Rediscovery of marine culture from the ancient Japanese literature “Nihon Eitaigura” by Saikaku

“Snapper” and “Boat racing” at a Nishinomiya-Ebisu shrine

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Abstract

In many of cases, literature can be the valuable historical materials to rediscovery of the new maritime cultures. In this paper, the theme is to describe certain case that the literature is worth equivalent to the facts and real historical events sometimes, through Gennai’s story appearing in Nihon-Eitaigura which is a representative work of Saikaku.

In the Edo era, the Nishino Miya Ebisu, where is the key place of Genai’s story, was surrounded by sea, the participants were competing in a blood-rushing “boat racing” to the Nishino Miya beach as described in Genai’s story. However the current Nishino Miya Ebisu region is soil, and there is no historical record proving that the Nishino Miya Ebisu was located by the seaside.

Rediscovery of marine culture such as whale fishing, some fishery technology, sailing with “Kobayabune” depicted in the story, and geological changes were possible through ancient literature such as Nihon Eitaigura by Saikaku.

Keywords Japanese Literature in 17century, Saikaku, whale fishing, fishery technology, Deity of Ebisu, Nishino Miya Ebisu, Boat racing, Kobayabune.

Introduction

Among the numerous collections of short tales by Ihara Saikaku (1642-1693; Figure 1), one of the most distinguished novelists in seventeenth-century Japan, his magnum opus is no doubt Nihon Eitaigura (1688; Figure 2). Of late this work has been noted, not only from the national but also international viewpoint, as one of the most interesting and illuminating historical writings regarding their contemporary economic phenomena and ideas. From its subtitle, Daifuku Shin Choza Kyo, this collection might at first sight seem to be a moral book (‘kyo’) on how to have success in life (‘choza’) in the current thriving society (‘daifuku’, ‘shin’). Only two thirds or so of the 30 tales in it, in fact, were moral fables about those piling up riches thanks to their ingenuity or dexterity or ending in retributive poverty due to their conceit or wickedness. The rest of them feature real successful entrepreneurs, by the alias or real name (e.g., Mitsui Takatoshi, 1622-1694, the
founder of Mitsukoshi), and describe vividly, if in somewhat comedic veins, the way in which they struggled in the so-called cash nexus.

**The tale in volume 2, number 4, of *Nihon Eitaigura***

The tale in number 4 of volume 2 of the collection, entitled ‘Tengu wa iena no kazaguruma’, is a case in point. It unfolds as follows.

The fishery village of Taiji, Wakayama, has a master of harpooning, whose given name is Gennai, family name Tengu, and house flag of a pinwheel (‘kazaguruma’ in Japanese). He led the local whaling industry to prosperity not only by taking by far more whales than anyone else but also by ingeniously producing oil from disused whale bone fat. The prosperity accelerated as he devised a collective way to whale using fishing nets and organised the fishery profession beyond his native village. These also procured him not just enormous wealth but also wide reverence.

Gennai was also devout, practicing his religion at Nishinomiya Ebisu Shrine (a shrine which is located at Nishinomiya, a pivotal place for transportation about 130km away from his village in a straight line but in much more distance by sea). Such was his faith that his annual pilgrimage to the shrine on the early morning of the tenth day of the new year lasted for over two decades, the festive morning event in every year which continues at the same shrine to date, known as ‘Toka-Ebisu’.

On the tenth day of a year, however, he woke up so late that he could by no means arrive at the shrine in the morning. Too late though it was, he rushed in a high-speed boat with twenty oars, but not until night fell did he come ashore at Nishinomiya. He saw no visitors around the shrine any longer, nor was he received by any shrinemen; he could not but turn back with his resentment finding no outlet. While lying still in frustration aboard back, he dreamt a sleeping or waking dream, in which Ebisu, the god enshrined at Nishinomiya, made his appearance to reveal an oracle or divine instruction to him to the effect that Gennai could and should carry his caught sea breams fresh to more distant consumers by pricking them with a needle. Back in Taiji he followed the instruction to see his market more expanded and, thereby, his wealth more accrued.

