

Obara Jinja Shrine

Obara Jinja is a Shinto shrine that was established in 852. The main sanctuary was reconstructed in 1796. The shrine has a collection of 35 *ema* (votive tablets), which hang in the shrine buildings and the *emaden* (a special hall for displaying them). They depict scenes such as local silk farming, as well as images of Byodoin Temple south of the city of Kyoto. The oldest *ema* has been dated to 1599.

Obara Jinja is known for its association with childbearing. It has a collection of materials on childbirth and child-rearing from the Edo period (1603–1867) and the Meiji era (1868–1912) that attracts midwives from all over. Childbirth was stigmatized in ancient Japan for being unclean. *Ubuya* (childbirth huts) were constructed to remove some of the stigma and provide a place for women to receive the blessings of kami (deities) during childbirth.

Ubuya have existed in Japan since at least the Nara period (710–794). The Obara *ubuya* is one of the very few childbirth huts remaining. It is built next to a river; this is symbolic of the division the river creates between this world and the otherworld in Japanese belief, as childbirth is said to happen between the two worlds. New mothers would give birth in the hut and spend up to a week living here while recovering their strength. Although it is unclear when this *ubuya* was built, we do know the last birth here occurred around the turn of the twentieth century. Sand from the *ubuya* is considered auspicious and is used in good-luck charms for ensuring safe childbirth.