

An Animated Adoration

The Folk Art of Japanese Gamers

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Abstract

Consumers of *manga* (comics), *anime* (cartoons), and video games increasingly search for alternative ways to forge a connection with their favorite characters. In Japan, many of the actual places used in such media as models for background scenery have within recent years become popular as tourist destinations.

In an effort to connect with the characters from the action-adventure game *Sengoku Basara*, female gamers began to gather at a shrine dedicated to Japan's war dead. At the shrine they choose to express their adoration for the game characters by drawing comic illustrations on votive prayer tablets. Based on a field survey of the votive prayer tablets found on display at the shrine, I argue that through the production of folk art, that is religious icons, fans engage with the game characters in a personal and spiritual manner, while simultaneously creating bonds with other fans.

Keywords fan, folk art, icon, Japan, video game

Introduction

Through the year tourists flock to Aobayama in Sendai City, Japan. From an elevated hilltop, where a castle once stood, visitors look out over the modern urban landscape under a statue of the feudal lord Date Masamune (1567-1653), who rides on a horse in full samurai regalia. Behind his statue lies the Miyagi Prefecture Gokoku Shrine (henceforth Gokoku Shrine), which is the prefectural branch of Yasukuni Shrine where Class A war criminals are deified. It enshrines, but does not inter, over 56,000 souls of the war dead. Gokoku Shrine was built in 1904 on the spot of the inner citadel of Masamune's Sendai Castle. Today tourists to the castle site often make impromptu visits to the shrine.

Whereas mainstream visitors pass through the shrine in a cut-and-dried manner, one group of excursionists converges on the shrine to leave their mark. In apparent disconnect with the purpose of Gokoku Shrine, they do not come to pray to the spirits of fallen soldiers. They instead pay homage to Masamune, former master of the castle. Although he is not enshrined in the shrine proper, "fans" of Masamune demonstrate their devotion to him by consecrating what, I argue, are religious icons. Many of the icons are illustrated with images of Masamune that lack historical accuracy, since the young artists who create them have come to love Masamune through his incarnation as a video game character.

The Lord of the Game

Sengoku Basara (henceforth *Basara*) is an action-adventure game produced by Capcom originally released for PlayStation 2 in July 2005. In the game version released in Japan the Sengoku (Warring States) period of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries provides the historical backdrop for the game. Most of the sixteen playable characters are based on actual, feudal era samurai lords. The popularity of the game led to an *anime* (cartoon) broadcast on television in April 2009 followed by a theatrical play, an animated feature film, and a television drama.

In *Basara* one playable character is based on the seventeenth lord of the Date clan, Masamune. As a real historical figure, Masamune was named the first *daimyō* (feudal lord) of the Sendai fief for aiding the first *shogun* (generalissimo) of the Tokugawa family at the battle of Sekigahara in the year 1600. Masamune was thirty-four years old.

Three years later he moved into Sendai Castle where he and his descendants ruled for over two-hundred years until the fall of the shogunate (the *shogun* controlled government). Masamune now endures as a popular *Basara* character. His first place ranking among characters in fan voting polls on Capcom's official *Basara* homepage (Capcom 2005) and in the fan magazine *Basara Style* (Capcom 2007, 64-65) demonstrates his game world popularity from early on. In the game Masamune is depicted wearing a black helmet bearing a gold-colored crescent moon resting horizontally across the front. His body is wrapped in black armor covered by a fashionably cut, blue tunic. A patch covering his right eye signals a shadowy temperament and gives him his nickname, "One-Eyed Dragon." He carries six swords, which he wields in both hands. Tall and slim with dark, untamed locks, his game/*anime* image mirrors a prevailing fashion ideal for Japanese men (Miller 2006). This image contrasts with the historical rendering of Masamune in painting and sculpture depicting him as an older, pudgy patriarch.

Fan Engagement

In this article I define fans of *manga* (comics), *anime*, and video games as people who go beyond simply reading, watching, or playing and engage in additional practices and activities, and, as per one definition of "folklore," artistically communicate with one other (Ben-Amos 1971, 13). Although Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington (2007, 3-4) might caution against excluding those who consume this media in an ordinary fashion, I wish to underscore that the fans I spotlight do not just passively receive media, but creatively respond to it on their own terms. For instance, fans of *manga*, *anime*, and games in Japan increasingly visit "mundane places that fandom has made sacred and special" (Brooker 2007, 149). They typically refer to this practice as *seichi junrei*, literally "sacred-land pilgrimage." Creating the background scenery for such media from scratch costs time and money, so creators frequently adopt scenery from real-life. As a cultural byproduct the incorporated scenery serves as a springboard moving the consuming fans away from the two-dimensional screen out into the physical landscape of Japan to find the actual places used. Guide books providing background and travel information to pilgrimage sites reflect a desire to tangibly connect with the media (Ofusai-

do Bukkusu Henshūbu 1999; Kakizaki 2005; Dorirupurojekuto 2010; Seichi Junrei Iinkai 2013).

