Holding On While Letting Go: Dealing With Death Through Kuyô Egaku In 19th Century Iwate

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Abstract. In all human societies, death and its associated rituals offer a primary channel for the study of local cultural values and beliefs about life. Since ancient times, Japanese have commonly utilized talismanic objects that represent their spiritual and religious worldviews to mediate their earthly existence with the divine and otherworldly realm. Among the most colorful and artistic of these ornamental symbols are ema (horse pictures), votive tablets still found abundantly at Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. Typical ema consists of wooden picture boards of various sizes and shapes, brought to or created at a sacred site, through which the wishes and needs of supplicants are made known to whatever deities are enshrined there. Most Japan scholars agree that a majority of ema constitute a technique or mode of problem solving, crisis prevention, and/or thanksgiving related to issues that affect the earthly life of petitioners, rarely addressing their desires pertaining to the afterworld or death. Until the end of the 20th century, it was widely accepted that there were only a few minor exceptions to this general pattern. However, in 2001, a fourth variety of ema was identified in Iwate prefecture, northeastern Honshū, which seems to contradict this understanding. Dubbed kuyô egaku (literally, “mourning picture frames”), this type of ema connects the living votively to their loved ones, relatives and friends who are dead. This paper documents the discovery of kuyô egaku, highlights its prominent characteristics, and articulates the significance of this finding for understanding both ema and Japan’s folk religious worldview in the nation’s northeast.
Introduction to Kuyô Egaku

As one enters the sanctuaries of older Buddhist temples in many of the outlying rural communities of Iwate prefecture, northeast Japan, an eerie presence draws one’s attention overhead. Positioned high above the crossbeams on the interior walls are typically hundreds of life-sized photographic portraits of parishioners, long ago deceased, anchored permanently into place (see Figure 1). At any time of the day or night, the visages of these congregants, captured while in their earthly prime, seem to gaze downward at visitors below as if they are still alive, creating an otherworldly presence quite disturbing to most moderns. The custom of displaying memorial photographs of dead laity inside parish temples following their funerals as a hónô (votive offering), was a practice once widespread throughout Japan (Neko 2001, 119). Yet, as if eclipsed by the morbid candor of this popular mid-to-late-20th century funerary observance, often hanging side-by-side in the temples of central Iwate are also much older and more culturally edifying renditions of the dearly departed, depicted on ema (votive tablets) painted by hand - many from the mid to early 19th century - which have too often gone unrecognized since before World War II. These highly illustrative posthumously rendered remembrances, many over one-hundred-and-fifty years old, are symbolically even more ghastly than the photographs. Interestingly, during the 20th and 21st centuries, these striking paintings, referred to locally as kuyô egaku (literally, “memorial picture frames” - more accurately described as votive memorial paintings) - have remained largely unstudied, even by local scholars, until now. Using a multidisciplinary, ethnologic approach, this paper documents the most recent research on kuyô egaku in central Iwate and articulates the significance of these findings for understanding ema in Japan and the historic folk culture associated with spirituality and death in this nation’s northeast (see Figure 2).

Grieving the death of a loved one or friend is about as universal a human emotion as exists. In all human societies, death instigates a contradiction between the need for mourners to push the dead away, and their need to remember them. These needs typically direct the bereaved to construct a variety of rituals, practices, and
mediation tools (both public and private) to insure that a proper balance between loss and remembrance can be maintained (Metcalf and Huntington 1991, 79-107; Ruby 1984, 201).

Similarly, in central Iwate, kuyô egaku were once a routinely utilized public and private mediation tool that helped mourners to assign their deceased loved ones to a new social category from which they would never return. Sometimes called kuyô ema (votive memorial tablets), these paintings, produced from about 1840 until about 1930, typically depict children and adults full of life in vibrantly detailed everyday scenes as they blissfully pursue a wide range of what must have been their favorite earthly pastimes. These portrayals are thought to be hyper-idealized renditions of the life that subject(s) actually lived - a dream-version of their earthly existence; the deceased dressed in newly made clothes, living in a recently constructed house, eating favorite foods, in the company of beloved friends and relatives, and enjoying the absence of any earthly problems or conflicts - scenarios too perfect to actually be possible in real life (Tono 2001, 5). This is why, to the uninitiated, it is especially mystifying to learn that these skillfully detailed

Figure 1.
renderings don’t actually depict a perfected version of how life WAS in this world for those portrayed, but represent how things ARE for them in the next.

The Function of Ema in Japanese Folk Life

Since ancient times, Japanese have regularly utilized talismanic objects that represent their everyday hopes and fears to mediate their earthly existence with the otherworldly realm. Among the most attractive and abundant of such ornamental symbols are *ema* (literally, “horse picture[s]”), wooden plates of varying dimensions, often marked with a painted horse design, intended for the expression of votive messages. In existence since the early Nara period (710-794), *ema* are directed at the deities associated with a particular Shinto shrine or Buddhist temple to solicit their influence. Considered to be, *kami to hotoke e no tegami* - “letters to kami (the pantheon of Shinto gods) and buddhas ([in folk parlance] the deceased who have attained enlightenment and live on in the afterworld)” (Morizaki 1983, 82), the purpose of a votive tablet or plate is to physically me-
mediate messages from their creator(s) to the spiritual realm by externalizing in concrete form the inner desires and wishes of the supplicant (Reader 1991, 25-26).

