

Poor Man, Beggar Man, Rich Man, Thief! ...but is the Amma also a fish without water?

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An-mo, a Chinese traditional healing art of massage, was imported into Japan sometime around the sixth century when it came to be called *amma*. During the Tokugawa period (1603–1867) this type of healing therapy, performed by the professional masseur known as *amma-shi*, or simply *amma*, was not designed to relax the individual being treated but, conversely, was intended to drive out ailments through forceful means.¹ During *amma* massage, fingers, thumbs, forearms, elbows, knees, and feet were used to stroke, manipulate, pull, push, and press, as well as stretch, shake, and percuss vigorously. Indeed, there is good reason *amma* is referred to as *jishin* (earthquake) massage.²

The wandering *amma*, almost exclusively a *mojin*³ (blind man), with his head clean-shaven like that of a tonsured priest, was a ubiquitous figure on the streets of Tokugawa Japan. His connection to that other ever-present figure, the priest, was deeply rooted in history. Since early days, the *mōsō* (blind priest), likely a lay priest, wandered among local farmhouses reciting a sutra to the earth deity,⁴ accompanied by his *bizwa* (lute). It was felt

that this sutra to the earth god *Jishin*, *jishin-kyō*,⁵ was vital to ensure an abundant harvest, as well as afford protection against fire and disaster.

The *amma* usually belonged to a guild called *tōdō-za*, an association for those who were visually impaired and whose members came from numerous occupations.⁶ Although not every blind person belonged to the guild, it was a formidable organization that concerned itself with the economic and political interests of all the visually impaired. Many blind individuals were to remain poor, some relying on begging for a livelihood, while a few others were able to amass substantial sums of money. Frequently those individuals who grew rich and the *tōdō-za* itself, which accumulated wealth due to income from its members, became moneylenders, often reviled as virtual thieves due to usurious interest charges.⁷



■ 1. *Amma with chikaraishi*. Ivory, 19th century, signed Ryoun. Formerly author's collection.

1. *Shiatsu Anma Therapy*, Dr. Doann Kaneko, 2006, pp. 6–7. The commercialization of massage resulted in the use of more “relaxing” techniques. As a result, current massage bears only minor resemblance to techniques used prior to the end of Taisho (1925).

2. Op. cit., p. 210.

As a subject of netsuke, *amma*, the blind masseur, seems most often represented by a crouching figure dressed only in a *fundoshi* (loincloth), attempting to lift the heavy *chikaraishi*⁸ (strength-stone) to prove his vigor (Figure 1), though he never seems able to lift it. One “vacant” eye and at times the other as a bulging or closed eye imply blindness. Frequently there is a *nikkei* (fleshy protuberance) located somewhere on the scalp.⁹ The scantily clad figure suggests the poverty of some individuals; the more formal appearing garb worn by others, which may be referred to as *kamishimo*,¹⁰ suggests the wealth and position they might attain.



■ 2. *Amma with stone lodged in geta*. Wood, 19th century, signed Shoko. Alan and Anne Fisher collection.

As the *amma* maneuvered the streets in search of clients, he made his presence known by calling out “*kamishimo*” (from top to bottom), indicating a full-body massage; a cry suggested by the seemingly formal attire illustrated in Figure 2. He also announced himself by using a peculiar low whistle,¹¹ likely unique to his profession. In Figure 3, that sound is suggested by a face that has a twisted, elongated mouth reminiscent of the whistling *usofuki*¹² mask of Noh.



■ 3. *Whistling Amma*. Wood, 19th century, signed Tenkaichi Takusai. Author's collection.

3. By the use of two specific *kanji*, *mojin* means “blind person”; however, using two different *kanji* the word *mojin* means “to pun; to parody.”

4. “Tragic Victims in Japanese Religion, Politics and the Arts,” Dr. Herbert Plutschow, *Anthropoetics* 6, No. 2. “According to the *Moso Yurai* (Origin of the Blind Priest), Empress Genmei (661–712) ordered that blind monks placate the spirits who cause havoc.”

5. *The Legend of Semimaru, Blind Musician of Japan*, Susan Matisoff, 2006, pp. 28–31. This *sutra* (*kyō*) is directed to the god *Jishin* (Skt., *Privithi*) who lived on and under the earth. While the word *jishin* can mean benevolence, alternatively by using different *kanji* it can also mean earthquake.

6. For more about various occupations, see “Netsuke Basics from A to Z,” Christine Drosse, *INSJ* Vol. 27, No. 4, pp. 62–66.

7. According to one author, the interest rate charged by the blind, although often usurious, seems to have been no greater than that charged by the sighted.

