

Russian Japanology Review, 2025, 2, pp. 5–20

DOI: 10.55105/2658-6444-2025-2-5-20

The Symbolism of Fish and Fishing in Japanese Culture. Whales, Dolphins, and Fantastic Creatures in Legends and Ideas

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Abstract

In Japan, there are many regional legends and traditions associated with water, fish, and fantastic creatures inhabiting the sea. These legends go back many centuries; the first mentions of large fish are found already in the first Japanese poetic anthology *Man'yōshū* (8th century) and in the mythological and chronicle text *Nihon Shoki* (720). In different provinces, legends and traditions vary, some motifs are interpreted differently by folklorists, however. Evidently, we can talk about a single body of related texts, united not only by plots where the main characters are whales, dolphins, etc., but also by accompanying actions: *matsuri* festivals in honor of fish and fishing, ritual performance of magical texts, dancing, songs, cooking, making amulets, etc. The symbolism that unites the theme of fish and fishing in Chinese and Japanese culture is also obvious: wealth and prosperity, which is reflected not only in written monuments, but also in works of art. Whales, for example, are associated with numerous legends, traditions, and mythological motifs of local significance, ideas about these mammals as deities of the sea, to whom Shinto shrines are dedicated. Images of fish were part of offerings to the bride's family due to the auspicious meaning of the item. It is noteworthy that the legends about the sea included famous literary and legendary characters and episodes from famous works of Japanese history and literature, such as *Kojiki*, *Nihon Shoki*, *Man'yōshū*, *Heike Monogatari*.

Keywords: Japanese legends and traditions, *Man'yōshū*, *Heike Monogatari*, symbolism of the fish and fishing, Yamato Takeru, Miyamoto Musashi, Ebisu.

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Conflict of interests

The author declares the absence of the conflict of interests.

Fish and fishing in China and Japan are a symbolic sphere full of diverse meanings that have developed over many centuries. In Japan, fish in its emblematic sense stands for wealth, prosperity; catching a big fish means attaining happiness. In Chinese, the characters 魚 *yui*, “fish,” and 余 *yui*, “abundance,” are read the same way; thus, a transfer of meanings took place when the word “fish” was loaded with the concepts of “abundance,” “multitude,” “excess.”

China and Japan have significant fish resources; the main food was rice and fish. Fish spawn abundantly, and therefore it became a symbol of harmony, marital happiness, and childbirth. *Netsuke* 根付, ivory figurines depicting fish, which the Japanese tied to their belts, had a favorable meaning and were presented as gifts with wishes for happiness, wealth, and childbirth (*Fig. 1*). Fish often swim in pairs; so they are also seen as symbols of union, especially sexual. “Double fish” is also a talisman against evil spells.

According to Buddhist beliefs, virtue can be gained by releasing living beings, such as birds, fish, turtles, etc., during temple festivals. Buddhist temples often have ponds with carp and goldfish of extraordinary beauty – the result of many years of very skillful breeding. They were

often depicted on Chinese and Japanese porcelain, which began to be imported to Europe, and there appeared their own manufactories of *chinoiserie* (French for “imitation of Chinese”), on which images of fish are often found. These fish came to Europe in the 17th century and became widely known.

Since both birds and fish are oviparous, in ancient times, it was believed that they were related creatures; they can transform from one species to another and easily adapt to different elements. Many species of fish were described in ancient Far Eastern texts as hypostases of birds.

The carp, thanks to its bright scales and the extraordinary strength with which it moves upstream during spawning, was considered an emblem of martial arts. According to the American scientist C.A.S. Williams, there is a legend in China that when carps in the third moon of each year go against the stream of the Yellow River (*Huang He*), at the rapids of the Dragon Gate (*Lunmeng*) they turn into dragons [Williams 1976, p. 183]. That is why images of carp are given to Japanese boys on the day of the year when the *yang* element is especially strong, i.e., the 5th day of the fifth moon. In China, the carp is a symbol of literary knowledge and successful passing of exams for the rank of an official; they know how to go upstream, which means they can pass difficult exams. Fish are emblems of the epistolary art, which is also associated with their abundant spawning. In old books, fish are compared to the subjects of the sovereign, and the art of fishing – to ruling: a hapless fisherman will catch nothing, and a helpless ruler will not cope with his people [Williams 1976, p. 184]. The legendary Chinese emperor Fu Xi 伏羲 (traditional dates 2953–2838 BC) earned his name “Hiding Prey” because he wove different types of nets and taught his subjects to catch fish and sea creatures for subsistence [Ibid.].

