

8 Washing Away the Past

On 11 March 2011, Ayukawa was erased by an 8.4-metre-high tsunami. Of the roughly 700 houses, over two-third were washed away in the span of a few minutes. Despite the near-complete destruction, the number of victims was surprisingly low for a community of 1,400, with seventeen dead and six missing. The two last whaling stations, situated near the port, were crushed first by the waves, erasing some of the last reminders of Ayukawa's past as the main whaling port in northeastern Japan. During a debate in the House of Representatives, Shitamichi Yoshikazu, the chairman of the Japan Small-Type Whaling Association, pushed for a swift reconstruction of the Ayukawa whaling stations:

Ayukawa was a representative example of Japan's coastal small-type whaling: a town that preserved the history and tradition of 9,000 years of whales used by the Japanese race. Should the light of whaling go out in Ayukawa, not only will the regional community collapse, but it would also mean that Japan's whaling history has come to an end.¹

Like Shitamachi, many local stakeholders believed that the fate of the town was inextricably linked to the continued existence of whaling: 'The only way for Ayukawa to live is to make use of the whales for the development of the town. The tsunami has not changed that.'² Indeed, only one year after the tsunami, one of the whaling stations was the first building to be repaired in Ayukawa and coastal whaling commenced once again in 2012. As folklorist Kato Kōji argued, the people of Ayukawa drew much strength for the reconstruction of their town from an idealised image of their hometown during its Golden Age in the 1950s.³ This last chapter will trace the development of industrial whaling in northeastern Japan after 1912 and show at the example of Ayukawa how the region reinvented its own past to become part of Japan's national whaling culture. But as whaling became the principal symbolical capital

¹ MAFF, 'Dai 4 kai geirui hokaku chōsa ni kansuru kentō iinkai giji gaiyō'.

² Takanarita, 'Hogeji kara sekai wo miru', 101–2.

³ Kato, *Tsunami to kujira to pengin to*, 10.

of Ayukawa, its former local ecological knowledge, how to live side-by-side with whales without hunting them, was forgotten.

Exterminating the Gentlemen of the Sea

It is not without irony that the Same-ura Incident solidified industrial whaling in northeastern Japan. With the decline of near-coastal fishing at the beginning of the twentieth century, the cetosphere no longer held the same environmental importance for fishermen as they were no longer dependent on sei whales and other baleen whales to bring sardines close to the shore. Whales had become a solely industrial commodity and while this commodity played a key part in the community's economy, the animals themselves lost their cultural importance in the everyday lives of the locals.

Furthermore, the geographical location of the Same-ura station functioned as a bridgehead for Tōyō Hogeï and other whaling companies to expand their activities to Hokkaido. While Tōyō Hogeï opened a successful station at Muroan in southern Hokkaido in 1912, the whaling companies Dai-Nihon Suisan and Kii Suisan both encountered local resistance in Akkeshi and Nemuro and had to move to Konbumori in 1914. The two whaling stations in Konbumori helped the little town to prosper and in only a few years the number of houses doubled.⁴

In 1915, Tōyō Hogeï set its eye on the main prize: The Sea of Okhotsk, where hundreds of whales gathered each summer to feed on the plankton bloom. They opened a station in Abashiri and presented the local fishing union with an offer similar to the one in Same-ura a few years earlier: a tax of five yen for every caught whale. Having learned from their experiences at the Sanriku Coast, they also built their station four kilometres outside of the settlement so as to not disturb the local fishing activities. As whale meat was not popular among the locals and Tōyō Hogeï wanted to reduce waste as much as possible, they sold the waste to local entrepreneurs to produce oil and fertiliser. Even after the opening of a whale meat salting factory in 1916, whale fertiliser remained important economically. After only five years, however, the whalers had exhausted the local whale stocks to the degree that the station had to be closed again.⁵

With the advancement of refrigerator technology, it became possible to store whale meat during the summer months, further bringing down whale meat and oil prices.⁶ At the Sanriku Coast, whale fertiliser

⁴ Kushiro-shi chiiki shiryō shitsuhen, *Kushiro hogeishi*, 101–7.

⁵ Kushiro-shi chiiki shiryō shitsuhen, *Kushiro hogeishi*, 112–15; Abashiri shishi hensan iinkai, *Abashiri shishi*, 912–13.

⁶ Uni, 'Kinsei kindai no geiniku ryōri no shiyō bui to kindai Nihon ni okeru geinikushoku no fukyū katei', 20–1.

remained economically relevant for another few years. By 1923, twenty-five independent whale fertiliser businesses were operating on the Oshika Peninsula and in Ishinomaki. However, by then they only contributed to around 5 per cent of the overall profit from whaling.⁷ Whales were captured offshore in the Sea of Kinkazan and the local population saw whales primarily in the form of flensed carcasses and piles of whale meat drying in the sun outside of the town. The anthropogenic transformation of the coastal environment fundamentally changed the human–whale relationship, leading to a new regime in which the ocean around Japan became a firm part of the anthroposphere and was no longer shaped by cetaceans as the main keystone species.

