

Focus on Japan

TAIRYOBATA AND MAIWAI

Tairyobata, a combination of "good catch" and "flag" in Japanese, refers to brightly colored flags that have flown from the masts of fishing boats for centuries. Between five and 30 square meters in area, these flags are painted with images of traditional Japanese good-luck symbols, such as sea bream, white cranes, turtles, and wave crests.

Fishermen originally used *tairyobata* to quickly signal news of abundant catches to people in the fishing villages. More recently, these flags are used as good-luck charms. For example, when a new boat is launched, dozens of *tairyobata*, made especially for the occasion, are attached to its masts to ensure safe sailing and good fishing. Fishermen also fly *tairyobata* from their boats during New Year holidays and at the beginning of each fishing season.

Origins of Tairyobata

The colorful images for which the *tairyobata* are famous originated in the 17th century on *maiwai* robes (*maiwai* literally

The fishing boats return home. Along the shore, cheering villagers gather. Why is everyone so happy? The boats are flying *tairyobata* — an indication of a successful day.

means "10,000 celebrations"), first worn by Japanese fishermen in Kujukuri, a beach east of Tokyo noted for sardine fishing. People from neighboring villages were impressed by the attractive patterns of the *maiwai* worn by the Kujukuri fishermen and decided to create their own designs and colors. The tradition quickly spread to fishing villages throughout the

Tairyobata are painted with brightly colored dyes.



Kanto region around Tokyo.

According to tradition, at the beginning of the fishing season the owner of each fleet purchased several *maiwai*, each bearing a special design reflecting his power, wealth, and character. Then he presented them to the most capable fishermen of the village as an invitation to join his fleet. An unwritten law specified that a fisherman who received a *maiwai* was obliged to remain faithful for life to the fleet owner and could not join another fleet. Fishermen wore their *maiwai* at fishing festivals and when visiting shrines during New Year to pray for a good fishing season.

In the latter half of the 19th century, the custom of wearing *maiwai* declined, eventually ending in the 1920s. However, the colors and designs that characterized *maiwai* are very much alive in the *tairyobata*, which are extremely popular even today.

A Master Craftsman

Perhaps the most famous *tairyobata* craftsman is 65-year-old Tadakazu Ozawa, a resident of Choshi, a town beside Kujukuri. When Ozawa was 13 years old, he began producing *tairyobata* while working with his father. Now, he constantly receives orders from fishermen and boat owners throughout Japan.

Japanese good-luck symbols, such as the sea bream, the white crane, and wave crests, are traditional *tairyobata* designs.





Ozawa works at his home near Kujukuri.



Ozawa first draws a design on white cloth with a special paste.

Ozawa makes *tairyobata* by a unique process. After discussion with the customer to determine the most appropriate design, he takes a piece of white cloth and draws a design on it using a special paste made from boiled glutinous



rice. The paste is sprinkled with sand and allowed to dry. He then paints a number of brightly colored dyes on the cloth, allowing each one to dry before applying the next. Finally, he removes the dried mold of paste and sand, leaving the vivid white design.

Tadakazu Ozawa is also one of the few remaining makers of *maiwai*, which are used mostly in movies, television dramas, and stage plays. He acquired this skill through his decades of experience producing *tairyobata* and his early childhood memories of fishermen wearing *maiwai*. Because of his efforts, the tradition of *tairyobata* remains popular, and the old custom of wearing *maiwai* is not being forgotten. ♪

Maiwai, colorful robes featuring *tairyobata* patterns, were popular among Japanese fishermen until the early 20th century.