Whales (鯨, *kujira*, Lat. *cetacea*), mammals that live in Japanese waters, have always attracted the Japanese because of their size; they have been hunted in Japan since the ancient Jōmon period (13,000 BC – 300 BC). In Japan, whales are called fish. Numerous legends, stories and mythological motifs are associated with whales (Figs. 3, 4, 5, 6). For Shinto, the indigenous polytheistic religion of the Japanese, which had

existed long before the arrival of Buddhism in Japan in the 7th and 8th centuries, the objects of worship are countless *kami* deities and the souls of ancestors. Many objects of living and dead nature (trees, brooks, lakes, stones, and others) can be *kami*. In Japan, there are thousands of Shinto shrines; it is a whole system united by rituals.

Whales are mentioned ten times in the first Japanese poetry anthology “Collection of Myriads of Leaves” (万葉集, *Man'yōshū*, 8th century), which became the title of the entire Japanese lyric tradition [Masaharu 1990, p. 3–4]. Many of the poems in it are associated with ancient rituals and ideas. Let us give an example of a poem of the ancient poetic form *sedōka*, or a six-line verse without rhyme and with alternating lines counting 5-7-7-5-7-7 syllables. Some Japanese scholars believe that this form is dialogic and may have been composed by two people (a question – 5-7-7 and an answer – 5-7-7), since their utterances are often opposite in meaning.

Anonymous Poem No. 3852.

Will the whale monsters be exterminated?
Will the sea dry up and become shallow?
Will the mountain ranges crumble?
No, the whales will not perish,
Even though the waters run short of tides...
But the mountains will crumble into dust.¹

Whales are mentioned in various genres of Japanese classical literature: descriptions of customs and lands 風土記 *fudoki*, diaries 日記 *nikki*, travel writings 紀行 *kikō*. In Japan, there are many regional legends, tales, and anecdotes related to whales: stories associated with toponyms, with historical figures, for example, with the famous warrior Minamoto no Yoshitsune 源義経 and with the literary monument “The Tale of the Heike” (平家物語 *Heike monogatari*, 14th century), which describes the war between two clans, Taira and Minamoto (12th century),

¹ Rendered from the Russian translation by E. M. Dyakonova.

with the victory over a huge whale by the ancient hero Yamato Takeru 倭武, described in the mythological and historical collection Records of Ancient Matters (古事記 *Kojiki*, 8th century). Whales are associated with the god of fishing, Ebisu, who brings wealth and good fortune and who turns into a large fish, *isana* (whale, dolphin, or shark). There are stories of whales making pilgrimages to shrines, of whale schools, whale festivals, and Whale Rocks, where the animals turn into huge stones, of whales as messengers of the gods and of whale priests.

Also popular are legends of the were-whale 化物 *bakemono*, or bone whale 骨者 *honemono* (Fig. 6). In ancient times, the part of the Sea of Japan that borders Izumo Province (now northeastern Shimane Prefecture) was called the Whale Sea because many whales lived there. One day, there appeared a whale consisting only of white bones; it had neither skin nor flesh. It was accompanied by schools of strange fish and birds. Fishermen went to the whale in boats, but no matter how many times they threw harpoons, they did not cause any harm to the animal. When they got closer, they found only a huge white skeleton and fled in fear. The fishermen later told the people in the coastal villages that it was a dead whale that had appeared in the form of a vengeful spirit.

There are many legends in the Shimane area about whales and their magical properties. One day in 1897, several large whales stranded themselves on the shore of Chibu Oki Bay in Shimane, causing fires and earthquakes. Locals believed that this was a curse from the dead whales, and performed rituals to appease their spirits.