**Ebisu at Nishinomiya and sea breams***

As many commentators have pointed it out, it is Taichi Kakuemon (1623-1699) that is the most possible real person that Saikaku might have borne in mind writing this tale. Kakueemon is noted to have revolutionised whaling from a simple way of harpooning to a combining way of netting and harpooning (Figure 3, the
supposedly oldest extant graphic representation about whaling, reproduced from volume 2, number 4, of *Nihon Eitaigura*. In Saikaku’s days, also, he may have been well known and charismatic among the readership, considering his innovation is presumably dated circa 1677. It may be remarked, nevertheless, that there is no documentary proof hitherto available that Kakuemon would have played a role in commercial distribution of sea breams.

First of all, this story may well draw our attention to the deity of Ebisu and its relationship to the significance of the sea bream. Nishinomiya Ebisu Shrine is today called simply ‘Nishinomiya Shrine’, but its official name in the seventeenth century was ‘Nishinomiya Ebisu Daimyo Shrine’, as the record of building its main architecture in July 1663 shows. As *Nihon Eitaigura* implies, moreover, the shrine was held in worship as the most prestigious of all the places enshrining Ebisu in the country, especially, among the merchant classes, by the time that Saikaku wrote it. The present article uses the appellation ‘Nishinomiya Ebisu Shrine’, to note the deity enshrined therein (Figure 4).

Ebisu is featured in *Kojiki*, the oldest extant chronicle in Japan (c.711), and *Nihon Shoki*, the second oldest (c.720). According to them, Ebisu was born to Izanagi and Izanami, the god and goddess creating Japan, but was shortly exposed to sea because of his innate disabledness, with the final result that he was enshrined as god of the sea—for safe water navigation and good fishery harvests—at Nishinomiya. The worship of Ebisu got soon disseminated among sailors and fishermen to the point where many shrines with the same divine name were erected everywhere they dropped in across the nation, providing meeting places which in turn helped transmit the worship to local merchants. This explains why Nishinomiya Ebisu Shrine may well be regarded now as well as before as the pivotal place for the faith underpinning thousands of Ebisu shrines.

The quintessential figure of Ebisu in graphic description features a lovely combination of ample body and smiley face, with a fishing-rod on his right shoulder and a sea bream under his left arm (Figure 5). As a matter of fact, there are hardly any exceptions. Considered to be a symbolic representation of the enjoyable gift of sea bream—the most popular, supposedly luxurious and divine fish—, this demonstrates how common among sailors and fishermen was the conception or even aspiration that the deity of Ebisu should not be parsimonious or punitive but liberal and supportive. It is not too digressive to remark here that this is the case with Inari, god of the land, regarded in worship mainly by farmers and peasants across the nation, with Fushimi Inari Shrine, Kyoto, enjoying the pivotal place comparable to that of Nishinomiya Ebisu Shrine.

Simply put, Ebisu as well as Inari was a god for a good harvest. Since a good harvest was obviously beneficial to all members of the community, Ebisu was worshiped as coming up with a blessed visitation to the whole. The ascending dominance of the cash nexus, however, led many to doubt the obvious; since the market economy made a good harvest give profits to some but losses to others within the same community, Ebisu was no longer for the communal happiness but rather a god to which to pray for one’s personal gain. It was the Edo era that witnessed this change in divinity of Ebisu.

