

# Culture

## Natural Disasters – Belief & Action



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### Introduction

I begin this article where my previous one ended. In that article – “Natural Disasters: Alleviation of Impact – a Historical Viewpoint”, *Japan SPOTLIGHT* March/April 2023 issue ([https://www.jef.or.jp/journal/pdf/248th\\_Special\\_Article\\_01.pdf](https://www.jef.or.jp/journal/pdf/248th_Special_Article_01.pdf)) – I had mentioned that the path to safety is in human endeavour coupled with the mysteries of the unseen. I concluded that article with the “Spirits of Dewa Sanzan”. This article begins with the “Spirit of Kashima”, centred at the famous Kashima Shrine at the eastern periphery of the Kanto plains in Ibaraki Prefecture, about 100 kilometers from central Tokyo.

The earlier article had begun with the excellence of disaster management in earthquake-prone Japan. It portrayed the fullness of human commitment and endeavour in generating the best out of what may seem at first glance a rather raw deal from nature. That article touched upon the immense contribution of a 19th century personality, Goryo Hamaguchi (1820-1885), who was later immortalised in the book *Inamura no Hi* (“The Burning Rice Fields”) for his prompt action in saving villagers’ lives during the tsunami set off by the 1864 Ansei-Nankai earthquake. This article concludes with a more detailed look at that outstanding example of service to society.

The topic of what it is to be Japanese has been explored by many thinkers in the past – both Japanese and foreign. In this article I shall touch upon the “Spirit of Japan”.

### Kashima Shrine

The deity who holds some level of power to subdue the fiery natural energy that uncloaks as earthquakes is *Takemikazuchi-no-Mikoto*, whose principal location of office is at the Shrine of Kashima, the abode of the Great Spirit of Kashima, the *Kashima Daimyoujin* in eastern Japan. Understandably, a deity with such credentials must be exceedingly mighty and is therefore also revered as the spirit of valor and strength. The immense uncontrolled energy that manifests as earthquakes is thought to be due to a giant catfish, the *Namazu*, who lives beneath the earth’s surface with its head at Kashima Shrine and tail at Katori Shrine, 20 km away. A magical stone, the *Kanameishi*, marks both these spots at the respective shrines. *Takemikazuchi-no-Mikoto* holds a spear to the stone, thereby pinning *Namazu*. However,

there are times when the grip loosens and *Namazu* moves, with disastrous results for mankind – as often experienced on the Japanese archipelago.

*Takemikazuchi-no-Mikoto* is petitioned by people to keep control of *Namazu*. In an ancient Japanese collection of poems, the *Manyoshu*, the following verse appears:

ゆるげども よもや抜けじの 要石  
鹿島の神の あらん限りは

*The pivot stone may wobble,  
but it will not become unstuck  
as long as the God of Kashima is with us.*

(Source: [fudosama.blogspot.com](https://www.fudosama.blogspot.com))

The *Manyoshu*, along with the *Kojiki* and *Nihongi*, may be the oldest extant chronicles on the inception of Japan, including the land and its people. The Shinto traditions and divinities (*Kamisama*) and the traditions observed by the Imperial household have their foundations in these ancient texts.

When I spoke with the head priest of Kashima Shrine, Noriyoshi Kashima – 70th in a long line of hereditary head priests – in May, he presented some mysterious tidbits. A few days before the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 11, 2011, an unfortunate whale had beached on the Pacific coast, right at the closest point to the shrine. It seemed to foretell the oncoming calamity. For the Kashima Shrine, damage by the temblor was limited to the destruction of its giant concrete gate, or *Torii*. Just a few days after the disaster, a wooden shrine marker (*fuda*) was carried by the waters of the Pacific to the same point. The head priest’s foreboding by this unusual arrival was soon confirmed. The *fuda* belonged to a sister shrine 400 km to the northeast in tsunami-devastated Kameishi town in Iwate Prefecture. The shrine had been inundated by the tsunami and its head priest had met the fate of many a resident in that coastal township. The *fuda* remained as a poignant farewell message.