Unlike o-mamori (amulets) or o-fuda (protective charms), considered to contain the sacred powers of specific deities meant to be kept on-person or in the home, ema, often depicting the mythological spiritual mediator for which it is named, are brought to or otherwise created at the revered site, and deliberately left there to deliver the rendered message in perpetuity. Some measure no more than 15cm across, while others are ten times this size. Smaller ema, often rectangular but sometimes pentagonal in shape, usually include a space on the back, where prayers, wishes, and requests can be rendered orthographically without disturbing any art work or cryptograms on the front.

On larger ema, votive messages are expressed not only in script but also as meaningful illustrations, or through the recreation of well-documented scenes taken from Japanese history or literature, but only on one side. Explained culturally from a pragmatic point of view, ema can be regarded as material channeling devices through which the votive wishes or needs of a humble petitioner can be made known to and acted upon by whatever deities are enshrined at a spiritually significant locale. Ema, to be sure, are not the only artifacts used within Japanese folk culture for this purpose, but are acknowledged by most Japan scholars to be by far the most prevalent of historical spiritual mediation tools still frequently observable at shrines and temples throughout Japan (Reader, 1991, 23-24).

Twenty-first-century research on ema has matured beyond the analysis of physical descriptions, artistic style, or verbiage contained within a creation – the methods preferred during earlier periods - to focus on the complex nature of the symbols utilized and the multivocal nature of the meanings expressed (Reader 1991, 23-32; Robertson 2008, 43-45). Long a topic of great interest among Japanese (Yanagita, 1970, 341-43) and foreign ethnologists alike, one of the earliest accounts of ema by an American scholar was recorded by University of Chicago anthropology professor Frederic Starr, who first visited Japan in 1904 (1920). Japanese folklorists continue to
generate many studies of votive tablets each year (Hirota and Hirota 2008, 42-43). However, the latest analysis of *ema* in English, published in early 2008 by University of Michigan cultural anthropologist Jennifer Robertson, attests to the longevity of the academic interest in this topic internationally, and the continued relevance of *ema* as one of many windows through which to understand Japanese culture and folk belief (Robertson).

Until the end of the 20th century, there was general agreement among *ema* researchers that votive icons in Japan (like those in Catholic Europe, Mexico, and Latin America) constituted a folk method or technique for thanks giving, problem solving, or crisis prevention in earthly life, and were for the most part not used for needs and/or wishes pertaining to death or to activities that take place in the spiritual world. As far as scholars knew, at no time in Japanese history had *ema* ever been used for funerary purposes, to mark death anniversaries, or to communicate with friends or loved ones who had passed on. The conventional thinking was that there were only three minor exceptions to this characterization of *ema*: 1) *mizuko ema*, offered in many parts of Japan to acknowledge a miscarriage or abortion, 2) *mabiki ema*, that similarly address infanticide – common during various historical periods, particularly in the nation’s countryside, and 3) *mukasari ema*, utilized as a vehicle for transacting marriages of dead souls - mainly for the benefit of bereaved family members left behind - a practice thought to be limited to Yamagata prefecture on the Japan Sea side of northeastern Japan (Robertson 2008, 46).

**The Discovery of Kuyô Egaku**

In 2001, a potential fourth variety of votive tablet was identified in Iwate (a northeastern prefecture near Yamagata on the Pacific side of Honshû). This development, still not widely known or appreciated, even in Japan, is putting long established assumptions about the spiritual range and influence of *ema* into question. A clear understanding of *ema* theology is important because this hitherto undiscerned variety of votive picture board, if legitimate, would be yet another example of what Japan scholars have known for some
time - that *ema* culture, and by extension Japanese spirituality – especially in pre-modern Japan - was not nearly as homogeneous or as prescriptive as is popularly perceived (Reader 1991, 43-48; Kawano 2005, 21-37; Kawanishi 2005, 453-55).

Amazingly, knowledge of the existence of *kuyô egaku* in Iwate is not new. Even during the postwar period, votive memorial paintings have been acknowledged in a variety of exhibits and ethnological materials pertaining to the region since 1955 (Tono 2001, 7). But until Neko’s January 2001 article entitled, *Kuyô Egaku ni Tsuite* (Regarding *Kuyô Egaku*), no formal studies of votive memorial portraiture in Iwate (or anywhere else in Japan) had ever been published. One reason for this lack of documentation is that *kuyô egaku* was (and is – as far as is known) predominantly a local folk religious phenomenon practiced only by a limited population in one isolated locale, in a culturally conservative, particularly syncretistic region of rural Japan. As a result, *Kairitu danto* (the desire of Buddhist folk practitioners to keep outsiders from entering the local culture to understand their private practices) and *kanshô* ([in turn], the reluctance of knowledgeable outsiders to provide information about practices they are supposed to know nothing about), have played a major role in making formal research, even by the most reputable scholars, difficult. Especially during the postwar period, few scholars have had the appropriate balance of theoretical training, both an etic and an emic understanding of area history, and the local connections necessary to mount a credible study of a folk topic such as this.

To *ema* scholars, the existence of *kuyô egaku* should not be a surprise. However, another reason *kuyô egaku* have not attracted much attention in the mainstream before now may be because the work of regionally based folk researchers who live in and study their own home territories in Japan has historically not been taken seriously enough. As indicated clearly in Matsumoto’s special exhibit at the Tono Municipal Museum in late 2001, it has been widely known and reported by local historians and folklorists since before the Second World War that from the middle of the Edo period (1603-1867) until the end of the Meiji period (1868-1912) within a neatly defined boundary that today falls geographically within central Iwate pre-
fecture, local residents regularly memorialized their deceased loved ones by presenting brightly illustrated *ema* (horse pictures) depicting their well-being in the afterlife as votive offerings to the local parish temple (Tono 2001, 7).