This new regime was put to the test for the first time in the early 1930s, when the fishing and whaling industries had not only to contend with exhausted marine resources but also with the Great Depression. The prices for whale oil and meat dropped so much that many whaling boats stayed in the port as the running costs of the crew were higher than what they could earn with a good whale catch. Alone in 1931, over 10,000 cans of unsold whale oil were stored at one company.⁸ During this time, over 200 people lost their jobs in the whaling industry in Ayukawa. Even harder hit was Hachinohe, where in 1933, the whaling station in Same-ura, which had at this point been integrated well into the community and provided jobs for over 500 people, had to close due to financial difficulties. This time, locals fought fruitlessly to keep the station running.⁹ The Great Depression also coincided with a drastic reduction of whale stocks in the Japanese waters. In May 1930, the marine biologists Hayashi and Inouye of the Imperial University Tōhoku presented a dark future for whales and the whaling industry in the *Japan Times & Mail*:

At present the sei-whale, the third in industrial value, is on the way to be exterminated. . . . All kinds of whales living in the water around Japan are decreasing not only in number but also in size. We can say nothing but that they are dying away. Thus, one of the largest whaling grounds in the world is now being ruined.¹⁰

⁷ The Oshika gunshi notes that the twenty-five whale fertiliser businesses produced about 2,500 tawara (straw bags) of whale fertiliser. A tawara could be sold for five yen, making a total of 12,500 yen. On average, some 300 whales were caught in Ayukawa during the summer season. A whale could be sold for 800 yen, making a total revenue of 240,000 yen for the whaling companies, see Oshika-gun, *Oshika gunshi*, 239.

⁸ Kahoku Shimpō, 'Sū ha ooi ga rieki ga sukunai'; Oshika chōshi hensan iinkai, *Oshika chōshi: Jōkan*, 172.

⁹ Watanabe, *Japan's Whaling*, 70–2. Industrial whaling was conducted in Same-ura again for a short time between 1947 and 1949, see Maeda and Teraoka, *Hogei*, 111.

¹⁰ *Japan Times & Mail*, 'Protect the Whale'.

Reports of whales decreasing in size are alarming as they indicate that whales are caught before they have matured and had thus not the opportunity to reproduce, which would over time potentially destroy the stock. The authors of the article feared that at the current rate of hunting, whales may go extinct, which would be a loss for humanity:

The whale is a huge, powerful creature. But it is not a lion or a leopard: on the contrary it is quite harmless. According to the experience of the whalers, it does not actively attack mankind, rather it has a tendency to become intimate with us. Whales are magnificent and awe-inspiring in figure and have something gentle and great in manner. They may be called gentlemen of the sea. It is sometimes said that whales waste the fishing grounds. Most fishers now know, however, that this is merely unfounded conjecture. We can hardly find one reason why they must be exterminated.¹¹

Hayashi and Inoue's depiction of whales as 'gentlemen of the sea' stands also in a stark contrast to the whaling industry, for whom whales are little more than industrial raw material. Interestingly, the authors do not argue that whales are useful for fishing communities, but rather note that they are not hurting fisheries. In this way, whales have lost their status as 'gods of the sea' that bring fish towards the shore for the human benefit. However, by giving them new characteristics, such as an awe-inspiring figure or gentle manners, Hayashi and Inoue depict whales as harmless animals that do not deserve to be exterminated, but rather be protected because of their inherent value as living beings. In the article, the authors do not morally question the right of the whaling industry to hunt whales, but rather point out that without international regulation, whales 'will disappear everywhere most probably long before the middle of this century', which ultimately will hurt the whalers themselves most.¹²

First attempts to make such international regulation were undertaken with the Whaling Convention of 1931 and 1937, but in both instances, the Japanese government was unwilling to sign these agreements. Instead, the larger Japanese whaling companies joined their international competitors to hunt whales in the southern hemisphere, ignoring the hunting seasons and catch limits agreed upon by the other whaling nations. In 1934, Nippon Hogeï (formerly Tōyō Hogeï) bought their first factory ship from Norway and sent it together with five catcher boats to the Antarctic region. A year later, a second whaling fleet followed and by 1938 six factory ships belonging to three Japanese companies were operating in the region. Until 1941, when whaling was halted due to the Second World War, Japanese whalers killed over 32,840 whales in

¹¹ Japan Times & Mail, 'Protect the Whale'.

¹² Japan Times & Mail, 'Protect the Whale'.

Antarctic waters, compared to 14,296 whales in waters around the Japanese Empire (including Korea, Taiwan, and Karafuto) in the same year.¹³

The Rise of Coastal Whaling

Let us return once more to Ayukawa. While the whaling companies fundamentally changed the social and economic life of the village, one continued point of contention was the exclusion of locals for higher positions in the companies. Most fertiliser businesses were in the hands of local entrepreneurs, and many locals were hired as low-income workers on the whaling stations and whaling ships. However, positions such as captain, gunner, but also management of the stations were almost exclusively in the hands of men from western Japan. Moreover, the fertiliser plants were completely dependent on the large whaling companies for their main raw material of whale waste, meaning the companies could dictate whatever prices they liked.

In 1925, a group of fertiliser merchants came together to form the first independent whaling company 'Ayukawa Hogeï' that was exclusively in the hand of locals. However, despite catching over 100 whales in the first season, the company struggled to become economically viable. A newspaper article of the time indicates that the other whaling companies, especially those from Kansai, had strongly opposed the founding of Ayukawa Hogeï and did everything they could to prevent the company from becoming a threat to their market dominance. For example, Ayukawa Hogeï only received a permit to hunt sperm whales and was not allowed to hunt any other species, while they were also not permitted to sell whale meat, forcing them to turn the whole whale carcass into whale fertiliser.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the other whaling companies were allowed to hunt most whale species and they gradually expanded their influence. After 1923, some companies received special permits that allowed them to hunt whales even farther away than 100 miles from the coast.¹⁵

After only a few years of operating, Ayukawa Hogeï was sold in 1937 to a western Japanese whaling company.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Ayukawa Hogeï left a precedent as the first independent whaling company in Ayukawa: starting in 1933, former employees of larger whaling companies and local entrepreneurs began to hunt smaller whale species that the industry had so far deemed economically worthless, such as minke whales or Baird's

¹³ Terry, *Japanese Whaling Industry Prior to 1946*, 8–10.