### Omura Shrine

Kashima Shrine is said to be at the eastern tip of a ley line that runs across the southeastern coast of Japan to the Takachiho Mountains of Kyushu, 1,000 km away, in the area where the three prefectures of

Miyazaki, Kagoshima and Kumamoto meet. This ley line supposedly marks the position of significant “power spots”, including the Imperial Palace in Tokyo and Mt. Fuji, 100 km away. About 450 km southwest from Kashima along this ley line, in the Iga province of Mie Prefecture, is Omura Shrine. The noteworthy mention of a mystical energy flow was made to me by the shrine’s head priest, Osamu Kanayama, a veritable treasury of information and one who stressed the importance of coupling ancient wisdom with scientific advancements. Just as in Kashima Shrine, Omura Shrine also houses in its precincts the sacred *Kanameishi* stone with *Takemikazuchi-no-Mikoto* keeping it in place with his spear, preventing *Namazu*’s movement (Photo 1). Kanayama narrated about the strong spiritual links between Kashima and Omura. Omura Shrine is within the penumbra of the most important of Shinto shrines, the Grand Shrine of Ise, just 50 km away and which of course is also astride the ley line.

### Ley Lines & the Nai Shrine

An explanatory note on ley lines may be necessary here. Ley lines are the energy lines of nature. They mark the location of power spots – places which have an unusual natural vibration frequency. Rationalists – rather mistakenly, in my view, and perhaps unkindly – use the word “imaginary” to describe ley lines. I would rather use the word “unseen”. Science has not yet established their presence, which does not mean that they do not exist.

I received the information about Omura Shrine and an introduction to Kanayama at a place about 20 km to the west in the town of Kikyogaoka in neighbouring Nabari city. I had gone there to visit the Nai Shrine dedicated to the “God of Earthquakes”. The shrine is rather unknown except among residents and wanting to know more about it I unexpectedly chanced upon a retired schoolteacher, Isao Okunishi. Over a cup of fragrant tea followed by a delicious *udon* lunch, the teacher, true to his long years of educating the young, steadily took me through the history of the shrine. Nai Shrine is very old. Along with a few ancient shrines across the archipelago, it had been dedicated to the God of Earthquakes (the Kanji characters used for

*Nai* were synonymous with “no earthquake”) at a time when *Takemikazuchi-no-Mikoto* possibly had not yet been identified by name as the deity having the role of providing protection from earthquakes. Okunishi fixed a meeting with Kanayama and after lunch we drove to Omura Shrine (Photos 2 & 3).

### Sparrow’s Closure of Doors (Japanese: すずめの戸締り)

*Namazu* and the *Kanameishi* have influenced world-famous Japanese animation and through it millions of young people. The animation movie *Sparrow’s Closure of Doors* by Makoto Shinkai (Cosmic Waves Film) grossed more than 10 billion yen in Japan in box office revenue in just 45 days from its release last year, and worldwide it has grossed \$320 million. In the story, the role of *Namazu* is played by a rather repulsive looking supernatural insect, *Mimizu*, that lives beneath the ground in Japan and creates earthquakes which are characterized by a foreboding purple mist that flows out through magical doors when open. The role of *Takemikazuchi-no-Mikoto*, represented by the handsome young hero Souta, is to serve society by closing these open doors. The *Kanameishi* appears under the same name and its key location can quite obviously in the film be traced to that of Kashima Shrine. The heroine is a teenage high-schooler, Suzume (which means sparrow in Japanese), who happens to chance upon Souta and becomes fond of him. She inadvertently releases *Mimizu* by opening a magical door which she can see because she herself is endowed with some supernatural powers. It is then left for Souta, as “door-closer”, to shut the door and keep the stone in place. Both Souta and Suzume then head across the Japanese archipelago closing doors which have mysteriously opened, thereby trying to subdue the impact of earthquakes. Shinkai gives full rein to his imagination and fantasy with the plot having complex and fascinating twists, including Souta turning into a strange three-legged child’s chair that can run, and Suzume’s pet cat turning magical and becoming a very mobile *Kanameishi*, and so forth.

Animation is an excellent teaching tool that is extensively used in

Photo1: Author



Shrine housing the *Kanameishi* stone (left) and *Takemikazuchi-no-Mikoto* subduing *Namazu* (right) at Omura Shrine

Photo 2: Author



Omura Shrine Head Priest Osamu Kanayama, flanked by Isao Okunishi and Mrs. Emiko Okunishi

Photo 3: Author



Nai Shrine in Kikyogaoka, Nabari city, Mie Prefecture

Japan. From the young to the elderly, from average citizens to specialists, important instructions and messages to them are conveyed by government offices, public utilities, hospitals, train stations – in fact every institution small and big – through carefully prepared cartoons and posters.