**Kuyô Egaku Research: The Importance of Long Term Contact and Local Connections**

The cultural and historical obstacles that make the study *kuyô egaku* in central Iwate difficult are significant, even for native Japanese scholars. This is why as an American cultural anthropologist based at a university in the U.S., I have been very fortunate to have had the necessary access to the folk culture of central Iwate. My own research on *kuyô egaku* would not have been possible if not for four concomitant factors. First, I was born and raised in Japan. I have benefitted greatly from the linguistic and cultural advantages this background has given me as I have pursued a range of research projects in rural Iwate. Secondly the long-term contact my wife, children, and I have enjoyed with the Tôwa-chô, Iwate community (where many *kuyô egaku* are found) has helped to establish the personal and professional relationships, institutional ties, and bonds of obligation and trust that have been indispensible to the study of this topic.

My involvement in Tôwa-chô began initially in 1987 as the guest of the first resident American English teacher, hired directly by the local school board, who was at the end of her two year stay (whom I later married). She had been dispatched by Earlham College (Richmond, IN) a year following graduation on a program designed to provide international education to isolated villages and towns in the prefecture. After my wife’s departure, she and I made many visits back to Tôwa-chô during the years that followed for various personal and professional purposes. From 1994-96 my wife and first child (a son) lived in Tôwa-chô full-time, so I could work in the town hall as part of my Ph.D. dissertation fieldwork. During these years, my wife again taught English in the local schools, while our son was cared for by the wife of a local Shinto priest. These experiences helped to integrate us further into the fabric of Tôwa-chô’s community life.
Since completing my Ph.D. in 1998, I have conducted ethnographic research annually in central Iwate, which has resulted in a number of publications on traditional folk practices in the region. Coupled with our family’s personal ties with the Tôwa-chô’s community (which also includes a trip back in 2005 to introduce our then seven-year-old daughter), this body of work has given me a measure of credibility and legitimacy locally that has opened many doors.

A third factor that has facilitated my research in central Iwate are the significant levels of local depopulation, economic decline, as well as the detrimental changes in regional development policy experienced in the region since 1980. These fluctuations have made the residents of Tôwa-chô (since 2006 incorporated into Hanamaki) more willing than ever to share about their local folk heritage. Members of communities in all sectors of Hanamaki are now keenly aware that unless documented now, many of their private local practices and traditions may be forgotten and lost forever (Thompson 2004; 2008). Consequently, access to insider perspectives on local cultural issues has become much easier than in the past.

Finally, my association with Iwate folklore researcher Neko Hideo (born and raised in Hanamaki) is probably the most significant reason I have been able to research kuyô e-gaku. Even though he rarely ventures outside his native prefecture, Neko is firmly connected to both the regional and national academic folk studies community in Japan and has contacts everywhere in the northeast. Since 1994, he has singlehandedly provided me with access to a wide range of human and material resources in central Iwate and to emic perspectives on regional folk religious practices that otherwise I would not have. In conjunction with Neko-san, I also owe a great debt to Tôwa-chô dentist Dr. Tada Kôji and wife Eiko, their children and relatives - one of the first Tôwa-chô families to befriend mine in 1994. Tada family friend and retired businessman Tada Norio (no relation) has been equally supportive. The Tada Kôjis, about ten years my senior, have been my homestay hosts for over 10 years. Without their kindness, generosity, advice, and mentorship, my annual fieldwork trips to Tôwa-chô would not have been possible or as productive.
What Are Kuyô Egaku?

To date found only in central Iwate – votive memorial paintings exhibit all of the characteristics typical of previously studied *ema*, except for one: its tablets address the hopes, wishes and desires of supplicants in this life pertaining to their loved ones in *shigo no se-kai* (the existence following death), also termed *takai* (the other world/world of death) as if it were an actual place or state of existence (Hanamaki 2008). Thought to be a Japanese theological worldview expressed through local folk symbolism articulated this directly only in central Iwate, *kuyô egaku*, can still be found in the local sanctuaries of temples with histories in their present locations of one-hundred or more years (Neko 2001, Tono 2001). The oldest in Iwate can be found in the city of Tono, created in the second year of Kôka – 1845. In Hanamaki, located due west, the oldest painting can be traced back to the 2nd year of Bukyô, or 1862. Two other known examples in Hanamaki were created at the end of the Edo period, in 1866 and 1867. Hundreds more from this period are thought to have existed but were thrown away as temples rebuilt or destroyed in fires. The most recently crafted votive memorial painting in Iwate was made in Showa 5 – or 1930 also in Hanamaki. Neko’s research has shown that after this time, portrait photographs began replacing *kuyô egaku* in all local temples (Tono 2001, 12-15).

According to Neko and Dewa, folk culture specialists native to central Iwate, *kuyô egaku* are visual representations of the *nembutsu* ritual (the vocal act of praying for the salvation of others [and by virtue, one’s own] by reciting the sacred name of the Amida Buddha in the formula, *Namu Amida Butsu* [Hail to the Name of Amida Buddha]) still prevalent in the region. This practice, first spread throughout Japan by Tendai Buddhist monks in the 8th century, was thoroughly incorporated into teachings disseminated in central Iwate parish communities by the Jôdô and Sôtô sects and others by the 12th century. As indicated in the closely related practice of *nembutsu kuyô*, meaning, “*nembutsu* memorial,” the act of vocal *nembutsu* is also directed at the dearly departed as a commemorative rite, to ensure their continued welfare in the next life. Such memorial rituals are intended to continue at regular intervals indefinitely through
time until the bereaved themselves have passed on. As the literal meaning of the expression *kuyô egaku* (“memorial picture frames”) indicates, votive memorial paintings then are actually commemorative illustrations directed at the deceased that visualize and eternally substantiate their state of bliss in the next life (Lu 1974, 114; Tono 2001, 7-10).

