Brief Paper:

Women’s Sumo Wrestling in Japan

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In this paper, Japanese traditional and folklore women’s sumo is introduced as an example that female was involved in combative sport.

(1) Description in the Nihonshoki: First record of women’s sumo, (2) Women’s sumo as a show exhibition - from the middle of the Edo period to 1950’s, there have been a women’s sumo show exhibition performed, (3) Women’s sumo as local folklore events and a performing art peculiar to a certain locality - in the north west part of Kyushu island (Nagasaki, Saga, Kumamoto), sumo was performed as local culture events. There are two types of sumo performed. Real sumo tournament and folklore dance as a motif without fighting a sumo wrestling, (4) Women’s sumo as a praying for rain - women’s sumo was performed as a praying for rain in Akita prefecture. In addition, in Okayama Prefecture and Saga prefecture, there are records that women’s sumo was performed for praying rain, (5) God sumo in Okinawa - at the time of festival called Shinagu and Unjami, festival praying for abundant crop(fertility), sumo tournament of man against woman was performed in Okinawa. As above-mentioned, Japanese sumo was not exclusive to the male. Women was said to have participated time to time in the sumo tournament.

Keywords: Japan, women, sumo wrestling

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1. Introduction

In this paper, the history and the folklore of women’s sumo are introduced as an example of women’s involved in athletic competition.

Sumo, a national sport in Japan, prohibits women from participating or even entering into the Dohyo (ring). A history of women’s sumo does exist, however:

2. First Record of Women’s Sumo – Description in the Nihonshoki

First record of women’s sumo appeared in [the Nihonshoki] volume 14 in 13 Year of the Emperor Yuryaku, September (around 469 AD) [Sakamoto et al. (1994 pp.70-72)].

The story goes that during Emperor Yuryaku’s reign, a master carver called Inabeno-Mane could cut the wood on the stone without damaging the axe all the day long. The emperor asked, "Don’t you ever hit stone?" Mane replied, "Never!" The emperor then had women wearing only loin cloths hold a sumo match, which so confounded Mane that he hit the stone and damaged his axe. He was only saved from death for lying at the pleasure of his colleagues. Some says this is not a historical fact, but a story formulated in later age [Hasegawa (1993 pp.57-59)].

3. Women’s Sumo as a Spectacle

Women’s sumo in the Edo period (1603-1867) was performed as an exhibition, but repeatedly forbidden, but continued up to around 1950 with titillation rather than skill as its drawing card.

Sumo as a show and exhibition started in 1744 in Edo (ancient Tokyo). [Zokudankai, Biutei (1746 etc.)] In 1768, sumo was performed in Kamigata (Kyoto and Osaka). In 1769, Zato sumo (sumo between the blinds) and the blind against the women appeared [Hamamatsu (date: unknown), Rajo-sanjin (date: unknown etc.)]. It was prohibited immediately. [Rajo-sanjin (date: unknown etc.)]

In winter 1826, sumo of blind men versus women

1 A Japanese ancient history published on May 21, 720.
was restored [Asakura (date: unknown p.563)] and in spring 1848, women’s sumo group from Nagoya re-started performances in Osaka [Asakura (1928 p.66)].

On July 19, 1873, Article 21 of a proclamation prohibited mixed-gender sumo and snake charmers [Kaneda (1993a pp.112-113)]. Despite this, women’s sumo continued, promoted by a Takatama group from Takatama village of Yamagata Prefecture and Ishi-yama Onna sumo from the same prefecture.

According to Kaneda, the Takatama group was organized by recruiting big women from the Oto region by Hanzaburo Honna. His successor, Kanzuro Honna, divided the entertainment group into two for provincial tours in northern and southern Japan. The Takatama group consisted of 35 women wrestlers ranked Ozeki, Sekiwake, Komusubi, Haridashi-maegashira and Maegashira. In March 1926, women’s sumo was performed at Asakusa Nakamise with participation of male spectators, but was forbidden on March 23, 1926 [Kaneda (1993a p.117)].

The Ishi-yama group consisted of 17 east and 17 west members ranked Ozeki, Sekiwake, Komusubi and Maegashira. The performance were the combination of show of a weight lifting in her dent and abdomen, sumo folk song, Japanese posture dancing from Fuku-gawa and sumo wrestling. They were the biggest performance group of the time [Kaneda (1993a p.115)].

Of the the more than 23 theatrical companies at that time, most were from Yamagata prefecture [Kaneda (1993a pp.117-118)].