¹⁴ Kahoku Shimpō, 'Hogeï seigen ha hanhada fukōkhei'.

¹⁵ Kondō, *Nihon engan hogeï no kōbō*, 300–1.

¹⁶ Oshika chōshi hensan iinkai, *Oshika chōshi: Chūkan*, 230–1.

beaked whales. Other than for the larger whale species no regulation existed for these whales and so anyone who could obtain a small, motorised fishing vessel and purchase a whaling gun could become an independent whaling entrepreneur.

Instead of turning these whales into fertiliser, however, they were sold locally for their meat. Initially, the demand for whale meat was negligible and the prices extremely low, but with the outbreak of the Second World War and the rationing of food, whale meat became an important source of proteins and an indigenous whaling cuisine developed at the Sanriku Coast based on minke whale meat. In 1944, large-scale whaling ceased as the whaling vessels were needed for the war effort and so many gunners and sailors who had so far worked for the large whaling companies joined the minke whale hunt.¹⁷ While the large companies brought wealth to the town, the small-scale minke whalers, which were often family-owned businesses, were much more incorporated into the social fabric of the town and were regarded by the locals as ‘our whaling’.¹⁸

After the war, the Japanese whaling industry, like many other industries, laid in ruins. Initially, the American occupying force restricted Japanese fisheries to the immediate coastal waters, but the fishing zone was extended further and further into the Pacific in the following years in order to feed the population. This included whaling, which was extended to the Ogasawara and Kazan Islands in November 1945 and in August 1946 also to the Antarctic waters.¹⁹ The prospect of renewed whaling in the Antarctic region was received with enthusiasm in Japan. A representative of the whaling industry calculated that each season enough whale meat for feeding thirty million Japanese people could be obtained.²⁰ In fact, 46 per cent of all animal protein consumed in 1947 came from whale meat, although this was mainly because much of the meat industry had been destroyed by the war.²¹ In the 1947 fishing season, 1,320 whales were killed in Antarctica, while coastal whalers killed as many as 1,992 whales, most of which were smaller species.²² In the eyes of many Japanese, whale meat saved them from famine and misery directly after the war. For the first time we can speak of a truly Japanese national whaling culture, for which whaling towns like Ayukawa stood as its symbolic representation.

¹⁷ Tōhoku nōseikyoku Ishinomaki tōkei jōhō shucchōjo, *Michinoku kujira monogatari*, 39–40.

¹⁸ Kato, *Tsunami to kujira to penguin to*, 96. ¹⁹ Finley, *All the Fish in the Sea*, 73–5.

²⁰ Nippon Times, ‘Steady Flow of Whale Meat is Envisioned as Fishing Fleet Being Groomed for Action’.

²¹ Watanabe, *Japan’s Whaling*, 125.

²² Nippon Times, ‘Whaling Industry is Vital for Welfare of Japanese’.

A Festival for the Wild Beasts of the Sea

Despite its short existence, Ayukawa Hogeï was not only an important first step of the region to emancipate itself economically from the whaling industry, but also to grow culturally independent from the western whaling culture. Even though whales had been transformed from helpers and messengers of the gods to an industrial raw material and old forms of local knowledge began to disappear from the collective memory, whales remained important cultural symbols. Over time, the religious and cultural importance of whales was re-evaluated and adapted to the new socio-economic and ecological realities. Today, for example, there are several whale memorial stones on the premise of Ayukawa's main Buddhist temple Kannon-ji. As I argued in Chapter 2, whale memorial stones were a custom of the western whaling places and differed from the natural-looking whale stones erected on the Sanriku Coast prior to the introduction of industrial whaling.

Despite the 300-year history of the temple, all whaling-related monuments at Kannon-ji are dated sometime after 1906. The oldest two cenotaphs were erected by Tōyō Hogeï in 1922 and 1928 respectively to appease the souls of whalers whose boats had been lost in the Sea of Kinkazan. The third monument is a three-metre-high whale monument tower from 1933, which reads:

Memorial tower for the spirits of one thousand whales. (Ayukawa Hogeï Company)

Unlike the two older monuments, this stone was not donated by one of the large whaling companies but by Ayukawa Hogeï. According to a contemporary newspaper article from November of 1933, the stone served as a protection against the 'whale curse': "The whalers believe that the motherly love is very strong in whales and when a whale calf is shot the mother will become insane and starts hunting after the whaling boat and even curses the families of the whalers to die with diseases. To counter these curses, this whale memorial tower has been erected."²³

As we have seen, in the Edo period, whale curse stories were connected to western Japanese whaling places and were uncommon on the Sanriku Coast. Mayumi Itoh argued that these rituals and memorial towers showed that the whalers not only wanted to relieve their guilt of killing whales but also treated whales, in religious terms, in the same way they did humans who died at sea.²⁴ Finding such a story here suggests that the perception of whales changed in Ayukawa after the introduction of industrial whaling. Furthermore, the timing of the erection of this stone was no

²³ Cited after: Kahoku Shimpō, 'Kujira no kuyōtō'.

