

2 The Beached God

A long time ago, rough sea continued to plague the village of Same-ura with no end in sight, making any attempt at fishing naught. One day, as the village was about to face certain starvation, a young fisherman decided to set out boldly into the angry sea to bring home fish and save his loved ones. However, waves destroyed his little boat, and he was quickly swallowed by the large emptiness of the ocean. As he drowned, the young man cursed the gods of the sea with his last breath. At that very moment, a large whale appeared and brought him back to the shore on his back. Overjoyed with gratitude, the villagers affectionally began to call the whale Sameuratarō. Since then, each year the whale would appear in the water of Same-ura, followed by a large swarm of sardines that the villagers could hunt. Without a doubt, the whale was a messenger of the gods, and the villagers began worshipping Sameuratarō. In fact, the whale made a pilgrimage every year to the Ise Shrine in western Japan to become a god himself.

Decades passed, until in one year, Sameuratarō did not appear. Then, one morning, the village was in an uproar. A large whale had beached near Same-ura! It was Sameuratarō but several harpoons had been driven into his body. One of them was engraved with the name of a whaling group in Kumano from the Kii Peninsula. These whalers must have struck and heavily wounded Sameuratarō when he was on his yearly pilgrimage to Ise. Doing his best to escape, the whale had struggled all the way to Same-ura, where he died on the beach, surrounded by the mourning villagers. At his death, Sameuratarō's body turned into a large stone, which can today be found in front of the local Nishinomiya Shrine.¹

Many years later, in 1911, when Sameuratarō was only remembered in folktales, the whaling company Tōyō Hogeï announced its decision to build a whaling station at Ebisu Beach, not one hundred metres away from the

¹ Adapted from Nihon jidō bungakusha kyōkai, *Aomori-ken no minwa*, 78–83. The folktale has also been animated as a short story in 1985 as part of the popular animation show *Manga Nihon Mukashibanashi* (episode 0520-B), see Manga Nihon Mukashibanashi Webpage, 'Kujiraishi'.



Figure 2.1 Whale stone and Ebisu statue at Nishinomiya Shrine, Same-ura. Photograph by the author.

Nishinomiya Shrine, where one finds a three-metre-long stone half-buried in front the shrine, locally known as the ‘Sameuratarō whale stone’ (Figure 2.1).² That the shrine and the adjacent beach was dedicated to the god ‘Ebisu’ was probably considered by the whalers from western Japan as a lucky omen, as the god was in their home region known to grant good fish and whale catches. But for the locals, the location of the whaling station was a direct provocation as it was the very same beach, where Sameuratarō had, according to the local legend, died by the harpoons of western Japanese whalers. As one of the leaders of the anti-whaling faction remarked: ‘That the whaling station has been built here [at Ebisu Beach] has been fate’.³

As the story surrounding Sameuratarō and the whaling station in Same-ura shows us, fishermen in northeastern Japan had a different relationship to whales than their western Japanese counterparts. While dozens of whaling groups in Kii, Tosa, and Kyushu were engaged in the slaughtering of hundreds of whales each year, the people in the north mourned the death of each beached whale. Even so, in both regions, whales were closely associated to the god Ebisu, and once beached, coastal communities in the north did not hesitate to make the most out of the whale body. This chapter will explore the religious, cultural, and

² In some versions of the folktale the whale is also known as ‘Hachinohetarō’. The suffix ‘-tarō’ is used to indicate a generic male name, like ‘Joe’ in English.

³ Interview with Yoshida Keizō in 1956, cited in Satō, *Kujira kaisha yakiuchi jiken*, 23.

historical roots of the Same-ura whale stone, demonstrating how locals incorporated non-human whale agency in their religious and cultural practices. I argue that whale behaviour played a key aspect in how fishermen in western and northern Japan regarded whales. Through a close analysis of vernacular folktales and cultural practices regarding beached whales, we can reconstruct that the cetosphere played different roles along the Japanese Coast, leading to diverse representation of whales in Japanese folk religion and the coastal economies.

The Sea God Ebisu

Today, the god Ebisu (also called Hiruko or Saburo) is identified as the offspring of Izanagi and Izanami, the divine creators of Japan.⁴ According to a folk legend originating in the fifteenth century, Hiruko drifted ashore in Nishinomiya in the current Hyōgo Prefecture. Since then, he has been worshipped as a god of the sea at the local shrine. He was the patron of fishermen, sea voyagers, and shell-gatherers, who prayed to him for protection and good fish catches. At least since the seventeenth century, he has also been worshipped as a merchant god and around this time, he became one of the Seven Gods of Fortune and is often depicted beside Daikokuten, the god of the earth. Together they represent fisheries and agriculture.⁵

Since the Edo period, fishermen and merchants alike would pray to this popular Ebisu for ‘worldly benefits’ (*genze riyaku*), that is, the expectation of receiving tangible or intangible benefits in this world. While, in theory, one can pray for nearly every benefit – in the case of Ebisu worship these were often success in business, wealth, or good fish catches – there is a strong moral component to the prayers. While showing an effort to reach one’s goal makes it more likely that the gods will help you, greed on the other hand is often punished. For example, in his iconography, Ebisu can often be seen pulling a fat sea bream on a fishing hook. According to the religious scholars Ian Reader and George Tanabe, the use of a fishing hook instead of a net symbolises the importance to take only as much as one needs and not more. Small businessowners are in this way reminded

⁴ The Japanese word *kami* is often translated as ‘god’ or ‘deities’. It refers to anthropomorphic or zoomorphic creatures, as well as natural and supernatural forces. As Ebisu is mostly referred to as one of the Seven Lucky Gods, I use the term ‘god’ rather than ‘deity’. For more on the discussion regarding the translation of *kami*, see Rots, ‘Forests of the Gods’, 20–2.

