Boat Race FUNAGURO: Tradition and Acculturation

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Traditional boat races are held all over the world. They are popular in East Asia as well as South East Asia. Especially, southern China, Taiwan and the western areas and south east islands of Japan can be cited. Among them, Okinawa and Nagasaki are famous for boat races. The boat races there are termed as Hari and Peiron. Both of them are originally influenced by China, and have been held since much earlier times. The boat races whose ancestry is different from Hari and Peiron exist in Japan. Those boat races competed in traditional Japanese-style boats were once frequently carried out in the areas centering on western Japan. While paddles are used as a tool for propulsion in Hari and Peiron, ro is used in the traditional Japanese boat races. Ro was the most popular tool for propulsion in Japan. The areas where Japanese-style boat race was flourishing are in northern Kyushu. One of the areas is Tsushima Island that is located closest to the Korean Peninsula. In Tsushima, people have been familiar with the boat race, calling the boat race ‘Funaguro’. Boats were regarded as valuable as human's life in the island which is surrounded on all four sides by the sea. Boats were indispensable to people’s lives. Up until the pre-war period, Tsushima's main industry was agriculture rather than fishery. Boats in Tsushima were used for agriculture. Therefore, they were larger than fishing boats in their size. The boat race was conducted using those boats. The boat race in Tsushima was held as a ritual and an event wishing for rain in draught. Characteristic of the race in Tsushima is that the attendants in the race were limited to the first boy, namely an heir, of native families of the island. Those families were labeled as ‘Honko’. As Tsushima is situated on a country’s border, the boat race implied militaristic factors. Although the boat races had been frequently seen till around the thirtieth year of Showa era (1955), they gradually dwindled along with decrease of wooden boats. At present, the boat races remain in only several places of the island. They have been continued as an event of the summer festival.

Keywords: Tsushima island, races in Japanese wooden boats, The Boat Race named Funaguro, acculturation

1. Introduction

Boat races are prevalent in every part of the world. Especially, in South-East Asia and "South-west" in China, boat races have flourished since a long time ago. In Japan, as a peripheral country of those areas, boat races are held in places centering around western areas of Japan and the south-west islands. Among others, in Okinawa and Nagasaki, boat races, favorably called Hari "Dragon boat race of Okinawa" and Peiron "Dragon boat race of Nagasaki" are attracting popularity, while being closely attached to the community. Boat races in these areas help promote tourism today. It is said that both of them were originally influenced by Chinese boat races.

Here in Japan, boat races that have a different ancestry from Hari and Peiron are observed. They are boat races in western Japan conducted with Japanese-style traditional ships. While a short kai "A Japanese-style oar" (a paddle) is used as a tool for propulsion in Hari and Peiron, ro "A Japanese-style oar" pervading nation wide has been applied in a Japanese-style traditional ship. Ro has been used for various Japanese-style ships such as fishery and transport boats, indicating that it was the most popular tool for propulsion that was close to everyday life in Japan. However, that does not necessarily indicate that Japanese-style traditional boat races are...
In the present paper, centering on the case of Tsushima in northern Kyusyu area where boat races have flourished the most, the transformation of Japanese-style boat race is explored.

2. Outline of Japanese-style traditional boat races

The present status of traditional Japanese-style boat races is discussed first. As is widely known, Japan being an island-nation, is surrounded by the sea on all four sides and ships have been used for multiple purposes such as traveling and transportation. Ships were the core that supported the economy in Japan which was once termed as a seafaring nation. However, as time has changed from the modern-age to contemporary, people’s traveling method has shifted from ships to airplanes, resulting in the dilution of the meaning of ships, though the transportation of goods still depends on ships. During those shifting periods, ships with higher speed capabilities became predominant and motor-driven vessels replaced manually rowed wooden boats. The places quick in its replacements had started to use motor-driven boats in Taisho era. By the time around the fortieth year of the Showa era (1965), wooden boats had begun dwindling. Fishing boats used racing were no exception in the changes from wooden boats to plastic, and manually rowed to motor-driven. Along with the extinction of wooden boats, Japanese-style boat races were rarely seen except for certain areas. The time when the term of a boat race indicated the traditional Japanese-style boat race is becoming a distant history.

