

Article

Sacralizing the Playful Secular: The Deity of *Karuta*-Gambling at the Nose Kannon Hall in Sannohe, Aomori

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Abstract: In a faraway apple orchard in Sannohe, a small town in Japan's Aomori Prefecture, a *zushi* miniature wooden shrine at the Nose Kannon Hall caught the media's attention with its unique adornment—the *karuta* playing cards with European-inspired abstract designs in bold red and black colors that were used during the early modern period for pastime and gambling. Because of this decoration, the Nose Kannon Hall is known by locals as the *Karuta* Hall, and the *zushi* that enshrines the Buddhist deity Bodhisattva Shō-Kanzeon is also believed to be the home of *bakuchi no kamisama* “the kami deity of gambling”. Little is known about the nature of devotion to this *bakuchi no kamisama* or how the playing cards that were used for frivolous games came to be sacralized as items worthy to be used as decoration of a Buddhist shrine. This article considers the slippage between prayer and play in the regional Buddhist devotion by focusing on the Nose Kannon Hall, which presided at a key intersection along the northern trade route where the local community and outside visitors, such as pilgrims and traders, converged, especially during the Edo period (1603–1868). Marshaling historical records, televised interviews, and images provided by the town officials and guardian family of Nose Kannon Hall, I argue that the use of *karuta* playing cards on the miniature shrine at Nose Kannon Hall epitomizes a kind of localized early modern Shinto–Buddhist syncretism at the margins of the urban culture that is simultaneously devotional and tongue-in-cheek sacrilegious in a quintessentially Edo-esque way.

Keywords: Shinto–Buddhist syncretism; *karuta*; Japanese playing cards; gambling in Japan; *kami*; localization; folk belief; *kakebotoke*; *hibutsu*; Nose Kannon; Buddhism in northeast Japan



Citation: Jiang, Mew Lingjun. 2024. Sacralizing the Playful Secular: The Deity of *Karuta*-Gambling at the Nose Kannon Hall in Sannohe, Aomori. *Arts* 13: 27. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts13010027>

Academic Editor: Ángel Pazos-López

Received: 31 August 2023

Revised: 9 January 2024

Accepted: 20 January 2024

Published: 4 February 2024



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1. Introduction

In February of 2019, Asahi Television Broadcasting aired a TV program, *Potsun to ikkenya* (ポツンと一軒家, “Lone House”), which brought the attention of the audience to an unusual miniature wooden shrine (*zushi* 厨子) to a Buddhist deity, Bodhisattva Kannon (観音), inside a small temple in a secluded apple orchard in Sannohe, Aomori Prefecture, Japan (Asahi Television Broadcasting 2019). Enshrined within the Nose Kannon Hall (Nose Kannon-dō 野瀬観音堂 or Nose Shō-Kanzeon-dō 野瀬正[聖]観世音堂), the exterior of this shrine is decorated with what is known as “black cards” (*kurofuda* 黒札) in abstract designs of bold red and black colors, a regional variation of the Japanese playing cards, *karuta* カルタ, derived from the Latin/Italo-Portuguese four-suited cards, *carta* (Figure 1). The shrine protects the central deity of the hall: a circular iron mirror, generally known as “hanging Buddha” (*kakebotoke* 懸け仏) with the small relief images of the Bodhisattva Shō-Kanzeon (Sk. Āryāvalokiteśvara) flanked by two attending deities, whose identities remain unknown (Figure 2). Due to this unique decoration of the central shrine, the local devotees nicknamed the Nose Kannon Hall the “*Karuta* Hall” (*Karuta-dō* カルタ堂) that housed “the *kami* deity of gambling” (*bakuchi no kamisama* 博打の神様).

At first glance, gambling might seem at odds with Buddhism. Yet, gambling as a form of play and a game of chance has been associated with religious activities and the source of magical or supernatural forces across cultures like the Greeks and Romans (Roberts et al.

1959, pp. 601–2). At the Nose Kannon Hall, the *kami* of gambling and Bodhisattva Kannon are celebrated equally even today through the decennial *gokaichō* (御開帳; lit. raising of the curtains), a public display of “secret” deities that are otherwise kept hidden from devotees’ view. *Potsun to ikkenya* aired a follow-up program in October 2021 featuring the most recent *gokaichō* at the Nose Kannon Hall (Asahi Television Broadcasting 2021).



Figure 1. The Kannon *zushi* decorated with *kurofuda* playing cards with doors closed, Nose Kannon Hall, Sannohe, Aomori Prefecture. Image provided by Sannohe Board of Education, Sannohe, Aomori Prefecture.