⁵ Itoh, *The Japanese Culture of Mourning Whales*, 16; Guichard-Anguis, ‘The Parish of a Famous Shrine’, 68–70.

to search financial success with good customer service instead of only maximising the short-term profit.⁶

Underneath these popular portrayals of Ebisu, however, is a more archaic version of the god buried, which I call the ‘whale Ebisu’.⁷ The historical roots of the whale Ebisu belief remain an enigma since Ebisu is the only one of the Seven Gods of Fortune who is not based on a Hindu god. In its earliest incarnation, Ebisu is described as a ‘visiting deity’ with a strong connection to the ocean. In pre-modern times, as previously discussed, fishermen would never lose sight of the island Kinkazan when leaving the coast in their small boats. This fear of the open sea is also a prominent feature of Japanese cosmology, where Japan was imagined as the centre of the world surrounded by oceans, with mythical realms lying either beyond the sea or on its bottom (where, for example, the palace of the dragon god was believed to be). The farther away from the centre one travels the greater pollution and danger. On the other hand, these far-away realms were also said to hold untold riches. Elusive messengers, of which the sea god Ebisu is the most famous, sometimes bring these riches to the people living on the Japanese islands. In this way, the open sea is at the same time a place of great danger and of great prosperity.⁸

These messengers, often marine animals, such as whales, killer whales, dolphins, but also sharks or turtles were interpreted as avatars of Ebisu or envoys under his protection. When showing reference and respect towards these ‘spirits of the sea’ (*umitama*), they could bring gifts from the open sea, while showing disrespect, or hunting a creature under the protection of the gods, would bring disaster to the community.⁹ These divine gifts included everything fishermen found floating on the water surface or washed ashore, for example commercial goods from ship-wrecked cargo vessels, strangely shaped stones, or the appearance of a fish swarm. Even dead human bodies on the water were seen as an incarnation of Ebisu and were thought to bring good luck for catching fish.¹⁰

Whales, as the largest animals in the ocean, were especially strongly associated with Ebisu. For example, when fishing on the open sea, fishermen were not allowed to say *kujira* (whale) and instead had to say *ebisu* when referring to whales so as not to attract their displeasure.¹¹ When

⁶ Reader and Tanabe, *Practically Religious*, 2–16, 110, 154–8.

⁷ Naumann, ‘Whale and Fish Cult in Japan’, 2–3; Sakurada, ‘The Ebisu-Gami in Fishing Villages’.

⁸ Rambelli, ‘General Introduction’, xiii–xvii.

⁹ Rambelli, ‘General Introduction’, xix–xx.

¹⁰ Göhlert, *Die Verehrung von Wasserleichen und ihre Stellung im japanischen Volksglauben*.

¹¹ Naumann, ‘Whale and Fish Cult in Japan’; Sakurada, ‘The Ebisu-Gami in Fishing Villages’. Similar practices were also common for bear hunting among the Matagi,

behaving correctly, whales would bring great riches to humans. In north-eastern Japan, the belief that whales would bring good fish catches, either by indicating the location of fish schools through their presence or by actively driving fish towards the shore, was most common. As whales were connected to the gods, they could also be reasoned with to a certain degree, as the following source from the nineteenth century demonstrates:

Without whales many fish species did not come. In recent year, if you spotted a whale close to the shore and you chanted '*ebisu*' it would swim towards the beach. Many fish were afraid of whales and stay in the bay, making it [easier for the fishermen] to catch them.¹²

Chanting *ebisu*, the source alludes, would attract whales to the coast, who in turn drove fish with them. In this way, we can understand how the local ecological knowledge was an amalgamation of religious beliefs, as well of observations of natural phenomena.

A second way whales were bringing riches to coastal communities was by sacrificing their bodies for human consumption and creating wealth for the communities. As discussed in the introduction, the idea that whales would let themselves be hunted if the correct religious practices were observed, was common among many 'whale people' in the Pacific world.¹³ In the case of early modern whaling communities in western Japan, whales would sometimes speak with whalers in dreams, allowing themselves to be hunted if certain conditions were met. However, most whales were hunted without such a direct permission and post-mortem rituals had to be conducted. Non-whaling communities, on the other hand, refrained from actively pursuing whales and only brought already injured whales to the shore or made use of beached whales, which were believed to have sacrificed their lives for the benefit of the human community.

The Hachinohe Whale Stranding Records

Among the thousands of whales that migrated each year along the Japanese coast, some inevitably ended up dying on the beach. For coastal societies, these 'gifts' from the ocean provided a considerable amount of protein and wealth. While the discovery of a stranded dead whale was left

a hunter community from northern Japan, see Takeda, 'An Ecological Study of Bear-Hunting Activities of the Matagi, Japanese Traditional Hunters'; Naumann, 'Yama No Kami'.

¹² Cited after, Watanabe, *Kadoyashiki kyūsuke oboechō*, 33.

¹³ See, for example, Reid, *The Sea Is My Country*; Demuth, *Floating Coast*; Jones and Wanhalla, *New Histories of Pacific Whaling*.

to chance, coastal communities could increase that chance by targeting injured or lost animals near the shore. As discussed in Chapter 1, archaeological findings and early written evidence on the Japanese Archipelago suggest that the harvest of beached whales was not a phenomenon restricted to northern Honshu but was commonplace at almost every coastal region, leading to the development of various traditions and moral frameworks surrounding beached whales.¹⁴ In western Japan, many of these traditions surrounding beached whales became part of the proto-industrial whaling culture during the Edo period, while in other regions, where organised whaling did not take root, an alternative culture on how to approach beached whales emerged.

The Sanriku Coast was one of the whale-richest regions of Tokugawa Japan, so whales did beach frequently on its shore. As domainial governments confiscated a considerable part of the profits made from a whale stranding as tax, they had a strong interest in writing down all such occurrences. In the case of the Hachinohe domain, a full record of whale strandings recorded by clerks has survived, allowing us to study the ecological and economic role whale strandings played in northern Japan. Nowadays, Hachinohe is an unspectacular industrial port city in Aomori Prefecture with some 200,000 inhabitants. At the beginning of the Edo period, Hachinohe belonged to Morioka domain (also called Nanbu domain), which had an annual revenue of 100,000 *koku*. In 1664, after the death of Nanbu Shigenao, the second daimyo (domainial lord) of Morioka domain, the Tokugawa Shogunate, interceded in the succession and established Hachinohe as a new, separate, smaller-sized domain of 20,000 *koku*. Henceforth, a fifty-kilometre coastline between the city of Hachinohe in the north and Kuji in the south belonged to this new domain.¹⁵

From the domain's establishment in 1664 until its abolishment in 1871,¹⁶ we find seventy-four recorded entries about whales. Among those we can identify forty-two whale strandings events (some strandings warranted more than one entry), including two mass whale strandings (one in Shirogane in 1681 and one in Kadonohama). We also know of two more mass whale strandings in neighbouring domains: the Akamae stranding of 1701 and a mass stranding in 1808 on the Shimokita Peninsula. Moreover, the records also contain entries about merchants

¹⁴ See also, Yamaura, 'Kōkōgaku kara mita Nihon rettō ni okeru hogei'.

¹⁵ A roughly fifteen-kilometre-long enclave between today Rikuchū-Nakano and Mugio was, however, still part of Morioka domain. Therefore, whales that stranded in this part, were not recorded by the Hachinohe clerks.