In the coastal villages of Shikoku Island, the following story was told. Long ago, in the Seto Naikai Inland Sea off the island of Shikoku, there lived a huge evil fish (Fig. 6) the size of an island. It sank ships and ate people. Fishermen could not sail on boats, catch fish, and transport people and cargo. The sovereign sent warriors to exterminate the fish, but the ship was sunk, and all the warriors died. Then the sovereign became worried and ordered the hero Yamato Takeru to go to sea and defeat the evil fish. Yamato Takeru pursued it in various places where it appeared, off the coast of the provinces of Tosa and Awa. One day, he saw the scary fish in the depths of the waters, but a storm broke out at sea and

high waves did not allow the ship to approach the evil fish. The next year, the fish appeared near Tsuchinoto in Sanuki Province. Yamato Takeru chased the fish for a long time across the stormy sea, but finally managed to defeat it. He gathered his men, attacked the fish, and, piercing it with his sword, got inside. The belly of the evil fish was hot as fire, and the warriors who followed the hero died one after another. Yamato Takeru managed to strike the fish from the inside, then cut himself out of its belly and escaped. There is a version of the legend where the fish is killed by Yamato Takeru's son, fifteen-year-old Reiko.

The deity Ebisu no mikoto is one of the seven Japanese gods of happiness, the patron of fishing, success, and commerce; he is depicted in a hunting dress, with a fishing rod in his right hand and a sea bream or golden carp under his arm (*Fig. 7*). He is the only one of the seven gods of happiness of Japanese origin; the others are Chinese or Indian. He is called the “God who came from overseas” and is depicted on large fish catch flags in fishing villages. In addition to Ebisu, these flags also feature whales, dolphins, and whale sharks, i.e., *isana*. All these fish are revered in coastal villages throughout Japan, as it is believed that the appearance of these sea creatures brings a bountiful catch; whales and dolphins are usually accompanied by large schools of sardines, herring, and mackerel. Floats for nets, *abato*, are called *Ebisu aba*, “floats of the fishing god.” Ebisu is also called *Yori gami* – Moving god, or *Yori kujira* – Moving whale; there is a variant *Nagare kujira* – Drifting whale, which mainly refers to whales washed up alive on the shore or in shallow waters.

The whale-related god Ebisu is not found in the major ancient mythological and historical records, the Records of Ancient Matters and the Annals of Japan (日本書紀, *Nihon shoki*, 8th century); so, attempts have been made since ancient times to find a related deity in these influential works.

In Hyogo Prefecture, there is Nishinomiya Shrine (*Fig. 8*); it is a shrine to the god Ebisu and the head temple of all Ebisu shrines in Japan. Legends say that Ebisu no mikoto was washed ashore, and as he resembled the god of the sea, he became worshipped as a deity of waters. Ebisu was syncretized with the deity Kotoshiro no mikoto (or Kotoshiro-

nushi gami), who was considered a deity of oracles but loved fishing. His father, Okuninushi no mikoto, was the grandson of one of the main heavenly gods, the furious Susanoo no mikoto, ruled the country, taught medicine, and later, having ceded control to the Great Goddess of the Sun, Amaterasu omi kami, became the ruler of the underworld – the Country of Roots (*Ne no kuni*). Thus, Ebisu and Kotoshiro were associated with the god of the sea, and the idea of relationship between these deities arose quite late, during the Tokugawa period (1603–1868). The image of Ebisu with a fishing rod and a sea bream under his arm is, according to some surmises, based on the image of Okuninushi no mikoto's son. Before the emergence of the belief in Ebisu, shrines to Kotoshiro no mikoto were built, and later, images of Ebisu were also placed in them. The most typical “double” shrine is Miho, an important cultural property in Shimane Prefecture, which is the main sanctuary of Kotoshiro no mikoto. From the Tokugawa period to the Meiji era (1868–1912), the name of the deity venerated at many shrines changed from Ebisu to Kotoshiro no mikoto and vice versa. Both of these Shinto deities are worshiped as gods of fishing and shipping, as well as deities that repel insects in rice fields.