Whether in its vocal form or pictorial manifestation, the key to understanding the *nem-butsu* ritual is the way it was practiced as a folk tradition in central Iwate during the late Edo period (1860s) and its connection to the Mahāyāna Buddhist concept of *tariki*, or salvation acquired through a dependence on others (as opposed to *jiriki* – self acquired salvation). *Tariki* was propagated throughout Japan during the 10th century by Genshin, a Jōdō sect priest, though incorporated broadly by other Mahāyāna sects operating in the area such as Tendai, Sôtô, Ji, and Shingon. Practitioners of folk *nembutsu* in central Iwate, influenced heavily by the notion of *tariki*, believed that the only way they could achieve *satori* (enlightenment) and by virtue reach *gokuraku jyôdô* (paradise – Buddhist heaven, imagined also as a place, often referred to in English as the Pure Land) was to pray for the salvation of their families and fellow parishioners and to be prayed for themselves (Lu 1974, 114).

In common practice, theological distinctions between the state of enlightenment and the location practitioners thought of as the Pure Land were not significant. But parishioners believed that only through the self-denouncing act of putting their beloved friends and relatives in this world and in the next first in their prayers would they be in a position to reach *gokuraku jyô-do*. And even more significantly, according to the theology of *tariki*, it wouldn’t be the parishioner’s own prayers for others that would save them. Only by the unsolicited prayers of their friends and loved ones in this world on their behalf and the grace (meaning reciprocal prayers) of those who had already passed on (neither over which the petitioner had control) would a parishioner achieve enlightenment (Tono 2001, 7-10; Neko 2008). Thus, necessary for achieving salvation was active participation in the *nembutsu* process directed at both the living and the dead. This is in part why the term *nembutsu*, in common
usage, came to be used generically to signify the ritual aimed at both the living and the dead, though a distinction was made when relevant.

The nembutsu ritual then relied on a parishioner’s on-going contact with both consociates in this world and those in the next. Certainly, votive memorial paintings were visual nembutsu, offered by those in this life that artistically helped to actualize the satori of the deceased and their arrival in gokuraku jyôdo, to ensure their successful salvation and passing to this Buddhist Promised Land. However, as a dynamic visual expression of nembutsu, each portrait was also a medium for active contact with the deceased to assure that the supplicants in this world would not be forgotten by the dead. To be sure, the bereaved borrowed imagery they were familiar with from their earthly lives in the compositions they commissioned to more easily visualize the salvation of the deceased, but they did this also so they could better establish a foundation for and anticipate their own (Tono 2001, 7-10; Neko 2007).

**Interpreting Kuyô Egaku**

Kuyô egaku are unique within the genre of Japanese folk religious expression in part because they make a descriptive statement about the afterlife not seen depicted in any other known varieties of votive tablets anywhere else in Japan (Neko 2001, 120-22; Tono 2001, 14-16). They differ from mizuko ema and mabiki ema because they deal with death not from an earthly perspective but directly from within the domain of the otherworldly realm. And unlike mukasari ema, which focus on the deceased in a static time-warp that mimics precisely the world of the living, kuyô egaku portray a timeless, trouble-free, luxury-filled existence that continues beyond our earthly lives which is full of the best this world has to offer, but better – that was thought to actually exist and be accessible even if only occasionally from this life.

Because kuyô egaku seem to be so unique within Japan, it might be tempting to conclude that this conception of the spiritual world must have evolved in isolation or have come from some foreign source. However, interestingly, all evidence suggests that this no-
tion of the afterlife actually a synthesis of three major local influences; a folk theology deeply rooted in the history of the region, well-known *kami* worship common throughout Japan, and formal Buddhist teachings from a variety of sects such as those aforementioned, which infiltrated what is now central Iwate from Nara and Kyoto that from the 8th century onward combined with both (Miyake 1994, 40-67; Tono 2001, 6-7). An analysis of the production chronology and geographic distribution of *kuyô egaku*, and the examination of relevant local folk culture and related political/religious history provide a good starting point for understanding how these three influences combined to result in such a distinctive form of spiritual folk expression.

In the most recent study of *kuyô egaku* in Iwate, conducted by the Hanamaki Board of Education in March of 2008, 413 paintings were identified in the prefecture. (Hanamaki 2008). Seventy-two percent of these were located in the central Iwate cities of Tono and Hanamaki. Tono, of course, is famous throughout Japan and among Japanese folk culture specialists as the folklore capital of the nation, ever since the publication of *Tono Monogatari* (*The Legends of Tono*) by Yanagita Kunio, in 1910. During the Edo period, Tono was a merchant town at the foot of the southeastern access routes to Mt. Hayachine, long thought to be inhabited by a variety of supernatural creatures. The Legends of Tono documents the folktales and strange other worldly occurrences - many having to do with contact between this world and beings in the next - preserved in the local oral story telling tradition in existence there since before the cultural-political influence of the Yamato Chôtei (Japan’s first Imperial Court) and Buddhism in the region during the 8th and 9th centuries. Hanamaki, located directly west of Tono (which boarders the southwestern edge of Mt. Hayachine), claims many of the same folk spirits and legends dating back to the same era, and boasts a few of its own (Oikawa 1983).