¹⁶ The official records of the Hachinohe domain were published in a ten-volume series, see Hachinohe shishi hensan iinkai, *Hachinohe shishi: Shiryōhen Kinsei*, 1969.

writing petitions to receive a license for selling whale oil or bones to other domains. A close reading of the Hachinohe domain records helps us understand the importance of whale stranding for the economy of the coastal communities. While the data set is not particularly large, we can still draw a few conclusions from them. Let us first consider a typical entry:

[Kyōhō 11 (1726)] fourth day of the sixth month, clear weather

On the first day of this month, it has been reported that at the coast of Yokotehama in Taneichi one whale was washed ashore. The magistrate and the coast guard official went to the scene for a careful inspection. A man called Yaichirō from Minato village . . . raised 13 *ryō* and 100 *mon* and presented the money to the officials [for the whale]. The locals received one-third of the value.¹⁷

As this entry shows, when fishermen found a whale beached on their shore, they would call for the magistrate (*daikan*) in Hachinohe or Kuji. After an inspection on the scene the magistrate would look for a merchant who was interested in buying parts of the whale. In some cases, the whale carcass was also auctioned. In the example above, the whale was sold to Yaichirō from Minato, a village close to Hachinohe and some twenty-five kilometres away from Taneichi. We can speculate that Yaichirō must have been a wealthy merchant, as the offering of 13 *ryō* and 100 *mon* would have been enough (at least in theory) to buy food for thirteen people for a whole year. A third of this money was then given to the village, where the whale had been found, the rest was confiscated as tax. In the Sendai domain, locals often received two-thirds of the profits, but in Hachinohe the domain took normally half of the profits and in 40 per cent of the cases even two-thirds. As other entries show, this practice was not universally accepted. For example, after a whale stranding in Kofunato in 1801, locals received only one-fourth of the money, which caused civil unrest. Eventually, the domain conceded and gave them half of the whale's value (around 20 *ryō*).¹⁸

On average, the domain clerks could hope to sell a whale carcass for around 18 *ryō*, but the prices differed greatly with a range between 1 and 55 *ryō*. Besides inflation and deflation of the *ryō*, numerous factors probably contributed to the price discrepancies: whale species, season, demand for whale products, and size of the animal. In our example, the fishermen from Yokotehama received one-third of the profit or a bit more than 4 *ryō*. According to Ōtsuki Heisen, a full-grown right whale could be sold in western Japan for up to 60 kanme or around 1,000 *ryō*, but that

¹⁷ Cited after, Hachinohe shishi hensan iinkai, *Hachinohe shishi: Shiryōhen Kinsei*, 1977, 5:11.

¹⁸ Shōbuke, 'Hachinohe-han no "yorikujira" to Hashikami-chō', 26–7.

seems to be an extreme case.¹⁹ Recent studies have estimated that the average worth of a flensed whale by the Masutomi whaling group in Ikitsukishima in western Japan was probably more around 150 *ryō*.²⁰ Either way, the Hachinohe fishermen received for a stranded whale only a fraction of what a flensed whale at a whaling community would have been worth. Nevertheless, the monetary value of a stranded whale on the Sanriku Coast was still a significant amount of wealth for a fishing community and was comparable with an extraordinarily good fish catch. As the profits were distributed on a village level, sometimes several communities at once claimed the rights to a beached whale, leading to bitter conflicts between the communities. The flensing was usually done by the locals themselves, who had little experience in cutting whales. Unsurprisingly, this was often very messy and large amounts of whale liquid tended to leak out, which polluted adjacent salt farms and seaweed gathering spots.²¹

Interestingly, the frequency of the recorded whale strandings at a particular place seems to be not following a consistent pattern. Coming back to Same-ura, which is situated only four kilometres east of Hachinohe, there were six strandings between 1760 and 1824, but no recorded strandings before or after these dates. It is not clear if the lack of further records is the result of incomplete documentation or if other factors were at play here. The flensing and taking of whale meat without the oversight of the domain was forbidden and could result in severe punishments. As the fishermen had a monetary interest in avoiding the mandatory taxes to the domain, we must, however, assume that quite a few cases of whale strandings did go unreported. The research of local historian Shōbuke Susumu in the Hashikami community, for example, indicates that not every whale stranding was registered in the official domain books.²² From the data we have, a whale stranding occurred on average every five to six years in the Hachinohe domain, which meant that a given community could profit from a whale stranding directly around once per generation.

While the yearly frequency is not constant, the data indicate a certain seasonality of the whale strandings. Strandings peaked in February and

¹⁹ Ōtsuki, 'Geishikō', 1926, 85. The exchange conversion rate between *ryō* and *kanme* changed constantly, especially during famines, but in the early nineteenth century, one *ryō* was worth between sixty and sixty-seven *monme*. For simplicity's sake, I calculated one *kanme* as 16.25 *ryō*.

²⁰ This figure is, of course, also only an approximation, as depending on size, season or year the value of a whale could change drastically, see Nakazono and Yasunaga, *Kujiratori emonogatari*, 136–7.

²¹ Hachinohe shishi hensen iinkai, *Shinpen Hachinohe shishi: Kinsei Shiryōhen*, 2:230.

²² Shōbuke, 'Hachinohe-han no "yorikujira"' to Hashikami-chō'.

March and again in May and July. In autumn and early winter, strandings were much less common, with no recorded strandings in August and November and only one stranding in December.²³ The four recorded mass whale strandings also happened in spring, between February and May. This correlates well with our present-day understanding of whale migration routes, showing that most whales travelling on the Kuroshio and Oyashio currents to the Sea of Okhotsk passed the Sanriku Coast in spring with only a few taking the same route back south in autumn. Also, sperm and sei whales, who arrived not from the south but from the east, tended to appear in spring at the Sanriku Coast. In regard to whale species, the sources are less revealing. The only species that is regularly mentioned by name are sperm whales. Sometimes the length and body proportions of the beached whales are recorded, but this alone is not enough to identify the species.

Whale strandings occurred not only in Hachinohe domain but all over the Sanriku Coast. Unfortunately, we have no complete records of the strandings in the Morioka and Sendai domains. Assuming that the frequency of stranding in Hachinohe domain is comparable to other places on the Sanriku Coast, we can estimate that during the Edo period, around 500 individual whale stranding incidents occurred, if we include the four mass whale strandings, at least 900 whales died during this time frame. However, according to a petition of fishermen from the Oshika Peninsula whale strandings occurred several times a year, indicating that the true number of whale stranding might be in the thousands.²⁴ Be that as it may, compared to the estimated 200,000 whales hunted in western Japan over the same time period, this number seems miniscule. However, we should not forget that only a tiny fraction of the whales travelling each year along the Sanriku coastline found their death on the beaches there, especially as the locals were not actively pursuing whales.

