

In a [PMJS posting](#) (10/23/2015), Prof. Raji C. Steineck writes: "Sometime in the medieval period, Ebisu became associated with Izanagi and Izanami's abandoned child Hiruko. There seems to be a story that Hiruko spent time at the palace of the Dragon king, where he transformed into Ebisu. But the literature I've perused so far doesn't mention a source for that myth. Should any of you have come across a pertinent primary source, please do let me know.

Ebisu Origins

[Bernhard Scheid](#) (Vienna University) writes: One place to begin would be [Ebisu Shinkō Jiten](#) えびす信仰事典, 1999. I used it partly for my [introductory article on Ebisu](#). There is also an informative [online article by Darren Ashmore](#), which contains a modern version of the Ebisu legend of Nishinomiya Shrine (stronghold of Ebisu worship) in a long footnote.

It seems quite clear that most Ebisu lore including the Hiruko connection can be traced back to the Nishinomiya Shrine probably in the late Heian period. Or rather the Hiroda Shrine (the original "Shrine of the West"), which housed among others a shrine for Ebisu that later became Nishinomiya in its own right. At that time they started to send out puppeteers who performed with dolls called Ebisu Hyakudayū. This figure was seen as a fighter of epidemics (that were otherwise aroused by Ebisu/Hiruko). In this connection, the pairing with another god of health/illness, Okuninushi (Daikoku), makes sense, which may explain the early pairing of Ebisu & Daikoku, long before the seven lucky gods. If one accepts the original Daikoku connection with Mt. Hiei, Ebisu & Daikoku are also kami who protect Kyoto from West and (North)East. In any event, the puppets are probably the original trigger for Ebisu as a god of luck. Gerald Groemer, specialist on Edo street culture, confirmed to me recently, that these Nishinomiya puppeteers (called *Ebisu Kaki* 恵比寿傀儡) were very popular and have to be regarded as the predecessors of [Bunraku](#).

The original Hiroda Shrine was, according to Nihon Shoki (chapter on Jingū Kōgō), dedicated to the rough spirit of Amaterasu. This makes it quite plausible that Hiru-ko originally had nothing to do with leeches, but was just another "sun child," probably a "sun boy" opposed to Hiru-me (Amaterasu). On the other hand, the connection Ebisu-Hiruko is explained by folklorists with the frequent association of Ebisu with deformed, ugly, unlucky or otherwise negative items or aspects, which can still be found in rural areas. The logic is obviously to call these negative things "Ebisu" (i.e. stranger) and thereby turn them into something auspicious, something that also functions as a scapegoat.

I have not dug deep enough to look at engi of Nishinomiya, but I am sure that the Hiruko connection can be found there already very early. My guess is that Nishinomiya/Hiroda managed to connect a new, deformed health / illness deity with imperial mythology by way of pun, turning their sun child into a leech child that miraculously came back from where the original myths had sent it.

Ebisu Origins

[David B. Waterhouse](#) (Toronto University.) writes: Ebisu was originally the tutelary god of the Nishinomiya Jinja in Settsu, and from Kamakura times was honoured as a protector of those who travel in boats. Worship of him spread to major shrines and to Buddhist monasteries as well; and through a series of identifications he came to be worshipped also by military men. One of these identifications involved the Shintō god Ōkuninushi-no-mikoto... who was taken to be ultimately the same as Daikokuten (strictly a manifestation of the fierce Tantric deity Mahākāla). Hence in the Tokugawa period Ebisu and Daikokuten started to be paired together, and worshipped as bringers of abundant food and prosperity, particularly at New Year, when images of them were set on the kami-dama, the 'god-shelf'. Ebisu is usually depicted with a fishing rod and fish; and Daikokuten, who was co-opted by the Nichiren school in early Muromachi times and worshipped as a bringer of good crops, is usually shown with bales of rice and a wooden mallet. The Daikoku-mai, a New Year dance, developed out of this association.