It is probably not a coincidence then that over half of the *kuyô egaku* found in Iwate were located within the city of Tono. Most of the other 50% were found in the vicinity of Hanamaki, 80 examples within the contemporary city limits alone. Interestingly,
in Hanamaki, a large number were found in the eastern sector of the municipality, especially in the temples that border Tono, in a district now called Tōwa-chō. In the Tōwa-chō district, there are seven temples representing five sects of Buddhism common in Iwate, including the Tendai, Sōtō, Jōdō, Ji, and Shingon sects, all of which emphasize the practice of the *nembutsu* ritual and continue to display votive memorial paintings gifted there since the 1840s.

Historically, central Iwate has been influenced by a variety of Japanese Buddhist (Ma-hāyāna) traditions such as those mentioned here that were introduced to the region perhaps even as early as the 5th century (historians are unsure). The Tendai sect is known for stressing the theology of tariki (described earlier). A majority of temples in the prefecture are associated with the Sōtō sect (currently Japan’s second largest), which stresses *zazen*, or enlightenment through meditation on the Amitābha Buddha. The Jōdō sect (now called the Jōdō Shin sect) often referred to as Pure Land Buddhism (currently Japan’s largest), is also prevalent. The Jōdō sect is a devotional or "faith"-oriented branch of Japanese Buddhism popular among commoners focused on the recitation of various prayers to the Amitābha Buddha. Ji-shū is a smallest sect. It was founded by the priest Ippen, who preached the importance of reciting the name Amida (an abbreviation for Amitabha Buddha) in a *nembutsu*. The Shingon sect is also small, emphasizing the realization of the spiritual presence of the Buddha inherent in all living things. All of these influences can be identified clearly and with predictable variation within the votive memorial portraits produced and displayed in Tono and Hanamaki.

Taken as a whole, *kuyō egaku* can be divided into three major styles. In one pattern observed in samples found in west Tono area temples, adults and children are typically depicted in scenes from the households in which they lived (see Figure 3). *Ema* such as these are classified as *Seikatsu-gata* (Lifestyle Type) *kuyō egaku*. A second style portrays three Amitabha Buddha figures (referred to in Japanese as, *Amida Sanzon* [the Amitabha Trinity]) - and in some cases other deceased family members - who have arrived to escort the deceased to *gokurakuōjo* (the Pure Land), or Buddhist heaven. This variety,
called Raigō-gata ([the] Escort Type), are most commonly found in the temples of Kitakami, southwest of Hanamki (see Figure 4). A third variety balances local folk belief about the afterlife with the more formal teachings of sectarian Buddhism and folk nembutsu traditions in the area. These paintings depict the Amida Trinity
coming to escort the deceased to their next state of existence including scenes that portray them enjoying their earthly lives (see Figure 5). Classified as the Seikatsu-Raigô-gata (Lifestyle Escort Type), this hybrid variety, characteristic of samples found in Tōwa-chô temples on the eastern edge of Hanamaki, are perhaps the most ethnologically interesting because various local lifestyle customs and folk practices (such as hyakumanben – a nembutsu ritual in which up to 40 participants sit in a circle and circulate the beads of a gigantic rosary while chanting the salvation formula) not found in either of the other varieties are often illustrated within these paintings (Neko 2001, 120-23; Hanamaki 2008).

Indicated in temple records uncovered in central Iwate by Dewa, Matsumoto, and Neko, kuyô egaku were often presented to temples following a funeral as a votive offering, given to mark death anniversaries, and commissioned as an expression of mourning. These are all characteristics that defy the conventions of standard ema as previously understood. Based on the theology of the “other world” portrayed in kuyô egaku, temple parishioners living on the boundary between Hanamaki and Tono seem to have had a concept of the Pure Land that extended far beyond the margins of the formal Buddhist doctrines associated with any sects active in the area (Tono 2001, 8-10; Hanamaki 2008). This is not surprising, given the wide variety of folk beliefs associated with anoyo “the other world” and Mt. Hayachine documented in local accounts of folk spirituality such as Yanagita’s work (1910, 1970) and other collections of fables and legends in the area not as well known.

In folktales such as story No. 63, The Mysterious Mayoi-ga (The Phantom House), found in, The Legends of Tono, a young wife from the Miura household in the Oguni district is rewarded for not stealing from an uninhabited but elegant and fully stocked homestead she accidently encounters when unintentionally passing into the spiritual realm deep in a nearby woods (most likely in Mt. Hayachine). As a reward, she is presented anonymously with a valuable gift from the “other world” that eventually makes her household wealthy. This story and others in this volume demonstrate that within the local folk theology of central Iwate, the spiritual world is described as
being so close as to be directly accessible, even by accident, looks a lot like this existence, and is a place that if encountered might even bring good luck – concepts not of Buddhist origin but thought to be indigenously derived (Goto 1995, 120-23). Not unexpectedly, the votive memorial portraits portraying these themes were found most frequently on the municipal line between Tono and Hanamaki.