In the areas still carrying out boat races, they are carried out as a festive event in many cases. Though many races were witnessed in fishing villages of western Japan at one time, they are seldom seen today. Under these circumstances, among those areas that still keep the traditional races, many of them seem to relate with suigun (literally meaning is water-military) or a whaling group. Those areas are; western and northern Kyusyu such as Kitamatsuura and Iki-Tsushima, the Japan Sea coastal area of Yamaguchi prefecture, the whole Seto-inland sea coasts, the Uwa-kai coast of Ehime prefecture, Muroto in Kochi prefecture, Kii-Kumano and Ise-Shima.

Categorizing by means of propulsion, Japanese boat races are largely grouped into three; the Japanese traditional boat races using ro, Hari and Peiron using a kai (paddle) and Kaidenma using a long kai. Ro has a fairly long history, though not so long as kai. Ro originally had been observed around the 2nd century in China. According to Kenji Ishii, a specialist in ships, ro was brought to Japan through Japanese envoys to China in the Tang dynasty in the
7th century (Ishii, 1999). Ro at that time was made of a single solid timber. In order to row easily in the standing position, a doubled ro, as seen today, was fabricated with two pieces of timber fitted in the beginning of Edo era. After the doubled ro started to be used, it contributed to rowing for a long distance as an excellent tool for propulsion not only for a long cruise but also for everyday ships such as a fishing boat. Therefore, it is considered that the boat race competed by using a doubled ro observed today started as early as Edo era or later. However, as mentioned before, this sophisticated ro is rarely used these days. The succession of ro technique becomes more and more difficult. On the contrary, as paddles are easily fabricated, they have become popular in boat races.

Depending on areas, ro was replaced by paddles in order to continue the Japanese style boat race that has long tradition. Today, with establishment of Marine Day (the third Sunday of July) as a national holiday, an increasing number of areas have restarted boat races as a marine event. However, most of them are recreational boat races using paddles.

3. Transformation of traditional Japanese-style boat race

Terms for Japanese traditional boat races are studied.

The term used for Japanese traditional boat races varies depending on the area. In the western areas of Japan that have been investigated until now, different terms such as ‘Oshifune’, ‘Oshiai’, ‘Serifune’, ‘Seiguro’, ‘Funaguro’, ‘Funagoro’, ‘Oshikurago’, ‘Oshigokura’ and ‘Oshikurango’, being expressed in Kanji, Hiragana or Katakana. ‘oshi’ expressed in Katakana characters suggests the meaning of ‘push’ in Japanese, meaning ‘pushing the or’ here. Therefore, ‘oshi-’ in Katakana letters is equivalent to the Kanji characters "押す(osu)" indicating "push", and "船(fune)" is "ship", or a boat. ‘Guro’ and ‘goro’ are dialectal terms for "competing". In Tsushima pointed out by present study as well as the northern and western areas of Kyusyu, people often term a competition ‘guro’ in their respective dialects. An example is that a foot race is called ‘hashiri (running)guro’. Naming the traditional boat race "Funaguro", people in Tsushima and Iki have been familiar with the event.

As shown in the examples above, once-flourishing boat races are still carried out as an annual event in several places. In this chapter, the transformation of traditional boat races is discussed by centering on those in Tsushima Island where people once enjoyed the spree races.

Tsushima has historically been an important place for interacting with the continent since ancient times, and therefore, a unique social formation is observed.
First, I would like to put Tsushima in a historical and geographical perspective. Tsushima, the closest Japanese island to the Korean Peninsula, is situated North-West of the mainland of Japan. It is a small island 82 km from north to south in length and 18 km from west to east in width. While the distance between the north end of the island and the Korean peninsula is approximately 50 km, the island is 132 km from Fukuoka city. Regarding the area, it is the third largest island after Sado and Amami Oshima. Eighty-nine percent of the area is mountain forests. The level grounds are limited in area, resulting in cultivated fields of only 1.5 %. In its coastal area, the mountains are close to the sea. As represented by Asou Bay, several deep-indented shorelines can be seen. Those indentations function as naturally good harbors.