8. *The World of Netsuke*, Dr. Patrizia Jirka-Schmitz, 2005, No. 362, p. 258. “It was a custom to place large stones at one’s entrance to test the strength of the masseurs who arrived by appointment.” *Chikara* means “ability or strength”; *ishi* means “stone.”

9. From early times it was thought that the blind had special abilities, possibly even to the extent of seeing into the future. The fleshy protuberance, *nikkei* (Skt., *ushnisha*) may have played a part in that. When found on figures such as *Shinno*, god of medicine, or even the Buddha, they were deemed to be numinous.

10. *Kamishimo*, literally meaning “top to bottom,” is most often recognized when the upper garment is the stiff-shoulder winged vest *kataginu*, paired with *hakama* (formal pant); however, both of the soft-shoulder upper garments, *hitatare* and *suo*, paired with *hakama* are also called *kamishimo*.

11. *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*, Isabella Bird, 1881. When speaking of the blind masseur, she says, “...you hear every evening a man (or men) making a low peculiar whistle as he walks along, and in large towns the noise is quite a nuisance.”

12. *Historical Dictionary of Japanese Traditional Theatre*, Samuel Leiter, 2006, p. 224.

On the surface, the amma netsuke appears to be a straightforward representation of an occupational subject; however, *mitate*,¹³ a concept that allows things to be viewed from a different perspective, makes it more difficult to fully interpret. Therefore, it is not only necessary to understand the object as presented, but also as its alternate self.

Figure 2 depicts an amma who has trod on a large stone that became lodged between the two *ha* (teeth) of his *geta* (footwear). When stepped on, the stone extending beyond the length of those teeth likely caused the figure to pivot. A coin on the cord around his neck suggests that motion, as it has flown outward, then landed on his back (**Figure 2a**). The amma, standing with one foot raised to the other, has been stopped dead in his tracks by the stone, which he seems unable to dislodge from his *geta*, thus preventing his continued movement. That stone, the object of his distress, in this situation keeping him in place, could be thought of in terms of the pivot or foundation stone, *kaname-ishi*.

Another amma netsuke (**Figure 4**) illustrates what appears to be a strength-stone. However, in this case it contains an inscription: *rokuju kanme*. The word *rokuju* means sixty; *kanme* may be interpreted in terms of weight, a unit equal to 3.75 kg (8.27 lbs); therefore, “*rokuju kanme*” is 225 kg (496 lbs).¹⁴ Although the word *kanme* can be used to describe amounts of weight, it can also be used in monetary terms; in the Tokugawa period gold and silver coinage was valued by weight. A word with a similar sound to *kanme*, *kane*, can mean gold. It should be noted that the shape of the stone held by the blind man in Figure 4 is an elongated form suggesting those coins (**Figure 5**).



4. Amma with stone inscribed *rokuju kanme*. Ivory, 19th century, private collection.

Although with equal meaning the simpler term *kan* could have been used instead of *kanme*, it seems plausible that the carver also intended to make a homophonous connection to another word, *kaname*, and, by inference, the foundation stone, *kaname-ishi*.

The early twentieth century netsuke by Tokoku II that is illustrated in **Figure 6** depicts an amma struggling vigorously to lift a golden-color stone, albeit unsuccessfully. The stone, a piece of amber, in this case by its color rather



5. Eighteenth century Japanese gold *koban* coin.



6. Amma netsuke. Ivory and various materials, early 20th century, signed Tokoku II. Garfield Lee collection. (6 and 6a)

than by word association seems to convey the idea of money.¹⁵ Although it appears the muscular amma could easily lift the relatively small object, he is presented with the

13. “Mitate and Rusu Moyo,” Nori Watanabe, *INSJ* Vol. 30, No. 1, pp. 24–31. “It is to see things from different perspectives; to see things not in the original forms that were intended for them, but as other things.”
 14. The great weight suggested by the inscription is unlikely to be lifted by an individual; the significance of such a weight will become clear shortly. However, up to 150 kg of *mochi* is lifted in competition during the Godai-Rikison Ninno-e festival.
 15. The gold color, as well as the physical location of the stone, suggests the word *kintama* (precious jewels), a Japanese slang term for testicles; however, in this case that pun would seem to be secondary to “money.”

weight-challenge in a different form: he is standing on the rope that is wrapped over both his wrist and the stone, making the task of lifting it impossible. Due to the entanglement with the rope he is unable to lift the stone, and it has rendered him virtually immobile. To be pinned into place by the very stone he is trying to lift suggests a reference to another stone, the foundation stone, *kaname-ishi*.