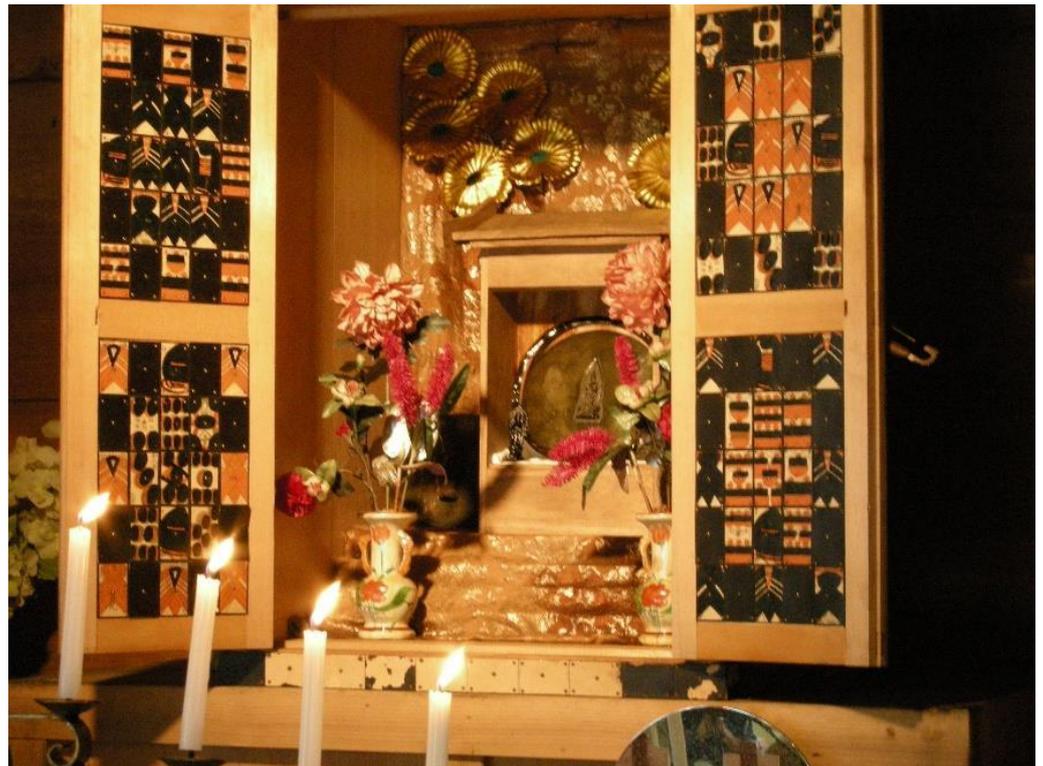


Figure 2. The view of the Kannon *zushi* with the front doors open. Nose Kannon-dō, Sannohe, Aomori Prefecture. Image provided by Sannohe Board of Education, Sannohe, Aomori Prefecture.

How did games and gambling turn into icons of worship at the Nose Kannon Hall? The *karuta zushi* at the Nose Kannon Hall reminds one of Nam-lin Hur's conceptualization of the blurring between prayer and play in Buddhist devotion (Hur 2000, pp. 31–72). For Hur, prayer and play were intertwined elements in Japanese Buddhism that sustained local religious practices. As will be explained further below, although the initial motivations for decorating the central shrine at the Nose Kannon Hall using playing cards are unclear, the arrangement of the cards clearly showed aesthetic concerns that signal the anonymous decorator's reverence for the deities enshrined within. Yet, the presence of *kurofuda* playing cards that, from a Buddhist perspective, were clearly tools of transgression, converted the *zushi* into a luminous space that oscillates between, and even conflates, the notions of prayer and play, piety and transgression, and the sacred and the secular. Through the association with playing cards, and more specifically gambling, the deities inside the shrine also acquired an additional presence as *kamisama* among the local patrons of the temple. The newly assigned identity was founded loosely on the century-old nativized belief in syncretism between *kami* worship and Buddhism. However, the idea of “*kami* of gambling” was at its core peripheral, rooted in the movement of people and objects particular to robust trade relations of northeastern Japan.

Focusing on the *karuta zushi* at the Nose Kannon Hall, this study shares my preliminary explorations into a dynamic decentering of the predominant discourse on the early modern into modern Japanese culture of play. I argue that the presence of *karuta* on the Nose Kannon Hall central shrine provokes a kind of double effect. On the one hand, the cards secularized the deities within; all the while, the cards themselves were sacralized through their physical contact with the sacred receptacle of the Buddhist deity and their presence within the Nose Kannon Hall sanctified site.

2. Prayer at the Nose Kannon Hall: A Brief History

The syncretism between *kami* worship and Buddhism manifests in other structures in the Nose Kannon Hall compound: a wooden Inari (稲荷) shrine stands behind a bright

red *torii* (鳥居) gate to the right of the temple hall, and to the left is a stone miniature shrine dedicated to the “Great Luminous Deity of Kudō” (Kudō Daimyōjin 工藤大明神), protecting the Kudō family who oversees the temple and runs the apple orchard as a family business (Figures 3 and 4). This small and secluded Kannon Hall still serves as a key site of worship—its interior is full of shiny decorations and offerings including food, alcohol, and flowers (Figure 5). Although the hall is dedicated to Nose Kannon, it is also the place for Batō/Mezu Kanzeon (馬頭観世音, Horse-headed Bodhisattva or Bodhisattva Hayagrīva), who is vaguely described by a guiding signpost in front of Nose Kannon Hall (Figure 6). Despite Batō Kanzeon’s origin in Hinduism, the belief became localized in Japan and turned into a deity to protect horses (Fowler 2016, p. 21). Nothing of particular note related to Batō Kanzeon in this Kannon Hall appears in available historical records. However, the signpost at Nose directly refers to the Batō Kanzeon as a deity that safeguards horses and other livestock, protects horse-riding warriors, and blesses them with good health, as the region near Nose used to have several horse farms (Yuki 2018).