Mass Death on the Beach

While the stranding of a single whale brought modest wealth to a community, mass whale strandings could make a village rich. Let us take a closer look at such an occurrence:

In spring of 1701, the villagers of Akamae were starving. The cold and damp *yamase* winds from the north had destroyed the meagre crops of the coastal community in Miyako Bay. Not even the wild plants in the surrounding mountain forests grew ripe and hungry boars, deer, and rabbits descended from the hills, devastating the little that remained from the crops

²³ I converted the Japanese dates into the Gregorian calendar equivalent.

²⁴ This petition will be discussed in Chapter 3.

on the fields. Already over 26,000 people had perished in this eight-year lasting famine in the domain. For the surviving population of Akamae, rescue came eventually from the sea. On midday of 26 May 1701, a total of 139 sperm whales got lost in Miyako Bay, beaching near the village. Armed with small knives and any other cutting utensils that could be mustered, people from the village swarmed the beach and butchered the dying animals. The meat of the 139 stranded whales was sold for only two and a half *ryō* per animal, showing that the local economy did not possess the necessary infrastructure to absorb such large amounts of marine proteins. Nevertheless, according to the diary entry of a local official, the meat and the sperm whale oil were sold for around 300–400 *ryō*. The official estimated that in total a profit of around 1000 *ryō* was achieved, which was split between the domain and the village of Akamae. After three days of hard work, the carcasses were cleaned, and the community had not only been saved from famine but was now one of the richest communities in the region.²⁵

Present-day research indicates that mass strandings differ from single whale strandings in the fact that the individual whales caught up in the mass stranding are often healthy. These groups of whales do not appear panicked but swim calmly towards the coast. There are many theories why whales might swim in the ‘wrong’ direction, including navigational errors, ocean currents, noise, and other underwater interferences.²⁶ Interestingly, mass strandings occur more frequently among toothed whales who are organised in matrilineal hierarchies, for example, sperm whales, pilot whales, and false killer whales. These whales often swim behind a leading female whale cow and follow her onto the beach. If humans rescue a single individual and put it back in the water, the whale will swim back to the beach and strand again as long as the lead cow remains at the beach.²⁷

In the case of Miyako Bay cetaceans get entrapped, as the tubular rias is confined on three sides by land and the only natural escape route is the small entrance in the Northeast. Sperm whales inhabit most of the time in deep waters, using echolocation to orientate. However, this form of orientation does not work well in shallow waters, making it difficult for the animals to find their way out of a bay once they enter.²⁸ Therefore, we have to ask why the animals would come this close to the coast when it posed such a threat to them and was not even in their regular hunting range. Local historian Kamagasawa Isao speculated that the animals were in search for food near the coast, either small squid or sardines and chased their prey unsuspectingly into the cove during high tide without finding their way out again when the cove became

²⁵ Kamagasawa, *Yorikujira sōdō ‘Akamae wa hirumae’ no shiteki kōsatsu*, 15–20.

²⁶ Bradshaw, Evans, and Hindell, ‘Mass Cetacean Strandings’.

²⁷ Whitehead and Rendell, *The Cultural Lives of Whales and Dolphins*, 3439.

²⁸ Smeenk, ‘Strandings of Sperm Whales *Physeter Macrocephalus* in the North Sea’, 21.

shallower during the ebb. For this theory could speak that around the same period in the previous year, a great sardine catch was made in Akamae Bay, showing that sardines were common in the bay during this season.²⁹

Another possibility is that the sperm whales were themselves chased into the bay. One contemporary source cryptically hints that the sperm whales had been ‘ambushed’ on the sea. It is not clear who was responsible for such an ambush, but we can say with some certainty that it was not humans, as the language used in the historical sources refers to beached whale (*yorikujira*) and not whales hunted by humans (*kujira-tori* or *hogeï*). But when not humans, who else would have the ability to attack sperm whales, which could not only get up to twenty metres long but could also become extremely dangerous when provoked? The most likely suspect is killer whales, who are known to attack sperm whale groups.

This theory is further supported by local ecological knowledge: In the neighbouring fishing community of Miyako, killer whales were often called ‘dragons’ (*tatsu*). When a good fish catch was made in Akamae Bay the Miyako fishermen credited this due to the dragon god closing off the bay to the open sea, thus trapping the fish in the bay. Based on this, we can speculate that a group of resident killer whales hunted close to Akamae and, either intentionally or unintentionally, drove fish into the bay and trapped them there. In the case of the Akamae mass stranding of 1701, these killer whales might have startled a group of foraging sperm whales, who, in a panic, fled also into the bay, where they found their demise in the shallow waters.³⁰

Killer whales being responsible for driving whales towards the shore and eventually causing them to beach was a well-known occurrence on the Sanriku Coast. Indeed, it is here where the proverb *kujira no shachi no yō* (like an orca to a whale) exists, which describes someone who persists in hurting somebody without letting go.³¹ Similarly, the indigenous Ainu from Ezo also believed that stranded whales were a gift from the gods and because the orcas were hunting whales, the orcas were described as the ‘gods of the whales’.³² In this interpretation, it was the orcas who brought the whales to the beach, like the whales themselves brought sardines closer to the shore.

Looking at the Hachinohe domain records we see that orca attacks on whales were given in five cases as the reason for whale strandings.

²⁹ Kamagasawa, *Yorikujira sōdō ‘Akamae wa hirumae’ no shiteki kōsatsu*, 27–9.

³⁰ Kamagasawa, *Yorikujira sōdō ‘Akamae wa hirumae’ no shiteki kōsatsu*, 29–30.

³¹ Kinji, *Kita Tōhoku no tatoe*, 159.

³² Iwasaki and Nomoto, ‘Nihon ni okeru kita no umi no hogeï’, 174; Akimichi, *Kujira wa dare no mono ka*, 103.

Interestingly, all five of these cases happened late in the Edo period – between 1828 and 1864 – when only seven whale strandings occurred in total. One interpretation as to why we have no earlier reports of killer whale attacks could be that the cultural importance of orcas increased only over time and in earlier centuries the domain clerks were more interested in reporting the economic impact of whale strandings than their surrounding circumstances. However, there is also an alternative interpretation. In the early nineteenth century, whale strandings decreased in frequency, especially if we exclude the two mass whale strandings in 1808 and 1818. Between 1835 and 1853 not a single beaching is recorded. As we will discuss in later chapters, whale sightings decreased in this time period in general at the Sanriku Coast. Curiously, a similar phenomenon can also be seen in the European North Sea, where a study found not a single sperm whale stranding recorded between 1829 and 1913. In this case, European and American whaling was identified as the most likely culprit for the disappearance of sperm whales.³³ Seen in this light, it becomes quite important that five of the seven whale strandings in this time period were caused by killer whales. The increased whaling activities of western Japanese net whaling groups and American pelagic whalers most likely caused a drop in the sperm whale population, leading also in a drop of whale strandings at the Sanriku Coast. Moreover, the remaining whales were apparently more often attacked by killer whales than before, indicating a shift in the killer whale behaviour.