Among the *Basara* gamers are dedicated fans who make a pilgrimage to the historical sites associated with the feudal lords in the game. Pilgrimaging fans of Masamune inevitably visit Aobayama where they find Gokoku Shrine. Here, visitants throw coins in the offertory box, shake a rope to ring a bell, bow, clap, and pressing their hands together offer a silent prayer. This is standard practice at shrines throughout Japan. For the majority of visitors this ritual action is the sum of their religious engagement at the shrine. Generally a shrine visit begins and ends with a short, unlabored prayer, to a divine recipient whose name is left unsaid.

A few purchase an *ema* (wooden votive tablet) at a stall where amulets, talismans, and written fortunes are sold. In the past, a worshiper, or a professional artisan, would paint an auspicious image or scene, which symbolically conveyed the meaning of the intended supplication. Nowadays drawing or painting pictures is uncommon. Instead, worshipers write a prayer directly onto the *ema*. The written prayers cover a wide range of practical concerns, from passing examinations (popular for students) to a quick and safe childbirth. Prayers in the form of written text have become standard. Fans of *Basara* however choose to break away from the convention of text centered *ema*, preferring instead to draw, for instance, the inspired likeness of Masamune.

Figure 1



At the Gokoku Shrine the fans place their *ema* on the *emakake*, a rack used to display *ema* (figure 1). An attached string allows the *ema* to be hung from hooks. In particular for fans, as a public venue the *emakake* functions like a message board on the Internet with new postings (*ema*) being directed to the viewing fans, which they can alternately respond to in kind. The *ema* on the *emakake* represents a new form of offline communication, which comparable to the Internet does not entail face-to-face conversation (Andrews 2014, 220). At a time when the majority of Japanese

youth feel uncomfortable conversing directly (Schmidt-Fajlik 2010, 119), the *ema* allow complete strangers to interact with one another sharing their innermost feelings and desires, yet in a detached, unpressured, and playful manner.

The conspicuous art of the *Basara ema* beckons the attention of other fans. But different from the ordinary situation in which worshipers blanket the *emakake* with only written messages, when fans start to collectively display their art the visual dynamic of the *emakake* dramatically changes. It has been suggested fans endeavor to cluster their *ema* together because they feel the need to obscure their activities from the shrine custodians (Satō 2010, 118). Clustering, however, brings about a stimulating visual effect. Aldama (2010, 321) discusses the white margin dividing drawn panels in comics. The margin allows the viewer to form a mental picture of the interconnecting action. In similar fashion the space between *ema* on the *emakake* furnishes the viewer's imagination with a "margin" where the characters can become animated.

The offering of *ema* by *Basara* fans at Gokoku Shrine is not without controversy. When a newspaper article (*Sankei Shimbun*, May 15, 2009) addressed the presence of *Basara* fans at Gokoku Shrine the priest stated thus: "This (Gokoku Shrine) is the place where the souls who died in the war are worshiped. When offering an *ema*, we would be pleased if people were understanding of the shrine's history and respectful of the spirits of the dead soldiers" (My translation). The attention grabbing artwork advertises the presence of fans whose pilgrimage activities would otherwise likely fly under the radar. A little over two hundred years after Masamune's death, the Date clan faced off against imperial troops in the Boshin Civil War (1868-1869), ending with the fall of the shogunate with which the Date fief was aligned. Whereas imperial troops were the first to be enshrined at Gokoku Shrine their Date foes as enemies of the state were not. In consequence of fans offering artwork depicting Masamune, fans unintentionally challenge the legitimacy of the shrine (and the state) to occupy the grounds of Masamune's castle.

An Eye on the Art

On December 29, 2008, I conducted a survey of the *ema* at Gokoku Shrine. I photographed 569 *ema* in total. Not all the *ema* have dates inscribed on them, but reviewing the 291 dated *ema*, all were dedi-

cated in 2008 with a single *ema* dated 2007. This marks a period of intense fan activity at the shrine. Of the 569 *ema*, 219 (thirty-eight percent) contain illustrations. A total of 174 (thirty-one percent), what can be discerned as fan dedicated *ema*, make specific textual or visual references to *Basara*. Differing from an ordinary shrine visitor, a fan may refrain from writing a prayer instead writing about the game and its characters or noting their experience visiting the places related to the historical figures. Yet among the fan dedicated *ema* 136 (seventy-eight percent) have prayers, 150 (eighty-six percent) contain *Basara* related artwork, and significantly 146 (eighty-four percent) are illustrated with Masamune's likeness. In addition to analyzing textual data from the *ema*, I also examine the artwork noting the characters drawn, their number, placement, action, posture, facial expression, accouterment, and speech, giving consideration to scale, composition, space, and mass.