According to the temple’s hagiography and the history of the town of Sannohe (*Sannohe-machi kyōdoshi-kō* 三戸町郷土誌稿), Nose Kannon Hall was established sometime between 1040 and 1191 as Kinkazan Manpukuin (金花山満福寺; *Sannohe-machi Kyōiku-iinkai* 1969, p. 53). Since the Edo period, the temple has functioned as both a place for worship of Bodhisattva Kannon and a shelter for locals and passersby. However, not much is known about the history of the temple.

During the late sixteenth and the early seventeenth century, the head of the Nanbu clan, Nanbu Toshinao (南部利直, 1576–1632), was a devoted patron of Nose Kannon Hall and other Kannon sites located on the Nukanobu (or Nukabe; 糠部) Thirty-Three Kannon pilgrimage, in which Nose Kannon Hall is the twenty-first stop (*Tendai-ji Temple* 天台寺 n.d.). The Thirty-Three Kannon belief developed in the eighth century from the preceding devotion to Six Kannon based on the *Lotus Sutra*’s teaching on Kannon’s thirty-three distinct manifestations to save sentient beings (Fowler 2016, p. 216). In northeast Japan, the Thirty-Three Kannon circuit gained popularity in the sixteenth century and continues to today



Figure 3. A wooden Inari shrine next to the Kannon Hall. Photo courtesy of Dr. Iwasaki Mariko, 6 September 2020.



Figure 4. A stone-built miniature shrine dedicated to “Kudō Daimyōjin” next to the Kannon Hall, with a wooden board, possibly an *ema* rack, in between. Photo courtesy of Dr. Iwasaki Mariko, 6 September 2020.



Figure 5. The interior of Nose Kannon Hall. The elderly man on the right is perhaps Mr. Kudō Hiroyasu. Photo courtesy of Dr. Iwasaki Mariko, 6 September 2020.

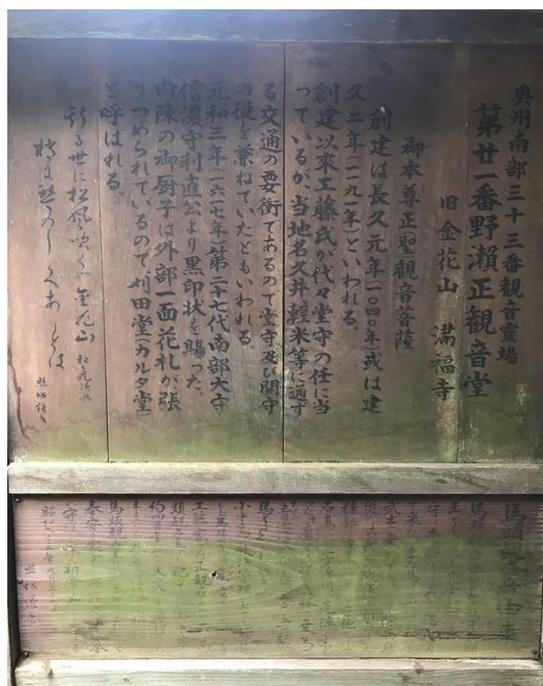


Figure 6. A guiding signpost at Nose Kannon Hall. Photo courtesy of Dr. Iwasaki Mariko, 6 September 2020. See Note 1¹ for translation.

The current superintendent of Nose Kannon Hall, Kudō Hiroyasu (工藤宏靖), is the twenty-first generation of the Kudō clan. Nanbu Toshinao first appointed the family to come to Sannohe in 1617 ([Sannohe-machi Kyōiku-iinkai 1969](#), p. 53). According to the “ridge plaque” (*muna-fuda* 棟札)—typically nailed to the ridge or a post to record the founding or repair of a building—stored inside the main hall, the Nose Kannon Hall was either rebuilt or restored at least four times during the Edo period in 1740, 1764, 1832, and 1863. Maintenance of the site may have become less frequent in modern times. The hall retains only one *muna-fuda* from the Meiji period (明治; 1868–1912), another from 1938, and one additional undated plaque.² The *muna-fuda* datable to 1938 might have to do with the rebuilding of the main hall and the *zushi* within following a great fire that decimated the site. The seeming change in the level of attention to the temple may relate to the drastic changes in transportation surrounding the region.

Throughout the Edo period, the Nose Kannon Hall protected an artery road that connected the two highways essential for northeast trade. The Kudō family was not only the temple steward but also the keeper of the checkpoint, responsible for maintaining order and security on this road that connected Sannohe to other key towns such as Hachinohe (八戸), and Kunohe (九戸) ([Sannohe Chōshi Hensan-iinkai 三戸町史編纂委員会 1979](#), p. 493; [Sannohe Chōshi Henshū-iinkai 三戸町史編集委員会 1997](#), p. 264). The development of new roads and the coastal railway in the modern era dramatically changed the movement of people in northeast Japan, leaving the former artery road by the Nose Kannon Hall obsolete. The Kudō family continued to manage the temple, but they were now relieved of their duty as the gatekeepers. The Nose Kannon Hall, too, changed its role, catering more exclusively to the local devotional needs.