The *Kojiki* contains world-creating and world-organizing myths. The chief demiurges – the gods Izanami and Izanagi – created the Japanese islands by ascending a high bridge over the abyss, striking a precious spear into the sea, and from the drops flowing from the spear, the islands emerged. They performed wedding rituals and conceived a child, but the rituals were performed incorrectly; so they gave birth to a “bad child” that had no arms or legs. “And the child they bore was a leech child. They put the child in a reed boat and set it afloat” [Kojiki 1994, p. 40]. The child was washed out into the sea and later, in popular belief, turned into the deity Ebisu no mikoto, who could not walk even at the age of three. The text of the “Records of Ancient Matters” or the “Annals of Japan” makes no mention of the transformation; these are undoubtedly later interpretations. Commentators believe that the Leech Child (*hirugo*) was called so because it resembled a leech, had a soft body, and lacked arms and legs. The “Annals of Japan” describe the child's

body as weak and limp, but with arms and legs. Later interpretations from the Tokugawa era say that the Leech Child resembled a newborn whale, which was associated with Ebisu no mikoto.

Many coastal villages and towns across Japan debate where Ebisu no mikoto was washed ashore. In Wakayama Prefecture, there's the Kujira Ebisu Shrine, dedicated to the whale god, *kujira gami*, where the tall *torii* gate and stairway railings are made of whale bones (Fig. 9).

Whales are not only the heroes of folk legends, the saviors of fishermen, pointing out schools of fish in the sea, but also an important, albeit intermittent, source of food for coastal villagers, for which people are grateful. Residents of coastal villages and towns hold annual whale festivals, *kujira matsuri*, where they offer thanks to the whales. The Kujira Ebisu Shrine also holds a similar festival. The festival (祭 *matsuri*) should be understood in a broader sense here: it is a way of communicating with Shinto *kami*. First, they are called to the earth, since they reside in other spheres (in the heavens, in the sea, in the mountains, in the rocks, groves, and even in the gravel in the courtyard of Shinto shrines, etc.), then they are worshiped, with participants performing ritual actions, playing theatrical performances of *kagura* (神楽, “joy of the gods”), accompanying the dances with the playing of flutes, lutes, and drums. Later, the gods are seen off to their place of residence, since staying close to the *kami* for a long time is dangerous for humans.

The patronal festival of the deity Ebisu matsuri, “in charge of” a bountiful harvest, a good catch, and prosperity for business and family, is held regularly, for example, in the city of Hiroshima at Koshi Shrine. Japan has many shrines dedicated to Ebisu, one of them being the influential Imamiya Ebisu (Fig. 11) in Osaka, which draws crowds of visitors for its whale festivals, held annually on January 9–11. The Ebisu ko (or Toka Ebisu) Festival at Imamiya Shrine is listed as an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property (Fig. 12). The popular name for the festival is Ebissan. The sea bream, the symbol of Ebisu, is the shrine's symbol and talisman. Fishermen's homes also hold rituals of thanksgiving to Ebisu at that time, during which skillfully prepared fish dishes are served (Fig. 13), and, at the shrine, they distribute whale-tail-shaped amulets

for good luck in fishing and commerce, as well as bamboo leaves for good fortune. Throughout Japan, whales, dolphins, and whale sharks are often called Ebisu.

Knowledge about fishing and the wisdom of fishing villages are captured in proverbs, nursery rhymes, metaphors, fairy tales, legends, and traditions. Below are some folk legends and traditions from various coastal settlements and fishing villages in many prefectures of Japan. These legends were recorded by folklorists and published in local editions: folk culture bulletins, regional cultural studies, coastal travel guides, etc.² These legends are not included in the main monuments of Japanese Shinto myths, the Records of Ancient Matters and the Annals of Japan, although whales are mentioned five times in the Annals of Japan.

In Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island, where winters can be harsh and snowdrifts can pile up, there is a popular local legend linked to the toponym Bakkai, or Whale Rock. Legend has it that when a devastating tsunami wave once hit the coast, the parent whale Porofunbe and its calf Ponfunbe tried to protect the cape and the entire area around it with their bodies from the onslaught of the wave. The whales turned into a rock; people said the rock was shaped like a huge whale carrying a calf on its back. People worshiped the rock as the whale god Funbekamui. The Ainu called this place Pakaipo-kai-pe ("Thing that carries a child"). The name of Cape Bakkai is written with the characters 抜海, which mean "Lost by the sea."