[Kadoya Atsushi](#) (Kokugakuin University) writes: Kotoshironushi is the offspring of kami Ōkuninushi 大国主命 (aka [Daikokuten](#); god of agriculture). As part of the pacification of the 'Central Land of Reed Plains,' Takemikazuchi, envoy of the heavenly kami, confronted the earthly kami Ōkuninushi and asked him to relinquish the land. Ōkuninushi entrusted his son with his response, whereupon Kotoshironushi pledged allegiance to the heavenly kami, and 'hid himself away' inside an enclosure of green leaves which he had made in the ocean. Based on this event, Kotoshironushi is viewed as an oracular deity transmitting the will of other kami. He also appears as an oracular deity in Nihongi's account of Empress Jingū and Emperor Tenmu. With the maid Mizokuhime of Mishima (in Settsu Province), Kotoshironushi had a child named Himetataraisuzuhime, who later became the wife of Emperor Jinmu. Kotoshironushi is an object of worship (*saijin* 祭神) at shrines such as Miho Jinja in Shimane and Mishima Jinja in Shizuoka.

Ebisu Origins

[Iwai Hiroshi](#) (Kokugakuin University) writes: The common practice of enshrining Daikoku and Ebisu together was already observed from that period (late Muromachi); the practice originated in the fact that the main object of worship (*saijin* 祭神) at the Nishinomiya Shrine was Ebisu Saburō, a figure who, however, was simultaneously identified with Ōkuninushi no kami and Kotoshironushi no kami. Eventually, however, Ebisu came to be identified as Kotoshironushi no kami alone, thus leaving Daikoku (Ōkuninushi) to be seen as a separate figure. In homes, the two deities Ebisu and Daikoku came to be enshrined in the area of the kitchen or oven, while merchants worshiped the two as tutelaries of commercial success, and farmers worshiped them as tutelaries of the rice paddy (ta no kami).

[Nishioka Kazuhiko](#) (Kokugakuin University) writes: Hiruko was a deformed infant born to Izanagi and Izanami as a result of Izanami's mistake in speaking first to Izanagi during their courtship. The child was placed in a reed boat and set adrift. The meaning of the child's name is debated, although hiruko means "leech," and the name may suggest a child with arms and legs but without bones. The main text of Nihongi states that the child could not walk even after reaching three years of age, with the result that he was placed in the 'rock-camphor boat of heaven' and set adrift to the mercy of the winds. In later times, Hiruko was identified with Ebisu, a maritime tutelary and one of the [Seven Gods of Good Fortune](#).

