



## The Hilltop Review

Volume 7  
Issue 2 *Spring 2015*

Article 19

April 2015

# Ancient Magic and Modern Accessories: A Re-Examination of the Omamori Phenomenon

Eric Mendes

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/hilltopreview>

### Recommended Citation

Mendes, Eric (2015) "Ancient Magic and Modern Accessories: A Re-Examination of the Omamori Phenomenon," *The Hilltop Review*: Vol. 7: Iss. 2, Article 19.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/hilltopreview/vol7/iss2/19>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Hilltop Review by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [maira.bundza@wmich.edu](mailto:maira.bundza@wmich.edu).



## Ancient Magic and Modern Accessories: A Re-Examination of the *Omamori* Phenomenon

*Runner-Up, 2013 Graduate Humanities Conference*

By Eric Teixeira Mendes

Fireworks exploded, newspapers rushed “Extra!” editions into print and Japanese exchanged “Banzai!” cheers at news of Japan’s crown princess giving birth to a girl after more than eight years of marriage... In a forestate of the special life that awaits the baby, a purple sash and an imperial samurai sword were bestowed on the 6.8 pound girl just a few hours after her birth - - along with a sacred amulet said to ward off evil spirits. The girl will be named in a ceremony Friday, after experts are consulted on a proper name for the child. (Zielenziger)

This quote, which ran on December 2, 2001, in an article from the *Orlando Sentinel*, describes the birth of one of Japan’s most recent princesses. In honor of her status and in preparation for her “special life” she received three gifts upon her birth, a purple sash and a samurai sword, both powerful symbols of her station, as well as “a sacred amulet said to ward off evil spirits.”<sup>1</sup> These amulets, these *omamori*, a class of objects so tied to Japanese identity that they are one of the first gifts given to children at birth, are the focus of this paper.

*Omamori*, from the Japanese root *mamoru*, “to protect”, are objects meant to protect or benefit their possessor. Translated as talisman, amulet, or charm, and a catch-all term for any object with protective or beneficial traits, variations of *omamori* have been present throughout Japanese history. *Omamori* have evolved over time into what is today their most iconic form: small objects sold by Buddhist, Shinto and other Japanese religious institutions. These objects are generally made of wood, paper, metal or plastic, often placed inside a fabric pouch and customarily cost between three and fifteen U.S. dollars. Although there are exceptions (for example, *omamori* that are meant to be left in the home or the car) the majority of *omamori* are meant to be carried with a person at all times in which they seek that object’s aid. The proximity of an *omamori* to its beneficiary is key to its efficacy.

*Omamori*, as material objects, hold a great deal of information about the aesthetic tastes and concerns of modern Japanese society, as well as the relationship of that society with its religious institutions. More than many other world religions, Buddhism and Shintoism concern themselves with aiding the population through “this worldly benefits”, which are immediately obtainable through the acquisition of *omamori*. As such, the benefits these religions presume to offer society are readily visible through the *omamori* they offer.

*Omamori* are something most Japanese have owned at some point in their lives. These are not obscure objects functioning on the margins of society, but a regular component of everyday life in Japan. *Omamori* act as gifts which express the support and concern of family and friends towards one another; a commercial force that keeps the economies of various temples and shrines alive; representations of a “traditional” Japanese culture; souvenirs; expressions of social identity; an organic link between religion and the populace; and a means of bearing the weight of the human condition. *Omamori* offer people a way to combat, express and bear their concerns, and help them overcome what cannot be prevented or cured. These objects are a commodity altered in both *form*, the morphology and design of an *omamori*, and *function*, the supernatural benefits an *omamori* offers its possessor, by the concerns of the Japanese public. As such, the examination of *omamori* holds great implications for furthering our understanding of Japanese society, as well as for the interaction of religion with a modernizing and globalizing world.

It is for these reasons, and others, that this paper will examine *omamori* as they exist in contemporary society, as well as the ways in which *omamori* have altered to accommodate changes in Japanese society over the last thirty years. I will examine the latter through a comparison of my findings and observations with those in Eugene Swanger's 1981 article, [A Preliminary Examination of the Omamori Phenomenon](#). Swanger's article is the only work centered on *omamori* that has been published thus far in English and, therefore, serves as an important precursor to this paper, as well as a fitting starting point from which to identify changes in *omamori* that have taken place over the last three decades.

Even in such a short period of time, *omamori* have seen a dramatic increase in both form and function, a set of changes that has also altered the traits which make these *omamori* popular. Each of these three qualities ([*omamori*'s] form, function, and the reasons for their popularity) were examined by Swanger, and, for this paper, will serve as the focus of comparison between modern *omamori* and those discussed in his article.

*Omamori* are organic, they change with the society in which they are immersed. As such, an analysis of the ways in which *omamori* have changed in the last thirty years will offer insight into both the ways in which Japanese culture has changed during this time, as well as the ways that religious institutions saw fit to accommodate those changes through *omamori*.

### ***Omamori Through Time***

*Omamori*, and the ways they are conceptualized, have changed a great deal over the course of Japanese history. In the Nara period (645-784 A.D.) we find the first extant and known examples of written history in Japan, the *Kojiki* and the *Nihongi*. Both of these documents contain examples of talisman use that can be categorized as representing kinds of (or possibly predecessors to) *omamori*. Within these books there is a great deal of discussion deities who utilize mystical objects with a variety of useful traits. These range in form and power, and include: a bow and arrow that give life, a hammer shaped object with the ability to grant wishes, a scarf that can ward off insect and reptilian threats, and peaches that repel demons. Each of these objects benefited its user and only functioned when it was in the immediate possession of a person or deity. Aside from sharing a similar mode of use, these objects also offered benefits similar to those of modern *omamori*; evil-detering *omamori*, wish granting *omamori*, and *omamori* for longevity, most directly.

