

## 【Ukai Spectator Boats on the Nagara River】

### Edo Period (1603–1867)

Gifu's cormorant fishing gained popularity as a sightseeing attraction during the mid-Edo period after the famed *haikai* poet Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694) visited the area in 1688. Prior to this, observing the fishing was primarily an activity of the ruling elite and their guests, but Bashō's poem about the spectacle brought instant fame to the Nagara River.

<i>omoshirōte</i>	Exhilaration
<i>yagate kanashiki</i>	followed by melancholy—
<i>ubune kana</i>	the cormorant boats.

Some have explained Bashō's melancholy as pity for the *ayu* (sweetfish) killed by the cormorants. The poem may also be an expression of the transient nature of excitement or pleasure in life. Regardless, the poem drew many people of all ranks to visit Gifu and experience cormorant fishing for themselves. By the end of the Edo period, the operation of spectator boats had become well established in the area.

### Meiji, Taishō, and Early Shōwa Eras (1868–1945)

In 1871, the nationwide dissolution of Japan's domain system removed the local Owari clan from their position of power, and, along with them, the support of cormorant fishing on the Nagara River. Without the infrastructure to distribute their fish, the cormorant fishermen had no choice but to find new sources of support for their profession.

The fishermen partnered with the spectator-boat operators to raise the profile of cormorant fishing as a tourist attraction. Local inns and food vendors were also drawn into the partnership. During the Taishō era (1912–1926), the city of Gifu took over administration of both the cormorant fishing and spectator boats. In 1929, it established a fixed time for cormorant fishing, making it easier for sightseers and boat operators to coordinate. Visitors to the Nagara increased such that a riverside hotel called the Nagaragawa Hotel was opened to accommodate them in 1933, and in 2012, the hotel site was reopened as the Nagaragawa Ukai Museum.

### Spectator Boats: The Spectacle of Ukai

Visitors to the Nagara River both past and present have come not only for the chance to

see cormorant fishing but also by the beauty of the river itself. Bordered by lush hills and Mt. Kinka, the Nagara is one of Japan's three cleanest rivers. As in centuries past, sightseers can tour it in traditional wooden boats. Maneuvering the vessels using poles and oars requires expert skill that was designated a Gifu City Important Intangible Folk-Cultural Asset in 2012.

As of January 2020, there are 40 spectator boats in operation on the Nagara River, 30 of which are wooden. Unfortunately, many of the boats were destroyed by Typhoon Vera (the Isewan Typhoon) in 1959, and the shipyard that produces them using traditional materials and methods could not replace them fast enough. Fiberglass boats with outboard motors have been adopted in their place.

During the fishing, the captains of the spectator boats coordinate with the cormorant fishermen to give passengers a close view of the action. For the *sōgarami* formation, the evening's finale, the spectator boats are lined up along the banks to give the fishing boats room for the display. Afterward, the cormorant boats pull up to the spaces between them, where passengers can see the cormorant masters untie their birds and reward them with baitfish.

### **Spectator Boats: The Cuisine**

For centuries, visitors to the Nagara River have sampled dishes made with ayu as part of the experience of viewing *ukai*. Paintings from the Edo period (1603–1867) depict boat passengers relaxing with entertainers while enjoying fine food and alcohol. Visiting dignitaries were often treated by their hosts to fresh, cormorant-caught ayu or *ayuzushi*, a local dish made from salted, rice-packed ayu that is fermented in a wooden tub.

Today, the boat operators do not offer meals, but packaged dinners to eat on the boats are available from many of the local hotels. Some of the meal plans include skewers of ayu that are grilled on a small boat and delivered individually. Other meals may instead include ayu specialties such as traditional *ayuzushi* and modern *ayu no sugatazushi*, or “ayu-dressed sushi.” Instead of being fermented, this dish is made with gutted, whole ayu wrapped around vinegared rice and cut into bite-sized pieces.