

The Classical Sumo of Oki A Unique Tradition of Cultural and Ritual Sumo

by Michiko Kodama

Introduction

A new sekitori with the shikona Okinoumi appeared in the juryo division this past Haru Bashi. He had earlier won the makushita championship without losing a single match under the name of Fukuoka.

In the Japanese newspaper articles reporting his promotion there was one small piece that wrote about the special form of sumo in Okinoshima¹, his home area.

Fukuoka himself took part in this distinctive and unique form of sumo while in his high school days. According to published accounts, when an auspicious occasion for the region arises, they hold a sumo event called Koten-zumo (Classical Sumo) which lasts all through the night.

Actually, several hundred bouts are fought in the competition by men living in Okinoshima and can run for a good 16 hours or more! Although I have been a fan of ozumo for a long time, it was the first time for me to read about the existence of a form of amateur sumo with such interesting origins.

Since 1958 unfortunately Okinoshima had not produced any sekitori in the world of Ozumo - the last sekitori from the island was Okinoshima who became a sekitori in 1958.

According to the local public officials, however, there will be no Classical Sumo held to praise just one person, this new juryo rikishi of Okinoshima, regardless of how happy and honoured they felt on his advancement. The reason

behind this is simple – Koten-zumo is a dedication to God.

A Mr. Kamikawa in the local government office soon arranged for SFM to speak with one of the directors of the Ohaba Kaiⁱⁱ in charge of Koten-zumo (the word ohaba is a local dialect term meaning kesho mawashi – the ceremonial apron rikishi wear in the dohyo-iri).

Mr. Nagami, head of the society explained the characteristics of the local form of sumo slowly in a strong Okinoshima accent that sounded very warm to the ear, and introduced two books on the subjectⁱⁱⁱ.

As one of the books is difficult to buy in Tokyo, they said they would obtain it from a local book store and send it to the capital.

鈍子ダム竣工記念
第10回 隠岐古典相撲大会

開催日 平成11年10月16日(土)・17日(日)
場所 (鈍子ダムサイト特設土俵)
大会 10月16日(土) 行司口上 17時
大会 10月17日(日) 打ち上げ 6時

主催 隠岐古典相撲大巾会
鈍子ダム竣工記念大会実行委員会

後援 (社)原田愛郷社・しまね文化ファンド・中条スポーツ振興会
西郷町・隠岐体育協会・島後体育協会・隠岐島後教育委員会
原田区・上西区・池田区・平区・有木区・八田区・月無自治会
隠岐島町村組合・隠岐汽船株・隠岐観光協会・西郷町観光協会

The main features of Koten-zumo

The most notable quality of Koten-zumo is in its divine service to those above. As was mentioned above, it does not take place regularly; it is only held when something beneficial to the whole area occurs. At that time the locals rejoice in the occurrence, thank God, and pray for long-lasting good fortune by dedicating sumo.

Taking previous instances as an example, classical sumo was performed when a large new torii (archway to a Shinto shrine) was erected on the 100th anniversary of the founding of a local elementary school, at the time a bell tower was built in a shrine, or to commemorate the opening of the new Oki Airport, etc.

The liturgical aspects of Koten-

zumo are well expressed in the form of its dohyo as well. It is called a threefold dohyo with two circles made of straw bags inside a square form also surrounded with straw bags: the diameter of two circles is 4.55m and 5.75m respectively.

The surface inside the smaller circle, where rikishi come together is some 20cm higher than that of the outer circle, and the surface of the larger circle is also 20cm higher than that of the outer square^{iv}.

If we look at the dohyo from above, it looks like a decoration of two slices of round omochi (rice cake) on the square wooden container dedicated to Shinto gods at New Year.

Usually, the amateur sumo

tournaments in Japan treat the outcome of each battle seriously. However, in Koten-zumo except for some bouts called tobitsuki-gonin-nuki (beating five people in succession by a lower-ranking rikishi) or shou-goban-shoubu (wrestled in three separate generation groups: in their twenties, thirties, and forties), each match is fought twice.

The winner of the first bout is literally 'the' winner, but in the second battle, the victor in the first match must lose; therefore, officially there is no winner or loser. Occasionally to appear 'defeated' without it coming across as intentional is rather difficult, but he (the winner of the initial fight) must try to give a semblance of effort in his being vanquished. It is said this procedure was started to maintain good relations on the small island: an ancestral form of wisdom aimed at not creating problems.