In many Japanese villages, there is an ancient custom: not to abandon disabled children to the mercy of fate; if there are no people willing to adopt them, the entire village takes care of the children, feeds, clothes, and raises them as best they can. If a child remains incapable, the villagers look after them until their death, providing them with shelter and food. This legend is told in Ishikawa Prefecture, where there still exists the custom of the entire village taking care of such "sunny children." When

² *Nihon no kujira ni kakawaru densetsu* [Legends of Japanese Whales]
<https://www.catv296.ne.jp/~whale/kujira-densetu.html>

they die, they turn into whales and wander far out to sea, but later return and beach themselves to thank the villagers for taking care of them throughout their lives. The fishermen accept this gratitude and butcher the whale, keeping the meat for themselves and selling the baleen.

A legend existing in the same area claims that, during the Tokugawa era, a married couple rescued a beached whale and its calf and managed to push them back into the sea. A short time later, the couple gave birth to a long-awaited child, named Kujiranami (Whale Wave).

The Itoshima Collection of Legends contains a colourful tale about a whale burrow in Fukuoka Prefecture, on Japan's southernmost island of Kyushu, beneath Mirror Rock (Kagami iwa). One beautiful spring day, celestial maidens wearing dresses made of bird feathers descended from the High Heavenly Plain and began to sing in sweet, bell-like voices and dance. Fragrances drifted through the air, and the maidens sang and sang with abandon. Then one of the girls began to sing a forbidden song from the nether world, and all the other girls fled in fear. The celestial maiden, having finished her song, instantly lost all her divine power, and her feather dress turned to stone. The celestial maiden prayed to the heavenly *kami* gods for forgiveness, but received no answer. In her grief, she threw herself into the raging sea and drowned. She fell into the whale burrow where she perished along with the whale that lived at the back of the cave. Thousands of years later, traces of the celestial maiden and her fossilized feather dress are found at the top of Mirror Rock. On the northern island of Hokkaido, there are legends based on episodes from the "The Tale of the Heike". This is a remarkable example of "literary legends." Minamoto no Yoshitsune, a warrior, a hero, an ideal samurai, who was later treacherously killed by his own brother, while wandering around Japan in search of refuge, one day began to compete with his faithful servant Benkei in archery at Cape Chimohito. Benkei sent the arrow far, but Yoshitsune sent it even further, to the coast of Shiranuki. A whale swimming nearby laughed and said, "Don't scare me, you won't." Yoshitsune got angry and shot the whale with another arrow. Then, having discovered the wounded whale on the seashore, beached by a wave, he began to cut off pieces from it and roast them on a spit.

Since the main and decisive battle at Dannoura (1185) between the Taira and Minamoto clans took place at sea with the participation of numerous ships and boats on both sides, there arose local legends associated with the sea, fish, dolphins, and whales. “The Tale of the Heike” tells about a large shoal of 200 dolphins that appeared in the Gulf of Dan in the Inland Sea during the battle. A fortune teller from the Taira clan predicted that if dolphins passed under the Taira ships and returned, then this clan would win; if under the Minamoto ships, they would win. The dolphins chose the Minamoto ships, and they won the battle, and the Taira clan was completely exterminated. One of the Taira warriors, sinking to the bottom, saw the remains of a whale on the seabed and said, “Waves and winds rage on the sea. My body sinks easily into the water. The whale’s gills hang in the water close to the bottom.” So says “The Tale of the Heike”.

Whaling was banned in Japan from time to time. In 1680, Shogun Tokugawa Tsunayoshi 徳川 綱吉 (1646–1709), nicknamed “dog shogun” for his concern for stray dogs and other domestic animals, issued a series of laws known collectively as the “Edict on Compassion for Living Beings.” The laws protected not only cows and horses, but also dogs and fish. Fishing was prohibited, with the exception of fishermen who earned their living by casting nets into the sea.