3. Play at the Nose Kannon Hall: *Karuta* Playing Cards

In the Edo period, the Thirty-Three Kannon pilgrimage and robust northeast trade brought worshippers and passersby to the Nose Kannon Hall, encouraging social interactions. Beyond the pilgrims and local devotees, travelers may have used the Kannon Hall to shelter from sudden rain or to take a break from a trip through the mountains. As Kudō

Hiroyasu imagined in an interview, something handy like *karuta* playing cards would have been desirable to spend time during a break (Asahi Television Broadcasting 2019).

Introduced to the Japanese archipelago by Portuguese and Spanish missionaries and merchants in the late sixteenth century,³ the Latin/Italo-Portuguese four-suit (Baton, Sword, Coin, and Cup; Figure 7) playing cards (Por. *carta*) gave birth to paper-based *karuta* card games in Japan. Playing cards grew from an upper-class luxury in the seventeenth century to a form of popular entertainment in the eighteenth century, enjoyed by commoners in small gatherings that also involved gambling (Ebashi 2015, p. 65). *Karuta* games that could be played by two to five players, like the trick-taking *yomi karuta* (読みカルタ) and fishing game *mekuri karuta* (めくりカルタ), were particularly popular in the eighteenth century. The Kansei reforms (*Kansei no Kaikaku* 寛政の改革) between 1787 and 1793 that restricted most gambling events and production of the European-patterned *karuta* could not stifle the fervor of *karuta* playing (Ebashi 2015, pp. 209–10). *Karuta* continued to be popular well into the nineteenth century.



Figure 7. *Miike Karuta* (三池カルタ). Replica of sixteenth-century playing cards. Woodblock print on paper; 48-card deck. Latin/Italo-Portuguese suit mark. Woodblock print. Ōmuta Miike Playing Cards and History Material Museum, 1989. Gift of Ebashi Takashi and the City of Ōmuta. The University of Chicago Library Special Collections. Photo by the author.

The Kansei reforms, in fact, fueled the development of countless variations of localized *karuta* games in the nineteenth century with diverse regional designs inspired by the original European pattern because many *karuta* makers fled from Edo (present-day Tokyo) and Kyoto to regional areas to avoid punishment where they established local workshops (Ebashi 2015, pp. 209–10). The production of regional cards (*chihōfuda* 地方札) continued well into the modern period. For instance, *kurofuda* (黒札), which is used to decorate the miniature shrine at the Nose Kannon Hall, first appeared in the late eighteenth century and popularly circulated in northeast Japan (Figure 8). Regional *karuta* shared certain principles of simplification or abstraction of patterns, which may have had more to do with the economy of production than the actual game-playing rules and necessities (Jiang 2022, pp. 61–83). However, there were enough differences among *chihōfuda* to provide insights into regional characteristics or the movement of people.



Figure 8. *Kurofuda*. Produced by Tsuruta Hisatarō. Hanamaki, Iwate Prefecture. First half of the Shōwa era (1926–1945). Woodblock print and stencil coloring on paper; 48-card deck, missing ten cards: three of batons; three, four, and the knight of swords; the dragon; nine and the king of cups; and three, the servant, and the knight of coins. Latin/Italo-Portuguese suit mark. Collection of Ebashi Takashi, *Japan Playing Card Museum*, <http://japanplayingcardmuseum.com/> accessed on 9 January 2024.

For example, the *kurofuda* nailed to the entire surface of the Nose Kannon *zushi* for ornamentation are identical to the cards produced by the *karuta* maker, Tsuruta Hisatarō (鶴田久太郎; d.u.), of Hanamaki (花巻) in Iwate prefecture, about three hours south of Sannohe by train. The two-of-coins cards on the *zushi* show an identical mark of “mountain ten” (*yama ni jū* 山に十), which was the trademark of Tsuruta (Figure 9). Tsuruta was perhaps one of the card makers who escaped Kyoto in the wake of the Kansei reforms. Tsuruta’s distinct design started to appear in the northeast region as early as the 1850s. We know that this maker continued to produce and sell playing cards from Hanamaki to the Aomori area in the Meiji era (Ebashi n.d.).⁴ For this reason, we can deduce that makers such as Tsuruta sustained the popularity of *karuta* consumption in the second half of the nineteenth century in regions surrounding Sannohe, including the Nose Kannon Hall. The regional *karuta* game was still being played in the Sannohe region around 1965. Although it is no longer in vogue today, *karuta* was also played in Takko (田子), a nearby village southwest of Sannohe (Iwasaki and Noda 2020). Indeed, the local ties seem central to the history of the Nose Kannon *zushi* and possibly also to the initial decision to decorate it using *kurofuda*. Although there is no way to corroborate the insight, Kudō Hiroyasu mentioned in an interview that the *kurofuda* used to decorate the Nose Kannon *zushi* originally belonged to someone from an inn in Towada (十和田), north of Sannohe (Iwasaki and Noda 2020).

