

## **【Cormorant Fishing: Forging a Bond between River and Community】**

Cormorant fishing is a highly traditional and equipment-dependent profession, and its preservation depends on the skills and efforts of not just the fishermen but also a large and varied community of craftsmen. Boatwrights, carpenters, boatmen, basket weavers, and even tour guides and hospitality workers are part of the intricate system that supports and is supported by cormorant fishing on the Nagara River.

### **Spectator-Boat Operators**

Each evening, spectator boats ply the river alongside the cormorant-fishing boats, offering their passengers the best views of the action without blocking one another or the fishing boats. These traditional wooden boats are propelled along the Nagara River with long poles (*sao*) held by boatmen at the prow and stern. The boatmen must contend with changing winds, currents, and river depth and be ready to alter course in an instant using nothing but their poles and long oars (*kai*). Developing these skills requires years of experience on the river. In Gifu, around 130 people are currently registered as captains of spectator boats.

### **Boat Construction**

The cormorant-fishing boats and the wooden spectator boats are built using traditional methods. Both types of boat are made using Japanese umbrella pine and assembled using custom-made iron spikes called *funakugi*. No specific design plan or blueprint is used; instead, the craftsmen are guided entirely by skill, experience, and the specific requests of their clients. The craft is preserved through in-person, oral instruction alone. Experienced boatwrights work together with their successors, teaching them the skills they will need to preserve the craft for future generations. The boatbuilding tradition has passed from master to apprentice in this way for hundreds of years.

### **Bamboo Basketry**

In modern times, cormorant masters have taken up the task of producing some of the hand-crafted gear that had been supplied by the community in the past. This includes the production of their straw sandals (*ashinaka*) and water-repellent straw skirts (*koshimino*). However, more intricate items, such as bamboo baskets, are still made exclusively by specialists. The cormorants' sleeping baskets (*toyakago*), the two- and four-bird baskets used to carry cormorants to the river (*ukago*), and the baskets into which the birds give up their catch (*hakekago*) are all woven from local bamboo by

local craftsmen. The *hakekago* are specially made for use on the river, with flat, square bottoms that make them less likely to tip in a rocking boat. They are woven in a tapered shape that helps to prevent fish in the bottom of the basket from being crushed.

### **Harvesting Pinewood**

The brilliant flame at the prow of a cormorant-fishing boat is one of the profession's most distinctive visual images. To keep the fire burning brightly, a cormorant master must constantly add split pine logs to the basket, typically consuming two or three armloads over the course of an evening. In the past, the pinewood was gathered on Mt. Kinka, and everything from roots to knotty wood was used. Today, cormorant fishermen prepare a stock of uniformly sized lengths of pine, which they season over the winter.