Whale Stones on the Sanriku Coast

The death of whales was often commemorated with so-called whale stones, as it also appears in the folktale of Sameuratarō. In her 2018 study, Mayumi Itoh identified 156 whale graves and related monuments all over the Japanese Archipelago, and it is believed that many more have existed in older times.³⁴ While Itoh and other Japanese folklorists make no difference between whale memorial stones and whale stones, I suggest that many whale stones in north-eastern Japan were originally ‘Ebisu stones’ that differ in their religious meaning from whale memorial stones. Ebisu stones usually come in two varieties: they were either strangely shaped stones found at a beach or they were smaller stones from the bottom of the ocean, fishermen from Kyushu and the Sanriku Coast found

³³ Smeenk, ‘Strandings of Sperm Whales *Physeter Macrocephalus* in the North Sea’, 27–8.

³⁴ Itoh, *The Japanese Culture of Mourning Whales*.

sometimes entangled in their nets.³⁵ These stones were believed to be infused with the spirit of Ebisu.

We can find many traces of the first variety of Ebisu stones on the Sanriku Coast. For example, in Shiranuka on the Shimokita Peninsula in northern Aomori Prefecture, an Ebisu stone existed near the village. After a successful fish catch, locals would donate two sardines to Ebisu at the stone, as they believed whales and orcas had helped them during the hunt.³⁶ Other Ebisu stones can be found in Yoriiso and Samenoura (both on the Oshika Peninsula) and on Ajishima.³⁷ Some of these stones were probably taken to the shrines because of their unusual shape and only later brought in connection with whales, while others were erected in order to commemorate a stranded whale, as they wished to praise the whale for giving his life so that the people could collect the meat.³⁸ These whale stones often commemorated a specific (mass) whale stranding and shrine priests did hold yearly rituals to thank the whales for their sacrifice.³⁹

Whale stones are most prominent at the Osaki Shrine in Karakuwa near Kesenuma, a fishing port in the northern part of the former Sendai domain and today's Miyagi Prefecture. The city centre lies deep in one of the rias of the Sanriku Coast and is protected from the open ocean by the island of Ōshima in the south and the Karakuwa Peninsula in the east. The most southern edge of the Karakuwa Peninsula is called 'Osaki Misaki' and fishermen used the distinctive shape of this cape as a point of orientation when leaving the coast for fishing. The Osaki Shrine of Karakuwa is located at the most southern edge of the cape. According to legend, the construction of the shrine goes back to the fourteenth century when a member of the Ōji family, who reigned over the Obi-Hyūga province in Kyushu (today's Miyazaki Prefecture) gave up his territory. He intended to rescue the Osaki Shrine of his hometown from civil war and bring it to a safe and remote location. The legend goes that a white whale guided Ōji and his men to Osaki Misaki in Karakuwa, where they rebuilt the shrine in 1308.⁴⁰

This is not the only story that connects this shrine with a mysterious whale occurrence. According to the shrine's records, in the fifth month of

³⁵ Interestingly, these Ebisu stones seem to not have been prominent in the Kansai region, where the main Ebisu Nishnomiya Shrine is situated, further indicating the difference between the popular Ebisu cult and the whale Ebisu culture, see Tanaka, *Ebisu no sekai*, 32, 284.

³⁶ The stone was destroyed when the new harbour was built, see Tōhoku rekishi shiryōkan, *Sanriku engan no gyoson to gyogyō shūzoku: Gekan*, 154.

³⁷ Tōhoku rekishi shiryōkan, *Sanriku engan no gyoson to gyogyō shūzoku: Jōkan*, 40–1.

³⁸ Ambros, *Bones of Contention*, 58. ³⁹ Arch, *Bringing Whales Ashore*, 2018, 171–3.

⁴⁰ Itoh, *The Japanese Culture of Mourning Whales*, 45; Yoshihara, 'Kujira no haka', 422.

Kansei 12 (1800), the merchant Ōsukaya Yasushirō was transporting rice on his boat *Toyoyoshi-maru* from Sendai domain to Edo when a storm hit him and his sixteen crewmen. Taken by winds and currents, the ship drifted southeast into the open sea for two days and the crew lost all hope of ever returning to land. Suddenly, a large group of whales spearheaded by a majestic white whale appeared around the boat. The whales pushed the boat back towards the coast, saving the merchant and his crew. After his miraculous rescue, the merchant went to the Osaki Shrine and donated money to erect a whale stone.⁴¹ At the Osaki Shrine, whales were considered messengers of the gods and it was explicitly forbidden to hunt or eat them. When whales became stranded in Kesenuma Bay, the shrine officials conducted memorial services for the souls of the whales and offered sacred sake and sardines. Figures of Ebisu and Daikokuten can also be found at Osaki Shrine.⁴²

We can also find material objects directly related to whales at the shrine. Fifty metres from the entrance is a row of erected stones, at least two of which are whale stones. The engraving on the first stone reveals that the stone was erected in the fourth month of 1810 and was dedicated by fifty fishermen to a whale stranded in Tadakoshi Bay. They wanted the whale to find peace in the afterlife. The other, smaller whale stone to the right was set up for another stranded whale in the same bay in 1835.⁴³ The two whale stones at Osaki Shrine have a peculiar shape. The larger stone on the left has a distinct hole like a vulva at the bottom, while the top of the right stone is phallus-shaped. Locals have explained that these stones represent the large sex organs of whales, which were believed to increase fertility. Although there are no further primary sources, local historians speculate that fishermen (and their wives) prayed at these whale stones when wishing for children.⁴⁴

The second variety of Ebisu stones, the one entangled in nets, are harder to find in written sources or as material objects. One prominent example comes from a different retelling of the Same-ura whale stone tale, which has been recorded by the local historian Satō Ryōichi:

Onaiji-sama, the master of whales, had lived before the coast of the village Same-ura. He brought the sardines closer to the coast, granting the fishermen large catches. Every year he travelled to the Kumano Shrine in Wakayama Prefecture.

⁴¹ Karakuwa chōshi hensan iinkai, *Karakuwa chōshi*, 348–50.

⁴² Fieldwork in Kesenuma, August 2017.

⁴³ There are two more possible whale stones nearby, but Japanese researchers are unsure about the readings of the inscriptions, see Itoh, *The Japanese Culture of Mourning Whales*, 45–6.

⁴⁴ Kesenuma shishi hensan iinkai, *Kesenuma shishi: Sangyōhen*, 5–2:249; Komatsu, *Uminari no ki*, 132–3.