²⁴ Itoh, *The Japanese Culture of Mourning Whales*, 47–50.

coincidence as only a few months earlier, a massive tsunami had destroyed large parts of Ayukawa, including many fertiliser plants.²⁵ With this monument, Ayukawa Hogeï not only sought divine protection but also demonstrated to the community and the other whaling companies that they had been successful in capturing over 1,000 whales, despite the constant pressure from the other companies, the difficult financial environment of the Great Depression, and the 1933 Sanriku tsunami.

The whale memorial stone was meant as a symbol of the emancipation of the locals from the larger whaling companies. Not only had Ayukawa Hogeï successfully demonstrated that they could perform whaling techniques, but they had also appropriated western whaling culture. Ayukawa was now equal to the western Japanese whaling companies. In this way, by the end of the war, in Ayukawa and at other whaling ports of the Sanriku Coast, a new coastal whaling culture had developed due to the establishment of independent whaling entrepreneurs. These coastal whalers not only facilitated new cultural traditions, which they adopted from western Japan, but also helped to establish a regional whaling cuisine based on minke whale meat, that differed from other regions.

The notion of a ‘whale curse’ remained a central pillar of the Ayukawa whaling culture. While not many primary sources have survived, we receive some glimpses of this culture from the novel *Kujira no Machi* (The Whaling Town) from 1943, which was re-released in 1955 under the more dramatic title *Umi no Yajū* (The Wild Beasts of the Sea).²⁶ Taikichi, the protagonist of the novel and possibly the alter ego of the author, who was a sailor himself, moves from Hokkaido to Ayukawa to work on a whaling ship.²⁷ In one scene in the novel, the crew of his ship captures four sperm whales and tow them with a chain to their catcher boat. However, one of the chained sperm whales is still alive and stares with hatred in his eyes towards the whalers. As one of the sailors assures Taikichi, the hate of the whale is not reserved for him: This whale is not holding a grudge against you. It is the captain. Before he was a captain, he has worked as a gunner and has until now killed over 1500 whales. It is the grudge of 1500 whales that the captain has gathered inside him.²⁸

Later in the novel, the crew pays their respect to their shipwrecked comrades at the whale memorial stones at Kannon-ji. One of the whalers explains that some decades ago a ship from the whaling company Tōyō

²⁵ Kahoku Shimpō, ‘Sanriku no gyohi gyōsha shinsai de daidageki’.

²⁶ ‘Umi no Yajū’ was also the Japanese title of a 1926 screen adaptation of *Moby Dick*. Later adaptation received different titles in Japanese.

²⁷ Kato, *Tsunami to kujira to penguin to*, 56.

²⁸ Kajino, *Umi no yajū (kujira no machi)*, 108–9.

Hogeï did go missing in the Sea of Kinkazan and the crew of thirteen was never found again. Many people in Ayukawa believed that a sperm whale was responsible for this.²⁹

Unlike Hayashi and Inoue, the novel does not portray whales as 'gentlemen of the sea' but rather as 'wild beasts of the sea', showing yet another shift in the perception of whales. According to the novel, the whalers believed whales would resent the humans for hunting them and would even attack the ships. This resentment could even transcend death and the angry souls of the whales could bring misfortune to the whalers or the community as a whole. To counter such curses and to relieve the guilt from killing other living beings, the erection of whale memorial stones and the holding of whale memorial services was necessary.

Such memorial services were ritualised in a yearly festival starting in 1953 when the first community-wide religious ceremony was held to celebrate the catching of over 40,000 whales since 1906 (Figure 8.1). Prior to the festival, whalers, of whom most originally came from western Japan, had held religious rituals among themselves. The new festival was integrated into the traditional Tanabata and O-Bon festival and included Buddhist rituals to comfort the spirits of whales and shipwrecked sailors alike with a floating lantern memorial service. For this, a priest from Kannon-ji brought down a whale tablet to the sea in a ritual called *umi segaki* so that the whale souls can be sent off to the sea beyond.³⁰ The appeasement of the whale souls was modelled after similar Buddhistic rituals from whaling regions in western Japan. It was believed that whales, like humans, could after their death become a Buddha and enter Nirvana or be reincarnated into a new life. However, when they are killed violently, they might end up as wandering hungry ghosts among the three Worlds of Karmic Reincarnation tormenting the living. The primary religious goal of the festival was therefore to appease the 'wild beasts of the sea' so that they would not bring harm to the community.

However, the festival fulfilled also other cultural needs of the Ayukawa community. Alongside the religious rituals, the festival was from the beginning designed to attract tourists from Sendai and Ishinomaki. A boat race and a demonstration shooting of a live whale took place in the harbour, baseball games and water sports. Moreover, the woman association reinvented and performed a New Year's folk dance from nearby Tashirojima, as the 'Seven Gods Dance' to impress visitors.³¹ Anthropologist Masami Iwasaki-Goodman has argued that this first 'whale festival' (*kujira matsuri*)

²⁹ Kajino, *Umi no yajū (kujira no machi)*, 120–1.

³⁰ Nishiwaki, 'Kujira Matsuri'; Kahoku Shimpō, 'Hogeï jikkyō mo kōkai'; Kahoku Shimpō, 'Ninki Yobu Hogeï Jigyō'.

³¹ Kato, *Tsunami to kujira to penguin to*, 206–7.

