**【A Cormorant Master’s Day】**

**1) Morning Care and Cleaning**

A cormorant master rises each morning between 6:00 and 7:00 a.m. Regardless of season, a cormorant master spends the first part of each day tending to his cormorants. He removes the birds from their sleeping baskets and checks each one’s condition by feeling its throat, watching it flap its wings, and assessing its demeanor. Based on this inspection, the cormorant master decides which of his cormorants are fit for fishing that evening. The cormorants are then released into large enclosures, where they can roam around, bathe, and socialize during the day. Meanwhile, the cormorant master cleans the birds’ sleeping area, rinses their baskets, and inspects and repairs his fishing equipment.

**2) Supervising the Cormorants**

From morning until late afternoon, the cormorants remain together in their enclosure. During those hours, the cormorant master is occupied with various tasks, but he does not leave the birds totally unsupervised. Fights between cormorants can be extremely violent, and the cormorant master must remain within earshot to intervene if necessary. This is one reason why cormorant masters keep the birds in enclosures in or near their own residences.

**3) Selecting Cormorants and Loading the Boat**

As evening approaches, the cormorant master readies his birds and equipment. Of the 20 or so birds that each cormorant master keeps, he takes only 10 to 12 with him each evening. His choice of birds depends on the morning’s physical inspection, the condition of the river, and the birds’ temperaments. Some cormorants are naturally better fishers than others, but using those birds every evening would quickly wear them out, so the cormorant master seeks to balance the group between youth and experience. The chosen birds are loaded into either two- or four-bird baskets, and the remaining cormorants are fed and put into their sleeping baskets.

At around 4:00 in the afternoon, the cormorant master’s boatmen, the *nakanori* and *tomonori*, bring his fishing boat to the riverbank. They set the *kagaribō*—the long wooden pole that holds the metal fire basket over the water—in its place by the prow. Branches of Rose of Sharon (*mukuge*) are wedged in around the base of the *kagaribō.* The sap from its leaves reduces friction between the boards and the pole, allowing it to swivel more easily. The boatmen also load the fishing equipment, cormorant baskets, and bundles of pine firewood. Once the cormorant master is aboard, the boat heads upstream to the meeting place.

**4) At the Meeting Place**

In the early evening, the six cormorant boats gather at a spot on the northern bank just below Ukai Ōhashi Bridge. The fishermen light a campfire and begin their final preparations. The cormorant masters put on their traditional fishing attire and remove the cormorants from their baskets. Each bird is fitted with a thin cord called a *tanawa*. One part of the cord—the *haragake*—is tied around the cormorant’s belly, and another part—the *kubiyui*—around its neck. To avoid injuring the bird, the *kubiyui* is tied just tight enough to prevent the cormorant from swallowing large fish while still allowing it to swallow small ones. Judging the tightness correctly is a skill that takes many years of experience to acquire.

While the cormorant masters prepare the birds, the boatmen light the fire baskets. The six helmsmen (*tomonori*) gather to hold the nightly lottery that determines each boat’s position in the fishing formation. A boat can be positioned in the center of the river, close to either bank, or somewhere in between. Positioning can greatly affect how many *ayu* (sweetfish) are caught by each boat, so Nagara River fishermen developed the lottery system as a way to ensure that everyone has an equal chance of securing the best position. Once the sun has fully set, the boats head out.

**5) Fishing with the Cormorants**

As the cormorant boats proceed gradually downstream, each cormorant master must maintain his fire while managing the constantly overlapping lines of the diving cormorants. As each bird dives, the cormorant master watches carefully to see if it comes up with a fish. A bulge in the bird’s throat is the signal for the cormorant master to pull the cormorant into the boat, where it spits the fish into a basket called the *hakekago*. Cormorants can hold as many as five ayu in their throats at a time, but they rarely collect that many before being brought in. While the cormorants fish, the cormorant masters call, “Ho! Ho!” to encourage them.

The boats continue downstream until they reach the area just before Nagara Bridge. There, they regroup for the climax of the evening, called the *sōgarami.* They turn and pole back upstream a short distance before turning again and returning to the bridge in a perfect line that spans the breadth of the river. This spectacle concludes the evening’s fishing.

**6) Feeding the Cormorants**

After the boatmen pull the fishing boats onto the bank and begin to unload, the cormorant masters untie the *tanawa* from the cormorants and feel their bellies to determine how many smaller fish they swallowed during the evening. If a cormorant has not eaten enough, the cormorant master feeds it mackerel or other baitfish until it is full. Afterward, the cormorants are loaded into their carrying baskets and taken back to their enclosures. The masters place them in their sleeping baskets, and another day draws to a close.