

## **Tsunami Awareness Kit**

Resources for Educators

### **A Living God**

By Lafcadio Hearn

From immemorial time the shores of Japan have been swept, at irregular intervals of centuries, by enormous tidal waves, tidal waves caused by earthquakes or by submarine volcanic action. These awful sudden risings of the sea are called by the Japanese "tsunami." On the evening of June 17, 1896, a wave nearly two hundred miles long struck the northeastern provinces of Miyagi, Iwate, and Aomori, wrecking scores of towns and villages, ruining whole districts, and destroying nearly thirty thousand human lives. The story of Hamaguchi Gohei is the story of a like calamity which happened long before the era of Meiji, on another part of the Japanese coast.

He was an old man at the time of the occurrence that made him famous. He was the most influential resident of the village to which he belonged: he had been for many years its muraosa, or headman; and he was not less liked than respected. The people usually called him Ojiisan, which means Grandfather; but, being the richest member of the community, he was sometimes officially referred to as the Choja. He used to advise the smaller farmers about their interests, to arbitrate their disputes, to advance them money at need, and to dispose of their rice for them on the best terms possible.

Hamaguchi's big thatched farmhouse stood at the verge of a small plateau overlooking a bay. The plateau, mostly devoted to rice culture, was hemmed in on three sides by thickly wooded summits. From its outer verge the land sloped down in a huge green concavity, as if scooped out, to the edge of the water; and the whole of this slope, some three quarters of a mile long, was so terraced as to look, when viewed from the open sea, like an enormous flight of green steps, divided in the centre by a narrow white zigzag, a streak of mountain road. Ninety thatched dwellings and a Shinto temple, composing the village proper, stood along the curve of the bay; and other houses climbed straggling up the slope for some distance on either side of the narrow road leading to the Choja's home.

One autumn evening Hamaguchi Gohei was looking down from the balcony of his house at some preparations for a merry-making in the village below. There had been a very fine rice-crop, and the peasants were going to celebrate their harvest by a dance in the court of the ujigami. The old man could see the festival banners (nobori) fluttering above the roofs of the solitary street, the strings of paper lanterns festooned between bamboo poles, the decorations of the shrine, and the brightly colored gathering of the young people. He had nobody with him that evening but his little grandson, a lad of ten; the rest of the household having gone early to the village. He would have accompanied them had he not been feeling less strong than usual.

The day had been oppressive; and in spite of a rising breeze, there was still in the air that sort of heavy heat which, according to the experience of the Japanese peasant, at certain seasons precedes an earthquake. And presently an earthquake came. It was not strong enough to frighten anybody; but Hamaguchi, who had felt hundreds of shocks in his time, thought it was

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queer; a long, slow, spongy motion. Probably it was but the after-tremor of some immense seismic action very far away. The house crackled and rocked gently several times; then all became still again.

As the quaking ceased Hamaguchi's keen old eyes were anxiously turned toward the village. It often happens that the attention of a person gazing fixedly at a particular spot or object is suddenly diverted by the sense of something not knowingly seen at all, by a mere vague feeling of the unfamiliar in that dim outer circle of unconscious perception which lies beyond the field of clear vision. Thus it chanced that Hamaguchi became aware of something unusual in the offing. He rose to his feet, and looked at the sea. It had darkened quite suddenly, and it was acting strangely. It seemed to be moving against the wind. It was running away from the land.

Within a very little time the whole village had noticed the phenomenon. Apparently no one had felt the previous motion of the ground, but all were evidently astounded by the movement of the water. They were running to the beach, and even beyond the beach, to watch it. No such ebb had been witnessed on that coast within the memory of living man. Things never seen before were making apparition; unfamiliar spaces of ribbed sand and reaches of weed-hung rock were left bare even as Hamaguchi gazed. And none of the people below appeared to guess what that monstrous ebb signified.

Hamaguchi Gohei himself had never seen such a thing before; but he remembered things told him in his childhood by his father's father, and he knew all the traditions of the coast. He understood what the sea was going to do. Perhaps he thought of the time needed to send a message to the village, or to get the priests of the Buddhist temple on the hill to sound their big bell... But it would take very much longer to tell what he might have thought than it took him to think. He simply called to his grandson: "Tada ! quick, very quick!... Light me a torch."

Taimatsu, or pine-torches, are kept in many coast dwellings for use on stormy nights, and also for use at certain Shinto festivals. The child kindled a torch at once; and the old man hurried with it to the fields, where hundreds of rice-stacks, representing most of his invested capital, stood awaiting transportation. Approaching those nearest the verge of the slope, he began to apply the torch to them, hurrying from one to another as quickly as his aged limbs could carry him. The sun-dried stalks caught like tinder; the strengthening sea breeze blew the blaze landward and presently, rank behind rank, the stacks burst into flame, sending skyward columns of smoke that met and mingled into one enormous cloudy whirl. Tada, astonished and terrified, ran after his grandfather, crying, "Ojiisan! Why? Ojiisan! Why?"

But Hamaguchi did not answer: he had no time to explain; he was thinking only of the four hundred lives in peril. For awhile the child stared wildly at the blazing rice; then burst into tears, and ran back to the house, feeling sure that his grandfather had gone mad. Hamaguchi went on firing stack after stack, till he had reached the limit of his field; then he threw down his torch, and waited. The acolyte of the hill-temple, observing the blaze, set the big bell booming; and the people responded to the double appeal. Hamaguchi watched them hurrying in from the sands and over the beach and up from the village, like a swarming of ants, and, to

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his anxious eyes, scarcely faster; for the moments seemed terribly long to him. The sun was going down; the wrinkled bed of the bay, and a vast sallow speckled expanse beyond it, lay naked to the last orange glow; and still the sea was fleeing toward the horizon.