Heian Japan (784-1185 A.D.) also has evidence of *omamori* use that survives through literature. Two of the more famous examples are found in *The Tale of Genji* and in a portion of *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* called the "Easy Delivery Charm of the Swallows". A continued presence of protective objects and a move to their use by humans instead of deities can be seen through these two stories.

*The Tale of Genji* offers an interesting example of *omamori* use in popular culture from the Heian period. In this book, author Murasaki Shikibu, relays the life of Genji, a son of the emperor. At one point in his life, Genji comes down with a grave fever, and after "all sorts of spells [are] cast and healing rights done, but to no avail," he seeks out a hermit in a mountain, reputed to be able to cure any illness.<sup>ii</sup> The ascetic then "made the necessary talismans, made Genji swallow them, and preceded with the rite"<sup>iii</sup>. Genji does in fact quickly recover from his illness with the help of these talismans.

This is one of the first cases in which there are extant examples of *omamori* that can be obtained with the same general form and purpose.<sup>iv</sup> Though they are rare today, Koganji Temple, in the Tokyo area, distributes this kind of talisman, which, when ingested, is said to cure illness. This modern *omamori* takes the same form as the one described in *The Tale of Genji*, a small slip of paper carrying the Sanskrit name of a deity.<sup>v</sup> Although I have yet to encounter any sources which mention similar *omamori* prior to the example found in *The Tale*

of *Genji*, it is clear that the use of *omamori* was already established by the Heian period, based on their inclusion in this novel.

By the Tokugawa period (1615-1867 A.D.) charms purchased from religious institutions were carried on a person in a manner that would make the activity inconspicuous to others. Patrons of *omamori* wore them around their necks, in their pockets, or inside small cases that hung from their obi.<sup>vi</sup>

Tokugawa period *omamori* were aesthetically very simple. Comprised mostly of a small piece of paper or wood bearing a short inscription<sup>vii</sup>, the aesthetics of *omamori* does not seem to have been a driving force in their public appeal. That is not to say that quality was neglected, as there are references to the use of fine woods and high quality paper<sup>viii</sup>, but these objects seem to have been designed for their supernatural function alone. Tokugawa period *omamori* were objects with a purpose, they were bought and used for that purpose, and discarded when that purpose had been fulfilled.

### *Omamori* Today

For the aims of this paper, I will now focus on changes in three main aspects of *omamori*: their functions, forms, and the ways in which they are popularized. These three aspects have been chosen because they are explicitly discussed by Swanger in his article, and because these three aspects encompass three of the most informative and organic (adaptable) aspects of *omamori*.

### Functions

As times have changed, so have the functions *omamori* have come to serve. There are functions of *omamori* which have existed since as early as the *Kojiki*, and possibly even the Jomon period in the form of *dogū*.<sup>ix</sup> These *omamori* functions are ever-present and represent aids to the human condition, or as Swanger puts it, “ritual sustenance of the normal order”.<sup>x</sup> These functions include promotion of good health, longevity, deterrence of evil, the “opening” of one’s luck, relationship aids, and prosperity.

In addition to these ever-present functions, new additions have been made to the *omamori* roster as society and its concerns have changed. With the development of new technologies, conditional stressors, such as traveling on foot, can be abandoned by *omamori* functions in favor of more pressing concerns, such as driving-safety. The functions which *omamori* serve only persist for as long as their patrons need them; once their need has diminished they can, and have been, abandoned for more relevant stressors.

In the past century there have been at least two major developments in terms of *omamori* function. The first, and most apparent of these two, is the development and rampant popularity of travel/auto safety *omamori*. Before these, there were *omamori* for travelers which protected them from misfortunes (such as bandits) and from pain due to extensive walking. Today, these *omamori* are all but extinct, replaced by sales of *omamori* for safety in vehicles, most commonly cars, but also planes and bicycles. Traffic related purification ceremonies at a temple in Kawasaki went from 100 incidents in 1963 to 67,000 in 1982.<sup>xi</sup> An increased volume in vehicular transportation, and the threat such an increase carries, has given rise to driving-safety *omamori*. Swanger discussed this type of *omamori*, and, as he noted it was then, it is still one of the most popular kinds of *omamori* functions available.

The second, and newest, development in *omamori* function is the creation of *omamori* for the protection of electronics and the data these carry. This type of *omamori* function is still uncommon; however, based on personal observations, its availability did increase between 2008 and 2010.

*Omamori* for the protection of electronics and their data did not exist when Swanger wrote his article in 1981, and are a result of the increased dependence society has developed on electronics since then. With the proliferation of cell phones, personal computers, and other electronics, the potential loss of information associated with these objects has become a major stressor in modern society. Due to this, people in Japan have begun to turn to religious institutions for an increased sense of security in the safety of their cyber-data. With society's continuing dependence on electronics, it is likely that this function will quickly multiply and proliferate to the point that it may one day rank among the most popular *omamori* available.

Beyond the addition of new functions for *omamori*, the array of functions that a single temple or shrine offers has also increased since Swanger wrote his article. As Swanger put it, of the seven specific functions he identified that *omamori* commonly served ("traffic safety, avoidance of evil, open luck, education and passing the examination, prosperity in business, acquisition of a mate and marriage, and healthy pregnancy and easy delivery") "seldom are all seven needs met by a single shrine or temple".<sup>xii</sup> He went on to specify that *omamori* at Tenmangu Jinja in Dazaifu served seven different "functions", *omamori* at Senso-ji in Tokyo served 6 "needs", and *omamori* at Kompira Shrine in Shikoku offered *omamori* for forty-five "needs".<sup>xiii</sup> By removing Kompira Shrine from consideration, as it represents an anomalous shrine that is reputed for its array of *omamori* types and functions, and looking at tables one and two, we can see a trend for increase in the variety of functions offered at a sampling of today's temples and shrines.

