Rowing the Eternal Sea

The Story of a Minamata Fisherman

By Oiwa Keibo

Narrated by Ogata Masato

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Part One

Sunset on the Shiranui Sea viewed from the bluff behind Masato's house. The small building with tiled roof facing the water is "Yuuan," Masato's study. Masato's wooden boat Tokoyo is seen behind the roof. Beyond the sea is a silhouette of the Amakusa Islands.
A Vibrant Village

I was born on November 8, 1953, in the main house of the Ogata clan, about fifty meters from where I live today. In our remote village, tradition still prescribes that the eldest son inherit the main house. As is expected of younger sons, I set up a branch household when I became an adult. Presently the main house is occupied by the eldest son of my eldest brother. It is his responsibility to take care of the assets, cemetery, and ancestral tablets of our clan.

Our village, Oki, is located on a small peninsula called Meshima, meaning “woman island.” Directly across the water, the inland sea of Shiranui, is Shimojima, one of the Amakusa Islands. My father’s family immigrated to the mainland from Shimojima. It was when grandfather was still young, so it must have been about 120 years ago. Currently there are fifty-seven households in Oki. In all of Meshima there are only two hundred houses, so our village represents about one-fourth of the population. We’re one of the oldest families in these parts—not the very oldest, but perhaps next in line. Within the village is a hamlet called Ikenoshiri, consisting of nineteen households. Six of the nineteen houses are referred to as Kochidomari, or “eastern anchorage.” This is where I live.

My father, Ogata Fukumatsu, had eighteen children. I was the youngest, born when he was fifty-six. My father married three times. The second marriage lasted only about three months. Apparently the bride fled when she discovered how hard her life would be. With his first wife he had eight girls and four boys. His oldest son died of sickness in the war, so the next oldest became head of the family. After Father’s first wife died—an event probably not unrelated to giving birth to so many children—he took my mother as his final wife. Together they had six more kids. I was born when my mother was close to forty. Of her six children, two boys and a girl died shortly after birth. Three are still living. I was the last.

My mother already had two daughters when she married my father. I don’t think she had been formally married. Those daughters are still living. Count-
ing the children who died, there were twenty of us. I was the twentieth, although in the family register I'm listed as the eighteenth.

In my earliest memories, my brothers and sisters were still living at home. We caught all kinds of fish, including red snapper, mullet, and cutlass, but our primary income came from sardines. We used a huge net to catch sardine fry, which would later be sun dried. In those days we didn't have hydraulic rollers to pull in the nets. This was back when most people still used rowboats, and we needed lots of manpower. We'd boil the sardines for a short time, leave them out to dry, and then sell them to a wholesaler.

Our family started out with fixed-shore-net fishing, shifted to trawl netting for sardines, and then moved into purse seining, employing a lot of men. Father was one of seven or eight bosses, ami moto, in the village net fishery. Due to mechanization the number gradually decreased, until only one remained. This boss hires mainly family members, so essentially the old “boss” system has vanished.

I had many brothers and sisters, and the brother who succeeded as head of the family had six children. Although most of my sisters were married off by the time I was a small child, the house was full of people who came to work for us. There were also live-in servants who did domestic chores. I remember that two of them were mentally retarded. Among the servants there were also some Koreans. These people eventually left to look for work in the Osaka area, in the late fifties and early sixties. In our heyday we'd have thirty or forty people living and working with us. We also had employees who commuted from neighboring houses and villages.

In sardine fishing a boat would go out ahead to find the fish. Two others followed towing a net. A fourth carried the catch. The boats that needed the greatest number of hands, of course, were those with the nets. Purse seining required about thirty people. They would light a big fire on the edge of the boat at night to attract the fish, and then they would set the net. Right after the war this was the biggest industry in the Shiranui Sea. During the war, most of our hands were drafted, so no one caught many fish. Toward the end of the war, especially, people thought it dangerous to be at sea during a bombing attack. Then the war ended, and everyone came home. The fish stocks were up, and the men were back. This is when purse seining got started, and it remained popular until the late fifties.

Then our region was struck by Minamata disease. Fish stocks dwindled, and we couldn't sell what we did catch. This happened in the early sixties.

When I was small the community was thriving. People would come to work from nearby villages and from the Amakusa Islands. Second and third sons who couldn't inherit farmland from their fathers would come from the countryside to fish. There was even a guy who came all the way from Shikoku
to sell kimono fabric and ended up staying here and working for us. The number of households hasn't changed, but there were a lot more people back then. The atmosphere of the village was entirely different. It was vibrant.

As you see, I was born and raised surrounded by lots of people. There was a strong feeling of family, but at home there was no clear-cut distinction between true family and nonfamily members. Many of my sisters ended up marrying employees. It was all very natural—how else would we find suitable mates for so many women?

Imagine the din of more than thirty people eating together! These weren't like meals today, where you can get just about anything you want, but simple affairs consisting of rice mixed with barley, miso soup, and some broiled or boiled fish. When we were really busy, we'd make do with sweet potatoes and rice balls. Even when we'd steam two big pots of rice, there wouldn't be a grain left. Meals were lively and fun, but if you didn't concentrate on eating, you'd be left without anything. The proportion of rice to barley was seven parts to three, or six parts to four. “It was worse than this during the war,” my mother would always remind us. She would put rice in a two-liter sake bottle and churn it with a stick to remove the bran. Because we had a big family, she had to do this every day. “That's why my shoulders ache even now,” she would complain.