

【Traditional Techniques】

Many of the skills and methods that cormorant fishermen use today have changed little since the Edo period (1603–1867). Historical depictions of cormorant fishing portray the cormorant masters operating just as they do today, managing the lines of numerous birds and feeding the fire baskets that hang from the prows of their boats. Such paintings also depict the fishing boats proceeding in choreographed formation for the benefit of onlookers, another tradition that continues today.

Sōgarami

The climax of each evening's fishing is a formation known as the *sōgarami*, which roughly means “all linking together.” For most of the night, the cormorant boats travel downstream in a loose configuration, but just before Nagara Bridge, they turn around and head back upstream. After a certain distance, the boats turn and travel downriver again, now arranged in a single line that stretches from bank to bank. As the boatmen steer, they beat the sides of the boat with their oars to startle the *ayu* (sweetfish) out of hiding. With the cormorants diving before them, the boats return to Nagara Bridge in a dramatic display for the passengers on the sightseeing boats lined up along the bank.

The exact origins of the *sōgarami* are unknown. Ostensibly, it drives the *ayu* away from the shallows along the banks and into the path of the cormorants, but this effect is minimal. Instead, the custom likely developed during the Edo period as a show of respect to visiting members of the ruling Owari clan or other dignitaries.

Managing the Cormorant Lines

Leaning over one side of the boat's prow, the cormorant master manages the long cords tied to his 10 to 12 cormorants. The lines must be constantly monitored and kept from tangling so that the birds can dive quickly in any direction. Holding the crisscrossing cords in his left hand, the cormorant master skillfully separates them with his right, then returns the untangled lines to his left. Remarkably, he does this while pulling cormorants onto the boat to collect their *ayu*.

Raising the Lines

As the cormorant boats progress down the Nagara River, they occasionally pass over shallows where the boats barely clear the riverbed. The cormorant masters are familiar with these places, and as they approach each one, they raise the cormorants' lines high to prevent the birds from diving and becoming pinned under the boat.

Feeding the Fire Basket

In addition to managing the cormorant lines and collecting the catch, each cormorant master must maintain the blazing fire in the iron basket that hangs from his boat's prow. As the fire burns, the cormorant master must regularly add wood to keep it going. These fires, called *kagaribi*, provide light for the cormorants and lure ayu to the surface of the water. To make the fires burn as brightly as possible, the fishermen use Japanese red pine, a wood with a high resin content that burns easily. Using this wood, the flames get hot enough to warp the rings of the iron baskets.