[Iyanaga Nobumi](#) writes (in his upcoming 2018 entry in the Brill Encyclopedia of Buddhism): Another important coupling of deities was formed around the same time (Muromachi era) as the Seven Lucky Gods—that which associates the Buddhist deity Daikoku with the Japanese deity Ebisu. Ebisu is a very complicated kami. Unknown in Japan’s classical mythology, his appearance probably occurred at the end of Heian era. The word ebisu (夷 or 戎) is closely related to the word emishi (蝦夷), which designates northeastern Japan, or Ezo (蝦夷), originally meant “barbarous” or “wild.” During medieval times, Ebisu’s “original body” (honji) was conceived as Acala (Fudō Myō-ō) or Vaiśravaṇa—facts that suggest that the deity was represented as a fierce warrior-type character. Ebisu is essentially a marine deity, revered by fishermen. At the folk-tradition level, a whale or a dolphin running after a shoal of fish, an embryo of a whale, a stone of strange form found at the bottom of the sea, or even a drowned corpse—that is, anything extraordinary in the sea—could be called “Ebisu” and revered as granting a good catch. In the Muromachi era and later, Ebisu is represented as a short and fat deity, carrying a fishing rode and holding a big fish (that he has caught) under his arm. At the mythological level, Ebisu (whose main shrine is Nishinomiya [西宮], located halfway between present-day Ōsaka and Kōbe), is closely associated with the deity “Saburō” (三郎; lit. third son), who was revered in a shrine contiguous with Ebisu’s shrine; and this Saburō was identified with Kotoshiro-nushi-no-mikoto (事代主命) of classical mythology, who is none other than the third son of Ōkuninushi-no-mikoto. According to the Kojiki and Nihon shoki, Kotoshironushi was fishing at the promontory of Miho (美穂碕) in Izumo when the Heavenly kami descended to earth and ordered Ōkuninushi to yield his earthly realm; Kotoshironushi obeyed the orders of the Heavenly kami on behalf of his father and went away by boat on the sea to never return. Moreover, the Nihon shoki says Kotoshironushi was the son of Ōmononushi of Miwa. In medieval times, Saburō’s honji was thought to be Acala or Vaiśravaṇa. These affinities intermingled Ebisu and Saburō, so that Ebisu eventually came to be known as Ebisu-Saburō as well. At the same time, in some medieval sources such as the Jinnō shōtō-ki (神皇正統記; Chronicles of the Authentic Lineages of the Divine Emperors; ca. 1339) by Kitabatake Chikafusa (北畠親房; 1293-1354) or the Genpei jōsui-ki (源平盛衰記; Tale of the Vicissitudes of Minamoto and Taira Clans; late 14th century), Ebisu-Saburō is identified with Hiruko [蛭子] (or [蛭兒]), the first “failed” child born from the union of the Japanese cosmogonical couple, Izanagi 伊弉諾 & Izanami 伊弉冉. He was a “failed” child because three years after his birth, he still could not walk. Named “Hiruko,” that is “Leech Child,” his parents cast him into the sea in a boat of reeds, so that he never returned. As a lost child-god in the sea, this deity might be related to Kotoshironushi. How is it possible to explain this widely known & popular linkage of Daikoku & Ebisu? Kita Sadakich’s theory (Kita, 1976) suggests that Ebisu was mingled with Saburō, and Saburō was another name for Kotoshironushi, who in turn was the son of Ōkuninushi; and since Daikoku & Ōkuninushi were conflated by at least the 14th century, it is understandable that Daikoku & Ebisu were “paired.” Although this is a plausible theory, we must remember that the relationship between Daikoku & Ōkuninushi was rather recent (end of Muromachi era) and probably after the formation of the Daikoku / Ebisu pairing. Thus, this explanation seems somehow difficult to accept. Moreover, it is very complicated and far-fetched. Perhaps a simpler, more plausible explanation would be to consider that Daikoku & Ebisu were both popularized during the Middle Ages—Daikoku as the god of agricultural fertility (recalling his close association with the earth deity) and Ebisu as the god of bountiful fishing. Both were venerated in Japan’s thriving urban markets & became two of Japan’s most popular deities of “good trading,” with Daikoku representing the land & agriculture and Ebisu representing the ocean & fishing. If the association of Ebisu with Hiruko, the “Leech Child,” has a deep mythical basis, it would be interesting to enlarge our perspective to a larger East Asian mythology rather than to restrict ourselves to the strict field of the history of Japanese beliefs. For example, the Caturśīti-siddha-pravṛtti (Manifestation of the Eighty-Four Siddhas) by Abhayadatta (late 11th or early 12th C.) contains a chapter dedicated to a Siddha named “Mīnapa” (aka “Mīnapāda,” meaning “fish’s foot,” identified with Matsyendranātha) who was a fisherman living in eastern India; one day, he was swallowed by a huge fish. While in the fish’s stomach, he eavesdropped a secret teaching given by Mahādeva (Śiva) to Umā (his consort). Mīnapa was subsequently initiated by Mahādeva and spent the next twelve years meditating inside the fish’s belly. When the fish was eventually caught by another fisherman, its belly was cut open & Mīnapa appeared. People were amazed at the sight of this man. Not only had he lived twelve years in a fish’s stomach, but he was also a saint. “Given offerings by everyone, Mīnapa danced all over the land, his feet never imprinting the ground” (Abhayadatta, Buddha’s Lion. The Lives of The Eighty-four Siddhas, ET by James B. Robinson, 2014, 47-49; see R. A. Stein, 1986, 43 and n. 65; Iyanaga, 2002B, 478-484, 754-755). Such a mythical figure, deeply associated with both the sea and fishing, and also with Śaiva mythology, may be referred to if we consider Japan’s linkage of Daikoku with the “Leech Child” Ebisu.