Really, however, Hamaguchi did not have very long to wait before the first party of succor arrived, a score of agile young peasants, who wanted to attack the fire at once. But the Choja, holding out both arms, stopped them.

"Let it burn, lads!" he commanded, "Let it be! I want the whole mura here. There is a great danger, taihen da!"

The whole village was coming; and Hamaguchi counted. All the young men and boys were soon on the spot, and not a few of the more active women and girls; then came most of the older folk, and mothers with babies at their backs, and even children, for children could help to pass water; and the elders too feeble to keep up with the first rush could be seen well on their way up the steep ascent. The growing multitude, still knowing nothing, looked alternately, in sorrowful wonder, at the flaming fields and at the impassive face of their Choja. And the sun went down.

"Grandfather is mad, I am afraid of him!" sobbed Tada, in answer to a number of questions. "He is mad. He set fire to the rice on purpose. I saw him do it!"

"As for the rice," cried Hamaguchi, "the child tells the truth. I set fire to the rice... Are all the people here?"

The Kumi-cho and the heads of families looked about them, and down the hill, and made reply: "All are here, or very soon will be... We cannot understand this thing."

"Kita!" shouted the old man at the top of his voice, pointing to the open. "Say now if I be mad!"

Through the twilight eastward all looked, and saw at the edge of the dusky horizon a long, lean, dim line like the shadowing of a coast where no coast ever was, a line that thickened as they gazed, that broadened as a coast-line broadens to the eyes of one approaching it, yet incomparably more quickly. For that long darkness was the returning sea, towering like a cliff, and coursing more swiftly than the kite flies.

"Tsunami!" shrieked the people; and then all shrieks and all sounds and all power to hear sounds were annihilated by a nameless shock heavier than any thunder, as the colossal swell smote the shore with a weight that sent a shudder through all the hills, and a foam-burst like a blaze of sheet-lightning. Then for an instant nothing was visible but a storm of spray rushing up the slope like a cloud; and the people scattered back in panic from the mere menace of it. When they looked again, they saw a white horror of sea raving over the place of their homes. It drew back roaring, and tearing out the bowels of the land as it went. Twice, thrice, five times the sea struck and ebbled, but each time with lesser surges; then it returned to its ancient

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bed and stayed, still raging, as after a typhoon.

On the plateau for a time there was no word spoken. All stared speechlessly at the desolation beneath, the ghastliness of hurled rock and naked riven cliff, the bewilderment of scooped-up deep-sea wrack and shingle shot over the empty site of dwelling and temple. The village was not; the greater part of the fields were not; even the terraces had ceased to exist; and of all the homes that had been about the bay there remained nothing recognizable except two straw roofs tossing, madly in the offing. The after-terror of the death escaped and the stupefaction of the general loss kept all lips dumb, until the voice of Hamaguchi was heard again, observing gently, "That was why I set fire to the rice."

He, their Choja, now stood among them almost as poor as the poorest; for his wealth was gone but he had saved four hundred lives by the sacrifice. Little Tada ran to him, and caught his hand, and asked forgiveness for having said naughty things. Whereupon the people woke up to the knowledge of why they were alive, and began to wonder at the simple, unselfish foresight that had saved them; and the headmen prostrated themselves in the dust before Hamaguchi Gohei, and the people after them.

Then the old man wept a little, partly because he was happy, and partly because he was aged and weak and had been sorely tried. "My house remains," he said, as soon as he could find words, automatically caressing Tada's brown cheeks; "and there is room for many. Also the temple on the hill stands; and there is shelter there for the others." Then he led the way to his house; and the people cried and shouted.

The period of distress was long, because in those days there were no means of quick communication between district and district, and the help needed had to be sent from far away. But when better times came, the people did not forget their debt to Hamaguchi Gohei. They could not make him rich; nor would he have suffered them to do so, even had it been possible. Moreover, gifts would never have sufficed as an expression of their reverential feeling towards him; for they believed that the ghost within him was divine. So they declared him a god, and thereafter called him Hamaguchi Daimyojin, thinking they could give him no greater honor; and truly no greater honor in any country could be given to mortal man. And when they rebuilt the village, they built a temple to the spirit of him, and fixed above the front of it a tablet bearing his name in Chinese text of gold; and they worshiped him there, with prayer and with offerings. How he felt about it I cannot say; I know only that he continued to live in his old thatched home upon the hill, with his children and his children's children, just as humanly and simply as before, while his soul was being worshiped in the shrine below. A hundred years and more he has been dead; but his temple, they tell me, still stands, and the people still pray to the ghost of the good old farmer to help them in time of fear or trouble.

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Lafcadio Hearn Koizumi Yagumo wrote *A Living God* on September 1896, three months after Japan's Sanriku tsunami. The story was included in *Gleanings in Buddha-Fields* published in September 1897 by Houghton Mifflin Company of Boston & New York. This story is included in the Tsunami Awareness Kit with kind permission by Mr. Bon Koizumi, great-grandson of Mr. Hearn and assistant professor at Shimane Women's College, Matsue City, Japan.

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