



Ebisu, a strange stranger...

Ebisu is considered a genuine Japanese *kami* (神, a word used to describe spirits, natural forces, or essences in the Shinto faith), linked to the bounty of the sea. He is often associated with his counterpart Daikoku, charged with the fertility of the earth. Both ride on the arch of the Seven Deities of Good Fortune. With a fishing rod in his right hand and a red *tai* (鯛 - sea bream) under his left arm, his image is displayed in fishermen's homes all over Japan, be it as a stone sculpture covered with moss or a well worshiped wooden statue inside its altar. An important member of the Japanese *kami* pantheon, Ebisu has his own sanctuary in Nishinomiya (Hyôgo prefecture). The reason why Ebisu became the patron of fishermen and, later, that of merchants is not well documented, however.



He might have been mistaken for Saburô, who was popular as a protector of seamen around the Seto Inland Sea, near the Nishinomiya sanctuary, during the Heian period. Further, this Ebisu character, with his reassuring smile, has a whole set of myths that could have much more primitive origins. He is sometimes considered to be synonymous with the boneless leech-child, a product of the incestuous union between Izanagi and Izanami¹, who was abandoned on a boat made of reeds due to his deformation. Moreover Ebisu sometimes takes the shape of a simple stone caught in fishermen's lines or picked up from the seabed during seasonal rituals. He could be a dead dolphin or just a bone from one; even dead corpses drifting in the sea or found on the shore could be associated with Ebisu, and for that reason are carefully gathered and buried in a proper ceremony. Whales and, sometimes, sharks or dolphins are frequently associated with Ebisu. A lack of reverence for these imposing sea creatures is considered as an insult that could anger the Ebisu/whale deity, and threaten fishermen with a fearsome curse, while kind treatment is more likely to bring blessings to them and to their village.



This worship of an animal regarded as a god capable of good deeds or revenge is also depicted in many stories about travelling strangers, noblemen, prince or deities disguised as peasants or beggars, asking for hospitality when arriving in a village. During the Edo period, Japanese society featured four distinct classes: samurai, peasants, artisans, and merchants-- a hierarchy rigidly enforced, and one which precluded social and geographic mobility. A few professions

¹ The couple of deities who created the Japanese islands according to the Kojiki (古事記, "Record of Ancient Matters"), the oldest text about Japanese history, compiled according to the preface from the year 672.

were able to travel –smiths, carpenters and other craftsmen, along with all kinds of peddlers, shamans and priests, and actors– all probably following regularly traveled routes. Strangers were thought to have special skills that peasants did not possess, and, for that reason, probably inspired as much fear as admiration. Due to the fact that they had come from overseas, the Portuguese who arrived in Japan during the sixteenth century were thought to have frightening supernatural powers, a fear that still lingered when Commodore Perry arrived at Uraga in his four “black ships” in 1852. The power to recognize magic stones that could enhance longevity or even give eternal life was attributed to these foreigners. Earlier folk tales identified the Chinese as travelers who could recognize stones of supernatural value, but Europeans would replace the Chinese in these tales during the Edo period.

As depicted in folk tales, many of which have subsequently been made into movies such as the “Seven Samurai” or “Zatôichi”, travelers arriving in remote villages were viewed as auspicious or dangerous. The power given to foreign visitors can also be associated with the old belief in *marebit*, a deity from the other world who would periodically visit villages, bringing gifts of wisdom and good fortune. Such a belief is not so very different from the numerous folk tales from European and Arabic Literature or Greek myths, in which a traveling prince disguised as a peasant or a beggar repays his hosts with blessings when treated with kindness, or with a curse when mistreated².



With such a history rooted deeply in Japan’s past, it is no wonder that Ebisu is still enormously popular today; he has his own brand of beer (brewed by Sapporo), a train station in Tokyo that carries his name, and even a blue jeans fashion line (*Evisu*). The image of the smiling god is still seen as a good omen in modern homes, bringing luck if well treated.

Raw wood sculptures are still easy to find from the Meiji or Edo period, although polychrome are rarer. Collectors tend to look for Ebisu and Daikoku pairs. They come in all sizes, from tiny figures (a few centimeters) to about 40 centimeters. Huge models (sometimes over one meter) are mostly modern sculptures. Bronze Ebisu images are typically from the Meiji or a later period if they are of large size (over 10 cm). Interestingly, very old Ebisu sculptures, such as those from the Muromachi period, sometimes sport a frightening grimace, making one wonder if the Japanese deity was more feared during those times.

² See the episode of Zeus and Hermes visiting earth disguised as mortals who were repelled by a “thousand homes” and only admitted by the humble couple of Baucis and Philemon. When served with a welcome meal, the two gods reveal their true nature and promised punishment to the neighborhood, flooding all their houses while turning Baucis and Philemon’s home into a golden temple, of which they became the guardians. At the end of their lives, they were turned into trees, just having time to embrace each other and becoming one single tree.