Whaling was also banned in Japan several times. For a long time, whale fishing was tabooed, with only small catches permitted. Currently, only seasonal and limited whaling is permitted. The Japanese consider whale meat and blubber delicacies and prepare many unique dishes from them. Whalebone was used to make strings and ornaments for musical instruments, and sinew was used to make bowstrings. Whale bones were used to decorate shrines. In coastal villages where whaling is prohibited, they say that people who have caused damage to the village turn into whales and swim far out to sea to get rid of their grievances and take revenge on those who offended them. Those villagers who want to thank the village for good deeds or rescues also turn into whales and perform a good deed by washing themselves ashore so that the villagers could share the whale meat among themselves. In Ishikawa Prefecture, there

is a legend about an old woman whose house burned down because of her fault, and she, feeling guilty about her neighbours who suffered from the fire, said she wanted to turn into a whale after her death and make an apology from the sea, accompanied by a good deed. After her death, the aggrieved neighbours filed a lawsuit and were awarded a large repayment. The following year, the family managed to entice a large whale onto the beach, kill it, and sell it. The whole village and other residents of the area said that it was the old woman in the form of a whale who came to apologize and pay off her debt to her neighbours.

On the coast of western Japan, there's a legend about two villages that had been arguing for years over the border between their settlements. One day, a storm raged at sea, and a huge whale was washed ashore. A fierce quarrel broke out between the two villages over the spoils, which lasted well into the night. Suddenly, there came a terrible roar, the ground beneath their feet and the monstrous whale broke in two, and a shower of foam and blood began to pour. The villagers realized this was the will of the gods, and from then on, the crack in the earth became the boundary between the villages, and the people ceased to feud. The cape has since been called Kamiwarisaki, "Split by God" (*Fig. 14*).

A legend from Hateruma Island tells the story of the origin of whales. Once upon a time, there lived a hopelessly lazy man on the island who did not want to work in the rice fields. He had cows, and they plowed and planted rice for him. The lazy man reveled and drove his cows to the fields. A huge tsunami wave arose in the nearby sea, but the lazybones did not notice it right away; so the sea swallowed him up and he sank to the bottom. The cows were not lazy; they kept swimming without stopping, even though Hateruma Island had disappeared from sight. Over time, their front legs turned into pectoral fins, their hind legs into tail fins, and they gradually evolved into whales and became sea creatures. In autumn, whales come to their native coast, cut through the waves, and moo like cows, yearning for the island. And all because whales were originally cows! Similar stories are told on the island of Okinawa.

In Mie Prefecture, there is a legend about a family of pious whales living in the sea near Kumano: a father, a mother, and their calf. One day,

they were planning to visit the most famous shrine of the sun goddess, Amaterasu, in Ise. In the bay, they encountered a fisherman who had not caught a single fish since morning. Seeing the family of whales, he pulled out a harpoon and prepared to launch it at the whale. The whale mother pleaded, "We were heading to the Great Shrine of Ise to offer our prayers to the Sun Goddess. Please let us pass." But the fisherman didn't listen and killed the father and son. From then on, the fishermen from the village of Tomita were never able to catch a single fish, and the seaside village became deserted. Then the villagers held a memorial service for the whale family and stopped whaling forever. Since then, during the season when whales with calves go to Ise Shrine for worship, killing whales has been prohibited.

In Tokyo, there existed the following legend. One day, a whale encountered a ship at sea that was heading to Mount Fuji. The whale, too, was planning a pilgrimage to the mountain and asked the fishermen to take him along. But the fishermen refused his request and began throwing harpoons at him. Then the whale got enraged and swallowed all the fishermen.

There are also many legends about whales turning into huge black stones. Such a stone is located, for example, at Nishinomiya Shrine. Once it was a wounded whale searching for its way back to its native shore. People come to this stone to remember the lost whales and ask for their mercy.

A legend from the town of Marushima in Kumamoto Prefecture states that, in the 1880s, strong winds and high waves brought a large whale from the sea, and the next morning, people found a huge black stone on the sandy shore. The proceeds from the sale of the whale were used to build an elementary school in Marushima. There are seven *kujira gakko* elementary schools in Japan: in the prefectures of Niigata, Akita, Mie, Fukuoka, Kumamoto, Iwate, and Chiba, which were built by local residents thanks to whales, with whom close connections are maintained through offerings, *matsuri* festivals, prayers, and amulets. On March 10, 1887, a dozen whales washed ashore in the port of Funagawa, Akita Prefecture. Half of them were sold by local residents, and the proceeds

were used to rebuild a school, which was named Whale School. This is a true story.