The regionality of the *kurofuda* cards and the local history surrounding their use on the Nose Kannon *zushi* betrays the limitation of the present discourse on the playfulness of the Edo-period (or more generally Japanese) cultural production centered around the metropolises of Edo/Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka. The use of *karuta* at the Nose Kannon Hall was predicated upon the prevalence of a particular kind of *chihōfuda* around Iwate to the Aomori regions, and on the local communities’ engagement with and perception of *karuta* as an object and gameplay. In fact, the cultural and social associations *karuta* and card play cumulated in the early modern and modern periods differed in the metropolises and peripheries.



Figure 9. An upside-down two-of-coins card (upper left) and another two-of-coins card (upper right) on the Nose Kannon zushi showing the “mountain ten” trademark of card maker Tsuruta 鶴田 from Iwate (bottom). The trademark is seen in this early Showa-period kurofuda two-of-coins by Tsuruta. Images taken from Figures 1 and 9.

In the Edo period, the popularity of *karuta* games led to a unique *karuta* culture of play, exemplified by the depictions of *karuta* in pre-Kansei Reforms popular fiction. Before we move onto the discussion of the differences between the perceptions of *karuta* at the urban centers and rural peripheries, it is important to note that the tongue-in-cheek deification of *karuta* began in the seventeenth- to eighteenth-century Kamigata region (Kyoto and Osaka) and the city of Edo. Ihara Saikaku (井原西鶴, 1642–93), one of the most influential writers from the Kamigata region, for instance, wrote stories about gambling-addicted players praying to the “great luminous deity of *karuta*” (*karuta daimyōjin* かるた大明神) in *Honchō nijū fukō* (本朝二十不孝, Ihara 1686) and *Futokoro suzuri* (懷硯, Ihara 1687; fascicle 1). In Chikusō’s (竹窓, d.u.) *Theories on Variegated Flowering* (*Sakiwake ron* 咲分論, c. 1778–80), a spirit of *karuta*, in the form of a warrior mounted on a horse, ascends from a pile of burnt *karuta* and admonishes a geisha who has thrown the playing cards into a brazier, claiming that card games should coexist in harmony with the geisha’s business. A similar plot appears in a 1778 story by Chikusō’s contemporary, Shachōdō Shōtsūhenjin (者張堂少通遍人, d.u.), called *Ohana and Hanshichi’s Mekuri Games with Public Opening and Blessings* (*Ohana hanshichi kaichō riyaku mekuriai* お花半七開帳利益札遊合). Shōtsūhenjin’s work was illustrated by a prominent Edo writer and a known *karuta* aficionado Kitao Masanobu (北尾政演, 1761–1816), more famously known by his later penname, Santō Kyōden (山東京伝).

The number of comical fiction writings on *karuta* dwindled as the Kansei Reforms began. Even after many *karuta* makers fled the major cities following the Kansei Reforms, illegal *karuta* sales and gambling continued. Soon *karuta* became closely associated with gangs, and the European-pattered cards with illegal activities. At the same time, new types of Japanese cards for matching games began adopting the term *karuta*, such as poem-matching *uta karuta* (歌かるた) and syllabary-matching *iroha karuta* (いろはカルタ). *Uta karuta* was regarded as a high-class game rooted in courtly culture, especially entering the Meiji period when scholars started to re-evaluate Japanese games (Ebashi 2015, pp. 274–76). Furthermore, since the nineteenth century, the illustrated *uta karuta* and *iroha karuta* had come to be widely used for educational purposes and accepted as a kind of traditional Japanese gameplay.

The regional-patterned *karuta* also became associated with the working class due to the societal status of the players and the economical but relatively humble material and design of the cards.⁵ Similar to users in the city, regional users also considered the mass-produced regional cards using woodblock printing and stencil coloring to be less appealing

in comparison to illustrated playing cards. Yet, despite the general association with gang culture and lower-class workers in the nineteenth century, the regional *karuta* remained as everyday leisure objects, especially in rural areas like Nose in Sannohe, far from the political center and thus under less scrutiny. Calling the central deity at the Nose Kannon Hall the *kamisama* of gambling through an association with the *karuta* decoration on the *zushi*, on the one hand, distantly harks back to popular mid-Edo-period literature of the urban centers, while on the other hand, it speaks to a continuation of card games in the daily lives of the local community. There must have been a generally positive impression toward *karuta* play shared among the Kudō family as guardians of the Nose Kannon Hall and the temple's patrons for them to feel comfortable (even amused) to have the cards associated so closely with their divinity and by extension themselves.

4. Sacralizing the Secular with Prayer and Play: *Gokaichō* at the Nose Kannon Hall

The belief in the *kami* of gambling continues at the Nose Kannon Hall even after the *karuta* vogue is long past, as devotees continue to visit the temple to pray for good luck in games of chance and in lotteries (Iwasaki and Noda 2020).⁶ In August 2002, the Uchizawa/Uchisawa (内澤) family in Sannohe donated the Kannon votive panel with playing cards, commemorating the twentieth *gokaichō* at the Nose Kannon Hall, featuring more modern and popular English–French four-suited playing cards (Figure 10). The panel not only nods to the signature *zushi* of the temple but also seems to conflate prayer and play by using the cards as an adornment of Buddhist deities. On this panel, the adornment is a minimalist one but cleverly presents the four cards of kings flanking the titling word *hōken* (奉献, “dedication”), with a joker card placed on the bottom row. The intentional placement of the highest-ranking court cards suggests an awareness of the connection between prayer and play, an aspect that is further amplified in the *karuta zushi*.