Fan art tangibly links *Basara* fans to the pilgrimage, capturing their attention, providing motivation, and further drawing them together as a community. Despite a general consensus that fan art is the defining characteristic of fan produced *ema*, researchers show reluctance to address what and how fans illustrate, concentrating instead on the accompanying text (Imai 2009; Satō 2009; Satō 2010; Imai 2012; Yoshitani and Satō 2014). My research is not the first published survey of the *Basara ema* at Gokoku Shrine. Satō (2010, 118) conducted a survey of 289 *ema* on March 14, 2009. The smaller number of *ema* in his study is the result of an annual ritual removal of the past year's *ema* in conjunction with New Years. In his research Satō (2010, 119) remarks on the generous representation of *Basara* characters (close to ninety percent of the illustrations). Nevertheless he opts for a statistical analysis of commonly occurring words and expressions. Lamarre (2009, ix-x) citing the problematic disinterest in examining *anime* "as moving images" finds commentators tend to view *anime* merely as a text, not seeing the forest for the trees, so to speak. The art, which stirs the hearts of so many fans, equally deserves our attention if we are to determine whether *ema* truly function as religious icons.

Consecrating Icons

Condry (2013, 185) asserts that a "love revolution" is taking place in Japan in which fans are vocalizing their adoration for two-dimen-

sional characters. The messages written on the *ema* affirm that *Basara* is by no means an exception. A woman makes clear her motivation when she pens, "I came to meet you dear Masamune! I love you!" (All translations of fan written text are my own). On thirty *ema* fans express love for Masamune showing their emotional attachment as with the following words: "Dear Masamune thank you for being born." Fans go so far as to express an unending commitment, for example, "Lord Master! I will follow you to the end!" Another expresses the depth of her feelings when she writes, "Having been able to meet (you) dear Masamune, I am moved to tears!" Encountering and engaging with Masamune can be a powerful emotional experience.

The *Basara* fans make public various details about themselves on the *ema*. *Basara* is popular with women in their teens and early twenties. They jot down a personal name, which can indicate their sex, or a call sign, which reflects their familiarity with the Internet. From prayer content we can determine whether the fan is in school or not. Throughout Japan students commonly petition deities to pass entrance examinations, to graduate, or to get their first job. Regarding the *Basara ema*, I find the greatest number of prayers, eighteen percent, concern examinations and graduation. Prayers for work and employment rank second at seventeen percent. Through their prayer messages *Basara* fans additionally divulge information regarding personal relationships, health, and finances. By posting publically at the *emakake*, they move to communicate the information to other *Basara* fans. Even so, first and foremost they channel it to Masamune, asking him for help with graduation, employment, romance, and other worldly matters. In a conversation about how sacrifice sets the stage for the exchange of goods between people forming the basis of social relationships, it has been suggested: "The first exchange is with the divine. The second is with other people" (Miller 2012, 21). Putting this in context, fans produce and present an *ema* of their own design. And by offering it to Masamune, even playfully, they consecrate a pattern of exchange among fans, who sharing an interest in *Basara* and an adoration for its characters show their dedication to the fan community by producing more *ema* that again attract fans, further extending the umbrella of interaction and cultivating a sense of belonging.

Reader (1991, 375) contends that *ema* constitute religious behavior if a person directs a message to a deity and then offers the *ema* at a shrine or a temple. The fans do just that. One fan writes to Masamune, “Thank you for a wonderful meeting / relationship.” It remains unclear whether she refers to her encounter with Masamune or an actual person. Regardless, Masamune is the entity that actualizes it. Many of the young women who petition Masamune express interest in having a relationship or getting married. A passionate fan prays for help in finding a partner saying, “I beseech you, Masamune.” One woman further requests that her romantic partner resemble Masamune. She writes, “I pray someone like (you) Masamune comes along!” Masamune represents an aesthetic ideal, not only for possible love interests, but also for the fan herself. Whereas one fan avows the difficulties of life stating, “I pray the day of triumph will come to me for whom every day is a battle.” Another suggests in Masamune lies the power to overcome. She writes, “I pray I become strong, resolute, and beautiful like (you) Date Masamune. I pray I become a samurai who does not falter in the face of adversity.” To fans this dashing hero not only personifies an ideal romantic partner, but represents someone they aspire to be like.