Shrine/Temple Name	<i>Omamori</i> Functions*
Sensō-ji	10
Asakusa Jinja	10
Hie Jinja	14
Inokashira Benzaiten	9
Hokkaidō Jingū	13

**Table 1:** Omamori offered at various temples and shrines in 2010

Shrine/Temple Name	<i>Omamori</i> Functions*
Sensō-ji	6
Tenmangu Jinja	7

**Table 2:** Omamori offered at various temples and shrines as described by Swanger in 1981

\*The quantities for omamori functions in table 1 and 2 were derived in the following ways:

**Table 1:** I collected these quantities personally on site at each temple and shrine. Distinctions were made based on the advertised function of each omamori at its specific shrine or temple. For all omamori in which no description of a specific function was given, I categorized them under a single function of general purpose omamori. For omamori that were not specifically advertised for any single function, but were attributed with more than 2 functions, I also categorized them as general purpose omamori. In the case that a temple or shrine advertised an omamori for a single specific purpose, however, written on the omamori were additional attributes, I categorized them under the function as advertised by the temple, rather than as general purpose omamori. I did not condense any omamori functions into categories, for instance, if a shrine had an omamori for recovering from an illness, one for good health, and another for longevity, even though all of these functions pertain to health, they were left as distinct functions. The only time I condensed functions was when an omamori was attributed

with the same function as another, for instance, each of these temples and shrines had more than one omamori specifically for driving safety, thus all driving safety omamori would be categorized under a single function.

**Table 2:** These quantities were taken from Swanger’s article “A Preliminary Examination of the Omamori Phenomenon”. In this article he gave numbers for what he called omamori functions, but did not elaborate on how he obtained these numbers or delineated between functions.

Senso-ji alone has increased its repertoire by 4 functions, and the other 4 shrines have 4-7 more functions than Tenmangu Jinja did. The shrines chosen for comparison range in fame and size from smaller and less famous to larger and more famous than Tenmangu Jinja, and show that even smaller and less frequented shrines serve more functions today than Tenmangu Jinja did when Swanger performed his analysis.

Although the source of this rise in the variability of *omamori* functions is difficult to identify, there are two likely causes. The first is that the proliferation of mass manufacturing has created such ease in the production and acquisition of various *omamori* that temples and shrines see no reason not to offer a wider array of functions, which would appeal to the concerns of a broader set of patrons. This explanation alone, however, seems insufficient. It is likely that this reasoning is encouraged by the results of what is often argued to be a growing lack of belief in these objects by the Japanese population. This issue will be discussed further, but for now, it is important to understand that there are many people, if not most people, in Japanese society who claim that the act of purchasing *omamori* is not a religious act but a societal custom.<sup>xiv</sup>

If one accepts this premise, the persistence of this custom is often attributed to the act of obtaining *omamori* as a souvenir and/or gifting *omamori* to show your concern or support for someone, generally family.<sup>xv</sup> When someone is going through something difficult, stressful, or dangerous, a way to express one’s concern and support for that person is to gift them an *omamori* with a function relevant to their issue. I believe that this rise in gift giving, as a motivation for purchasing *omamori*, represents one of the main reasons that shrines and temples have increased the variety of functions they offer since Swanger wrote his article. With a decreased importance given to belief in the potency of *omamori*, the reputation of that institution for a specific purpose would diminish in importance as well. A greater variety of *omamori* functions would allow any temple or shrine to offer a patron an *omamori* that would address the concerns of their loved one(s), giving shrines and temples a one-stop shopping feature.

### Form

Industrialization and technological advancement have altered *omamori*’s form as well. Originally produced by lay women<sup>xvi</sup>, *omamori* are now almost entirely produced by large secular manufacturing companies that specialize in the production of religious objects<sup>xvii</sup>. The switch to secularized manufacturing is due to both an increase in popularity, and the ease of long-distance travel. The high demand for *omamori* has made it impossible for temples and shrines to continue using their laity for *omamori* production.<sup>xviii</sup> This transition from laity to industry caused Peter Takayama, who wrote the supplemental remarks for Swanger’s article, to project that maintaining an aspect of uniqueness in *omamori* for individual temples and shrines was unlikely.<sup>xix</sup> His projection, however, did not come to pass. Although mass manufacturing has produced a degree of ubiquity amongst *omamori*, one rarely encounters an *omamori* with the same form and function at more than one temple or shrine.<sup>xx</sup>

The visual aspect of *omamori* has become extremely significant. As stated above, earlier in their history, *omamori* took on very practical forms — a small piece of wood, or paper with a prayer or the name of a deity written on it. The only apparent concerns for aesthetics were in the quality of wood and paper used to create the *omamori*, likely done to avoid the charm's potency being called into question due to poor craftsmanship. In modern times, however, *omamori* have seen a drastic change in their form. As the circumstances and beliefs of Japanese culture have changed, so have the aesthetics of *omamori*.<sup>xxi</sup>

Previously, *omamori* needed be little more than objects which brought about a desired effect. If a person was being haunted<sup>xxii</sup> or came down with an illness, that person bought an *omamori* to alleviate their problem, carried it with them, and kept it hidden until it served its purpose. Today's *omamori* have changed a great deal. In addition to carrying religious power, *omamori* have now become objects of personal adornment.