Surrounded by the warm ocean current, Tsushima has a subtropical mild climate.

The population of Tsushima at the beginning of Showa era had been increasing from 30,000 people in the Edo period and 50,000 in the Meiji, reaching nearly 70,000 in the thirty-fifth year in Showa era (1960). After that, it decreased to 40,953 in February of the sixteenth year in the Heisei era (2004). In the meantime, in March of the sixteenth year of Heisei, six towns of the island were merged, and Tsushima city was established.

According to a part of a Chinese historical text “Gishiwajinden” issued in the third century, Tsushima island was covered with mountains and had only poor cultivated land, so the people went out to Korea or Kyusyu in pursuit of food while subsisting on seafoods (Isihara, 1985). From those days to Meiji era, the situation of the island had been basically the same. Put it in other words, it may be no exaggeration to say that the island’s history is centered around securing food for subsistence. In spite of the fact that the island was surrounded by the sea, the lord in the Edo era placed a priority on agriculture over fishing, aiming at the expansion of food production. This was partly because the domain government tried to make people dependent on agriculture, and to monopolize the benefits gained by the trade with Korea by preventing unsanctioned trade by people. Therefore, the major industry in the island was agriculture. For the purpose of food production, burn fields called koba were frequently conducted in order to change the mountainous grounds to farming lands.

Being covered with mountains, the shorelines are very close to the sea. Traffic routes on the island were scarcely arranged. The poor traffic conditions continued until the middle of Showa era. The reason of this was not only geographical as mentioned above but also the fact that Tsushima was a strategic place in a military sense. Given this situation, a ship was the main mean of transportation for a long time. A ship was very effective way since it easily reached destination except during periods of inclement weather. A ship was indispensable for Tsushima, being regarded nearly as valuable as human life itself.

As mentioned before, cultivated lands were scarce. A ship was used to and from farms. It was essential not merely for traveling but for carrying livestock for farming, fertilizer and harvest. These facts indicate how valuable a ship was. Regarding the size of the ships in Tsushima, they were one or two sizes larger than the ships used for agriculture in the mainland of Japan. In Tsushima, those large ships for agriculture were applied for boat races.

Next, the social characteristics of Tsushima are discussed. Though the primary industry in the domain duties period had been concentrated for a long time, the people’s life style shifted to the semi-agricultural and semi-fishery style as the restrictions were eased along with the start of modern era. Still, the life for the people was tight. To survive, the people came up with a unique social system, namely the system that was made up of main families and temporary residents that had been introduced in Meiji era. In that system, families in the village were separated into two groups based on the native islanders in the period of old domains. One was the group consisting of original families that tried to keep the conventional feudalistic bondage of the village, and the other is made up of people such as the second and third boy of a family, namely people in branch families, and people from outside of the island. Discriminating those two, the former was termed as ‘Honko (the main families)’, and the latter ‘Kiryu (temporary residents)’. People in temporary residence were excluded from the community, in that they did not have the right to speak in community matters, or the right to attend the community meeting. In other words, they were not treated as a member of the community. Therefore, they were not allowed to take part in the annual events such as the boat races and Bon Festival dance. Hence, people who did not tolerate the system could not help going out of the community.
Though this system continued till around the thirtieth year of Showa, it disappeared along with the outflow of young people in the period of high economic growth in Japan.

As written before, boats were imperative in the life of Tsushima. Those boats were separated into two groups, ‘mura-fune (village boats in its literal meaning)’ that is owned by the village and ‘ji-bune (local boats)’ as personal property. The village owned one mura-fune or two to use for transport of rice as land tax to government and for emergencies (rescue). The size of the village boats were ten hiros (one hiro=1.5m) or larger, up to 13 – 15 hiros in the largest. For boat races held between competing villages, those large boats were used. The mura-fune was also termed a boat for public use. The feudal domain was willing to offer its support at time of rebuilding of mura-fune (Yasutomi, 2004).