There he swallowed one stone and carried it back to Same-ura to turn into a god. One year, the chief of a whaling group from Ise had a strange dream: In the dream, Onaiji told the whaler that he had come to Kumano for 33 times and that he would turn into this year a fish god. He urged the whaler to spare him this year as well, so he could fulfil his ambition. As a way of gratitude, he would let himself be captured by the whaler in the next year. The whaler, however, ignored the appeal and went out the next day to the sea to catch an unusual large whale. However, all the fishermen who ate the meat of this whale died an unexpected death. In July 1874, a citizen of Same-ura made a pilgrimage to the Ise Shrine. He slept in a Ryokan, and as the innkeeper heard his client is from the province of Nanbu [Hachinohe], he told him about the unfortunate end of Onaiji-sama.⁴⁵

While this version fails to explain how the whale stone at Nishinomiya Shrine near Ebisu Beach came to be, we have here a different association to Ebisu stones. In the Sameuratarō tale it is the body of the injured and stranded whale itself that petrifies and becomes a whale stone, while in the Onaiji-sama version, the whale has to swallow each year a stone from the bottom of the ocean near the Kumano Shrine, explaining why the whale made the dangerous pilgrimage to a region that was known for whaling.⁴⁶ These stones are a clear reference to smaller Ebisu stones that fishermen sometimes find entangled in their nets when fishing. According to this tale, when a whale gulps thirty-three of these stones from the ocean bottom, he becomes a god, indicating that not every whale is automatically a god of the sea but has the potential to become one if he takes the spirit of Ebisu into his body by swallowing stones from the ocean bottom. The motivation of becoming a god seems to protect the community of Same-ura and as after his ascension to godhood he is no longer in need of a physical body, he would have allowed the whalers to take his body. Unfortunately, whalers from Kumano caught the whale prematurely, despite being warned in a dream, and were in turn struck with a ‘whale curse’.

The Dreaming Whalers in Western Japan

One of the most curious elements of the Onaiji-sama folktale is the inclusion of whaler from western Japan for whom a whale appears in his dream. Indeed, as a closer look reveals, this was a common trope in many western Japanese whaling folktales. For example, on the Gotō Islands, there was the story of Yamada Monkurō, the chief of the Uku Island whaling group, who dreamed in 1716 of a female whale. In the dream, the whale told Monkurō

⁴⁵ Translated and adapted by the author from Satō, *Kujira kaisha yakiuchi jiken*, 2–3.

⁴⁶ In the Sameuratarō tale, the whale travels not to Kumano but to the Ise Shrine. Both shrines are on the eastern side of the Kii Peninsula and considered among the most important Shinto shrines. Near both shrines, whaling groups were active in the Edo period.

that she was on a pilgrimage to the Daihō Temple with her offspring and begged the chief not to capture them. The next day, Monkurō gave the order not to hunt any whales; however, the season had been poor and many of his people had debts they wanted to pay off before the new year. When they sighted a blue whale with a calf, they ignored the order and went out to hunt them. The whale fought back and a storm took the whalers off guard, drowning seventy-two of them. Faced with this tragedy, Monkurō gave up whaling and established a sake business. In a local temple on Uku island, a memorial stupa can be found for the drowned whalers.⁴⁷

A similar folktale is also attached to a whale memorial stone in Shiro-ura (today Kihoku, Mie Prefecture), which was erected in 1759 at the local Jōrin Temple. According to this tale, a high priest of the temple had in the year before been visited in his dream by a pregnant whale, who begged to the priest to spare her, until she had given birth to her child in the South Sea. The whale would then allow herself to be seized by the local whalers on her way back. However, the priest failed to warn the whalers in time, and they caught a pregnant right whale the next day. Soon afterward, the village was struck with a plague. In order to lift the ‘whale curse’ the whalers made a large donation to the temple and asked the head priest to bury the whale and make a funeral service to appease the soul of the whale. Additional annual memorial services were conducted over the next two hundred years for the whale.⁴⁸

As these examples show, whale memorial stones in western Japan can often be found in the vicinity of whaling communities and were erected to appease the angry souls of whales that had been killed by the whalers to avert a potential ‘whale curse’ that could bring misfortune to the community. Another peculiarity of the whale memorial stones in whaling regions is that many of the memorial stones were dedicated to whale fetuses or whale calves. Often whaling groups forbade the slaughtering of whale mothers with calves as the mothers would defend their children, making the hunt much riskier. Also, when the flensing of a whale sometimes revealed that the whale had been pregnant, the whalers often expressed remorse for the fetus who did not have the chance to experience life and erected a whale memorial stone for it.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Nakazono and Yasunaga, *Kujiratori emonogatari*, 163–5. Historical sources indicate, however, that Monkurō was already dead in 1714, see Itoh, *The Japanese Culture of Mourning Whales*, 197–8.

⁴⁸ Itoh, *The Japanese Culture of Mourning Whales*, 90–1. Very similar stories existed also among other whaling groups on the Kii Peninsula, see Ishida, *Nihon gyominshi*, 15–16; Tokuyama, *Kishū no minwa*, 190–1.

⁴⁹ See, for example Itoh, *The Japanese Culture of Mourning Whales*, 108.

In Buddhism, all living creatures possess a soul that can come back to haunt the living upon death. The killing of animals was considered a sin and the idea of pollution also played a central role in everyday religious practices. For example, birth and death caused pollution and everyone that came into contact with this form of pollution needed to be purified in a religious ritual. As Shmuel Eisenstadt pointed out, pollution beliefs were centred around social taboos, which could be broken as long as the appropriate purification rituals were used afterwards to restore the former 'clean' state.⁵⁰ Accordingly, fishermen and whalers were ranked low in the social hierarchy of western Japan as their occupation included the taking of life. Deities would only visit a community that was in a state of purity, otherwise disaster would occur. Purification rituals therefore played a crucial role in the western coastal communities and Arne Kalland estimated that about 5 to 10 per cent of the potential fishing days were lost due to purification festivals.⁵¹

Western Japanese fishermen and whalers performed memorial services and erected memorial stones not only to appease the souls of people lost at sea but also to appease the souls of all the animals they had killed. These rituals expressed the gratitude of the fishermen that the animals had given up their life for the survival of the human community and to guide them to their next life. The most elaborate rituals were held for whales, who also received posthumous names in the local temples.⁵² Arch noted that while other nonhuman animals were also sometimes granted a memorial stone, whales were the only nonhumans to receive Buddhist names in death registers.⁵³

Whale memorial stones and Buddhist death register entries for whales were not known on the Sanriku Coast prior to the introduction of industrial whaling in 1906. But we find other elements of western whaling culture on the Sanriku Coast, such as an inversion of the dreaming whaler story. We can speculate that the Onaiji-sama folktale was originally one of the many retellings of the dreaming whaler folktale that was adapted over time to Hachinohe, a non-whaling region. In western Japan, the story was a warning to whalers not to be too greedy and to wait for the right time to catch a whale. This message made little sense in Hachinohe, however, where whales were not hunted actively. Here, whales fulfilled a different role by bringing wealth to the community, either by attracting fish or by sacrificing their own bodies during a whale beaching. Underneath the religious notion of whale Ebisu, whales are framed as positive forces of nature that help mankind. The death of Onaiji-sama is not caused by the

⁵⁰ Eisenstadt, 'The Japanese Attitude to Nature', 196.