The first major change made to modern *omamori*, which was also discussed by Swanger, was the addition of a cloth pouch.<sup>xxiii</sup> It is a long standing belief in Japan, especially within Shintoism, that deities inhabit hollow and dark places - hollow trees, mountains, and the inside of stones for example. Since an *omamori* carries the essence of a deity, it was believed that for that essence to remain in the charm, the individual would have to keep the *omamori* in a dark place, hidden from light.<sup>xxiv</sup> Since the part of the *omamori* inhabited by a deity's essence was now constantly enclosed in a dark place, a cloth pouch, it was no longer necessary to keep the *omamori* hidden.

With this innovation, the potential for *omamori* changed a great deal. Not only could *omamori* aid its possessor, it could now also be made visible, advertising for the temple and allowing the person to use the *omamori* as an accessory.<sup>xxv</sup> These uses for *omamori* were not discussed by Swanger, and likely represent more recent phenomenon. Based on Swanger's article, *omamori* at the time he did his research were seem to have been used in a manner similar to the way they had been before, kept inside a bag, pocket, or wallet, and generally hidden from sight. What likely popularized *omamori*'s transformation into an accessory since then was the development of bumper sticker and adhesive *omamori* for cars, and *keitai*-strap *omamori* for cell phones, electronics and their cases.

Cell phones have become one of the most personalized objects in Japanese culture. A cell phone in Japan, especially for young people, is "more than just a tool, it is something they are highly motivated to animate and customize as a dream catcher, good luck charm, an alter ego, or as a pet."<sup>xxvi</sup> This fad was seized by shrines and temples, which turned *omamori* into objects meant to be hung from one's cell phone, keys, bag or adhered to a car. Putting *omamori* in plain sight, and selling them as something that would be visible to others, created a need for shrines and temples to make *omamori* more attractive.

One of the ways that this attraction is achieved is through the use of popular culture. For example, the use of cute culture, the adoption of popular characters like Hello Kitty, Abe no Semei (popularized by graphic novels and a set of films), and Sakamoto Ryoma (popularized by TV dramas, films, and graphic novels) and the variety of colors and styles available to choose from are all ways in which *omamori* have been altered to accommodate popular demand.

Since Swanger wrote his article, cute culture has become such a significant element of Japanese popular culture that, in 1992, the word *kawaii* (cute) was "estimated to be the most widely used, widely loved, habitual word in modern living Japanese."<sup>xxvii</sup> Cuteness in Japan is said to be represented by "being small, soft, infantile, mammalian, round, without bodily appendages, and without bodily orifices (e.g. without mouths)..."<sup>xxviii</sup> The dramatic spread of cute culture since the 1980s left few objects unchanged, there were even houses one could purchase especially marketed for their embodiment of cuteness.<sup>xxix</sup> This new aesthetic craze was not to leave behind *omamori*. Through their aesthetics, *omamori* become a collective embodiment of *kawaii* (cute) culture.

Figure 1



Zodiac Animal Omamori

Figure 2



Yoshitsune and Benkei Omamori

Figure 3



Jizo Omamori

It has become nearly impossible to visit the amulet counter at a temple or shrine and not encounter a wide array of cuteness. The twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac are made into characters one would expect to see in a children's book (Figure 1), warriors of legend are turned into little cloth characters with tiny limbs (Figure 2), and Jizo, a deity, is turned into a small, round, chubby snowman-like figure (Figure 3). With the rebellion towards growing older and gaining responsibility in Japan finding its expression largely based in cuteness<sup>xxx</sup>, Japan's consumption of cute culture is enormous, and the creators of *omamori* do not fail to take advantage of this situation.

Figure 4



Omamori featuring Hello Kitty

Part of cute culture, the popular Hello Kitty character is one of the only non-religious figures to permeate *omamori*. There is in fact one shrine in Tokyo in which more than half of the types of *omamori* sold there feature Hello Kitty. Hello Kitty is undeniably one of the most powerful marketing characters of Japan's post-war generation. Representing a billion-dollar industry, she successfully crosses the age gap, appealing to children as being cool, adolescents as being cute, and adults as being nostalgic.<sup>xxxii</sup> Hello Kitty is so powerful that a



study from Tôyô Gakuan University in Japan showed that when asked, people who claimed not to like Hello Kitty often owned something with her likeness on it, and act as though they like her around others.<sup>xxxii</sup> The Hello Kitty trend is so powerful that people feel obligated to be fond of the character. As I have stated, this marketing power and love from her fans is understood and utilized by temples and shrines that feature her on their *omamori*.

Color variation is also a highly used means of making *omamori* appealing. There are many religious institutions that offer the same talisman in a variety (generally 2 or 3) of colors, and an array of other charms that can complete the color rainbow. The purchasing of *omamori* today can be dictated solely by their attractiveness to a patron or tourist<sup>xxxiii</sup>, and in various cases are purchased as souvenirs,<sup>xxxiv</sup> and even collected<sup>xxxv</sup>. The reality is that, *omamori* have become accessories, and must accentuate images that individuals wish to project.

It is clear that these changes have affected the variety of *omamori* forms (their morphology and design) available at temples and shrines. The increased importance in aesthetics, due to the new application of *omamori* as accessories, has resulted in a dramatic increase in the selection of *omamori* one has to choose from. Swanger described Senso-ji as having 15 “forms” of *omamori* and Tenmangu Jinja as having 19 different “kinds” of *omamori*. The ambiguous nature of Swanger’s language makes certainty in cross analysis impossible, as he did not specify what constituted a kind or type of *omamori* in his assessment. However, some comparisons can still be made.

