

## **Fisheries: History and Culture**

Yakushima, a mountainous island on the Kuroshio Current with limited arable land, has relied on food from the sea for survival since ancient times. Displays of gratitude to the sea have always been a part of island life, taking the form of traditional performances and the worship of Ebisu, one of Japan's Seven Gods of Fortune.

### *Evolution of the Fisheries Industry*

Archaeological sites excavated in Isso, on the north coast of Yakushima, date back to the Jomon period, between 10,000 and 300 BCE. They contained remnants of fish bones and seashells, suggesting that inhabitants of the island enjoyed abundant hauls for thousands of years. Flying fish and skipjack were the main catches around the sixteenth century, and it was customary to present dried flying fish to the shogunate in Edo and the lords of the Satsuma domain (now Kagoshima Prefecture).

Yakushima produced an average of 1,800 kilograms of dried skipjack annually by the late nineteenth century, and catches of around four million flying fish were recorded each year. However, fishing boats from the Satsuma Peninsula in Kyushu began to encroach southward on the fishing grounds off Yakushima, and overfishing led to the gradual disappearance of skipjack from the island's waters. As a result, the islanders shifted to mackerel fishing. Entrants from Yakushima won a prize at a national exposition for dried mackerel in 1897, and since then, Yakushima dried mackerel has been a specialty of the island. By the late 1920s, approximately 4,500 tons of dried mackerel flakes were produced in a year at one factory alone.

### *Ebisu*

Ebisu is the god of good catches and is worshipped as a guardian deity of fisheries. Depictions of Ebisu typically show a figure holding a fishing rod in the right hand and a sea bream in the left hand. Fishermen give thanks to Ebisu after a large catch, and pray for a bountiful catch after a poor one. The appearance of the deity varies by region.

Two small shrines known as the "Beach Ebisu" stand at the Isso fishing harbor. One of the shrines is made from a porous rock and houses both a statue of Ebisu holding a sea bream and a headless stone statue. The other shrine is made of a hard, reddish stone and enshrines a small natural stone within. The Ebisu with the sea bream is believed to be a guardian of skipjack fishing, while the natural stone Ebisu is said to bring good fortune in catching flying fish. It has long been believed that stones in the ocean got along with fish underwater, and that placing the stones on the beach facing the sea would attract fish to the shore. For this reason, all Beach Ebisu face towards the sea.

Another Ebisu statue in Isso is made of *yakusugi* cedar and worshipped at a small stone altar known as the “Village Ebisu.” Villagers pray to this Ebisu for success in business. The use of the prized *yakusugi* wood reflects the islanders’ reverence for Ebisu.

A wooden carved Ebisu looks out over the port of Mugio on the southeastern coast of the island. This Ebisu is known as the “good-looking Ebisu” because of the handsome face and bright colors. A festival is held every January 10 to thank this Ebisu for his blessings and protection, and to pray for safety at sea as well as good fishing. Ebisu usually holds a sea bream, but this one holds a skipjack—something which began to be seen when the Ebisu faith was introduced from the mainland after skipjack fishing flourished in the Edo period (1603–1867).

#### *Flying Fish Summoning Dance*

The “Summoning of the Flying Fish” is a traditional women’s dance performed in Nagata village to pray for large catches. On the Buddha’s birthday, which is celebrated on April 8 by the lunar calendar (early to mid-May by the current calendar), people pray to the Buddha on the beach and then visit an Ebisu shrine at the mouth of the river. Female performers wave bamboo poles adorned with leaves, woven sedge hats, and colored streamers while singing to summon the flying fish. Variations of this ceremony are found on Amami Oshima Island to the south and on islands near Taiwan. The performance of this traditional dance ended when flying fish were no longer caught in Nagata, but it has been revived recently as a tourist attraction.