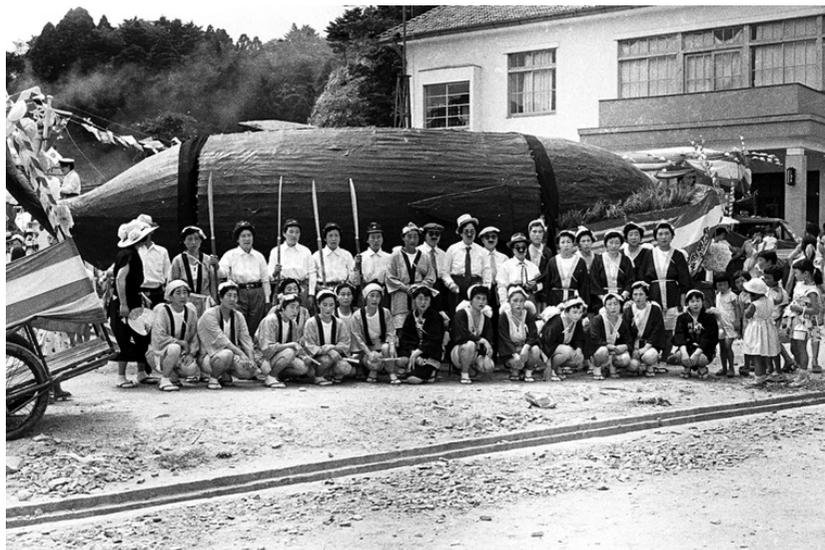


Figure 8.1 Whaling festival in Ayukawa in the 1950s. Photograph by Kanoi Seisuke.

marked the beginning of a new era when whales and whaling finally became a collective symbol for all inhabitants of Ayukawa.³² As a whaling port, the population of Ayukawa was affluent with many people staying in the town only for a few years before moving on. As a consequence, families were often torn apart and local associations fulfilled quasi-familial roles for many inhabitants of Ayukawa.³³ It is thus important to recognise that the festival was organised not by the whaling companies, but by the local groups, such as the firefighters, the women's group and the youth group. In later years, the organisation of the festival was taken over by the Ayukawa stores and shop organisation.

Similar to the whale memorial tower of Ayukawa Hogeï in 1933, these associations appropriated the religious symbols and rituals from the western Japanese whaling culture and made them their own. For example, in later years, the live shooting of a whale was replaced with a plastic mock whale that was caught in the harbour with the net-whaling technique as part of a performance.³⁴ As we have seen, the net whaling technique has

³² Iwasaki-Goodman, 'An Analysis of Social and Cultural Change in Ayukawa-Hama (Ayukawa Shore Community)', 80.

³³ Kato, *Tsunami to kujira to penguin to*, 42–4.

³⁴ Oshika chōshi hensan iinkai, *Oshika chōshi: Jōkan*, 185–6.

never successfully been established in the region and it is therefore not an essential part of the regions whaling history. While most locals were aware of this fact, by including the net-whale performance in the whale festival, the associations invented a new tradition that for outsiders seemed to be older than it actually was.³⁵

The whale festival was cemented as part of Ayukawa's culture on a national level with the release of the feature film *Kujira o tatakau otoko* (The Men who Fought Whales) in 1957, which might be loosely based on the previously mentioned novel. The protagonist of the movie, a Japanese gunner called Yamagi, arrives in Ayukawa suspecting that a rival gunner was involved in the death of his brother. The two gunners and their respective crews soon come in direct conflict with each other, also because both men are interested in the barmaid Yuki. The climax of the movie is set during the whale festival and after a bar fight, Yuki reveals to Yamagi that everything had been a misunderstanding, as the rival gunner had actually been a good friend of the brother but felt guilty for not being able to prevent his death during a whale hunt.

The film was shot on location, featuring footage of real whale hunts and the flensing of whales at a whaling station, giving us a glimpse of life in Ayukawa during the 'Golden Age' of whaling. The whale festival itself was performed a second time in this year in Ayukawa, so that the movie crew could film it.³⁶ We can see that during this time period the flensing was mostly done by the local women, something also mentioned in the novel.³⁷ While the life and hunt on the ships were portrayed in the movie as a purely masculine affair, the processing of the whales was no longer in the hands of men. Indeed, as early as 1911, 40 per cent of workers at the local fertiliser plants were women, who were preferred by the owners, as they could be paid lower wages than men.³⁸ Women are also prominent during the whale festivals, for example when a large whale puppet is dragged during the street and some flenser open its belly to reveal three dancing women inside. Gender roles had thus shifted, and women had become an integral part of the new Ayukawa whaling culture, not only as workers at the whaling stations but also as performers at and organisers of the whale festival.

Unlike the novel, whales appear here not as wild beasts but as a natural force that only the most masculine men can harvest to further his social status among his peers and among women. Despite its title, the movie is not really concerned with the fight between men and whales, but rather

³⁵ Kato, *Tsunami to kujira to pengin to*, 69.

³⁶ Kahoku Shimpō, 'Kujira No Hama Ni Roke-Tai'.

³⁷ Kajino, *Umi no yajū (kujira no machi)*, 30–1. ³⁸ Anonymous, 'Hiryō ninpuchō'.

whales are tokens of male potency as the rival whaling crews define their struggles over which group can kill more whales. In one scene only one group was able to shoot a whale in the Sea of Kinkazan, while the other group had to return to the harbour empty handed, looking entirely defeated. This is further highlighted during the whale festival, when Yagami has to show his superiority by defeating an opponent gunner by shooting the mock whale in the harbour with a harpoon cannon. Also, a reporter in the movie tells the captain of one of the whaling ships that ‘all people of Japan believe that you do a very good job and are very grateful for your work’, highlighting how a ‘masculine art’ like whaling was constructed as a service for the nation. Overall, the movie was an important propaganda piece for the whaling industry and presented Ayukawa as an important whaling port with a long history.