In 1930, Ishiyama Onna sumo toured Hawaii and the Takatama group toured Saipan, Tinian, Truk, and Palao [Kaneda (1993a pp.112-120), Kaneda 1993b p.100]

After World War II, Ishiyama Onna sumo performed at Takadanobaba in December 1951 and at Shinjuku in 1952. Women’s sumo was sometimes even performed at cabarets, beer halls, and on TV [Omitsu (1993a p.352)], but no performance show by theatrical company with a group of women wrestlers was recorded for posterity. (Fig.2)

4. Women’s Sumo as a Regional Performing Art

Sumo existed as a regional performing art in northwest Kyushu, e.g., Nagasaki, Saga, and Kumamoto, at festivals, inauguration ceremonies, and marriages and is performed even now. It is, like men’s sumo, divided into Dohyo-iri (ring entrance ceremony), Sorobumi (Dohyo-iri by three wrestlers), matches, and, unique to women’s sumo, folk dances focusing on sumo.

Women wrestlers wore Mawashi (sumo wrestler’s loincloth) over shirts, lingerie, and pants.

The origin of this ceremony is not clear. The only record of its origin is oral. But there were a lot of records of women’s sumo after the Meiji period. This is presumed that by the influence of national sumo tournament provincial tour, women’s sumo tournament was once popular in north west part of Kyushu [Kaneda (1993a pp.122-131)]. (Fig.3)

Outside of Kyushu, there are records of Hiyori sumo praying for safe voyages played by women instead of men during World War II [Shizuoka Pref. (1989 pp.1058-1060)].
5. Women’s Sumo as a Pray for Rain

Examples of women’s sumo to pray for rain are centered in Akita prefecture

- In the Ogita region of the town of Hina, Kita Akita District, there was a practice of praying for rain stripping to the waist and making up one’s face with soil and playing sumo wearing straw Mawashi [The Compilation Committee of The History of Hina machi (1987 p.851)]. These focused on playing the fool and provoking laughter [Kaneda (1993a p.134)]
- In the Kazuno City, When praying for rain, naked women fought bouts and when the last women wrestlers started to fight, it started to rain [The Compilation Committee of the history of city, Kazuno city general affairs department (1990)].
- Other examples include Odate city, Takanosu town Kita-akita District, Tashiro-cho Kita-akita District, Nishi- Senboku-cho Senboku District, and Kosaka cho Kazuno District.

These women’s sumo tournament were performed naked or almost naked at sacred precincts of shrines where women were prohibited to enter, with the purpose of “profaning” a holy place and provoked the anger of the gods, resulted in rain.

Such sumo went out of practice after War War II.

Regarding prayers for rain via women’s sumo outside of Akita, according to folklorist Taro Nakayama, a legend holds that Chinju Hachiryu Shrine in Nibi village, Kanzaki District, Saga, is said to love women’s sumo from old times and at praying for rain, 40 beauties in the village were selected to perform a women’s sumo tournament at the shrine and prayed for rain [Nakayama (1936 p.90)]. It is also said that there is a record of women’s sumo for rain in Kawakami town, Kawakami District, Okayama [Omitsu 1993b p.352].

6. Sumo of Gods in Okinawa

At fertility festivals Shinugu and Unjami in Okinawa, mixed-gender sumo matches were performed.

At Unjami in Ookinu, women Shinto priestesses called Kaminchu (Holy persons) fight men – and always win. With regard to the selection of the opponent, there is an opinion that Shirugami male Shinto priest will be destined to be selected or Kaminchu chooses the opponent at her discretion among the males in the village.

At present, sumo is performed on weekdays. Main events are on Sunday and the sumo tournament is scheduled the next day, so the number of men is limited. Also, there are no more Shirugami Shinto priests. Consequently, the chairman of town association fights against Kaminchu. Both the chairman of town association and Kaminchu are aged, therefore, they do not fight each other seriously but pretend to fight, and finally the chairman of town association will be fallen off. They show the performance of sumo. (Fig.4)

There is an explanation why the winner is already decided. Kaminchu, the representative from the god throws the male, the representative of human-being so as to amuse the gods. Human-being shall never win against the gods and the male is destined to lose.

This explanation is based on the Onari God belief, one of the characteristics of folklore religion in Okinawa. The Onari God belief is as follows; Sisters are always superior to the brothers spiritually. This is the belief that women are always superior to men. Under such philosophical background, in order to materialize the motif in sumo of the god versus human-being, scenario that women always wins in the sumo between women and male become predominant.

As above mentioned, Japanese sumo was not limited to men, but once involved women. Amateur sumo tournaments for women are held under the name “new sumo” presently.

It will be interesting to see how women’s involvement in sumo in Japan evolves and how the support develops.

2 Fukushima town, Hokkaido, Teshikaga town, Hokkaido etc.
Fig. 4. Sumo of Okaneku, Oogimi-mura, Okinawa prefecture’s fertility festival "Unjami".

References:

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