This does not mean that Classical Sumo in Oki is treated as a mere pastime of sorts as the men chosen to be sanyaku^v train very hard with the aid of senior wrestlers and supporters every night for about one month or sometimes 6 weeks before the bouts. This training is called jidori – again in Okinoshima dialect. During the jidori period, women in each region (in Koten-zumo Oki Island is divided into several regions) prepare dinner for the men - about 30 to 40 men in all in any one area - night after night. This treatment by the local ladies is named yakoi. Though women can never participate in the battles of Koten-zumo, they do support the male participants behind the scenes. The jidori and yakoi not only make the participants realise what being a rikishi of Koten-zumo means, but also help people in Okinoshima gradually develop build better relationships in each district. Consequently even if the representatives in their own area cannot win, they feel as if all of

取組表

座元 (西郷町)				寄方 (都方村・五箇村・布施村・島前)				
地区名	屋号	氏名	年齢	役	地区名	屋号	氏名	年齢
有木	中松屋	中泉 慎	31	正次	北方	塩川	河内 洋	39
池田	白川	白川 広明	29	正次	釜屋	中川	吉本 春木	25
原田	若西屋	若林 恵治	25	正小	蛸木	蛸木 仲	吉山 進一	26
中村	坂根	河上 修次	35	正小	中里	中里 紺	神村 隆	34
雨来	仲田屋	池田 邦彦	27	正小	郡	花崎	田崎 幸雄	26
港町	平田	平田 暁	20	正小	浦郷	丹後屋	平水 英治	24
東郷	山田屋	吉田 和弘	中3	草	西里	仲屋	田中 隆幸	中3

前相撲

座元 (西郷町)				寄方 (都方村・五箇村・布施村・島前)				
地区名	屋号	氏名	年齢	役	地区名	屋号	氏名	年齢
有木	平水屋	田中 勤	27	正前	北方	中西	中西 和志	33
池田	西原	藤原 誠	22	正前	釜屋	吉本	吉本 龍典	33
原田	鶴居	鶴居 誠	24	正前	蛸木	吉本	吉岡 正道	27
中村	高野	村上 良一	28	正前	中里	川ノ上	半田 耕一	30
上西	柴屋	有本 正典	24	正前	郡	滝本	滝本 一雅	21
港町	福岡	福岡 翼	22	正前	別府	大野	大野 誠	25

会場見取図

their local rikishi are heroes in some way shape or form.

Procedures following the decision to open Koten-zumo

When a region where a propitious event emerges decides to host a Koten-zumo event they ask the Ohaba Society which oversees classical sumo for approval. After being given official permission from the organisation, the preparation for the sumo festivities starts. Just as in Ozumo, where all the rikishi fight divided into two groups – east and west, they have two parties in Koten-zumo: zamoto and yorikata. While the zamoto group is formed of some districts centering on the venue itself, yorikata is made up of the other areas. Each region has to find a place where they can take a rest on the day of the battle and can put their mawashi and the sacred ohaba near the venue. For the members of the yorikata, this means they have to borrow a lodging in the enemy's camp.

The zamoto decide the banzuke in as far as ozeki, sekiwake, komusubi, three maegashira, and members of shou-goban-shoubu goes, with yorikata later selecting their best counterparts – carefully considering the rikishi's physique, experience as an amateur wrestler, potential to be a good leader in the future, etc.

As most of the sanyaku rikishi shall join the Ohaba society later in life, they must have the talent to train their juniors properly. To put it briefly, the famed shin-gi-tai of sumo is an essential condition. Accordingly, the banzuke conference takes a very long time with deliberations very deep and meaningful. In addition, every sanyaku rikishi is given a shikona.

Along with the work for the settlement of banzuke, the operations for making a dohyo are carried forward. One of the most important things is the construction of a dohyo for Koten-

zumo and it is vital to choose good trees to provide the pillars which will be given to the ozeki and sekiwake after the battle. The height and diameter of the pillars should be over about 5.3m in length and 22cm across. In cutting down the Japanese cedars, around 30 men gather and purify the wood with Japanese sake and salt. When the dohyo is completed a rite – the Dohyo Matsuri is performed and a gyoji will bury six offerings in the centre of the dohyo: dried chestnuts, dried squid, kaya nuts, kelp, pickled Japanese apricots, and salt. Except for the gyoji no one can go onto the dohyo wearing shoes and as in professional sumo, women can never enter the dohyo.

The day of the match – before the bouts

In the morning of Koten-zumo, in each district all the rikishi get together at the house of one of sanyaku and pay a visit to their tutelary deity with a gyoji elected by their district. At the shrine they stamp on the ground – shiko – and head to their camp. Sanyaku rikishi wear ohaba (kesho-mawashi) and naga-juban (similar to a yukata Ozumo rikishi wear) which they must not put on by themselves.