A Whaling Town without Whales

Ayukawa reached its peak in the middle of the 1950s, when the population had grown to 3,795 inhabitants. The city centre boasted not only stores for daily life, but also a movie theatre, bars, cafes, billiard halls, cabarets, pachinko parlours, and other entertainment establishments.³⁹ Older inhabitants often remember this time with nostalgia as the ‘Golden Age’ of Ayukawa, when the smell of whale oil in the air was associated with wealth. However, all this wealth came at the price of a destroyed cetosphere.

Shortly after the war, the Fisheries Agency had divided the whaling industry into three categories: pelagic whaling, which mainly focused on the Antarctic Ocean, large-type coastal whaling (LTCW), and small-type coastal whaling (STCW), the latter specialised in hunting smaller whales for local consumption with whaling vessels weighing less than 30 tons. Initially, the Fisheries Agency gave permits freely, and by 1948 over 73 vessels had registered as STCW, leading to fierce competitions among the whalers. Similarly, the five LTCW companies hunted large whales near Hokkaido and the Sanriku Coast without restrictions, but soon the whalers noticed a decrease in the size of the caught whales, just as Hayashi and Inouye had already warned in the 1930s. The Fisheries Agency began setting quotas for sperm whales, but according to Kondō Isao, a whaler and local historian from Ayukawa, the LTCW companies met in secret to set their own quotas. The companies began to actively deceive the Fisheries Agency supervisors who were sent to the whaling port to overwatch the quotas.⁴⁰

³⁹ Kato, *Tsunami to kujira to penguin to*, 61.

⁴⁰ Kondō, *Nihon engan hōgei no kōbō*, 339–42.

The same tactics were also used when two observers from the International Whaling Commission (IWC), of which Japan was a member since 1951, arrived in Kushiro and Ishinomaki to monitor Japanese coastal whaling in 1972.⁴¹ The whalers organised that the observer who was supposed to control the whaling stations in Onagawa, Ayukawa, and Yamada was accommodated in Ishinomaki, which was too far away to make effective control visits. Only after repeated complaints was the observer transferred to a nearby hostel in Ayukawa. The whalers not only falsified official records by recording the size and sex of the caught whales incorrectly but also proceeded to flense whales at night so that the observer could not record the true number of whales caught.⁴² These attempts at deception and mismanagement, born out of the need to remain financially viable, not only damaged Japan's international reputation but also accelerated the disintegration of the whale stocks. As a result, by 1971, fin whales were effectively extinct in the Sea of Kinkazan, followed by sei whales in 1975. Kondō concludes: 'The actual number of animals captured after 1950 is known only to the gods, the published number of whale catches are completely meaningless.'⁴³

Meanwhile, other nations terminated their whaling programs, and the international community demanded an end to all whaling activities. While the two IWC observers were operating in Japan, a ten-year moratorium on commercial whaling was suggested at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in June 1972. These were devastating news for Ayukawa. Only a year prior, in 1971, the new panoramic 'Cobalt Road' was opened that shortened travel time by car from Ayukawa to Ishinomaki. It was hoped that this new road would be a large boost for local tourism. In anticipation of large tourist crowds, the founder of Toba Hogeï, a local whaling company, took a large loan to build a massive hotel near Ayukawa.⁴⁴ Indeed, in the first year, over 750,000 guests came to the Oshika Peninsula. The main attraction for most tourists was minke whale meat, which was served at local restaurants or was sold at souvenir shops.⁴⁵

However, the prospect for implementing a whaling moratorium threatened the booming tourist industry. A local craftsman, who made jewellery out of sperm whale teeth, commented at the time: 'That the protection of whales has become so much talked about recently, worries me. To put it bluntly, if they decide not to take whales anymore, I'll be out of business.'⁴⁶ These worries were shared by many locals as 600 jobs were

⁴¹ Kahoku Shimpō, 'Bei Kara Kanshiin Futari'.

⁴² Kondō, *Nihon engan hogeï no kōbō*, 402–5.

⁴³ Kondō, *Nihon engan hogeï no kōbō*, 405. ⁴⁴ Toba, 'Toba Hogeï', 43–6.

⁴⁵ NHK, 'Shinkankō Ru-to'. ⁴⁶ NHK, 'Shinkankō Ru-to', 74–5.

directly or indirectly connected to whaling in Ayukawa. Tourism alone, especially without fresh whale meat and other whale products to sell, would not be enough to compensate for the loss of the whaling industry. Furthermore, without the tax money from the whaling industry, further investments into infrastructure were also threatened.⁴⁷

In an attempt to prevent the moratorium, the mayor of Ayukawa travelled to Tokyo to fight for the survival of commercial whaling. While he and others made whaling a national political issue, they could not prevent that the IWC voted for a ban on commercial whaling on great whales in 1982. Originally, Japan vetoed this decision and was thus not bound by the moratorium, but when the US government threatened to reduce the Japanese fishing quota in the American exclusive economic zone, the Japanese government rescinded their veto. The moratorium went into effect at the end of 1987, officially ending commercial whaling in Japan. However, this was not the end of all whaling activities: The LTCW companies merged their assets to form Kyōdō Senpaku, a new company that sent its ships to the Antarctic starting in 1988 to conduct whaling for scientific purposes, which was allowed under the moratorium.

The large companies that conducted LTCW had all interests in other fisheries, making their withdrawal from the unprofitable whaling industry less severe, especially as they were generously compensated by the Japanese government. STCW companies, on the other hand, were hit much harder: not only were they not compensated they were also forbidden to hunt the now-protected minke whales. Even so, STCW operators in the four communities Abashiri (Hokkaido), Ayukawa (Miyagi), Wadaira (Chiba), and Taiji (Wakayama) did not give up their licenses and instead continued whaling smaller species such as Baird's beaked whales, that were not protected by the moratorium.

