

TATTOOED GUARDIANS OF OUR OCEAN GODS

Ignacy-Marek Kaminski

The 'NO TATTOO' warnings appeared in Japanese and English long after an expanding beach had divided our ancient fishing village into two halves located on the opposite sides of the bay. The black dressed Beach Security Patrols (BSP) kept tattooed folks from entering the ocean and the beach taverns zone. Beachgoers were ordered to either cover their tattoos with tape, or sunbath in their clothes. Some locals conformed. Many men wearing full-body tattoos refused. Only old fishermen I had befriended after settling near the beach and joining the volunteer Life Guards five years ago, laughed at my surprise at an emerging new social order. The fishermen doubted the power of the newly installed 'NO TATTOO' warnings.

"Since ancient times, tattooing among fishermen has been a sacred ritual offered to our Guardian Gods to keep our journey safe."

"Safe?" I wondered.

"Yes. Our Ocean Gods needed to know who you really were all along your life journey..." My fishing village friends taught me. "Even if typhoons or tsunami took your life-boat away and your body turned out on a different shore, your tattoo would identify your soul. Your family could trace your journey to the Gods and honor your spirit at a home altar wherever you might be. Don't fear, come and swim with our Guardian Gods along a portable Omikoshi altar on Ocean Day..."

Three summers and several Pacific Swimming Races later, the elders of my neighborhood's Ishigami Shrine finally allowed me to join my fellow Volunteer Life Guards in a two kilometer long 'Omikoshi Swimming Ritual'. The Omikoshi altar and a Shinto priest, a Kannushi, were carried onboard my fisherman friend's boat. The other boat carried the shrine elders and children playing drums and bamboo flutes. For the first time, two foreign Sakanoue residents were allowed to join some twenty Japanese swimmers from the Sakanokuchi fishing village. We swam deep into the bay where the sacred rock used to rest before it was offered by fishermen to Ishigami Shrine many centuries ago.

While swimming, we carried a small bowl of parboiled red rice, passing it from hand to hand. When a distant Fuji-san appeared behind Enoshima Island, the boats anchored. As we shared the festive *sekihan* rice we had brought to please the Ocean God, the Kannushi blessed the ocean and all us swimmers. After our rice sharing ritual was completed, we all raced 1 km back to the fishing side of the beach. I reached the shore last. We all earned our Ishigami protective wooden badges and shared sacred sake and beer honoring the Ocean Gods. Then we escorted our portable Omikoshi back to Ishigami Shrine's ocean rock. Wearing my protective shrine badge, I walked back to a narrow sand strip crowded with beach taverns and thousands of sunbathers controlled by dozens of private Beach Security Patrols (BSP).

A few days later, a local owner of a beach tavern I had befriended years earlier noticed the shrine badge hanging around my neck and invited me for a beer on the house.

"So the Ishigami Elders and the Fishing Village finally let you join our Omikoshi swimming ritual. Lucky you..."

"Lucky?"

"Having Ocean Gods on your side used to help in old times. And Fisher Folks are right to doubt the power of these new 'NO TATTOO' signs. They are useless!"

"But you put the 'NO TATTOO' sign at your tavern's entrance..."

"Local orders... Have to make a living, man!" Then he pulled up his T-shirt and showed me his full-body tattoo. "Plenty of our guys running beach houses with their tattoos hidden, like I do. That's how life goes along our shores these days."

If he was a second generation fisherman who lost his ancestors' boat to typhoons, or a member of the local Yakuza gangs controlling many beach houses along the shore, or both, I didn't learn. The fishing village folks didn't care how he had earned his tattoo. "Our Ocean Gods have known his and our life journeys better than our town's local law enforcement services. Behind each tattoo is a different destiny."

Soon after joining the community of beach cleaning volunteers, I had witnessed two black dressed, heavily built BSPs knocking down with karate blows a skinny, ordinary looking Japanese man trying to trespass the *NO TATTOO* zone. He lay unconscious on the sand that once belonged to the dragnet fishermen for several minutes. His companion helped him to stand up. They silently bypassed the nearby beach police station, the *kōban*, and walked away towards a traffic light crossing. Who the ordinary local men brutalized by the Beach Security Patrols were, and how many similarly unprovoked incidents happened before, I didn't dare ask then. And yet I couldn't stop wondering how our geographically divided beach and our guard/ians' differing attitudes to tattoos, were symbolically rooted in the country's ancient past. The past when wearing a tattoo wasn't associated with crime, but with the sacred guardians living in the nature surrounding us.

When I shared the story in the fishing village, I was advised to keep away from the BSPs and their '*NO TATTOO*' zone. "Our Guardian Ocean Gods will take care of these dark souls and their new laws soon."

The next summer the Beach Security Patrolmen were changed with less brutal ones and new teams of more community friendly, blue-dressed patrolmen were introduced to the beach crowds. But the '*NO TATTOO*' zone that wasn't mentioned in any local guide has remained in our divided fishing village, for the time being. "Our Guardian Gods are getting slower these days..." A young widow with four kids who replaced her dead fisherman husband as a family boat skipper a few years earlier sighed. "Nowadays even fish avoid our polluted bay." She was earning her living by running a beach booth to rent umbrellas and plastic toy boats to the visiting sunbathers during the summer.

Millions of Japanese and non-Japanese visit our beautiful hometown annually. Some tourists who passed through our divided fishing village and noticed a tattooed young fisherman dragging his heavily loaded boat safely to the shore after the latest typhoon, might have reflected over the guardian power of our Ocean Gods.

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Francesco Baldessari "Kamakura. A Historical Guide." 2016/

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• THE JAPANESE MATSURI

Kamakura has a rich cultural tradition to draw upon, so, in spite of its small size, it has a great number of extremely interesting festivals—matsuri—all year round.

But even more than interesting they are fun in a distinctly rowdy way. Drinking too much at neighborhood festivals—and those are the original ones, the real thing—is allowed and expected, from males at least. In the past even sexual excesses were forgiven if they took place at matsuri time. Yakuza often show up, together with cheap food stalls, to display their tattoos, and the continuous rumbling of the Japanese drum, the huge taikō, excites Japanese and foreigners alike. In fact, excitement and speed are the sensations I most associate with these events.

The word matsuri, however, derives from the verb matsuru, and a look at the dictionary reveals an unexpected complexity in these noisy events. The verb means to worship, deify, enshrine. Matsuri are fun and serious business at the same time, and another etymology can explain why.

Everybody in Japan is, at least in theory, a shrine's ujiko, or protege. The term however literally means "son of the clan," and goes back to the times when Japanese were indeed divided in rival groups. Each clan worshiped a common ancestor but, later, as the clans

Matsuri of Kamakura



Foreigners are always welcome, and many like my friend Marek take advantage of the opportunity.



gradually disappeared, the ancestor evolved into a tutelary spirit not tied to a family, but to a place. That spirit is what is being paraded here, for a matsuri is in its essence a Catholic procession, albeit without the seriousness. The statue of the village's protector saint is carried around to meet the people, so that it knows what they look like, then in the fields among the growing crops, to make sure it knows what it is expected to do.