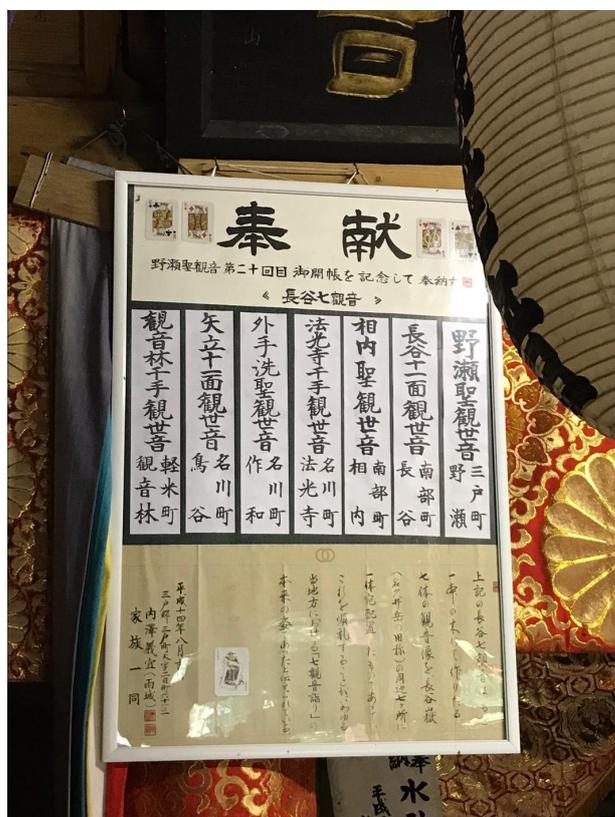


Figure 10. A votive panel to the Nose Kannon Hall, dedicated in August 2002. Photo courtesy of Dr. Iwasaki Mariko, 6 September 2020.

The visually striking adornment on the exterior of the *zushi* appears to be an aesthetic choice showing symmetrical patterns with the four suits of *kurofuda* (Figure 11). For instance, on the front of the *zushi*, the pair of doors are divided into four panels, each panel featuring nine pip cards of a suit in the center,⁷ with the edge covered by another suit of pip cards and black cards in between (possibly the back of *kurofuda*, as *karuta* is usually wrapped with black paper in the back). The interior panels of the doors are adorned in the same manner, as seen in Figure 2 in which the *zushi* is open. The symmetrical layout with the bold and abstract red and black *kurofuda* patterns creates an interesting effect, different from many Buddhist miniature shrines that usually feature an interior painted with figurative icons. In addition to the visuality, dedication is visible in the craft: all four sides of the *zushi* are covered in cards, and each card is meticulously secured with five nails—one in the center and four at the corners—as seen in both the current *zushi* and an old *zushi* that partially survived from a fire in the 1930s, although we do not know the exact date of the fire or when the new *zushi* was built (Figures 1 and 12).

The public opening of the Nose Kannon *zushi* to display the icon used to happen every sixty years, then every thirty years, and it now occurs every ten years (Sannohe Chōshi Henshū-iinkai 三戸町史編集委員会 1997, p. 264). These occasional events to display the Shō-Kanzeon certainly attracted visitors and created opportunities for social gatherings, as public displays of *hibutsu* became popular in the Edo period and turned into a combination of “sacredness with secularized ways” for a Buddhist facility to secure economic and symbolic capital (Rambelli 2002, p. 275). Decennial public openings still happen at Nose Kannon Hall today for visiting believers and nonbelievers alike



Figure 11. Layout of the *kurofuda karuta* playing cards on the front of Nose Kannon miniature shrine, recreated with images from an uncut sheet of regional bold-patterned *kurofuda*, produced by the same maker, Tsuruta Hisatarō, Hanamaki, Iwate, late Shōwa period (1950s–1989). Portuguese-patterned four-suit playing cards. Woodblock-printed uncut sheet. Collection of Japan Playing Card Museum. Edited by the author.



Figure 12. The old miniature shrine stored in the Nose Kannon Hall. Photo courtesy of Dr. Iwasaki Mariko, 6 September 2020.

In July 2021, Nose Kannon Hall held its public opening to display the *hibutsu*; the event was initially planned for August 2020 but was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. On the day of the opening, six people, including a priest, the superintendent Kudō Hiroyasu, and a few locals, attended the event following the social distancing protocols. In the past, the *gokaichō* typically attracted hundreds of participants.⁸ At the 2021 *gokaichō*, the superintendent, Kudō, opened the *zushi*. Inside the *zushi*, there is a smaller wooden miniature shrine concealed with a cover with calligraphy reading *gohontai* (御本躰, “the true form”). Kudō lifted the cover to reveal the *gohonzon* (御本尊) or *mishōtai* (御正体) also meaning “the true form,” of the Nose Kanzeon inside the opened *zushi* (Figure 13). It is an iron-cast mirror with a diameter of about 20 cm (7.87 inches) with an image of the standing Kanzeon at the center in relief. Kanzeon appears standing on a lotus pedestal against a mandorla, holding a vase in the left hand while raising the right hand. Additionally, two smaller bodhisattva attendants flank the central deity, with the figure to the right facing Kannon larger than the left.