In the meantime, large jibune owned privately were 6-8 hiros in their size though not so large as mura-fune. Those boats were mainly used for agriculture. In Tsushima, an economically deprived land, it is considered that owning a large boat could give the family economic burden. Each family unit appeared to own one boat in Meiji and Taisyo eras, and two in Showa era, one for agriculture and another for fishery. Two boats in one family suggest that quite a many boats were newly fabricated every year. Meanwhile, it is said that a boat race was carried out every time a boat was newly built. In that case, boat races seemed to be held very frequently.

The reason boat races were so popular in Tsushima is not clarified. However, it would make sense because boats were essentials for people’s everyday lives. Almost every time two boats met each other in those occasions when people went out for work and came home by boats, the boat race started. Additionally, in Tsushima being located on the borders of the country, boats might play a militaristic role on the sea.

The writer of present study had a chance to investigate the boat race in Tsushima, and contemplated a distribution map shown in the Figure 1 (Yasutomi, 2004). The figure indicates that boat races were frequently held in various places in the island though those held today are scarce. This is firstly because the chances when ro is used are disappearing due to facts such as decrease of rowboats and, especially, the introduction of motor boats. The reason considered secondly is that the social order in the village could not be kept any more and became worldly as the number of fishermen decreased due to slumping of fishing business. In addition, young people left the island along with the high economic growth in Japan.

Those phenomena are observed not only in Tsushima. They are issues common in peripheral regions nationwide. Considering those conditions, the change of traditional Japanese boat races is explored.

Generally, Japanese style boat races were held as ritual events for the fishing village in many cases. The boat used had been a fishing boat owned by a family before the war, namely the high-time of wooden boats. What is more, in most cases, the boat used for the race was a newly built one. This is done partly so the capacity of the new boat could be tested. At the same time a wish to god for the safety of the boat and the great catch of fish was made. Therefore, the boat owner was proud that his boat was selected for the boat race. He put a great deal of money into the race, scrambling for good ro and supporting the

![Figure 3: Distribution of boat races in Tsushima](image-url)
rowers of his boat in order to win the race. However, in present days the time of the wooden boats has long passed and boat races no longer carry any significant meaning for personal owners as boats built exclusively for the purpose of boat races are owned by public organizations. The community as a whole implements the race. Such enthusiasm, or adherence to victory as existed before, is not seen any more in the boat races today which are conducted by an entire community.

Until around the fortieth year of the Showa era, the society maintained a seniority system centering on elders who presided over community events. In addition, youth organization producing strong boat rowers kept authority at that time. The rowers, being limited to specified persons in the community, felt honored to be chosen. Today, the old social system has broken down because the number of young people is decreasing. It became difficult to find rowers only within community, resulting in acceptance of rowers from outside. It means that any community holding the race spends a lot of money on lining up of rowers and supporting them. To put it in another way, the expenses of festive events, as well as donations, are collected from each family. Tsushima was not an exception.

As mentioned before, many boats used for agriculture in Tsushima were larger than the race boats (fishing boats in most cases) in the mainland. In the case of large murafune, 20-30 pairs of ro were applied. Even in jibune, 7-15 pairs were used. Comparing to them, the boats in the mainland had as few as 4-8 pairs. Most of all, in Tsushima, the larger boats were built for inter-village races, which was not observed in the mainland. That special festive mood, however, disappeared around the thirtieth year of Showa.

Since Tsushima concentrated on agriculture as its major industry, one of the characteristics of its boat race is that it was held as a ritual wishing for rain as well as competitions. Generally speaking, the boat races as a ritual for rain are held in China more frequently than in Japan. The race for rain is still being carried out in China in the festival of May fifth in the Chinese calendar. Around the festival day in China, the season is early summer. Finishing rice planting, people pray for abundant water to the god of dragon and rich harvest.