⁵¹ Kalland, *Fishing Villages in Tokugawa Japan*, 46–52.

⁵² Kalland, *Fishing Villages in Tokugawa Japan*, 43–6.

⁵³ Arch, *Bringing Whales Ashore*, 2018, chap. 5.

Same-ura fishermen, but by the whalers from the Kii Peninsula who ignored the warnings of the whale. This tale shows that the inhabitants of Hachinohe were aware of the different traditions surrounding whales in the whaling regions.

The Origin of the Same-ura Whale Stone

After having discussed various legends surrounding the whale stone in Same-ura and its possible connection to western whaling practices, let us investigate the historical records a bit closer. It appears that the stone is closely connected to the mass whale stranding of 1818. At this time, 118 large whales beached, for no apparent reason, along the coast of the Hachinohe domain. This event left a distinctive cultural and religious mark for the involved fishing communities. The carcasses of the beached whales could be found between Shirahama in the north and Taneichi in the south, a distance of thirty kilometres, but most of the whales, ninety-five, stranded near the village of Kadonohama. The community of Kadonohama used their share of the money from the selling of whale meat to set up a new Shrine to show their gratitude. For the inauguration of the Whale Province Shrine (*kujirasū jinsha*) they performed a ceremony in which they moved an aspect of the Goddess Benzaiten from Kinkazan to the new shrine.⁵⁴

According to the local historian Shōbuke Taneyasu, the mass beaching of 1818 also intrigued Nanbu Nobumasa (1780–1847), the eighth domanical lord of Hachinohe. One of the whales had beached in Same-ura at a place called ‘Buddha Beach’ (*hotoke hama*). Nearby and just a few hundred metres off the island of the famous Kabushima Shrine was a peculiar stone that the locals nicknamed the ‘Buddha stone’ (*hotoke ishi*). When Nobumasa heard of this stone, he suspected a connection between the mass whale stranding and the Buddha stone. He ordered an investigation for looking at the old records of the domain to find the origin of the stone. One of his retainers discovered an entry in the *Hachinohe-han kanjōsho nikki* (Diary of the Hachinohe Domain Treasury), according to which, in 1736, a captain of a trade ship from Osaka had been harbouring with his ship near Hachinohe. One day, the captain had a curious dream in which the stone sculpture of a Jizō spoke to him.⁵⁵ The Jizō statue

⁵⁴ The official domain records are cited from Hachinohe shishi hensan iinkai, *Hachinohe shishi: Shiryōhen Kinsei*, 1980, 8:341–3; Hachinohe shiritsu toshokan, *Hachinohe Nanbu shikō*, 393–4; Maeda, *Hachinohe-han shiryōhen*, 524–5.

⁵⁵ Jizō (Sanskrit: *kṣitigarbha*) is a bodhisattva who is seen in Japan as the guardian of stillborn or miscarried children. Jizō statues depicting a Buddhist monk can be found on roadsides and graveyards.

explained that he had ascended from the ocean to the land and that the captain should come to him to pray. When the captain ignored the dream, and tried to leave Hachinohe the next day, strong winds prevented him from leaving the harbour. Remembering the dream, the captain searched for the statue and found a stone near Kabushima Shrine that resembled a man. He prayed to the stone thinking it might be the incarnation of Buddha and soon after his ship was able to leave. The locals have since called the stone 'Buddha stone' and the adjunct beach 'Buddha Beach'. They started praying to the stone and were rewarded with good fish catches.

Nobumasa was fascinated by this story and wanted to see this mysterious stone for himself. The form of the stone reminded him of Kotoshironushi-no-mikoto, an indigenous god associated with Ebisu. As Ebisu had a close connection to whales and the mass stranding had occurred near this stone, he announced that the stone should be called 'Ebisu stone' and the beach 'Ebisu Beach'. He donated three boxes of sake to the stone and wrote a poem praising the stone for protecting fishing and trade ships and making the region prosperous.⁵⁶

Shōbuke Taneyasu research on the Same-ura whale stone illustrates how cultural meaning and traditions surrounding a material object can shift and distort over time. What the locals once knew as a 'Buddha stone', was renamed 'Ebisu stone' by Nobumasa after the 1818 mass beaching, only to become eventually known as 'whale stone'. Interestingly, even in its earliest inception, fishermen prayed to the stone apparently to receive good fish catches, in this regard it is possible that already at that time a connection between Ebisu and/or whales had existed for the locals. Another element that would be reused in the Onaiji-sama folktale was again the element of receiving a prophetic vision while dreaming. In the *Hachinohe-han kanjōsho nikki* it was a ship captain having such a dream, while in the Onaiji-sama version, it was a whaler from Kumano.

The Cetosphere and the Two Whale Cultures

As we have seen throughout this chapter, comparing cultural representations of whales from western whaling places to the ones in the Sanriku region highlights some striking discrepancies. On a superficial level, we find that whale graves were erected in all regions to honour the souls of dead whales, but if we look more closely, we can see that these whale graves were built for different reasons. In the west, whale memorial stones

⁵⁶ Shōbuke, *Nanbu mukashi gatari*.

were erected for whales killed by whalers, often to appease the angry spirit of a whale mother, whereas on the Sanriku Coast, whale stones were mainly erected for stranded whales.

Sanriku folktales focused on the aspect of whales bringing wealth from the sea and saving humans in peril: we have discussed the story of Sameuratarō saving a young fisherman from drowning or the story about a white whale saving the merchant Ōsukaya Yasushirō and his crew from drifting offshore. Documented cases of whales saving other species, including humans, make these stories at least plausible, however.⁵⁷ For example, in 2009, scientists recorded how humpback whales had saved a seal on an ice floe from a killer whale attack and in early 2018, a marine biologist claimed that she had been saved by a humpback whale from a tiger shark attack.⁵⁸ Similar behaviours have also been reported for dolphins.⁵⁹ These recent examples suggest that Sanriku fishermen might have observed similar behaviour and then expressed these events in folktales and historical recordings.