Shine/Temple Name	Types of <i>Omamori</i>	Absolute Number of Types
Sensō-ji	16	37
Hie Jinja	22	51
Hokkaidō Jingū	29	40
Inokashira Benzaiten	14	21
Asakusa Jinja	18	37

**Table 3:** *Omamori* Offered at Various Temples and Shrines in 2010

Shine/Temple Name	“Kinds of <i>Omamori</i> ”
Sensō-ji	15
Tenmangu Jinja	19
Konpira Shrine	77

**Table 4:** *Omamori* Offered at Various Temples and Shrines as Described by Swanger

In table 3 I have provided two sets of tallies for each of five temples and shrines. The first set, categorized as “types of *omamori*,” includes a tally of *omamori* which differed in any combination of shape, design motif or function. I condensed *omamori* which were identical in every way except color variation or size, combining those into a single “type”. I also condensed *omamori* which were of the same form and style, but varied based on the recipients’ year of birth, i.e. if there were 12 *omamori*, one for each animal of the Chinese zodiac (see Fig. 1), or 9 *omamori*, one for each of the Buddhas/bodhisattvas one might be born to, the set was condensed into a single “type” all 12 or 9 *omamori* respectively counting only as 1. The second tally, “absolute number of types,” does not make this distinction. I

counted each *omamori* offered at a shrine or temple as one, thus including all of the *omamori* excluded in the “types of *omamori*” tally.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

As stated, Swanger failed to discuss the way in which he counted types of *omamori*, and thus, it is impossible to state with certainty whether his numbers match my “types of *omamori*” or “variety of types” categories. However, based on context, and the fact that Swanger counted 77 different “kinds” of *omamori* at Kompira Shrine, I will be working off the assumption that his “kinds” match my “absolute number of types” category.

Even this assumption, we can see a dramatic increase in the variety of *omamori* forms available for purchase at a given shrine, again, removing Kompira Shrine from the equation as an anomaly. At Sensō-ji, in the last thirty years, *omamori* forms have increased from 15 to 37, more than double what the count had been. We see similar numbers in contemporary shrines, the closest to Swanger’s counts coming from Inokashira Benzaiten, a much smaller and less frequented shrine than any of the others discussed by myself or Swanger. We can see from the changes discussed in this section, most significantly the use of *omamori* as objects of adornment, that the variability of *omamori* forms offered at a single shrine or temple has increased dramatically in the last 30 years.

### Popularization of *Omamori*

The final aspect of *omamori* that I will discuss here is the modes by which temples and shrines popularize *omamori*. The popularization of *omamori* was discussed by Swanger, and the ways in which it has changed over the last thirty years say a great deal about contemporary Japanese society.

Association with the past has a great deal to do with the popularization of *omamori*. It can be hard, for many, to deny that a tradition which has survived for over a thousand years is correct.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Using images and stories that tie a temple, shrine, or specific *omamori* to a past supernatural power or event, creates a degree of justification for belief in that power. This in turn makes *omamori* use more defensible to oneself and others, and thus more publically acceptable.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

These stories create a framework, a justification and a tradition for the belief in the mystical potency of objects.<sup>xxxix</sup> They imply another time and place, in which mystical energies and divine magic were both powerful and commonplace<sup>xl</sup>. The stories then proceed to tie supernatural beings to this world by making them the deities of it, and by making the land in which many of the stories took place Japan itself<sup>xli</sup>.

An important example of how supernatural power is tied to the Japan inhabited by humans, and then used for *omamori*, can be found in the *Kojiki*’s story of the deity Izanagi fleeing the land of the dead after having broken his vow to the deity Izanami. Izanagi is being pursued by “the eight thunder deities and a horde of warriors of Yōmi” and arrives at the foot of a pass.<sup>xlii</sup> Upon arrival, Izanagi

“took three peaches which were there and, waiting for his pursuers, attacked them with the peaches. They all turned and fled. Izanagi-nō-mikōtō said to the peaches: “Just as you have saved me, when, in the Central Land of the Reed Plains, any of the race of mortal men fall into painful straits and suffer in anguish, then do you save them also.”<sup>xliii</sup>

In this portion of the story of Izanami and Izanagi, there are a multitude of interesting inferences that can be made. In this story, what was used as an amulet was not originally a possession of a god, but rather a fruit found in its natural state. Many other examples of talismanic objects from the *Kojiki* are items that were owned and utilized by deities with no reference to humans. The story of the peach allowed for objects in nature to hold inherent mystical power, as well as for the employment of that power by humans. This helped lay the

groundwork for many modern *omamori* which contain pieces or symbols of objects found in nature, such as trees, seeds, and the peach itself, which are said to empower them.

In his article, Swanger discussed the importance of a good *engi*, or back story, to justify and popularize *omamori*<sup>xliv</sup>, and this persists as one of the features which make an *omamori* marketable today. People will still travel from all over Japan to visit a temple or shrine that is famous for a given *omamori*, a popularity that is often rooted in some kind of *engi*.<sup>xlv</sup> Though *engi* are extremely important to the popularization of *omamori*, changes in popular belief about *omamori* and their efficacy have influenced the creation of new methods of popularizing *omamori*.

Today, religion itself is a matter of great debate among scholars studying Japan and its people. It has become commonplace for Japanese people to say that they are not religious, often stating that they do not actively practice any specific religion, and any activities they partake in that may be construed as religious are nothing more than tradition and habit.<sup>xlvi</sup> In such a modernized society, it is often seen as old-fashioned to consider oneself religious<sup>xlvii</sup>, with many people only visiting a local temple or shrine for special occasions, like New Year's and Obon festival, and at times of need, like before college and high school entrance exams.

