

## Ukai fish (Cormorant Fishing)

What is Ukai like? You might imagine the Nagara River Cormorant Fishing of Gifu Prefecture when you hear the word “Ukai” . The scenery is elegant and fantastic, where cormorant fishing masters (called Usho) on their boats (Ubune) are manipulating a number of cormorants in their hands to catch sweetfish (Ayu) attracted by a bonfire. The Nagara River Cormorant Fishing is cormorant fishing patronized by the Imperial Court (called “Goryo-ukai” ). Cormorant fishing masters are appointed as “Imperial Cormorant Fishing Masters, Board of Ceremonies and Rituals (shikibushokū), Imperial Household Agency”, in the status of a national public servant engaged in the work of passing on the traditional culture of Ukai to future generations.

Ukai cormorant fishing had been conducted, not only on the Nagara River, but also at other sites in Japan. More than 150 sites in Japan were recorded in documents. The Tama River Cormorant Fishing in Tokyo was depicted in a Nishiki<sup>★11</sup> print by Ando Hiroshige, an Ukiyoe artist of the Edo Period.

Ukai cormorant fishing had been widely conducted in Japan. However, along with the development of fishery with a fishing net, Ukai as a practical way of fishing has gradually died out.

Nowadays, Ukai cormorant fishing is conducted at 12 sites in Japan but Ukai as a practical way of fishing is conducted only by “Goryo-ukai” . All others are conducted as a sightseeing event for tourists.

The Isawa Ukai Cormorant Fishing, held every summer on the Fuefuki River, is also an event of cormorant fishing for sightseeing purposes. This Isawa Ukai applies a rare fishing method called “Kachiu” in which Usho manipulate cormorants by walking along the riverbed and not from a boat.

★10 · · · “Shikibushoku” refers to one of the internal subdivisions of the Imperial Household Agency

★11 · · · Nishikie refers to a multi-colored woodblock print of ukiyo-e



◀ Ukai on the Nagara River

Kachiu  
Isawa Ukai on the Fuefuki River

## Ukaizan Onmyoji Temple and Noh Song “Ukai”

The historical record of “Ukaizan Onmyoji Engi”<sup>★12</sup>, describes the legend of how Onmyoji Temple in Isawacho, Fuefuki City was established. Saint Nichiren was traveling around the Kainokuni area on foot to propagate the religion of the Lotus Sutra. He visited Isawa in 1274 where he encountered the ghost of Uzukai (a cormorant fisherman). In order to bring peace to the ghost Saint Nichiren carried out “Kawasegaki Kuyō”<sup>★13</sup> (a memorial service conducted on a riverbank). He ordered his followers to write characters from the eight volumes of the Lotus Sutra on pebbles and these were thrown into the riverbed for three days and nights. As a result, the ghost of the cormorant fisherman could rest in peace and a tombstone was placed at the site. Onmyoji Temple was later built here and the tombstone is the origin of the temple.

By the end of the Kamakura Era, this story, “Ukairyo-O-Boreisaido”<sup>★14</sup> had spread far and wide in the Kanto area and about 600 years ago, during the Muromachi Era, Noh writer Zeami created the Noh song “Ukai” based on an episode from this story.

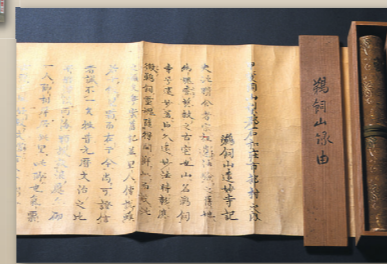
★12 · · · “Ukaizan Onmyoji Engi” describes the legend of how Onmyoji Temple was established.

★13 · · · “Kawasegaki-Kuyo” refers to a memorial service offered on a river bank to pacify the unsatisfied soul of a drowned person.

★14 · · · “Ukairyo-O Boreisaido” is one of the episodes of Saint Nichiren who saved the soul of the Uzukai Ghost by offering a memorial service. Buddhist scriptures were written on pebbles and thrown into the riverbed.