Another pivotal role played by Nishinomiya Ebisu Shrine was in diffusing Bunraku (Figure 7). As mentioned above, Ebisu has a fishing-rod on his right shoulder and a sea bream under his left arm, but, as is often unattended, he uses a small shrimp as bait. That is a representation of a bonanza, bearing in mind that whereas shrimps were commonplace, sea breams were scarce. To stand for this bonanza, as is well known, the dance called ‘Dance for Ebisu (Ebisu-Mai)’ (Figure 6) was born and was later turned into a puppet theatre for larger audience. This puppet theatre was toured across the nation by puppeteers, the profession which was organised and controlled under Nishinomiya Ebisu Shrine and allegedly instrumental for intelligence activities in the Medieval era or the Warring States
period. Either way, the puppet theatre was combined with the popular version of music called ‘Joruri-Bushi’ to gain huge popularity as ‘Ningyo (puppetry)-Joruri’ in the Edo era, boasting Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725), the most famous scriptwriter. This form of puppet theatre is still popular while today known as Bunraku.

Before proceeding to the next section, let us account succinctly for how Gennai treated his caught sea breams, as described in Nihon Eitaigura. What Ebisu advised him to do was presumably not to leave them dying but to make them braindead aboard. For one, this treatment enabled him to distribute his sea breams fresh in such a distance that he gained success in fishery; for another, it is generally used among the fishery in Japan, today known as ‘ikejime’. (One can see the theoretically identical technique in the final episode of Dae Jang Geum, a Korean TV drama series.) It is possible and probable that Saikaku may have heard of an entrepreneur winning a bonanza using this innovative technique in the emerging market society, whether or not he was Kakuemon from Wakayama, a region whose coastal waters boast good harvests of sea breams to date.

The early-morning boat pilgrimage to Nishinomiya Ebisu Shrine

Saikaku’s story about Gennai has another episode relevant to our purpose; his failed early-morning pilgrimage to Nishinomiya Ebisu Shrine by sea. One can watch TV news shows on the 10th January every year that report that hardly does the shrine open its gate in the early morning before many young men rush in for its central building in competition with one another, and that the shrine awards the winner the prize ‘The Lucky Boy of the Year’. But no one hears in detail of how this avowedly old racing event developed over time. Interestingly enough, Saikaku in his Nihon Eitaigura wrote about Gennai’s regular attendance—and his careless nonattendance—at the early-morning pilgrimage to the shrine on the 10th January by boat (for details see Morita 2011). Although there is no definitive evidence for it, it is not too unreasonable to infer from Gennai’s high-speed boat that the pilgrimage took one or another form of boat racing in those days, and that it provided a prototype for today’s racing for ‘The Lucky Boy of the Year’. Gennai’s sort of high-speed boat was originally used for whaling, but is used for festive boat races (Figure 9), for it is easy to change her direction. Moreover, considering that usual use was made of a small boat with twelve oars for an urgent purpose (Figure 8) and of a large boat with forty for a less urgent and more caring or long-distance purpose, it seems to have been reasonable enough that Gennai would have chosen a boat with twenty oars on the morning that he woke up too early. Assuming that he would have had forty sailors bend the oars by turns from embarkation to landing and that the weather and tide would have had no effect on his navigation on the average, Saikaku’s description of Gennai’s fourteen hours or so travel from Taiji to Nishinomiya seems to be realistic enough or not too fictitious to be a reliable material for social history (for detail see Morita 2011). It is not too conjectural to infer from this that the coastal waters before Nishinomiya Ebisu Shrine were covered with innumerable high-speed boats coming across the nation on the day of

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**Figure 6**

**Figure 7**

**Figure 8**

**Figure 9**
early morning pilgrimage.

That the annual boat race at Nishinomiya, on the 10th of January, attracted many fearless sailors seeking the crown, is implied in an early-modern tale that dates from 330 years ago, and it is very likely. All novels and tales are not too unreliable for historiography.

Concluding Remarks

Henrich Schliemann (1822-1890), a German archaeologist, discovered the ancient remains of Troy along with the Mycenaean sites, led by his belief that that Homer's *Iliad* reflects historical events, a pioneering work on Aegean civilisation. This way of discovery may not be confined to the archaeology or historiography of the West. We conclude the present paper by suggesting that the classic literature all over the world may provide us numerous hints to unknown marine ethnographies.