The tradition surrounding the *kaname-ishi* now needs to be briefly explained so that its relationship to the amma netsuke may be understood. As legend tells, the *namazu*, a massive creature, resides deep below the surface of the earth with its head beneath the area of Kashima-Katori; its movements are the cause of the many earthquakes that plague Japan. Although the *namazu* may be variously described in tales, it frequently is thought to be in the form of a giant catfish. The responsibility of subduing the monster-*namazu* falls most directly to the Kashima *daimyōjin*, the deity of the Kashima shrine, and the principal device used to accomplish the task is the *kaname-ishi*, the pivot or foundation stone. As illustrated in the nineteenth century woodblock print in **Figure 7**, it is a stone of indeterminately large size that is placed on the head of the *namazu* creature, preventing movement. Although the Kashima *daimyōjin* was thought to be generally effective in performing his task, the tradition allows that there were times when the deity would be absent¹⁶ from Kashima, therefore unable to reliably



7. Kashima deity with *kaname-ishi* standing on catfish-*namazu*. Japanese woodblock print, 19th century.

control the *namazu*. On those occasions, the resulting earthquakes could be of major consequence, effecting massive structural damage to buildings and often leading to raging fires, as was the case in Edo during the great Ansei quake of 1855.¹⁷

Superstition surrounding the *namazu* suggested that it was able to assume human form: “This disguise, by which the *namazu* so to speak becomes a man among men...takes many forms: child, woman, man, and as practitioner of all kinds of professions and occupations.”¹⁸ Logically, it follows that the often irrational beliefs of the people caused them to imagine



8. *Namazu* in human form, leisurely smoking. Japanese woodblock print, 19th century.

that the amma, the masseur who performed earthquake massage, would be one of those professionals. A *namazu* in human form is shown enjoying a pipe of tobacco at the stall of a merchant in a print from the nineteenth century (**Figure 8**).

16. *Namazu-e and Their Themes*, Dr. Cornelius Ouwehand, 1964, p. 16. “It is a popular belief that in the tenth month the gods travel to Izumo to confer....” Although the gods were known to occasionally be absent throughout the year, it was deemed especially dangerous during *kaminazuki*, the month without gods.
 17. Usually listed as occurring on November 11, 1855, by the Western calendar, it was actually the second day, tenth month by the lunar calendar, which was in use at that time in Japan.
 18. Ouwehand, 1964, pp. 8–9.



■ 9. Catfish-*namazu*, gold coins flowing from his belly. Japanese woodblock print, 19th century.

them, it also seems to provide a link to the illustration in **Figure 9**, a *namazu* whose slit belly is spewing gold coins. Additionally, the color of the rope used in **Figure 6** is an archaic reference to the “black rope” used in the now-distant past to bind criminals. It not only suggests low regard for the blind as usurious moneylenders, but also as the human embodiment of the disaster-causing *namazu*.

The *namazu* and the blind were both thought of with ambivalence; they were each viewed in positive and negative ways. The *namazu* caused earthquakes that often resulted in major destruction; however, that in turn provided bountiful employment for construction workers and craftsmen. After disasters had occurred, the reviled blind moneylenders were then the ones with cash to lend for reconstruction and replacement of destroyed personal property. And it mattered not to the common worker, who had few losses and whose pockets were being filled with money, that the loans might be usurious, as it was the more well-to-do property owners who would have to pay. Money always flowed after an earthquake.

The *amma netsuke* is a charm, a talisman.²⁰ Through *mitate*, it provides a look at a confounding bit of everyday life from an earlier period: the *amma* performs earthquake massage that feels destructive but is healing to the body, and though reviled for any wealth they might acquire, the blind are lenders of money in times of need. Moreover, the *namazu* creature generates earthquakes resulting in destruction that ultimately provides employment and much needed money for the common people. On one hand, the *netsuke* represents a desire to avoid calamitous earthquakes; on the other, knowing they are inevitable, it is a wish for prosperity afterward.²¹ •

19. “The Guild of The Blind in Tokugawa Japan,” Gerald Groemer (2001), *Monumenta Nipponica* Vol. 56, No. 3, p. 358.

20. For more information on *netsuke* as talismans: *Promenade dans l'art japonais*, Alain Ducros, 2006.

21. Most assuredly some figures depicted with a stone will not be blind masseurs. For a differing interpretation of what is commonly called a “stone-lifter” *netsuke*, see “The Porcupine” (Totsuka Beggars), *INSJ* Vol. 26, No. 1, Spring 2006, pp. 46–48.