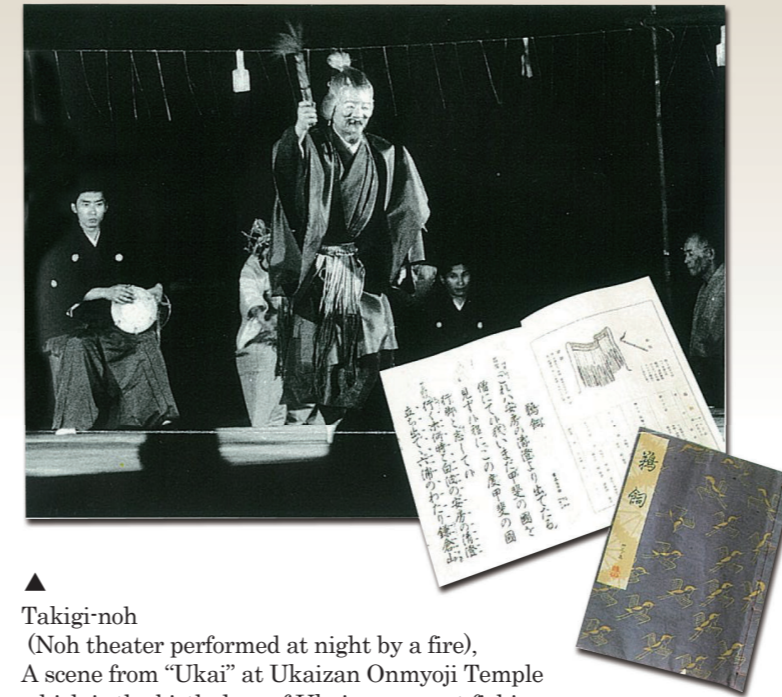
◀ Entrance Gate of Ukaizan Onmyoji Temple



“Ukaizan Onmyoji Engi”  
(Established around the end of Edo period, Owned by Onmyoji Temple)

## Ukai cormorant fishing conducted in Isawa

Why had Ukai been carried out in Isawa? It is historically known that Isawa is the only place in Kainokuni (present-day Yamanashi) where “Mikuriya” was allocated. “Mikuriya” refers to the place where sacred fish were prepared and offered to the gods. Ukai river was considered to be the best site to catch Sweetfish (Ayu) and at that time Ukai cormorant fishing was not only popular but also the best way to catch them.



▲ Takigi-noh  
(Noh theater performed at night by a fire),  
A scene from “Ukai” at Ukaizan Onmyoji Temple  
which is the birthplace of Ukai cormorant fishing  
[Important intangible cultural property holder]

▲ Reference book  
of the Noh Song “Ukai”



▲ The Fuefuki River where Isawa Ukai is held  
(The Isawa River used to flow in those days)

## Kyo-ishi stone of the Onmyoji Temple

The Kyo-ishi stone of Onmyoji Temple, also called “Ichiji-isseki-kyo” (one character stone scriptures), is a pebble on which a single character of a Buddhist scripture is written. The practice, passed down from the Kamakura Era, became widespread in the Edo Era. It was carried out for the purpose of curing diseases, producing good harvests and pacifying unsatisfied souls.

An article “About Kyo-ishi Stone” by Emu Yamanaka was published in the magazine called KOKOKAI (Archaeological World) issued in Meiji 34 (1901). It says, “The pebbles on which Buddhist scriptures were written were found in many regions in Japan. They are called Kyo-ishi stones. Among them, the most famous Kyo-ishi stone is preserved at the Onmyoji Temple in Isawa-shuku. It was offered by Saint Nichiren to pacify the unsatisfied soul of the Uzukai ghost” .

The pebbles preserved at the Onmyoji Temple can be said to be the most famous Kyo-ishi in history



▲ “Nanajino-Kyo-ishi” of Onmyoji  
Temple, pebbles on which seven  
◀ characters from Buddhist scriptures  
are written – a character on each pebble  
<packaged in a glass container>



▲ “Osusuri-Mizu” on the right bank by the Man-nen-bashi Bridge  
<a well to get water for the ink-stone to write characters on the Kyo-ishi stone>

鶺鴒  
Ukai  
飼

Koshu-dochu  
Isawa-shuku  
and Isawa Ukai  
Cormorant Fishing

Isawa Ukai Cormorant Fishing on the Fuefuki River