### **Tsunami Education Center**

*Light the fire of rice sheaves that will last forever in your heart.*

Younger generations in Japan must be taught the essentials of disaster preparedness, relief, and recovery. The *Inomura-no-hi-no-yakata* tsunami educational center in Hirogawa, in the Arida district of Wakayama Prefecture in western Japan, is an outstanding example of such teaching. Following the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami of 2004, the need to learn from experience was never more apparent. Ever since its inception in 2007, the center, in addition to disseminating information across Japan (much of which, of course, is coastal), has reached out to Aceh in Indonesia, which was close to the epicenter of the earthquake of 2004 and was almost completely wiped out in the tsunami aftermath.

At the entrance to the educational area of the center stands “Pepper” the robot, which welcomes visitors and provides guidance on the center’s sections. The first section is the Disaster Simulation Room where, through posters, videos and interactive devices, the visitor can learn about tsunami and how to protect oneself from them. The area ends with the Inamura Ranger Game, in which visitors can test their knowledge by playing with characters in the guise of the famous Ranger animation. The next area has a large tsunami simulation tank. Visitors can watch a mini tsunami simulated here and learn about the waves, which are different from normal waves. The last area in this section is a mini auditorium where a 3D documentary is screened on the impact of tsunami and the importance of preparedness.

The center also has a section dedicated to the sister museum it helped found in Aceh. In addition, there is an exhibition corner with photographs and pictures and material exhibits relating to tsunami and preparedness, an archives room, and a guidance room where one-on-one and group guidance sessions are delivered. A historical section and corridor, the Path of Inheritance, traces the history of tsunami in Japan and how preparedness has evolved over the years. This area includes the museum’s centrepiece, the Fire of Inamura gallery.

*Inamura-no-hi* means “the fire of the rice sheaves”. I talked about this in my earlier article mentioned in my Introduction above. In 1864, the great Ansei-Nankai earthquake triggered a series of tsunami. The local head, Goryo Hamaguchi, against many odds – himself having been caught in one of the first tsunami while trying to warn and rescue people and barely escaping with his own life – saved the lives of many villagers by setting his own stacked rice sheaves on fire, thus enabling villagers to escape in the enveloping darkness. This noble act of selflessness, sacrifice, courage, and amazing leadership has become a symbol for tsunami preparedness. Hamaguchi did not stop there. After the disaster, he motivated villagers to remain or return

and construct an embankment to protect against future tsunami, an edifice which survives to this day.

The museum gallery has realistic videos which graphically describe those traumatic days and nights of 1864. In addition to developing a deep admiration for Hamaguchi’s contribution, the section can inspire people to be enthusiastic and motivated, and to develop a sense of service.

My main thought at the end of my visit to this center was that knowledge about its existence must be spread across Japan and coastal countries in the world. I was surprised and disappointed to find that the average person I talked to in areas away from this region knew little about it. In the adjoining town of Yuasa – which as the birthplace of Japanese soy sauce had close connections to the ancestors of Hamaguchi – knowledge was strong. In fact, a local Japanese rice wine has even been branded as “*Inamura-no-hi*”.

### **The Hamaguchi Residence**

The *Inamura-no-hi-no-yakata* museum is housed in a modern building with all amenities. Adjoining it is an old Japanese house. It is the restored residence of Hamaguchi and houses the “Hamaguchi Goryo Archives”. The space is dedicated to Hamaguchi and depicts several facets of his life, including a small garden which he used to cherish. There is a community space which can be reserved for social service discussions, Edo-era armour which he used to collect, and two small projection areas that screen documentaries on his life.