Correspondingly, a ritual for rain in Tsushima was not an annual event. The boat race praying for rain in Tsushima was an event held by the entire community during a time of draught. Its procedure was as follows; On the occasion of dry weather in Tsushima where few rivers and storage reservoirs were arranged, the people brought tiered food boxes to the shrine and stayed there in order to pray for rain. When it did not rain even after they prayed, neighboring communities gathered and prayed for...
rain in the rain shrine. With wish fulfillment, a boat race, a playacting or sumo-wrestling was dedicated to the god as a token of appreciation. The item of event was chosen by lot before wishing. As the boat race was the most popular among the three, it is said that more winning lots for the boat race than others were included. Incidentally, if the draught was harsh, the scale of the wish became bigger. The bigger its scale became, the more emotionally the people became and involved in the race with the wish of honoring their community. In inter-village boat races, each community competed to build a new boat or to hire a boat from another community. The entire community had to bear the expenses.

As for the boat race in Tsushima, Hisae Nagatome, an authority of Tsushima’s history, demonstrated that one event among a boat race, a playacting and sumo-wrestling had been selected and held for the purpose of a wish for rain since a long time ago (Nagatome, 1988), indicating that the boat race in Tsushima had a long history. However, the boat race for rain in Tsushima had been held till pre-war days, and it ceased after the war. The reason was that as the cost of a boat race was high, people started other events. Today, the event wishing for rain in large scale is not implemented. Only villagers in each village separately visit the shrine for wishing rain. Meanwhile, except for Tsushima, the boat race wishing for rain did not exist in Japan.

One of the specialties of Japanese traditional boat races in many areas is that men in woman’s clothes stood in the bow of the boat. This feature was not seen in Hari "Dragon boat race of Okinawa" or Peiron "That of Nagasaki". In some cases, a person in woman’s dress was a young man or a boy. The man in woman’s dress was termed Daifuri or Odoriko (a dancer) in the main land Japan, and Ayakiri in Tsushima. Ayakiri wearing red or pink undergarment of traditional kimono stood on the Ayakiri platform, and danced with aya (a stick to conduct) in both hands. The platform, 60 cm square, was prepared on the bow of the boat. A man in woman’s dress was very conspicuous. The reason why a man wore woman’s dress and why he danced was unknown. The difference between Tsushima and the mainland was that Ayakiri in Tsushima included a woman. A woman Ayakiri was seen in the middle and northern areas of the island where boat races by women were frequently implemented. As for participants wearing woman’s clothes, a folklorist, Tsuneichi Miyamoto wrote ‘... it is just as the traditional beater’s boat was chasing a whale. Thus, the style and the sailing method are taken over to Funa-goro of the village boat, and remains as was (Miyamoto, 1991)’. In addition, in the dolphin fishing in Tsushima, the first harpoon was thrown by a woman. In the meantime, the Tsushima’s case in which women boarded the boat was observed only in the areas where agriculture was its major industry. Women were not allowed to board on fishing boats either in the main land or Tsushima, and scarcely took part in the boat race.

It is considered that Ayakiri was termed because the dancing style in the dance was similar to Aya dance, namely the Bon Festival dance in Tsushima. Ayakiri was called Zeifuri (Zeikiri) or Zaifuri (Zaikiri) in the southern area of the island. They seem to be older terms than Ayakiri. "Zai-" and "zei-" are dialectal variations of "sai". ‘Japanese Dictionary’ reads that zai is ‘the same as "saihai", and is a dialectal form of sai’. ‘Japanese Dictionary’ reads that zai is ‘the same as "saihai", and is a dialectal form of sai’. Dialect 1) Saihai (literally meaning is taking command) 2) Hataki (meaning a duster)’. Incidentally, saihai is meant in that dictionary that ‘1) A kind of tassel made by paper. Used
for communication over a long distance. For the militaristic use, it was used to inform to the superior or to give orders. It was a belonging to a commander ……3) (Because the shape is similar to 1)) A duster.' (Japanese dictionary publication society, 1977) 'These explanations understandably show the meaning of ayakiri. Another Japanese dictionary, "Kojien" explains that ‘sai means ‘2) Coloring. Aya…. 6) Contracted word of saihai’, indicating that aya and sai have the same meaning. It is contemplated that the words, furi and kiri, were expressing the gestures of the dancer on the boat. In these days, only old people use the words, zai and zei. Ayakiri is the familiar term all over Tsushima today. In the meantime, not only in Tsushima but in other places, the dance danced by men wearing red and pink under clothes and make up on the face was mysterious. However, in present days, its ritualistic character has faded out, becoming a mere spectacle in which ayakiri has simply become a clown. In fact, the boat race is one of the events in summertime. In many cases, all the old and young attend and carry out the event in good humor. The mystique of the dancer in woman’s clothes, as in old times has been lost.