In the vicinity of west Hanamaki, Raigô-gata (Escort Type) votive *ema* have been closely associated with the myths and legends that circulated in a collection called the Chiribukuroshô. This work, compiled at the end of the Edo period (probably sometime during the 1860s) contains many tales that record the experiences of the Morioka Clan, which ruled the area at this time and had strong ties to Nara and Kyoto through the Sôtô sect of Buddhism that emphasized the formal teaching of the Amidhaba Buddha. The folktales from west Hanamaki, also influenced by local folk theology, also regard the spiritual world as close, and consider regular contact with the deceased by those faithful to the *nembutsu* tradition quite natural. In the folk narratives from both Hanamaki and Tono, otherworldly benevolence is enjoyed by story characters only when they share the discoveries they make through otherworldly contact.
with family and friends, or use them for the benefit of others they
don’t even know (Tono 2001, 13) – a moral emphasis reminiscent
of tariki, or salvation made possible through selfless action and the
grace of one’s ancestors in the other world.

According to Neko and Dewa, kuyô egaku were predominantly
a common class phenomenon, as mainly merchants, artisans and
farmers and their families are featured in a majority of the samples
that remain. Modest social standing more than gender seemed to
be a factor in the commissioning of these votive portraits, as records
indicate that they were often commissioned by parish families or
friendship groups that pooled their resources (Tono 2001, 12-15).

Some Distinctive Characteristics of Kuyô Egaku
The oldest known kuyô egaku, produced in the early 1800s, depict
many generations of friends and relatives sitting together, harmo-
niously enjoying each other’s company. Typically, these paintings
portray children, adults, and the elderly of both genders who are
identifiable as deceased only by their kaimyô (Buddhist posthu-
mous names given to all deserving believers usually only after
death), blended tastefully into the scene. The use of kaimyô is a
well-established aspect of everyday Buddhist culture in Japan. But
caracteristically, kuyô egaku present kaimyô on a fashionable scroll,
hanging vertically in a tokonoma (decorative alcove), integrated into
an indoor scene, or on a similarly incorporated sliding interior door
or wall. Most paintings list the kaimyô of each subject depicted, fol-
lowed by the death year and date, and in some cases other kinds of
specific information such as the cause of death and/or the location
of the grave. The presentation of kaimyô and related death informa-
tion within the portrait is the single most unique characteristic of
kuyô egaku that differentiate them from any other style of ema or
folk religious art form in Japan (Tono 2001, 9).

Another unusual characteristic of votive memorial paintings is
that they often portray the living and the dead together in the same
time continuum. This is made possible by the assignment and use
of gyakushu, a death name for an individual (given while they are
still alive) within the commissioned piece designed for a deceased
subject. The use of gyakushu in Buddhism is not uncommon, but very rare in Japanese religious art. The unusual use of this pre-posthumous renaming custom in kuyô egaku enabled the artist to draw the family members and friends of the not-yet-dead, recently dead, and the long-ago-dead in the same time frame. Normally considered engi ga warui (bad luck), examples of taboos associated with mixing the living and the dead in any capacity within Edo period life abound (Miyake 1999, 268-275). Yet, kuyô egaku indicate a localized folk perception of the spiritual world quite different from mainstream Japanese thinking during the mid 1800s, which viewed death as unclean, frightening, and to be avoided at all costs (Tono 2001, 13).

Not only did those who commissioned kuyô egaku believe the spiritual world was real, they felt fully comfortable associating themselves with it directly in this life. Kuyô egaku demonstrate that communion with the spiritual world by the residents of central Iwate was considered normal, pleasurable, and even fun! If these paintings are any indication, by continuing to practice the nembutsu tradition, most local residents hoped after death to move on to the existence they portrayed in these votive illustrations of the afterlife they commissioned to live happily ever after with those whom they depicted. Some grieving mortals may have even thought they would be able to visit the afterlife temporarily from time-to-time before joining their relatives and friends permanently when they died (Neko 2008).

Kuyô egaku can also be distinguished from other ema and temple paintings by the use of bright colors - blues, reds, and yellows - flower motifs. As in many religions, color symbolism is an important aspect of Buddhist art. Typically, blue represents coolness, infinity, ascension, purity, and healing. Yellow indicates rootedness, renunciation, and the earth. Sacredness, the life force, blood, preservation, and fire are represented by red. The liberal use of these colors in kuyô egaku is highly significant (Kuchitsu and Shimomura 2002, 125). The decorative and symbolic way in which colors were used also may have had to do with the artistic style for painting votive tablet offerings that was in vogue at the end of the
Edo and beginning of the Meiji periods (the 1860s – 1880s), as well as the influence of the new kinds of paints that began to be available as Japan officially opened its doors to the west in 1868 (Kutchitsu and Shimomura 2002, 122-23). Kuyô egaku seem also to borrow from the style and color combinations utilized in shini-e (death announcement paintings), a product of the kabuki theatre tradition (the highly stylized classical Japanese dance-drama especially popular in the 1850s) to mourn the passing of well-known actors, but to very different ends. However, shini-e portrayed death as morbid, appalling, and permanent. Kuyô egaku considered death to be the next stage of life (Tono 2001, 13).

While the oldest kuyô egaku don’t use color as freely as examples crafted closer to the 20th century, they depict detailed scenes that present a multitude of people in the same frame, and represent a variety of household scenes, beautiful kimono, lavish furniture, fancy flooring and extravagant food using layouts similar to kabuki-style portraits. Artists in the late 19th century tended to use more elaborate color schemes, but portraits began to depict fewer subjects at once, and started looking more like the less meticulously drawn individual sketches at the end of the Edo period. In the late 1800s, painted portraits and hand drawn sketches slowly gave away to the plain black and while photographs that eventually overtook both in popularity by the 1930s (Neko 2008; Hanamaki 2008).