Although many Japanese are passionate about their claim to be non-religious, their actions seem to betray them.<sup>xlviii</sup> It is from this modern controversy that the current perceptions of *omamori* have taken shape. Even though most Japanese claim to be non-religious, many still visit temples and shrines and partake in the purchasing of *omamori*. There has been much debate over the actual religiousness of this activity, and there are two arguments made for the secularity of purchasing *omamori*.<sup>xlix</sup>

The first is that, for many people, *omamori* are no longer considered to be magical, and are believed to hold no power of their own. They are purchased, instead, to follow in the tradition of showing your consideration to someone by gifting them an *omamori*.<sup>i</sup> This case is especially true for parents or grandparents, and their children. Through the gifting of *omamori*, a person is given the opportunity to express his or her feelings toward others, especially those of concern and encouragement.<sup>ii</sup> When giving someone an *omamori* for success on a final exam, you are not necessarily offering them something you think will give them a supernatural edge, but showing them that you are concerned and invested in their success and prosperity.<sup>iii</sup>

The second, and rather contradictory, argument against the religiousness of the act of obtaining *omamori* is that *omamori* are believed to hold no supernatural power. However, with their long history in Japanese culture and their ties to religion, there is a chance that they may have some power, so one should buy them "just in case". It is true that *omamori* are a gift which allows someone to show concern for an individual. To a sick loved one you give a health charm, and travel safety charm to a child going abroad. In addition to showing concern, however, there is considered to be a small chance that the folklore about *omamori* is true.<sup>iiii</sup> It is this sort of practical thinking which has allowed *omamori* to maintain their status as potentially powerful objects, for, though they are unlikely to have any power, their deep history in Japanese culture gives them too much credibility to be regarded as pure myth.

Though there are people who fully believe in the efficacy of *omamori*, what I have attempted to show here are popular opposing views within and without Japanese culture that have had a significant effect on *omamori*'s conceptualization and status. This debate over their religiosity has given rise to new, secular reasons for the popularization of *omamori* which should not be ignored.

Today, it is not uncommon for people to purchase *omamori* primarily as souvenirs, accessories and collectables, their potential religious benefits acting as a nice bonus or even a non-issue. Though support of this motivation by religious institutions is rarely verbalized, acceptance and accommodation of this type of *omamori* purchasing can be seen in the *omamori* offered by temples and shrines today. Religious institutions offer *omamori* that

depict a famous garden, scene, or aspect of the temple or shrine to serve as souvenirs of the place or a festival.

The public aspect of *omamori* is extremely significant in the reserved social atmosphere of Japan. Showing one's true nature, or the ties one has to religion is a very revealing act, something that is not taken lightly. Taking this into consideration, *omamori* can be thought of as coming in two basic forms, traditional – those which are plainly religious in nature from their appearance; and non-traditional – *omamori* which take the form of an animal, character, or object, which are only verifiably religious upon closer inspection. The use of a traditional *omamori* makes it clear to those around an individual that he or she is employing a religious object. Non-traditional *omamori*, however, are far more discrete. These *omamori* tend to look identical to secular cell phone charms that can be bought at shopping centers and souvenir shops, and which carry no institutional religious ties. Often the only way to know if a non-traditional *omamori* is in fact an *omamori* to look at the small silver or gold tag attached to the strap which carries the name of the temple or shrine where it was purchased. The discretion, and often exaggerated cuteness or coolness of these charms in particular, makes them the ideal talisman for someone who wishes to use an *omamori*, but do so inconspicuously.

The rapidly changing degree of faith in Japanese society has allowed *omamori* to become popular for reasons which do not seem to have come into play to such a degree for Swanger. Trends for accessorizing and cuteness, which experienced heightened growth after Swanger's article, made room for the popularization of *omamori* for non-religious reasons, focusing on their appearance rather than their religious functions. The greater degree to which open religiosity has come to be seen as old-fashioned has created space for the popularization of *omamori* which are not plainly religious. Again, there are many people who believe in *omamori* and seek them out for the powers they are attributed with. I have not attempted to privilege non-religious motivations for purchasing *omamori*, but, instead, to illustrate one of the ways that they have changed over the last thirty years to accommodate a changing society.

### Conclusion

Several changes have taken place since Swanger wrote his article, which have dramatically altered *omamori*. A rise in mass production and the changing aesthetic preferences of the population have created greater variability in *omamori* form and aesthetic. A rise in dependence on technology has created a new function for *omamori*. The mass use of cell phones created a niche for *keitai* (cell phone) strap *omamori* to fill, a development which also helped bring *omamori* into the realm of personal adornment objects. Finally, changes in beliefs surrounding *omamori* have created new reasons for the popularization of certain *omamori* that either did not exist or were too sparse for Swanger to deem worthy of inclusion in his analysis.

*Omamori* are a patron-driven commodity. They have changed form and purpose over time along with the society in which they exist.<sup>liv</sup> With a reduction in attesting to belief in supernatural powers, *omamori* became gifts offered to show people your concern and consideration for their plights. With a rise in popularity of cute and accessorizing objects, *omamori*'s forms have changed to fill this desire. With the adoption of new technologies, and thus new stressors, *omamori* have also adopted new functions such as the driving safety and the protection of electronic data. The ability of *omamori* to adapt in these ways is a significant reason why a tradition tied to ideas that might be considered magic has persisted into modern times. In depth research into *omamori* would greatly enhance the understanding of the concerns, lives, and tastes of various periods of Japanese history. *Omamori* deserve a closer examination from the social sciences and humanities to bring attention to an

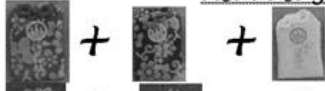
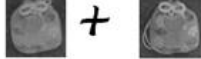


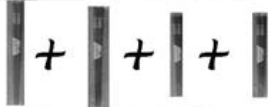


understudied piece of material culture that can greatly inform us about present and past peoples of Japan.