Hiruko-no-kami, Dokun and the Fisherman: a modern version of the myth, told at the Nishinomiya Shrine.

Written by Darren-Jon Ashmore, Assistant Professor, Akita International University, 2007

See: <http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/articles/2007/Ashmore.html>

This tale begins long ago, when the kami took more of a hand in things than they do now. After a long and fruitless day on the western sea, a young fisherman caught a strange stone effigy in his nets. In disappointment he threw it back, but before long he dragged up the same effigy and, deciding that this meant something important, he took it home and placed it in the most auspicious part of his house. In the night a crippled spirit came to him and said 'I am Hiruko-no-kami [Leech Child of Izanagi and Izanami]. I have travelled far and, liking this land, now wish to be worshipped here. Build me a hall a little to the West of your home and enshrine this effigy there'. The fisherman recognized the divine nature of Hiruko-no-kami and began the work with his friends the next day, erecting the Hiroda Daimyojin [The Great Shrine in the Plain], near the beach where the fisherman had brought the effigy ashore, to honour their new patron. However, in such a place, there were no miko who could be persuaded to dance for the crippled kami, fearing this alien god. So as each day passed without a miko at the Hiroda Daimyojin the western sea rose, storms from far away rolled over the land flattening the crops in the fields and many children were struck down with illnesses. However, after one hundred days of tempest, a mysterious old man of no known family, who called himself Dokun, appeared at Hiroda and claimed to be able to calm the spirit. The priests allowed him to make a puppet and dance with it before the sea shrine to Hiruko-no-kami. When Dokun and his puppet danced, the western sea was charmed, the crops sprang up in the whistling winds and the ailments of the children left them. All the people made offerings at the Hiroda Daimyojin. Though not a miko, Dokun served at Hiroda for many years, never once failing in his task and never once suffering the [polluted] touch of his master. However, eventually he became too frail and passed away, and on his death Hiruko-no-kami once again became enraged and threatened the land. The emperor, hearing of this and remembering the amagutsu doll which his elder sister had made to save him from the plague when a child, ordered that a puppet be clad in Dokun's clothing and manipulated just as Dokun himself had danced for the gods. This was done and the kami was once again appeased. [...] Thus, shortly afterwards, many copies of the divine Dokun puppet were fashioned by the priests of the Hiroda Daimyojin to sell or carry from shrine to shrine and house to house, where miko were not to be found, in order to entertain the kami and abjure from Hiruko-no-kami protection from disease for the faithful. Even today people bring their babies to the shrine on their one hundredth day of life to receive the blessing of Hiruko-no-kami in his guise as Ebisu-Hyakudayū, the patron of puppeteers and guardian of children. Interview with Yoshii Sadatoshi, the Chief Priest at Nishinomiya Ebisu Shrine, 2001.

[Raji C. Steineck](#) (Universität Zürich) writes: I came across a story in the Shintō yūrai no koto chapter of the 14th-C. Shintōshū 神道集. Interestingly enough, here, it is said that Izanagi and Izanami have three male children (the Sun god, Amaterasu, the moon god, and Susanoo) and one female child (Hiruko). Hiruko arrives in her boat at the palace of the Dragon king, who raises the child for some years and then sends it back; but because the Dragon king has no domain on land, he assigns the high waters of Sumiyoshi as the domain of Hiruko. The Shintōshū concludes the passage with a note that this is the deity venerated in Nishinomiya, and celebrated in an autumn festival of fishermen under the name of Ebisu. See Sakamoto Tarō. Shintōshū. Vol. 1. Shintō Taikai. Bungakuhon. Tōkyō: Shintō Taikai Hensankai, 1988, pp. 2-3.