The mirror-style, *kakebotoke*, is the format often found in mountain worship, closely associated with the *kami*-Buddhism syncretic devotion. The idea behind the format is that the figures floating on the mirror’s surface are the “original forms (*honji* 本地) of the *kami* that manifests their presence before us (*suijaku* 垂迹)” (Teeuwen and Rambelli 2003). In a personal communication with the folklorist and *karuta* researcher Itō Takuma (伊藤拓馬), he told me that this format of the central icon at the Nose Kannon Hall is key to understanding the conflation between the deity and the *kamisama* of gambling, for one could make a verbal connection in a pun between the *kake* (懸け, “hanging”) in *kakebotoke* and the *kake* (賭け) as in *kakeru* (“to gamble”).⁹ Itō suggests that this pun created a whimsical wordplay connection between a Buddhist icon and gambling, resulting in a local deity, *kakegoto no kamisama*.



Figure 13. A close-up view of the *mishōtai kakebotoke* iron plate relief of the Nose Kannon inside the *zushi*. Image by the author.

It is not clear when such a connection between the *kakebotoke* and *kakegoto* was formed at the Nose Kannon. However, considering that *kakebotoke* is a relatively familiar format of representing a *kami*-Buddhist icon in Japan, yet there are no other instances that I found so far where this sort of explicit connection to gambling is made, I believe we can still surmise that the presence of *karuta* played a key role in establishing this somewhat mischievous prayer–play connection at this site.

Today, the belief in both a Bodhisattva and a localized deity of gambling is alive in this mountainous region distanced from the cultural and political center. Its cultivation and survival have depended on a diverse group of people who have visited the Nose Kannon for different purposes over the years. Before the twentieth century, communities based on the Nose Kannon Hall included Buddhists, pilgrims worshipping Kannon, and travelers along the artery road passing through the checkpoint. Although a more detailed account of the premodern history of the Nose Kannon Hall is needed, the presence of a deity with an ambiguous *kami*-Buddhist-folk belief may have helped the temple survive the Meiji-era susception of support toward Buddhist institutions in favor of elevating Shinto as a national religion in the 1870s.

5. Conclusions

To my knowledge, no other miniature shrine manifests the interesting oscillation between prayer and play like the *karuta*-decorated *zushi* at the Nose Kannon Hall. The remoteness of the location likely shielded the temple from the scrutiny of the political institutions at the urban centers, and the act of *karuta* playing and gambling gained a new, more positive meaning of luck, abundance, and prosperity.

For the periphery, the sense of prayer and play had more of a key existential importance because this makes it possible for the religious institution to draw people from afar

to their remote place. In this sense, *karuta* sustained the community. After the Edo period, while the natural traffic from travelers stopped coming, the *karuta zushi* became an object that attracted visitors to the temple, where further devotion was shown. Although the old miniature shrine was burnt along with the hall during a fire in the 1930s, after the 1938 rebuild of the Nose Kannon Hall, the *karuta zushi* was also recreated, indicating a further degree of commitment to using *karuta* for decoration in the method of nailing: on the old *zushi*, each card was nailed onto the surface with one or two nails, but the new *zushi* attached five nails to every *karuta*. Such small details contribute to the overall striking effect of the *zushi*, whether it is closed or opened.

Such a commitment made the *karuta zushi* into a spectacle attracting visitors. The *gokaichō* has continued to this day to welcome both Buddhist believers devoted to Kannon and curious visitors revering the alleged *kami* of gambling. The aspect of play has been broadened in the modern time. The application of *karuta* has sacralized the cards themselves while transforming the hidden central deity into a more approachable “folk” deity with ties to the everyday leisure of the local devotees. Visitors come to this place today not only to pray for good luck in card games but also to wish for good fortune and prosperity such as in lotteries, dedicating objects from playing card decks to lottery tickets to Kannon Hall. The decennial public opening of the *zushi* celebrates the duality and ambiguity of the sacred and secular, continuing an Edo-esque manner that intertwines prayer and play.

