

The Fire of Rice Sheaves

*by Tsunezo Nakai**

“It is not normal”, Gohei muttered to himself as he came out of his house. The earthquake was not particularly violent, but the long and slow tremor and the rumbling of the earth were not something old Gohei had ever experienced.

It was ominous. Worriedly, he looked down from his garden at the village below. The villagers were so absorbed in preparations for a harvest festival that they seemed not to have noticed the earthquake.

Turning his eyes to the sea, Gohei was transfixed by the sight. Waves were moving back to the sea against the wind. And at the next moment an expanse of sand and black rocks came into view. “My God! It must be a tsunami”, thought Gohei. If he didn’t do something, the lives of four hundred villagers would be swallowed along with the village. But what could he do? He could not waste even a minute.

“Ah, yes!”, he cried, and rushed into the house. He ran out seconds later with a big pine torch. There were piles of rice sheaves all around, lying there ready for collection. “It is a tragedy. I must burn them, but by doing this I can perhaps save the lives of the villagers.”

Gohei lit one of the sheaves. A flame rose instantly, fanned by the wind. He ran frantically among the sheaves to light them all. Then, throwing the torch down, he stood as if dazed and stared at the sea.

The sun had already set, and it was getting dark. The fire of rice sheaves rose high in the sky. Someone saw the fire and began to ring the bell of the mountain temple. “Fire! It is the Squire’s house!” Young men of the village shouted and ran hurriedly to the hill. Old people, women and children followed.

To Gohei, looking down impatiently from the hill, their pace seemed as slow as ants. Finally, about twenty young men rushed up to him. They started to extinguish the fire. “Leave it, leave it! There’s going to be a disaster. Bring all the villagers here.” Gohei shouted in a loud voice.

The villagers gathered one by one. He counted the old and young men and women as they came. The people stared in turn at Gohei and at the burning sheaves.

Then he shouted with all his might, “Look over there! It is coming!” They peered through the dim light of dusk to where Gohei was pointing. At the edge of the sea in the distance they saw a thin dark line. As they watched it became wider and thicker, rapidly surging forward, now as high as a cliff.

“It’s a tsunami!” someone cried. As he said it, the huge wave crashed against the shore with the weight of a mountain, sending a shudder through the land. The noise was like a hundred thunders all roaring at once.

The people involuntarily jumped back. For an instant they could see nothing except sea spray that had covered the hill like a cloud. Then they saw the fearful white sea passing violently over their village, moving back and forth two or three times.

On the hill there was silence for a while. The people gazed down in blank dismay at the place where their village had been. It was gone without a trace, obliterated by the waves.

The fire of rice sheaves began to rise again, fanned by the wind. It illuminated the darkened surroundings.

The villagers began to recover their senses, and realized they had been saved by the fire. In silence they knelt down before Gohei.

** This story by Tsunezo Nakai, adapted from "Living God" by Lafcadio Hearn, appeared in a primary school textbook approved by the Japanese Ministry of Education from 1937 to 1946. This version was translated from Japanese to English by Dr. O. Muta, with some changes to the English by John Beavan.*

Lafcadio Hearn (also known as Koizumi Yakumo after gaining Japanese citizenship in 1890) was a journalist and writer who had a major influence on the spread of knowledge about Japan to western countries in the late 19th and earliest 20th centuries. He was also an avid collector of Japanese legends and folk tales (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lafcadio_Hearn). His story "Inamura No Hi", or "Living God", is loosely based on the historical figure Hamaguchi Gohei of Hiromura village, now the town of Hirogawa in Wakayama Prefecture.

Gohei's actions during the Nankai Trough earthquake and tsunami of December 1854, and in the years following, saved the villagers and enabled them to rebuild their lives. His wisdom and good works earned him the title "Inamura No Hi" or "Living God". In the Hirogawa region he is still revered, and is compared to the great Chinese philosophers Confucius and Lao-Tse.

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