At about 1500, a ceremony to offer a prayer for safety is organised on the dohyo. A two-handled keg with kelp, rice cakes, and other morsels is put on the rail hung from the roof above the dohyo and a Shinto priest expels evil spirits and purges the dohyo and pillars. While the divine service is performed, in every encampment a rite for wrestlers who are going into battle is observed. After finishing, throwing salt they start for the dohyo.

Around 1700, all the participants assemble at the dohyo. The head gyoji delivers a speech explaining the reason of the opening of Koten-zumo and the origins and history of Japanese sumo going

back to the statement in a book of Chronicles of Japan. The speech lasts quite long: recently 20-30 minutes. Soon after that the dohyo-iri starts with the zamoto group first. The dohyo-iri performed by each region can last up to four hours. After the introductions and entry, the upper-ranking rikishi whose bout is scheduled at the end of the event go back to their camp.

The bouts

Koten-zumo begins with the kusamusubi level fought by young boys between 15 and 20-years-of-age. Next comes warizumo in which lower-ranking rikishi are chosen on the spot; zamoto chose a rikishi first, and yorikata pick an equivalent. After warizumo, tobitsuki-gonin-nuki is held by the men who took part in the warizumo event. The bouts continue until one rikishi beats five opponents in succession. When tobitsuki-gonin-nuki is finished, it is usually around midnight. During an intermission, sumo-jinku is sung as an extra form of entertainment.

Afterwards, shou-goban-shoubu all of whose bouts are scheduled on the banzuke are executed by five rikishi. To this end, all the matches up until this point are considered to be maezumo bouts between unranked sumo wrestlers. In the early morning, when yaku-rikishi appear, the dohyo is surrounded by a lot of spectators.

Following the performance of the dohyo-iri by the sanyaku men, the competition is resumed with the match between those maegashira at the third level. As a yobidashi calls the shikona and puts some additional explanation into the rikishi intro in a cheerful tone, people raise a cry of excitement and throw a great deal of salt towards the wrestler to give him increased divine power. The salt which had been dedicated to the shrines or god's shelves is considered to be sacred.

Subsequent to the maegashira's bouts, komusubi, sekiwake, and ozeki struggles in the Koten-zumo reach their dramatic final scenes.

After the bouts

When all the fights are finished, straw is spread on the dohyo and senior ranking rikishi sit on this simple surface. The sake, rice cakes, and other things that have been put on the rail are brought down. They pour drinks for each other and swear eternal friendship.

The winners are heroes and so should not make their feet dirty by walking on soil. For that reason each of them is carried to his own house by their own local people on a pillar which has just been removed from beside the dohyo. The ozeki who won the top ranked fight is the first to choose a pillar. Next, the 'other' ozeki – winner of the second bout selects his own pillar. The two sekiwake make the same selection thereafter – one of the reasons people paid such close attention in cutting the trees to

produce the pillars.

On the day of taian (lucky days in the Japanese calendar) the pillars, with the shikona and title of the Koten-zumo event written on them, are hung along eaves of each winner's house to praise the great achievement of the rikishi living within while also praising the people who supported him through jidori and yakoi.

It is said that some people, including those in the world of Ozumo, deem Koten-zumo in Okinoshima to be the true origin of Ozumo. There is no way, unfortunately, of confirming about relationship between Koten-zumo and Ozumo as, historically, no accurate records remain; the oldest literature on traditional sumo held in Oki only indicates that sumo has been performed in this manner since the latter part of the Edo period (1603-1867).

That said, some of the most famous names in professional sumo have recently been on a

pilgrimage of sorts to Okinoshima – so what does that tell us?

ⁱ Okinoshima is an archipelago belonging to Shimane Prefecture, in the western part of Honshu. It is situated in the Japan Sea and is about 45 to 90 kilometres north of the Shimane Peninsula. In Japanese history Okinoshima is known as a place of exile for the Emperor Go-toba (1180-1239) and the Go-Daigo Emperor (1288-1339). There remain ethno-cultural assets, some significant historical sites, and local performing arts in the island.

ⁱⁱ Ohaba Kai is a society formed in 1971 to revive and maintain Koten-zumo. The organisation consists of men from Okinoshima who once wore ohaba as amateur rikishi.

ⁱⁱⁱ Oki Koten Zumo Ohaba Kai, Oki Koten Zumo Shi, Sanin Chuo Shinpo Sha, 2006. Iida Tatsuhiko, Sumo-Jima, Harvest Print, 2008.

^{iv} In order to ensure the safety of rikishi and the spectators, sometimes they prefer a common form of dohyo as seen in Ozumo, which has less difference in height.

^v Yokozuna do not exist in Koten-zumo. Ozeki is the highest rank as was in the world of Ozumo.



[Photo Bonanza](#)