

The Fire of Rice Sheaves    *translated by O. Muta, Gifu University*

*"The Fire of Rice Sheaves" was translated by Professor O. Muta of the Gifu University. We refer her translation from the Proceeding of the International Tsunami Symposium and Tsunami '93.*

"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 of the kind old Gohei had ever experienced.

It was ominous. Worriedly he looked down from his garden at the village below. Villagers were so absorbed in the preparation of a harvest festival that they seemed not to notice the earthquake.

Turning his eyes now to the sea, Gohei was transfixed at the sight. Waves were moving back to the sea against the wind.

At the next moment the expanse of the sand and black base of rocks came into view.

"My God! It must be the tsunami", Gohei thought. If he didn't do something, the lives of four hundred villagers would be swallowed along with the village.

He could not lose even a minute.

"That's it!" he cried and ran into the house. Gohei immediately ran out of the house with a big pine torch.

There were piles of rice sheaves lying there ready for collection. "It is a shame. I have to burn them, but with this I can save the lives of villagers."

Gohei suddenly lighted one of the rice sheaves. A flame rose instantly fanned by the wind. He ran frantically among the sheaves to light them.

Having lit all the sheaves in his rice field, Gohei threw the torch away. As if dazed he stood there and looked at the sea.

The sun was already down 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 the young men.

To Gohei, who was looking down from the hill, their pace seemed as slow as ants. He felt impatient.

Finally about twenty young men ran up to him. They were going to extinguish the fire.

"Leave them! There will be a disaster. Have the villagers come 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 looked at the burning sheaves and Gohei in turn.

At that time he shouted with all his might. "Look over there! It is coming." They looked through the dim light of dusk to where Gohei pointed.

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.

"It is the tsunami!" someone cried. No sooner than they saw the water in front of them as high as a cliff, crashing against the land, they felt the weight as if a mountain was crushing them. They heard a roaring noise as if a hundred thunders roared all at once.

The people involuntarily jumped back. They could not see for a while anything but clouds of spray which had advanced to the hill like clouds.

They saw the white fearful sea passing violently over their village. The water moved to and fro over the village two or three times.

On the hill there was no voice for a while. The villagers were gazing down in blank dismay at the place where their village had been.

It was now gone without a trace, excavated by the waves.

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

The villagers recovered their senses for the first time and realized that they had been saved by this fire. In silence they knelt down before Gohei.