

Uryujima and Ebisu-sama

This story tells of a beautiful island called Uryujima which used to lie in Beppu Bay. About 400 years ago the entire island sank beneath the sea after a devastating earthquake.

Long ago there were several islands in Bungo Bay (present-day Beppu Bay). Among these was one which for many years had been a flourishing place.

During the Muromachi Period (late 14th to late 16th century) Uryujima boasted one of the best harbours in Bungo (present-day Oita Prefecture) and had a thriving trade with foreign lands. The island had twelve villages with several thousand houses, and the headman, Yukimatsu Katsutada, had a handsome mansion to which led the Sanjo Boulevard lined with numerous shops.

The islanders led a satisfied and peaceful life for the sea and the fields yielded plenty to eat. Moreover arguments and quarrels were practically unheard of because they clung to an old and strange tradition: the people were bound to live in harmony, for if they did not, the gods would be enraged and the island would sink instantly into the sea. The portent of this would be when the face of Ebisu-sama, guardian deity of Ebisu Shrine, turned red!

The head family of the island had been very religious for generations, and many shrines and temples had been built on the island including Ebisu Shrine where many people came to worship in the morning and evening. The tradition was handed down in every family and any dispute or quarrel was nipped in the bud with the dread words: "Stop it, or Ebisu-sama's face will turn red!"

One man however, a doctor named Kato Ryosai who lived in the village of Sakarasu, treated this tradition with ridicule: "What nonsense! How could the gods punish us in that way. This island is so big that it couldn't possibly sink."

The islanders were aghast and remonstrated with him: "Don't say such things or the gods will punish you!" But Ryosai did not care: "Punishment! What punishment? I should like to see it." And he scoffed at their warning.

One night Ryosai secreted a jar of red-ochre rouge in the fold of his kimono, stole out Ebisu

Shrine and painted Ebisu-sama's face red!

Next morning an old man, coming to worship at the shrine, saw this and fled in terror to spread the awful news: "Ebisu-sama's face has turned red!" he cried. This was terrible! Surely it couldn't really happen. Perhaps it would be better to leave the island before it sank. And some people began to prepare to evacuate.

Two..., three..., four days passed, but nothing unusual happened. Two weeks passed, but nothing changed. The sea remained as before. Then Ryosai, confident that nothing would happen, revealed the truth: "I painted the face red," he boasted. "I did it to see what would happen. Look, there's nothing in it. It's only a fairy story. There hasn't even been a tremor."

But some people were uneasy. There was anxious whispering: "I hope nothing's going to happen. We can't be sure yet." Their fears were justified. On the twentieth day a tremor shook the island. This was most uncommon. The next day, and the next, the island trembled and the earth rumbled uncannily.

"This bodes ill," they thought. "The tradition is true after all. This must be a warning that the gods are angry. We won't wait any longer." Some people sailed away from the island.

The quakes and rumbling became more violent and weird and at length the island was shaken continuously. Walls collapsed, houses caved in, trees were uprooted. The sea, once calm, now raged and roared. "Yufu and Tsurumi are erupting!" The sky was ablaze with a shower of burning rocks which crashed onto the island. This fearful sight terrified the people and panic-stricken they started to leave the island.

Towards the evening the quaking and rumbling began to subside. At this moment there appeared from nowhere an old man on a white horse. "The island will sink," cried this messenger from the gods. "Leave now while you still have time!" Those who remained now rushed to the boats or plunged into the sea and tried desperately to swim to Funai (Oita City) or Hiji. Ryosai fled in a boat, but this was crushed by the angry waves.

Then from below the waves, or from the depths of the earth, came a rumbling which grew to a mighty roar and a mountainous wave engulfed the island.

The next morning the calm waters of Bungo Bay shimmered in the morning light as if nothing

had happened. But Uryujima was nowhere to be seen.

According to records, this disaster occurred on 12th July, 1596. Recently, reserchers have investigated the area in order to located the remains of the island.