**Situating Kuyô Egaku**

When kuyô egaku are compared to standard ema based on external artistic characteristics such as form, materials, and approach alone, they exhibit no significant difference. But because they deal so directly with death, can kuyô egaku truly be considered ema? In her recent publication on ema, Robertson reminds us that, “The legibility of a presented tablet is informed by a reader’s symbolic literacy and structural relationship to the producer, subject, or ritual context.” She warns us that the meanings of an ema are multiple and layered, and that, “…whether actualized or not, the potential of votive tablets both signifies the agency of popular consciousness and lies in transforming consciousness” (2008, 43).
Essential for understanding how to situate *kuyô egaku* then is a comprehension of and appreciation for the worldview of the *ema* readers themselves. The intended readers of *kuyô egaku*, of course, are not only the parishioners in the temples where they hung. *Ku-yô egaku* also speak to those of us rediscovering them now. According to both Neko and Dewa, currently the most prominent experts on *kuyô egaku* in Iwate, votive memorial paintings can confidently be considered to be well within the standard thematic range for *ema* because the residents of central Iwate perceived them to be (Neko 2001, 223; Tono 2001, 7). However, there are also several theoretical reasons why *kuyô egaku* can be considered fully part of the genre.

An explanation for why *kuyô egaku* should be considered within the same category as other known *ema* can be gleaned in part from the way in which each is different from the other. This distinction can be observed quantitatively by the finding that 70% of standard *ema* are found in *jinja* (Shinto shrines) and 30% are located in *tera* (Buddhist temples), whereas 100% of *kuyô egaku* are given to *tera* and none (as far as available records indicate) were ever dedicated to *jinja* (Tono 2003, 8). But what is the connection?

In order to answer this question, Dewa maintains that emphasized in the five sects of Buddhism prevalent in central Iwate during the mid 19th century was a teaching about the continuum of human existence called *shiku hakku* – the four life stages and four kinds of suffering that all mortals experience on their way to salvation and the Pure Land (Tono 2001, 8). He also points out that the historical function of *ema* throughout Japan has been to provide a way for mortals to seek spiritual mediation from any stage of the human life-cycle to any spiritual plain. Dewa argues that *kuyô egaku* in central Iwate are examples of *ema* that represent wishes intended for fulfillment in the fourth and final stage of human existence called *shi* (death) – the state in which an individual is released from all stages of human suffering – which, according to the teaching of *shikku hakku*, is still part of the human life-cycle. According to this view, votive messages offered to seek benefits in the afterlife are no different from those seeking profits in this life because they are
both stages of the human life-cycle (Tono 2001, 7-11). Dewa also suggests that many kinds of known *ema* incorporate a wide range of local folk theology into their messaging, and seek intervention from quite a broad pantheon of beings in the spiritual world, making distinctions between the realm occupied by deities and the afterworld complicated, if not impossible to dissect (Tono 2001, 7-11). Regarded in this way, it seems difficult not to conclude that *kuyō egaku* should be considered to be on a par with the other known varieties of *ema* Japan scholars have studied. Kuchitsu and Shimomura, as well as Yamada, agree (2002, 121-22; 2006, 289-90).

Were the residents of central Iwate trying to transform popular consciousness regarding the afterlife? Probably not. But *kuyō egaku* certainly seem to have signified the agency of local consciousness in this regard. Interestingly, ethnographic evidence that *kuyō egaku* may not have been such an anomaly, but merely an understandable local folk variation of mainstream religious and cultural influences including the *ema* tradition from Nara and Kyoto can be found in a little-known folk belief in central Iwate known as Nana Kannon Shinkō (*The Seven Buddha Faith*). This tradition is fully documented in a history book called the Tono Kojiki (*Historical Origins of Tono*), published in 1763. According to this work, this folk belief and its associated practices originated during the Heian period (794-1185) to test the degree of faith local parishioners had in the ability of the Kan-non (Buddha) to guide them to Paradise. The Nana Kannon Shinkō existed and persists today only in a territory that straddles the dividing line between Tōwa-chō and Miyamori-mura (present day Tono), where a majority of hybrid-style (*Lifestyle Escort Type*) *kuyō egaku* are found.

Nana Kannon Shinkō is based on a legend propagated during the 9th century, that a famous Buddhist priest from the Tendai sect named Ennin (better known by his posthumous name, Jikaku Daishi) carved 7 *Kannon* (Buddha) figures into the trunk of a single Katsura tree (*Cercidiphyllum magnificum*), then separated and dispersed them to an equal number of temples in the area. Tendai Buddhism, which flourished in Japan under the patronage of the Imperial family from the 8th century on prior to the development
of other sects, allowed for the reconciliation of Buddhist doctrine with aspects of Japanese culture such as the worship of kami, and was able to incorporate traditional indigenous practices into its teachings (Tono 2001, 9-12).

In Tōwa-chō and Miyamori-mura, local congregants continue to practice the belief that in the course of a chōya (one consecutive afternoon and evening), if all the Nana Kannon temples are visited on foot (a distance of approximately 100 kilometers), and a nembutsu (a recitation of the salvation formula) is offered too each Kannon, they and their deceased loved ones WILL enjoy goriyaku (divine grace and blessings) in this life and the next. One possible explanation then for how kuyō egaku came into existence in central Iwate during the late Edo period (1840s – 1860s) is that they were ema created by local congregants following a successful Seven-Kannon pilgrimage to visualize their release from earthly suffering with their ancestors and friends in the final stage of shiku hakku. In the context of an ancient folk heritage that emphasized a positive awareness of a spiritual afterworld, the Nana Kannon Shinkō may have combined with the formal Pure Land Buddhist doctrine emphasizing the nembutsu ritual and the concept of tariki at the beginning of the 19th century when the popularity of the ema tradition imported to the region from Nara was at an all-time high, producing the local votive memorial painting tradition in central Iwate as it is now known (Tono 2001, 9).