Why do we encounter so many stories of whales helping humans in the Northeast but not in the western Japan? Why are there not more stories about whales bringing fish closer to the shore in the whaling regions? Indeed, in the western Japanese folktales, whales appear mostly as lone swimmers migrating along the coast, neither interacting with fish nor with humans. Only when the whales or their calves were attacked did they defend themselves fiercely. One anthropogenic interpretation would be that the western whalers only regarded whales as prey and were not interested in recording alternative whale behaviour that did not fit this framework. Even worse, if they admitted that whales were helping humans, then this would further jeopardise their moral right to hunt them. This interpretation alone is unsatisfactory, however. Why would only the Sanriku fishermen recognise that whales were essential for bringing fish to the shore? Let us instead look at the behaviour of the whales during their migration along the Japanese Coast.

As noted, many baleen whale species migrate along the Japanese archipelago from the warm breeding places in the tropics to the cold but nutrient-rich arctic waters in the Sea of Okhotsk. During the migration following the ocean currents, most whales prefer to remain close to

⁵⁷ In recent years, there has been a fierce debate among biologists, historians, and anthropologists regarding whether or not we can interpret whale behaviour like saving humans as a conscious moral action or if such actions can, per definition, only be conducted by humans, see Whitehead and Rendell, *The Cultural Lives of Whales and Dolphins*; Martin, 'When Sharks (Don't) Attack'; Ingold, 'The Use and Abuse of Ethnography'.

⁵⁸ Natural History Magazine, 'Save the Seal!'; BBC News, 'Whale "Saves" Biologist from Shark'.

⁵⁹ Jones, 'Dolphins Save Swimmers from Shark'.

shallow waters and even orientate themselves using underwater landmarks. The whaling places in western Japan were all situated near places where whales would regularly come close to the shore during their migration. This also makes it clear why no whaling places were established in the Bungō Strait between Shikoku and Kyushu as most whales used a different migration route with better currents and orientation points.

The whaling season in western Japan during the Edo period was from early winter to spring when whales were travelling in both directions; however, whales would not waste time in these waters but move on as fast as possible, rarely pausing to hunt and instead living off their blubber reserves.⁶⁰ This behaviour explains why the whales were not seen hunting sardines in western Japan as often.⁶¹ In folktales from these regions, whales were imagined as being in the middle of their pilgrimage. This might have its origin in their migration to the southern calving grounds or to the northern feeding places. Also, in spring, whale mothers often travelled for the first time with their calves to bring them to the feeding grounds and pass on the knowledge of the migration route to their offspring.⁶²

Farther north on their journey, the baleen whales changed their behaviour. The first reports of whales driving sardines closer to the shores are from the Izu Peninsula, a region the north-bound whales would reach in early spring. When approaching the Sea of Kinkazan a few weeks later, this behaviour was even more pronounced. Here, in the ‘perturbed region’ of the Oyashio and Kuroshio currents, the baleen whales would, for the first time in months, hunt zooplankton and small fish for a few weeks. Indeed, the feeding rate of migrating baleen whales is ten times higher during the summer than during the rest of the year.⁶³ After the first hunting break on the Sanriku Coast, baleen whales would then leave again in early summer for their destination in the Sea of Okhotsk. As the perturbed region was in the open sea, the whales had to leave behind the shallow waters for their hunting. They often returned to the coast, however, with sardine shoals before them, as we will explore in the next chapter.

Sei whales lived most of the time in the open sea and reached the Japanese Coast near the perturbed region near the Sanriku Coast for

⁶⁰ Arch, *Bringing Whales Ashore*, 2018, 25–34.

⁶¹ It has been estimated that baleen whales ingest 83 per cent of their annual energy intake during the summer, see Lockyer, ‘Growth and Energy Budgets of Large Baleen Whales from the Southern Hemisphere’.

⁶² Whitehead and Rendell, *The Cultural Lives of Whales and Dolphins*.

⁶³ Konishi et al., ‘Feeding Strategies and Prey Consumption of Three Baleen Whale Species within the Kuroshio-Current Extension’, 30.

hunting during the spring months. Similarly, toothed sperm whales would have been hunting squid in the deep sea (up to 2,000 metres) far away from the coast but would also have come to the perturbed region in spring to hunt sardines and anchovy.⁶⁴ Therefore, only these whale species were observed by the Sanriku fishermen, and their behaviour might have been different to that of the whales migrating along the coast. This could also explain why the whales, who were now fed and more active would be more willing to help humans in peril.

Conclusion

Whales, as the messenger or helpers of Ebisu or the dragon god, brought many benefits to the human communities, and their bodies, as containers of nutrients and wealth, were no exception. This chapter has further complicated our understanding of how humans and whales have interacted at the Sanriku Coast. A non-lethal whale culture does not automatically mean that whales were not harvested at all, but rather, that it was done more responsibly, in accordance with what the humans interpreted as the wishes of the whales. While western Japanese whalers were always eager to maximise their profits, Sanriku fishermen took only from the cetosphere what was given to them, perpetuating a more ecological sustainable system of whale harvests. However, both communities depended in the end on the same whale stocks, thus, the western Japanese excesses were likely also responsible for a drop in whale stranding at the end of the Edo period.

The origin of the different whale cultures on the Japanese Archipelago can probably be found in geographic particularities, but, even more interesting, also in the behaviour that baleen whales expressed along their migration near the Japanese coast. In western Japan, whales mostly swam through the coastal waters on their way north or south without stopping for extended periods to hunt. Whales were not an integral part of the western Japanese coastal ecosystems and whalers could hunt them with only a small risk of disturbing other fisheries. Their main concern was the ‘whale curse’ as some whales, especially whale mothers, fiercely fought to protect their calves. Furthermore, the consumption of raw whale meat bore the risk of food poisoning. Building whale monuments and performing memorial services for the whales was one way to protect against this ‘whale curse’.

Further north, whales showed different behaviours as they hunted small fish or fed on zooplankton. The fishermen here learned that having

⁶⁴ Kamagasaki, *Yorikujira sōdō ‘Akamae wa hirumae’ no shiteki kōsatsu*, 75–6.

whales around benefited them as they indicated the presence of fish and could even bring the fish closer to the shore. When a whale beached, the fishermen in the north did not hesitate to make use of the carcasses and they expressed their gratitude through the erection of whale monuments or donations to shrines. The distinctive behaviour of the whales was also reflected in local folktales as part of their moral worldview. This shows us that humans experienced the cetosphere quite differently depending on how whales behaved in a certain region.

There are recurring aspects in the whale folktales, like the dream sequence that can be found in the folktales of both whaling and non-whaling regions, but the underlying messages and implications of the stories vary. Carving out these vernacular differences has been further complicated by modern interpretations of whale folktales ignoring the regional differences in favour of a national Japanese whaling culture. The examination of the Same-ura whale stone is an excellent example of how the cultural meaning of a material object can change over time.