There are also numerous legends about whale stones, known collectively as “The Journey to the Whale Stone,” and they are also gathered in the collection of legends “The Whale Stone and Legends of Hachinohe Taro” [Masaharu 1990, p. 3]. In the Nishinomiya forest in Hachi nohe (in Aomori Prefecture), there is a legend about Sameura Taro, who was thrown from the sea onto the shore and turned into stone at Nishinomiya Shrine. Once upon a time, in a coastal village, a constant drought made fishing impossible, and the villagers suffered badly. So, Sameura Taro decided to swim far out to sea and search for fish in the deep. But the waves became rough, and he nearly drowned, but a whale rescued him, held him afloat, and carried him ashore. The villagers were grateful to the whale, named him after the youth, Sameura Taro, and made him the village’s guardian deity. Sameura Taro was faithful to his shrine and the village, bringing schools of sardines to the shore each year, and the fishermen prospered. This continued for thirty-three years, and then the whale disappeared. Attacked by whalers from the Kishu Islands, he was wounded, washed ashore on the Samura River, and turned into a stone. The villagers began to worship it. Residents of Misato Town in Shimane Prefecture believe that the Whale Rock is inhabited by spirits and that it moves a little bit across the sand every year. They also say that if you cut the stone, living blood will flow out of it. Once upon a time, a man tried to cut open the stone, but blood gushed over the edge, and the scars have never healed. Large stones and rocks shaped like whales or whale heads and tails are important to coastal dwellers and serve as landmarks when they venture out to sea.

In his article “On Whale Graves in Shiragi Town,” folk culture scholar Masaharu Yoshi describes the burial customs associated with dead whales in Aichi Prefecture. They are buried in the ground with prayers, as they are considered guardian deities of villages and local shrines, messengers of the gods, and gifts from the sea. Bones of other whales and coins are placed in the graves.

In the Aburatsu region, in the neighboring village of Nanaura, a major storm lasted for several days, and coastal villagers were unable to fish because of the huge waves coming from the raging sea, according to the legend “Sea, Light, and Wind in Aburatsu.”³ The village was facing starvation when a whale, as huge as a mountain, was washed ashore. Without waiting for the village headman’s permission to butcher the dead whale, the villagers brought ladders, surrounded the animal, and, without asking for the whale’s forgiveness, divided the meat among all the fishermen and their families. Starving people from the neighbouring villages also came running, and they, too, were given whale meat. From then on, the dead animal became known in the area as the Savior Whale and the Great Whale. Grateful coastal villagers buried the remains of the huge whale – bones, eyeball – with great honors and held a memorial service. The whale turned out to be a female with a calf in her womb. It is said that, from then on, the fishermen of the village of Nanaura always had a good catch and never starved, because they paid their last respects to the whale that saved them. Aburatsu villagers still come to worship the spirits of large fish, and every year in May they prepare a dish called *kujira mochi* (“whale rice balls”) from rice donated by residents of coastal villages, grind it, saying *kujira-kujira* (“whale-whale”), *kami-kami* (“spirit-spirit”), so that the catch will always be abundant. This custom has been passed down from generation to generation in the Aburatsu region. Whale mochi is made by rolling ground rice flour into a cylinder about 15 cm long and 3 cm wide, then filling it with red bean paste and drawing yellow lines with beetle juice, creating a whale-like shape on the cross-section. These rice balls are made in the prefectures of Aomori and Yamagata in Tohoku.

³ *Nihon no kujira ni kakawaru densetsu* [Legends of Japanese Whales].
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This article was originally published in Russian. The reference for primary publication is: Dyakonova, E. M. (2024) Simvolika ryb I rybnoy lovli v yaponskoy cul'ture. Kity, del'phiny I fantasticheskiye sushchestva morya v legendakh I predstavleniyakh. [The Symbolism of Fish and Fishing in Japanese Culture. Whales, Dolphins, and Fantastic Sea Creatures in Legends and Ideas]. *Yearbook Japan*. Vol. 53, 227–242. (In Russian).

DOI: 10.55105/2687-1440-2024-53-227-242