[Month without the Gods: Shinto and Authority in Early Modern Japan](#), pp. 36-38

Written by [Yijiang Zhong](#), Associate Professor, Institute for Advanced Studies on Asian, Tokyo

In its promotion of Ōkuninushi, the Izumo Shrine did not stop at deliberately conflating the representations of the god with those of Daikoku the fortune god. Another strategy was to couple Ōkuninushi with his son Kotoshironushi and conflate the father-son gods with the images of Mahākāla and Ebisu, the latter of which being another popular god of fortune, particularly as the god of fishing and bountiful catch for fishermen. By so doing, Izumo preachers borrowed the popularity of Mahākāla and Ebisu as the two fortune gods that came to be enshrined and worshipped together from the sixteenth century. The origin of the god Ebisu was difficult to trace although his connection with sea became from early on the major dimension of the god's identity. As a *kyōgen* play called *Ebisu Daikoku* from the sixteenth century shows (more below), the god had been identified with Hiruko, the leech child of the couple gods Izanami and Izanagi in their joint project of engendering the Japanese islands, according to the Divine Age narratives of *The Chronicle of Japan (Nihon shoki)* and *Record of Ancient Matters (Kojiki)*. The leech child greatly disappointed the two gods and was abandoned by being flown away into the sea. But deciding the ancestry of Ebisu by his connection with the creation myth could be a later attempt to explain Ebisu's already popular connection with sea rather than being the reason leading to his popularity as the god of fishing. Ambiguous origin notwithstanding, popular representations of Ebisu in the early modern period were the god holding a fishing pole or a sea bream. Ebisu from early on had also been associated with commerce. Shrines to Ebisu as a tutelary of the marketplace were dedicated (*kanjō*) within the temple Tōdaiji in Nara in 1163 and at Kamakura's Tsurugaoka Hachimangū in 1253, and they gradually drew the devotion of merchants, in conjunction with the expansion of commerce. The shrine of Ebisu, the Nishinomiya Shrine not far from the commercial center Osaka, was the major promoter of the god as the tutelary of commerce. One strategy of promotion by Nishinomiya Shrine was juxtaposing Ebisu with Daikoku (Figures 6 & 7), partly because Daikoku, that is, Okuninushi, was also enshrined at the shrine compound with the main sanctuary devoted to Ebisu, and partly because it had been a customary practice to place the two gods together for worshipping. The afore-mentioned *Kyōgen* play, *Ebisu and Daikoku*, shows that the coupling was already in place by the sixteenth century. The story is simple: a devout follower of the two gods was visited by the two and was offered plenty of goods and money as result of his devotion. In the play, the two gods explained their own origin. The Ebisu god traced his ancestry to the couple gods Izanami and Izanagi whereas Daikoku to the Tendai Temple on Mount Hiei as the protective god of its numerous believers.

The god Kotoshironushi similarly could be associated with sea. In the narratives of *The Chronicle of Japan* and *Record of Ancient Matters*, Kotoshironushi was enjoying fishing when the heavenly gods sent down by the Sun Goddess to subjugate Okuninushi found him and demanded his submission. After the god agreed to submit to the Sun Goddess, he retreated into the far sea. The Izumo priests and preachers magnified this association with sea and conflated the representations of Kotoshironushi with those of Ebisu. The deliberate conflating and coupling of the father-son gods as fortune gods by the Izumo Shrine generated mutually reinforcing effects with Nishinomiya Shrine; the promotion of Daikoku and Ebisu was simultaneously that of Okuninushi and Tokoshironushi. These proselytizing strategies were deployed by the Izumo Shrine to popularize its gods with the eventual goal of raising more funds. These strategies, however, also functioned as articulations of a form of authority of Ōkuninushi not simply as the lord of the Shinto pantheon but also as the source of human life itself. A different vision of Shinto divinity from the imperial one was articulated: Ōkuninushi as the god of agriculture, symbolized by the bales of rice, and Kotoshironushi as the god of sea, symbolized by the fish held in his hand, represented provision of the necessary conditions for human life, or the source of life, the emphasis of which worked to relativize the rice-centered vision of life transmitted by and conditioned upon the rule of the Sun Goddess and her imperial descendants.