As evinced by the *ema*, fans entertain a personal relationship with the character Masamune. It has been suggested the Japanese possess a cultural proclivity “to relate personally, almost spiritually, with a product/mass-produced imaginary” (Allison 2006, 193). Nine-

teen fans mention on the *ema* that they journey to Sendai in hope of “meeting” Masamune. One fan writes, “It has already been two years since I first thought ‘I want to go to Sendai.’ I finally have come to meet (you) dear Masamune! I spent two days traveling around all the places connected to (you) dear Masamune.” Two women draw a side view portrait of Masamune along with Musubimaru, the official promotional *kyara* (character) for Sendai and Miyagi prefecture (figure 2). Musubimaru, an anthropomorphic cross between a rice ball and Masamune, is fre-

Figure 2



quently pictured on the *ema*. Because of Musubimaru's simple design, it appears some fans draw him in place of Masamune, a substitution made easier by virtue of Masamune's two-dimensionality. In their message to Masamune the two fans seek his praise stating, "It took us seven hours to come from Tokyo. Masamune, please show us your appreciation." The pair voice what they have given to him: seven hours of travel, implying a laborious sacrifice. Next, they ask him to help find, in their own words, a "three-dimensional" boyfriend. As Ruddock (1969, 41) notes, "The essence of relationship is reciprocity." Such exchanges foster a fan's relationship with Masamune.

Figure 3



The artwork, although based on the characters in the game and related *anime* productions, bespeaks the fans imagined relation with and feelings towards Masamune. The text in an *ema* picturing Masamune (figure 3) reads, "I have come to Sendai. I pray that I will continue to be blessed with propitious chances/relations. I love (you) Date Masamune." The text accentuates the reciprocal relation between the fan and Masamune. Resembling many other illustrations, this bust drawing focuses on Masamune's face. In a comparison with photography, Berger (1982, 52) explains that when

drawing a picture "the artist gives more time to what she or he considers important." Here, Masamune's hair drapes down to outline his eyes and mouth, two principal facial features that communicate emotion. He wears his trademark *kimegao*, a posed facial expression. The ambiguity of his emotional concern adds to his enigmatic character. The form of his mouth lies somewhere between a smirk and a smile. His blind eye, covered by a patch, further shrouds his intentions and heightens the mystery surrounding his presence. The blind eye also works to focus our attention on his open eye, drawing the viewer in, and intensifying the effect of his receptive gaze. In her research of Russian Orthodox icons of divine figures, Weaver (2011, 397) confirms that believers "assumed that

icons initiated actions, were aware of their surroundings, and participated in communication.” The artist’s creation of a gaze results in Masamune looking outward towards the viewing fan. Awaiting a visual connection, he is poised to communicate: “In a face-to-face encounter, even a non-reaction is a reaction” (Frank 2009, 101).

Fans also produce many childlike images of Masamune. The historical Masamune participated in his first military campaign at the age of fourteen and came to rule the Sendai fiefdom in his thirties, living until the advanced age of sixty-nine. Nonetheless, fans do not portray Masamune as anything but youthful. The appeal of Masamune as an adolescent or as a twenty something connects with the contemporary representation of male attractiveness that can be “aesthetically pleasing and erotically charged” for Japanese women (Miller 2006, 127). Why then do some fans choose to draw pictures of Masamune that are not only at odds with his historic representation

in artwork, but also unrepresented in the game? We find various examples showing childlike depictions of Masamune. Two representative examples were coproduced by two fans (figure 4), showing two cherubic-faced Masamune. Unlike the examples with a more mature Masamune, the faces in these childlike versions lack detail. Proclaiming her love for Masamune, the author on the right explains that they traveled far just to meet with him. They both talk about starting university, and although not stated, they pray to be successful in that respect. The childlike depictions these two women

draw adhere to the characteristics of *kawaii* (cuteness), which are “roundness, flatness, simplicity, and smiles” (Shiokawa 1999, 97). Cuteness is, as Shiokawa attests, “not threatening” (ibid.). This is not to say that the adolescent or twenty something image of Masamune is. Glasspool (2012, 119) offers that the “beautiful boy” adolescent image “provides a ‘safer’ form of masculinity.” So then, what does the childlike image of Masamune alternatively provide? Cuteness causes a desire to “play with, talk to, or otherwise engage

Figure 4



Conclusion

In this paper, I have focused on how *Basara* gamers engage with Masamune through the production of folk art. In doing so, they effectuate a new means of communication with other fans in a location far removed from the game console. Kinsella (1995, 224), who examines the “cute handwriting” phenomenon that emerged in the 1970s, explains Japanese youth “had invented a new language in which they were suddenly able to speak freely on their own terms for the first time.” When fans draw comic illustrations of Masamune they are transforming votive prayer tablets into something more. Thorn (2004, 184) writes that “in drawing and in words, revolution is easy. In fiction, one can rewrite the world, remodel human relationships, with the stroke of a pen.” A “revolution” is taking place in which the *Basara* fans are transforming their relationships to the game characters that they draw, and to which they are drawn, and consequently with one another.

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