As a result, the boat race without ayakiri is frequently observed. In addition, in the women’s boat race as well as men’s, dancers in woman’s clothes are often comical.

Women’s participation in the boat race in the pre-war is the characteristic of Tsushima, which is not displayed in any other place. As women were an indispensible labor-force in the island under the harsh environment, they naturally and imperatively rowed a boat for their livelihood in the island. For young women in the northern part of the island, rowing a boat was even mentioned as one of the conditions of their marriage. Further, there is a case showing that women played an important role in the boat race. That was the boat race wishing for rain held by women in Kin village, (Kami Tsushima town in the 16th year of Showa.) A participant at that time says ‘We had suffered from drought. Instead of men, women held the ritual wish for rain and the boat race.” (Yasutomi, 2004) The photo in existence is shown above. Such a sight was not seen in the mainland.

Next, the distance of a boat race is discussed. While the distance of a boat race was several thousand meters at the peak of wooden boats (until pre-war periods), it has become shorter and shorter, coming down to be several hundred meters at present. Some possible reasons are considered. Firstly, the chances of using ro have disappeared along with the demise of wooden boats. In addition, the rowing technique using ro is difficult and the physical capacity of rowers’ are insufficient. Meantime, the scene of racing boats rushing towards the shore from several thousand meters off-shore has disappeared.

Figure 6  Women holding boat race ritually wishing for rain (1941)
Most of the boat races today are conducted in the distance of several hundred-meter races in a direction parallel to the quay of the fishery harbor.

Regarding the rower’s clothes in boat races, rowers had worn only a loincloth until around the fortieth year of Showa era when the boat race assumed the nature of a ritual. The participants started to cover the upper body after that, with rowers dressing in happi coats and short pants. Brave figures in a loincloth that traditionally symbolized fishermen have evaporated. Meanwhile, the fact that today’s young people tend to hate wearing a loincloth reinforced the disappearance of the rowers in a loincloth from boat races.

4. Conclusion

The transformation of traditional Japanese-style boat races focusing on Tsushima was discussed. The status has greatly changed from the pre-war periods, the peak period for the use of wooden boats. Contrary to Peiron "Dragon boat race of Nagasaki" and Hari "that of Okinawa", traditional Japanese-style boat races are facing a fateful crisis. The race itself has become merely formal, losing its original braveness.

It is easily inferred that in the fishery village in old days, boat races even without the purpose of ritualistic ceremonies could exist. However, as wooden boats have disappeared, the technique of using ro is becoming difficult to exist today. Under these circumstances, survival of traditional Japanese-style boat races is not possible. It is obvious from the facts that builders of a wooden boat and craftsmen fabricating ro are decreasing. Especially, the number of ro craftsmen is virtually none at present.

After the war, concerned people have tried to take various countermeasures in order to continue the traditional events. However, the decreasing number of people engaging in fishery has greatly influenced the succession of traditional events. Though Japanese-style boat races have been continued for a long time as an event for young people, grey-haired rowers are involved in the race today. It seemed to be difficult to pass on traditional boat races to young people as a community event. Under these circumstances, the ro-rowing boat races, rowed by high school students in Tsushima and by elementary and junior high students in Hagi city of Yamaguchi, are being held in recent years, focusing on young people.

In addition, there was a case in Tsushima in the sixtieth year of Showa that a traditional boat race, Funaguro had started in Mitsusima town to boost development in the area. The race had spread all over the island. Each of the six villages had owned its racing boat and held an event respectively. Although the event of each village had developed into ‘The island-wide Funaguro Competition’, the competition was over after it had been back to the village where it had started. At present, a boat race is held in each town only as one of the events in the summer festival. The only place where the traditional Japanese-style boat race is held is Toyotama town in the middle of Tsushima Island where a ceremony is carried out at the Watatumi shrine on the first day of August in the old calendar.

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