In 1988, an international workshop of anthropologists aimed at answering whether STCW should be categorised at the IWC as 'aboriginal whaling', which would have allowed to hunt a limited number of minke whales again. The researcher conducted fieldwork in the four communities and concluded that they possessed a 'whaling culture' that they defined as 'the shared knowledge of whaling transmitted across generations'.⁴⁸ They continued:

This shared knowledge consists of a number of different socio-cultural inputs: a common heritage and world view, an understanding of ecological (including spiritual) and technological relations between human beings and whales, special

⁴⁷ Kahoku Shimpō, 'Masaka kinshi ni ha . . . '.

⁴⁸ Akimichi et al., *Small-Type Coastal Whaling in Japan*, 75.

distribution processes, and a food culture. The common heritage found in Japan's whaling culture is based on a long historical tradition.⁴⁹

While a majority of IWC member states rejected the notion of categorising STCW as aboriginal whaling, the workshop and its participants became instrumental in portraying the 'whaling towns' as bearer of a shared Japan whaling culture that was based on a long historical tradition.⁵⁰ The cultural and religious whaling traditions of Taiji and communities in northern Kyushu, which had long since given up whaling themselves, were thus represented as a genuine part of Ayukawa's history.⁵¹ No mentions are made in the workshop report or in later publications by the same authors that fishermen in northeastern Japan and Hokkaido had for centuries developed their own non-whaling culture and protested against the introduction of western Japanese whaling culture. The struggle to keep coastal whaling alive after the moratorium, facilitated the need to reinvent a historical whaling culture that was shared among the communities. In this narrative, the history between humans and whales began in Ayukawa in 1906 with the introduction of industrial whaling, and any previous relationships that might have existed faded from the collective cultural memory.⁵²

The 2011 Tsunami

The loss of their main economic resource, minke whale, was a huge shock for coastal whalers in Ayukawa. While the other three remaining whaling towns had focused on other species, Ayukawa's local cuisine had since the 1940s been focused mostly on minke whale meat. Nevertheless, under the provision of the IWC moratorium it was still possible to hunt some smaller, not protected cetacean species; therefore, the STCW began targeting a small number of Baird's beaked whales, even though its meat was not particularly popular in the region. To support the struggling coastal whaling industry, in 1994 the Japanese Government began organising scientific whaling expeditions in the North Pacific, modelled after the controversial Antarctic scientific whaling programme. After 2003,

⁴⁹ Akimichi et al., *Small-Type Coastal Whaling in Japan*, 75.

⁵⁰ Following the workshop a number of its participants released their own research on Japan whaling culture, all portraying it as a monolithic entity, see Akimichi, *Kujira wa dare no mono ka*; Takahashi, *Kujira no Nihon bunkashi*; Iwasaki-Goodman, 'An Analysis of Social and Cultural Change in Ayukawa-Hama (Ayukawa Shore Community)'; Kalland and Moeran, *Japanese Whaling*.

⁵¹ The situation is similar for Abashiri, where whaling was introduced shortly after Ayukawa and in Wada-ura where whaling was conducted only since after World War II.

⁵² For more on the concept of 'collective memory', see Assmann and Czaplicka, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity'.

one of these programmes allowed the two remaining whaling companies to hunt the otherwise protected minke whales. Without this additional money made from selling the minke whale meat at local markets, the whaling business would not have been profitable.⁵³ Indeed, 10–20 per cent of all whale meat in Japan is consumed in Miyagi Prefecture.⁵⁴

This was the situation, when the 2011 tsunami hit Ayukawa, pulverising the town in a few minutes. In the direct aftermath, it was unclear if the complete destruction of the coastal infrastructure would also mean the end of whaling for Ayukawa. However, in order to rekindle a shared identity and prevent the disintegration of the community, as more and more people moved away from the region, local stakeholders began to argue that the future of Ayukawa itself was inextricably linked to the whaling industry. The national government itself promised quick help and allocated 2.28 billion yen from the Tōhoku Reconstruction Funds for whaling purposes. However, soon it came to light that the money was not intended for Ayukawa but rather to pay for protective measures against anti-whaling groups in the Antarctic Ocean. Having lost precious time over this political scandal, the few years earlier founded Ayukawa Hogeï decided to rebuild the whaling station with its own money and in 2012, the scientific whaling operation was once again conducted in Ayukawa. Whalers have struggled to find enough minke whales in the sea off Ayukawa to fulfil the government-set quota. After the tsunami of 2011, coastal whalers in Ayukawa on the Oshika Peninsula began to notice a sudden drop in minke whales in the Sea of Kinkazan.⁵⁵ One of the involved researchers speculated that the tsunami might have changed the oceanographic conditions so much that the minke whales had temporally changed their migration route and no longer came to the region.⁵⁶ To make matters worse, most of the captured minke whales turned out to be sexually immature, indicating that the hunt was not sustainable. Because of the poor performance, the government began in 2017 to move some of the scientific whaling programmes away from Ayukawa to Hachinohe and Abashiri, where they hoped they would receive better catches.⁵⁷

Despite these difficulties, local stakeholders worked hard for keeping the Ayukawa coastal whaling culture alive. Starting in 2012, a group of senior citizens, who met after the tsunami in a temporary housing facility,

⁵³ Japan Times, 'Miyagi Whaling Town Has Seen Better Days'; Yomiuri Shinbun, 'Kujira to ikiru (4)'.

