Hilary Keyes, “Sacred Animals in Japan – See Japan’s Religion Through Its Animals.” *MATCHA* (15 Mar. 2018).

²⁵ Ibid.

The “lucky charms” aforementioned are just a few in the realm of tokens deemed valuable in Japanese culture. Others, such as the Daruma Dolls, *Jizo*, *Magatama*, and the *Torii* gate are also prevalent. Intricate detail is put into every single item of worship because practicing Shintoism ties in the reality of the power of the gods and kami. The kami are able to bring good luck and fortune to those who believe. The gods bless them with goodness in return for good done on earth. This can include purchasing items at or visiting a shrine. Along with assisting in making worship for the individual more tangible, it also helps reach the goals of the religion regarding its love for nature and its purification processes for the conflicted and antagonistic lifestyle. Without these simple amulets, worship would not be as convenient or enjoyable for the Shinto.

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