This class of objects can no longer be allocated to the sidelines of academia. Researchers must create a systematized way to count and organize *omamori* so as to make comparative research possible, a problem discussed in the form and function sections of this paper. In addition, the beginning stages of the lifecycle of *omamori* need to be explored to better understand the relationships between modernization and religions, as well as the local versus national associations of *omamori*. Are these objects designed and produced by companies who distribute them throughout Japan? Or are at least some *omamori* still designed by individual temples and shrines?

A better understanding must also be sought as to the conceptualizations of these items by both the religious institutions that disseminate them and the populace that uses them. Beyond simply asking whether or not these are believed to function in a supernatural manner, reasons for their aesthetic, functions, and popularity can give us significant insight into the relationship between society and religion. *Omamori* have a great deal to tell researchers about both present and past societies, and once we are able to broaden our perspectives and refine our methods when dealing with these amulets they will prove to be an invaluable catalyst to expanding our understanding of Japanese society, and possibly the interaction of humans with amulets on a global scale.

Appendix 1


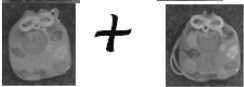



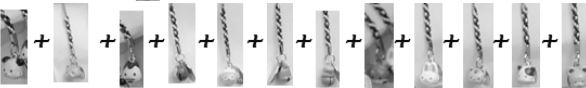
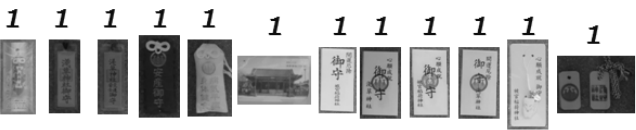
*Asakusa Jinja - Types of Omamori*

 = 1 *Color variation, but, identical size, design, and benefit*  
 = 1 *Color variation, but, identical size, design, and benefit*  
 = 1 *Color variation, but, identical size, design, and benefit*  
 = 1 *Color variation, but, identical size, design, and benefit*  
 = 1 *Color and size variation, but, identical design and benefit*  
 = 1 *Design variation as a result of recipient's birth year*  
 = 12 *Benefit and/or design variation*

Total  
18

Appendix 2

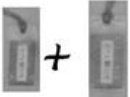
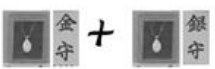
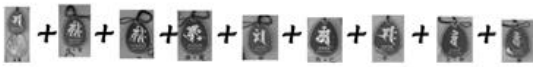

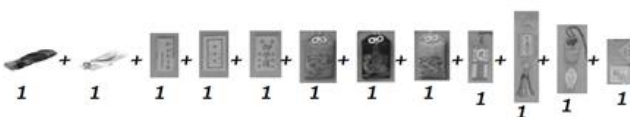
Asakusa Jinja Omamori - Absolute Number of Types

 = 3 Color variation  
 = 2 Color variation  
 = 2 Color variation  
 = 2 Color variation  
 = 4 Color and size variation  
 = 12 Design variation  
 = 12 Benefit and/or design variation

Total  
37

Appendix 3

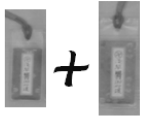
Sensō-ji- Types of Omamori

 = 1 Color variation, but, identical size, design, and benefit  
 = 1 Color/Metal variation, but identical size, design, and benefit  
 = 1 Design variation as a result of recipient's birthyear  
 = 1 Design variation as a result of recipient's birthyear  
 = 12 Benefit and/or design variation

Total  
16


## Appendix 4

Sensō-jū Omamori - Absolute Number of Types



$$+ = 2 \text{ Color variation}$$

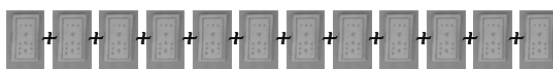
$$\frac{\text{Total}}{37}$$



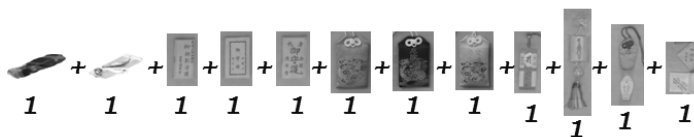
$$+ = 2 \text{ Color/Metal variation}$$



$$+ + + + + + + + + = 9 \text{ Design variation}$$



$$+ + + + + + + + + + + + = 12 \text{ Design variation}$$



$$1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 = 12 \text{ Benefit and/or design variation}$$

## References

- Anderson, Richard. (1991) What Constitutes Religious Activity?. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 18/4: 369-372.
- Arukawa, Ayumu. (2004-2008) 人はお守りをなぜ持つのか?: Alternative optionとしての お守り. *日本パーソナリティ心理学会大会発表論文集* 13: 52-53.
- Chamberlain, Basil Hall. (1893) Notes on Some Minor Japanese Religious Practices. *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 22: 355-370.
- Chamberlain, Basil Hall. (1919) *The Kojiki: Japanese Records of Ancient Matters*. Forgotten Books.
- Covell, Stephen. (2005) *Japanese Temple Buddhism: Worldliness in a Religion of Renunciation*. Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press.
- Davis, Winston. (1980) *Japanese Religions and Society: Paradigms of Structure and Change*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Hearn, Lafcadio. (1971) *In Ghostly Japan*. North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing.
- Habu, Junko. (2004) *Ancient Jomon of Japan*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Hur, Nam-lin. (2000) *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan: Asakusa Sensoji and Edo Society*. USA: Harvard University Asia Center.
- Hurst, G. Cameron. (1998) *Armed Martial Arts of Japan: Swordsmanship and Archery*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Ito, Mizuko, Daisuke Okave, and Misa Matsuda. (2005) *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian: Mobile Phones in Japanese Life*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Kimura, Harumi. (2009) *Living Japan: Essays on Everyday Life in Contemporary Society*. Folkestone, UK: Global Oriental LTD.