⁵⁴ The House of Representatives, 'Dai 181-kai nōrinsuisan iinkai'.

⁵⁵ Yasunaga et al., 'Cruise Report of the Second Phase of the Japanese Whale Research Program under Special Permit in the Western North Pacific (JARPEN II) in 2013 – (Part II) – Coastal Component off Sanriku Survey'.

⁵⁶ Interview with Toshihide Kitakado, 19 August 2015.

⁵⁷ Holm, 'The Whales and the Tsunami'; Holm, 'After Withdrawal from the IWC'.

began to sell whale meat online and experimented with new whale recipes. Similarly, locals also revived the whale festival, which was held once again yearly after 2013. When I visited the festival in August 2017, most of the whaling company workers were away whaling in Hachinohe. In the evening, the spectators could go down to the harbour to watch the cutting of whale meat; besides this, the whaling companies played a much smaller role in the new festival than they did before the tsunami. There were also no rituals for appeasing the angry souls of hunted whales. Instead, priests from Kinkazan performed an old dragon dance. Motifs of whales were represented on several posters, but the animals themselves were only 'attending' in the form of whale meat. Apart from a small amount of frozen minke meat that was sold, volunteers were giving away free samples of fresh Baird's beaked whale meat, sponsored by the whaling companies. As Baird's beaked whale meat does not taste good raw, it was cooked and various creative new dishes were tried out; for example, whale pizza, whale cornflake sticks, and grilled whale meat served with miso.

The festival is one of the main events of the year for the people of Ayukawa. However, according to folklorist Katō Kōji, who was directly involved in the revival of the festival, its objective has changed: 'Before the tsunami, it was a whale festival for a whaling town, but now it exists to hold the community together and bring back people who had moved away.'⁵⁸ Katō further explained that the whale festival plays an important role in the local identity of Ayukawa, even though most people nowadays have little to do with whaling. Even whale meat, the most obvious symbol of the local whaling culture, is only eaten on special occasions like this.

Since 2014, a group of interested citizens, both former and current, have met several times to discuss the reconstruction of Ayukawa. They have developed a plan for a completely new harbour area, with a business district, a tourist centre where various whale products are to be sold and a new whale museum. The museum is intended not only to display exhibits from the destroyed Oshika Whale Land but also to 'teach, protect and transmit the culture and history of Ayukawa that had thrived under the whaling industry in the past'. As in the 1970s during the 'nostalgia boom', it is hoped that Ayukawa will once again profit from its 'whaling culture' image. The new harbour area with the whale museum opened in 2021, exactly ten years after the tsunami.

⁵⁸ Interview with Katō Kōji, 19 December 2017.

Conclusion

Over the course of hundred years, the Northeast, with Ayukawa at its centre, developed its own regional identity as a whaling region that was part of a national framework. While in the first decades, western whaling companies effectively monopolised not only the whaling economy but also the cultural life of the Northeast, since the 1930s local initiatives have begun to reinterpret western Japanese whaling culture as part of the Northeast's own culture. The founding of their own whaling companies, the building of whaling monuments and eventually the establishment of a whale festival, which was prominently featured in contemporary media, effectually led to the Northeast becoming Japan's primary whaling region, while whaling in western Japan became almost irrelevant save for its historical significance.

With these changes also came a reinterpretation of the role of whales for the coastal communities. No longer were they regarded as benevolent 'gods of the sea' that brought benefits to humans. Other non-violent interpretations, such as the 'gentlemen of the sea', were similarly quickly abandoned and instead the discourse moved towards the 'wild beasts of the sea' that were dangerous to humans and only the most skilled and heroic whalers were able to take on directly. With the end of the cetosphere, the agency of whales also diminished. We can see this for example directly after the war, when, according to the popular discourse, whale meat saved the Japanese nation from starvation. However, it had not been the sacrifice of the whales that had made possible this miracle but rather the ingenuity of the industrial whaling fleet in the Antarctic Ocean. Indeed, at this point, outside of rituals performed at whaling festivals aimed at tourists, whales had transformed from gods that actively shaped the lives of humans to little more than an obstacle for efficiently extracting marine biomass for industrial products.

While Ayukawa flourished during its 'Golden Age' as a whaling town, the loss of the Northeast's less intrusive and violent non-whaling culture had dire effects on the abundance of whales and the well-being of the overall coastal ecosystem. The capitalistic logic behind industrial whaling led to severe overharvesting, which was compensated by the taking of immature animals and the direct forgery of statistics and deception of the Fishery Agency and the IWC. The truth is that it was not the international community and their cries for an end of slaughtering of cetaceans that brought an end to industrial whaling but the whalers themselves who had destroyed their own ecological foundation. The IWC moratorium was

a convenient way to abandon a devastated industry without losing face as blame could be placed elsewhere.

But whaling did not stop completely. In the past thirty years, Ayukawa and some other communities persistently continued small-scale coastal whaling in the hope to revive the whaling industry one day, as they believed that the economic and social future of their communities was dependent on whaling. The 2011 tsunami reinforced this feeling, and the reconstruction of the town was linked directly with the coastal whaling industry. The regulatory framework given by the IWC moratorium gave the remaining whalers the opportunity to experiment with new forms of coastal whaling that were less intrusive to the ecosystem and might be in its small scale even be sustainable. However, the damage done to the cetosphere seems to be so all encompassing that even the hunting of fewer than hundred whales a year seems to be too much for the ecosystem to handle. As it stands at the moment, the whale pilgrimage to the Sea of Kinkazan has come to an end.