Funding: This research received no funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: The author would like to express gratitude to people who kindly helped and supported her research online during the COVID-19 pandemic when she was not able to visit Japan, including Ebashi Takashi, Itō Takuma, Iwasaki Mariko, Morikawa Yuka, Takahashi Hironori, Takerube Nobuaki, and Umabayashi Isao. The author would also like to thank the two anonymous peer-reviewers of the *Arts Journal* for their comments and suggestions.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Inscriptions and translations for Figure 6: 馬頭観世音由来...馬頭観世音菩薩は馬頭明王とも呼ばれ家畜特に馬の守り本尊として厚く信仰されて来た。また馬は戦場における武士の乗物であったので除病息災のほか武士の武運も祈られていた。糠部は古来名馬の産地として名高いが宇治川の先陣を争った「磨墨」(するすみ)源義経の乗馬「青海波」(せいがいは)などは「三戸立」の駿馬として知られている。小中島の牧場管理に当たっていた(現在も上馬場、下馬場、赤馬立(アカマデ)等の場所がある)工藤家では正観世音と共に馬頭観世音を祀っていたが御本尊は約400年前の火災により焼損したままのため此の度信徒一同相諮り馬頭観世音の御本尊を新しく奉安し家畜の守護、交通安全の守護を深く祈念し奉るものである。昭和23年9月27日The origin of Batō Kanzeon: The Batō Kanzeon Bodhisattva Hayagrīva, also known as Batō Myōō, is the guardian deity of livestock, especially horses, and has been devotedly worshiped. Since horses were the vehicles of warriors on the battlefield, in addition to praying for good health, people also prayed for the warriors' good fortune. Nukanobu had been famous for its horses since ancient times, such as “Surusumi” that fought at the head of the Uji River and “Seigaiha,” the horse ridden by Minamoto no Yoshitsune. These horses are known as the outstanding horses of “Sannohe date.” The Kudō family, which had overseen the horse ranches in Onakajima (including today's Kami-Baba, Shimo-Baba, and Akamade ranches), worshiped Batō Kanzeon together with Shō-Kanzeon. However, the *gohonzon* venerated icon of Batō Kanzeon was destroyed in a fire about four hundred years ago. So, we, the members of the devoted congregation, hereby confer to consecrate a new *gohonzon* of Batō Kanzeon and offer our deepest prayers for the protection of livestock and the safety of traffic. September 27, 1948 (Shōwa 23) 奥州南部三十三番観音霊場第廿一番野瀬正観音堂。旧金台山満福寺。御本尊正(聖)観音菩薩。創建は長久元年(1040年)或は建久2年(1191年)といわれる。創建以来工藤氏が代々堂守の任に当たっているが、当地[名久井]、軽米等に通ずる交通の要衝であるので堂守及び関守の役を兼ねていたともいわれる。元和3年(1617年)第27代南部大守信濃守利直公より黒印状を賜った。内陣の御厨子は外部一面花札が張りつめられているので、刈田堂(カルタ堂)と呼ばれる。「祈る世に松風吹くや金台山梢に琴のしらべありとは」Nose Shō-Kannon Hall, the twenty-first site on the South Ōshū (Mutsu) Thirty-Three Kannon Pilgrimage. Formerly Kinkazan Manpukuji. The venerated icon is Shō Kanzeon Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. The temple was said to have been established in 1040 (Chōkyū 1) or 1191 (Kenkyū 2). Since its establishment, the Kudō clan has been in charge of the hall for many generations, and it is said that the clan also served as the superintendent and barrier guard because the hall is located at a strategic point of transportation to villages of Nakui and Karumai. In 1617 (Genna 3), the twenty-seventh lord of Nanbu,

- Nanbu Shinano Toshinao, bestowed the “black-seal” (*kokuin-jō*) official document to the hall. The inner sanctuary is called the “Karuta-dō” because the entire exterior of the *zushi* miniature shrine is covered with *hanafuda* [sic] playing cards. “Inoru yo ni Matsukaze fukuya Kinkazan, Kozue ni Koto no shirabe aritowa” “Praying in this world, the wind blows through the pine trees at Kinkazan Temple, in the treetops, hearing the koto melody.” Text retrieved from “Nose kannon (sannohe),” *Kuguru torii wa oni bakari*, <https://yuki.liblo.jp/archives/18017534.html>, accessed 2 June 2023. Translation by the author.
- ² The historical documents provided by Sannohe Town do not indicate where the *munafuda* are hung in the hall, and the information about patrons and reasons for construction is not included in the document or on the *munafuda*.
- ³ Contact between Japanese and Europeans began in 1542. Thereafter, Catholic missionaries and Portuguese merchants were very active in Japan through the 1590s when Spanish missionaries also became active in Japan. Trade was conducted through the Portuguese port of Macau and through Manila in the Spanish Philippines. Contacts ceased in the 1630s, connected to changes in Japanese foreign policies, which included prohibitions on Christian missionaries. For some first-hand accounts of the interactions, see (Cooper 1965).
- ⁴ Based on collections from the Japan Playing Card Museum and an interview conducted by Ebashi Takashi in Hanamaki, 1981. See (Ebashi n.d.).
- ⁵ Ebashi suggests that the workers on “Northern-bound ship” (Kitamaebune 北前船) maritime trade between Osaka and Hokkaido from the mid-eighteenth to the end of the nineteenth century spread regional *karuta* to places like Hokkaidō through the trade route, as the post-Edo period distribution of regional *karuta* overlaps with the Kitamaebune trade route. Personal communication, 11 June 2019.
- ⁶ Also reported by game designer Mr. Takerube Nobuaki 健部 伸明, who visited Nose in the early 2000s.
- ⁷ The Latin/Italo-Portuguese-patterned *karuta* has nine pip cards from ace to nine and three figure cards from ten to twelve.
- ⁸ Information and content of the public opening all observed from the TV show by Asahi Television Broadcasting, “Sōken sennen (hitsu) Kannondō jūichinen buri gokaichō & haha to kōkō musuko, *Potsun to ikkenya*, aired 10 October 2021.
- ⁹ Personal communications when exchanging information and going through materials with Mr. Itō, May 2020.

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