About 100 meters from this museum is another old Japanese house that has been restored. This is the Hamaguchi family residence and was the seat of Goryo’s elder brother. Goryo would often spend time here, especially after the devastation of 1864 when his own house was ravaged by the tsunami. This house was sturdier by the construction standards of those days. A marker today shows the height to which the sea waters had come in. Goryo’s brother, as one of the main inheritors of the family’s ancient soy sauce business, was well off and provided considerable financial support to rebuild the village and the Hiromura seawall. This embankment is about five meters high, 600 meters in length, and about 20 meters in width at the stone base, tapering at the top to form a trapezoidal structure. The sides of the embankment are planted with pine trees which tend to withstand tsunami better than other trees, forming a tide-prevention pine forest. The seawall was constructed from 1855-1858 and it became part of a multiple defense system against tsunami. It held well during the Showa Nankai Earthquake of 1946, preventing the inflow of tidal waves into the town and living up to the words left by Hamaguchi: “We must aim to provide relief to the residents and peasants by building the embankment.” Today one can take a leisurely walk along the path at the top of the embankment. The “Hiromura Seawall” is a designated cultural asset of national historic importance (*Photo 4*).

A well-marked walking tour path of about 2 km shows the route taken by Hamaguchi and other villagers on that fateful night to the safety and sanctity offered by Hiro-Hachimangu Shrine, located on higher ground (*Photo 5*). The whole area appears dedicated to the



Photo 4: Author

The Hiromura Seawall



Photo 5: Author

Hiro-Hachimangu Shrine with an original pavilion from 1864 at the front



Photo 6: Author

Inamura – a rice sheaf

memory of Hamaguchi. There is a rice stack maintained as a landmark and memorial (Photo 6). I concluded my trip to Hiromura with a visit to Hamaguchi's simple grave.

In his story "A Living God", Lafcadio Hearn (Japanese name Koizumi Yakumo, 1850-1904), wrote:

*"Certain persons, while still alive, were honoured by having temples built for their spirits, and were treated as gods. One such instance was Hamaguchi Gohei, a farmer of the district of Arita in the province of Kishu. And I think he deserved it."*

The person Hearn was referring to was Goryo Hamaguchi.

### The Spirit of Japan

In the plot of *Sparrow's Closure of Doors*, Suzume herself had lost her mother in the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011. Japan is a land which has historically been subjected to shattering earthquakes and in their aftermath, terrible tsunami, families have been separated or killed and homes and livelihoods destroyed time and again. Yet it is remarkable that this same land and its people rebound, resilient and stronger than ever, on a never-ending road to perfection and technological excellence. Only a strong combination of human perseverance and commitment, coupled with a spirit of never-say-die, can enable people to survive and progress in a land of such natural

disasters.

I touched upon Katori Shrine earlier in this article, that *Namazu's* tail lies below the ground at this location while its head is under the shrine at Kashima. The two shrines are like a pair, with about 20 km between them, including the Tonegawa River (Japan's largest), and under different prefectural jurisdictions – Ibaraki and Chiba. Indeed, legend says that the resident divinities of the two shrines act in consonance in doing their bit to protect the land from earthquakes or at least reduce their impact. All the gods and goddesses from all the shrines across Japan are supposed to assemble for an annual conference at the Grand Shrine of Izumo in western Japan. While even the deity of Kashima is an annual participant, his counterpart, the deity of Katori, is the only one who does not go. He, thereby, ensures that the *Kanameishi* keystone remains in place. The good friend that the god of Katori is, he hosts a huge welcome party for the god of Kashima and his entourage on their return from Izumo. Several notable annual festivals are held to this day encompassing the pair of Kashima and Katori shrines, including a flotilla of gaily decorated boats along the Tonegawa River. Such festivals are considered as propitiating the enshrined gods and goddesses and form a key part of the social fabric in Japanese tradition.

The Japanese spirit is well-endorsed at Katori Shrine. A calligraphy done by late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reads 大和心 (*Yamato kokoro*), meaning "The Spirit of Yamato" (*Yamato* refers to the Japanese people). For posterity, the words have been etched on a large black granite stone, inaugurated by Abe, who was an ardent proponent of reviving the traditional Japanese spirit in his compatriots. One could perhaps argue that this is the same sort of slogan that was used by militaristic Japan in the early 20th century with such disastrous effects for the world and for itself. But in current times Japan is being plagued by what could be called mental turbulence, characterized by irrational acts of violence such as the one to which Abe himself sadly fell victim in July 2022, and it is at such a time that his clarion call is even more relevant. *Yamato kokoro* is indeed the keystone of this country (Photo 7). **JS**



Photo 7: Author

The "Spirit of Yamato Stone" at Katori Shrine, flanked by Chief Priest Takeshi Katori and Akie Abe, wife of the late prime minister

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