- Kinsella, Sharon. (1995) Cuties in Japan. *Women, Media, and Consumption in Japan*: 220-253.
- McVeigh, Brian (2000) How Hello Kitty Commodifies the Cute, Cool and Camp: `Consumutopia` versus `Control` in Japan. *Journal of Material Culture* 5: 225-245
- Miller, Laura. (2008) Extreme Makeover for a Heian-Era Wizard. *Mechademia* 3: 30-45.
- Miyake, Hitoshi. (2001) *Shugendo: Essays on the Structure of Japanese Folk Religion*. Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan.
- Murasaki, Shikibu. (Translated by Royall Tyler). (2003) *The Tale of Genji (Unabridged)*. New York, NY: Penguin Group Inc.
- Nelson, John (1996) Freedom of Expression: The Very Modern Practice of Visiting a Shinto Shrine. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 23/1-2: 117-153.
- Nelson, John (2006) *Enduring Identities: the Guise of Shinto in Contemporary Japan*. Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press.
- Philippi, Donald. (1968) *Kojiki*. Tokyo, Japan: University of Tokyo Press.
- Rambelli, Fabio. (2007) *Buddhist Materiality: A Cultural History of Objects in Japanese Buddhism*. Sanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Reader, Ian. (1991) *Religion in Contemporary Japan*. Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press.
- Reader, Ian and George Tanabe. (1998) *Practically Religious*. Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press.
- Swanger, Eugene R. (1981) A Preliminary Examination of the Omamori Phenomenon. *Asian Folklore Studies* 40/2: 237-252.
- Traphagan, John. (2004) *The Practice of Concern: Ritual, Well-Being, and Aging in Rural Japan*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.
- Warms, Richard, James Garber, and R. Jon McGee. (2009) *Sacred Realms: Readings in the Anthropology of Religion*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Zielenziger, Michael. (2001) Japanese Celebrate News of Addition to Royal Family. *The Orlando Sentinel*. Dec. 12 Metro/Pg. A20.

---

<sup>i</sup> Zielenziger

<sup>ii</sup> Murasaki, pg 83

<sup>iii</sup> Murasaki, pg 83

<sup>iv</sup> See Chamberlain (1893), 363, and discussion of omikage omamori distributed by Kōganji which is “a small paper image of Jizō designed to be swallowed or stuck to the skin at the point of the affected area” Swagner 1981: 242

<sup>v</sup> Murasaki, pg83

<sup>vi</sup> Miyake, pg 69; and Traphagan, pg 114

<sup>vii</sup> Swanger, pg 240

<sup>viii</sup> Hur, pg 41

<sup>ix</sup> Habu, pg 142-144

<sup>x</sup> Swanger, pg 237

<sup>xi</sup> Reader, pg 190

<sup>xii</sup> Swanger, 239

<sup>xiii</sup> Swanger, 239. In his article, Swanger uses the words “function” and “need” interchangeably to describe the supernatural benefit(s) offered by an *omamori*. For the purpose of clarity, however, in this paper, when discussing *omamori*, function will always refer to the supernatural functions *omamori* are attributed with (i.e. driving safety, longevity, opening luck).



- xiv Anderson, 369-370; Arakawa, 53; Reader, 11
- xv Anderson, 369-370; Arakawa, 53; Reader, 189; Traphagan, 115
- xvi Swanger, pg 240
- xvii Reader and Tanabe, pg 222-223
- xviii Anderson, pg 371
- xix Swanger, pg 250
- xx Personal observation from informal fieldwork in 2008 and 2010 which included the visitation of over 100 temples and shrines throughout mainland Japan and Hokkaido.
- xxi Nelson (2006), pg 80, and Miyake, pg 69
- xxii Hearn (1971), pg 73-116
- xxiii Swanger, pg 240
- xxiv Swanger, 244
- xxv Anderson, pg 370
- xxvi Ito, Okabe and Matsuda, pg 87
- xxvii Kinsella, pg 221
- xxviii Kinsella, pg 226
- xxix Kinsella, pg 226
- xxx Kinsella (1995), pg 240-243
- xxxi Mcveigh, pg 225
- xxxii Mcveigh, pg 239-240
- xxxiii Traphagan, pg 122
- xxxiv Reader, pg 189
- xxxv Traphagan, pg 114
- xxxvi See Appendix 1, 2, 3, and 4 for an illustration of this process for Asakusa Jinja and Sensō-ji.
- xxxvii Miller, pg 41
- xxxviii See Nelson (1996), 122 and Davis, 232 for a discussion on the perceived aversion of some Japanese to associate themselves publicly with a particular religion or belief. In Kimura, 49-50, an interview can be found that outlines some of the embarrassment that may ensue from making omamori publicly visible.
- xxxix Miller, pg 41
- xl Mcveigh, pg 227-228
- xli Miller, pg 41
- xlii Philippi, pg 64
- xliiii Philippi, pg 65
- xliv Swanger, pg 240-243
- lv Examples include the omamori for protection of one's progeny from Yasaka Jinja discussed by Swanger (pg 241-242), the fish scale omamori at Sensō-ji, and the sports omamori at Shiramine Jinja.
- lvi See Reader, pg 11; and Tanabe and Reader, Pg 51 wherein a girl justifies her purchase of an omamori by saying that she is "only being a good Japanese".
- lvii Kimura, pg 48-49; Warms et al., pg 56-59; and Covell, 169-170
- lviii Reader, pg 11
- lix Anderson, pg 369-372
- l Kimura, pg 48-49
- li Traphagan, pg 115
- lii Kimura, pg 49
- liiii Tanabe and Reader, pg 128
- liv Nelson (2006), pg 80, and Miyake, pg 69