At the present time, there is no definitive explanation for how votive memorial portraiture was derived in central Iwate. But regardless, kuyō egaku provide unprecedented insights into how the residents of central Iwate regarded death during the 19th century and why they depicted a version of the their final state of existence as a place and a presence far better than the one in which they lived. To those of us in the 21st century, kuyō egaku should be a powerful and humbling illustration not only of the genuine love and selfless devotion that those who commissioned these works felt toward the ones whom they memorialized, but also as an awe-inspiring testament to the creativity and imagination that temple parishioners exercised in the expression of their locally based spiritual faith.
Message From the Spirit World

In their own right, *kuyô egaku* are important and original historic artifacts from central Iwate that are interesting and educational. There is much to be learned about the beliefs and lifestyle of Japanese northeasterners during the Edo period by further analyzing the content, symbolism and artistic techniques used by the limners who painted them. However, in order to fully appreciate the cultural insights that can be gleaned from *kuyô egaku* applicable to the contemporary context, it is important to connect these historic artifacts to current mainstream thinking about the spiritual world in both Japan’s domestic and global realms.

Since the introduction of Chinese divination methods to Japan in the mid 7th century, the northeast as a direction, and by association, northeast Japan, has been considered to be a natural gateway to and from the spiritual world through which good and bad spirits, as well as the living and the dead, could more easily pass back and forth from this world to the next (Lu 1974, 19). Domestically in Japan, even today, this spiritual stereotype continues to persists regarding the six prefecture in the region (Neko 2001, 119-120). As a result, within contemporary Japanese popular culture, ghosts in Tono (Iwate), *mukasari ema* in Yamagata, and geographic landmarks such as Osore-zan in Aomori (a spiritual mountain said to mark the boundary between this world and hell) are used regularly as icons of the paranormal around which novels about possessions, television programs that introduce spirits, horror movies dealing with a pantheon of other-worldly beings, and talk shows featuring communication with the dead are frequently based. The mass media in Japan regularly associates the northeast as a region with the mystical, with wandering souls, and with the macabre, feeding the stereotype that northeast Honshû is a vortex that connects this world to the next. Unfortunately, such popular portrayals usually represent the ethereal world as unlucky, abnormal, and/or frightening.

However, *kuyô egaku*, like many other folk customs and beliefs in central Iwate and the Tôhoku region (Thompson 2004, 2008), reveals a folk theology that diverges quite sharply from the popular
thinking in Japan (and in the rest of the world) that death and the afterlife is by nature unpleasant, unclean, and a topic generally of interest only to a minority in society interested in the occult (Ruby 1984, 201; Addiss 1985, 9-15; Foster 2009, 1-15). Contrary to what ethnologist such as Yamada have proposed (Yamada 2006, 292-293), it was not the fear of death or a desire to avoid the negative repercussions that the deceased might have upon the living from the “other world” that motivated the production of kuyô egaku in central Iwate during the 19th century. It was the heartfelt desire of the bereaved, wanting to help the deceased to continue their unfinished earthly lives in the next existence without being forever separated from their dearly beloved that led to their creation (see Figure 6). Kuyô egaku provided a way of holding on while letting go (Neko 2001, 233; Tono 2001, 7). Formal Pure Land Buddhist theology in the region that fused with indigenous folk beliefs regarding the afterlife enabled survivors to bring about a new spiritual balance between loss and remembrance through the medium of a visual nembu-tsu directed at the deceased (Neko 2001, 233; Tono 2001, 7). Kuyô egaku provided the residents of central Iwate with access to the final stage of the life cycle (life after death) via ema, by merging
the mainstream votive tablet tradition with a localized syncretistic vision of the afterworld perhaps unavailable anywhere else in Japan (Neko 2001, 122-123; Tono 2001, 10-13).

Ultimately, kuyô egaku hold in perpetuity some basic concepts fundamental to the folk worldview in the northeast that have been largely forgotten, ignored, or just plain misunderstood by Japan’s mainstream culture both in the past and in the present. Explicitly, this is a view that the spiritual realm is not bad but good, is closer to our reality than we might think, isn’t necessarily frightening or odd, and can be relied upon to help make this life and the next more meaningful and fulfilling. In other words, nembutsu (praying for the salvation of others) and kuyô (memorializing one’s ancestors) in the central Iwate tradition is as important today as it was yesterday. As Priest Sasaki Katsuo of Jôtakuji, a Ji-shû temple in Tôwa-chô, Hanamaki explains, “The purpose of keeping the hundreds of memorial portraits hanging in our hondô (main worship area) is not to frighten our congregants but to remind them and anybody else who will listen to remember, respect and communicate with (chant a nembutsu for) their deceased ancestors who are in a happier place ready to welcome them at any time” (Sasaki Katsuo 2008).

For an international audience, kuyô egaku in central Iwate reintroduces to the modern world not only an alternative way to think about the afterworld, but the timeless importance of tariki - the idea that salvation cannot be attained without the help of others. Neither in life nor in death can a meaningful existence be achieved without a reliance on others. At a time when Japan, like most nations around the world, is searching for a path toward a more peaceful, economically stable and ecologically sustainable future, kuyô egaku embody within them this most valuable lesson that the spirit world probably has in mind for us all.

References

