

Sumo as an Aspect of Japanese Life and Culture.

Some observations, pt 1.

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The following observations were made while watching and studying sumo, not so much as a sport but as a 'bujutsu' (martial art), and a part of Japanese life and culture.

For most Japanese sumo is 'Ōzumo', the tournaments that are held bi-monthly six times a year, alternately in Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya and Fukuoka, beginning with the first Tokyo tournament in January, and ending with the last in Fukuoka in November. It is watched on television, by those with plenty of spare time, from three to six in the afternoon, and by those who are busy, in digested form late in the evening. Not many people can take the time off to go to a stadium and of those that can, most go to see only the main bouts which take place between three and six every day of the tournament. In spite of the fact that sumo is the so called 'kokugi' (National Sport), it is nowhere as popular as baseball, especially among the young, few of whom seem to have the desire to go and watch it or find out anything about it. When asked for their impressions of sumo they mention as disagreeable many of the same things that turn off foreigners who have probably also seen it only on television, the apparent grossness of the wrestlers, the time taken between bouts, and the inability to understand the finer points, or more than the obvious. So if a Japanese finds sumo difficult to understand is it possible for a foreigner, especially one that has never had any practical experience of sumo, to understand

it, either? Only in as much as it is possible to understand anything that one has not actually practiced or any aspect of a foreign culture, and that probably best by comparison. In order to show what I think it is possible to understand about sumo and what one can learn from it about Japanese life and culture I would like to partly compare it with other Japanese sports and martial arts, and with other Japanese cultural forms like the traditional theatre of noh and kabuki, and the tea ceremony etc.

Although my main interest is in the martial art aspects of sumo, in its modern form sumo is essentially a sport with all the accompanying advantages and disadvantages. On the brighter side it teaches discipline, perseverance, self sacrifice, and the ability to 'take it' and to work with others. In common with all other Japanese sports and martial arts it stresses deportment, and bearing.¹⁾ It is different from team sports since sumo is essentially individual achievement.²⁾ As an aspect of Japanese life though, one's own success is naturally enjoyed by all the members of one's group (the so-called 'uchi' v. 'soto' aspect of Japanese culture), which in sumo for 'uchi' is the 'heya' (stable) or 'ichimon' (group of 'heya'). The disadvantages are the financial pressures which cause compromise, and the creation of the star system in order to help attract the crowds and their entrance fees, and in Japan in particular media pressures which seem to be much greater than they are in the West, and don't allow the weaker types to develop naturally. The training, too, is very hard and often ruins the health of the wrestler, although

1) One thing that always strikes me as strange is the way Japanese will practice baseball or golf strokes with their umbrellas, even on a subway platform, with no apparent embarrassment, and such dedication to form and style, whereas a Westerner would probably be content to wait until the game began and then just to be able to hit the ball.

2) There are no team prizes in professional sumo, although there are in amateur, especially student sumo.

this could not have been an important factor in an age when life expectancy was not as long as it is nowadays. In order to understand the aim of sumo it is first necessary to describe the practice and daily life of a sumo wrestler. Before talking about the tournament, therefore, I would like to deal with the training and the structure of the 'heya', then the object of the exercise, that is the tournament, and overall make a comparison with other forms, in both Japanese life and culture, and in the West³⁾.

Like many similar modern Western sports sumo must have begun either as a conscious or unconscious military exercise with the object of defeating an opponent by strength. Comparisons are boxing, Greco-Roman wrestling and running, possibly the most primitive since they required no weapons, to archery, fencing, throwing the javelin and a lot of the field events that date back to the first Greek Olympics, and the equestrian arts. The arguments for them are they help develop the mind and body, promote healthy competition and teach discipline, teamwork and self-sacrifice, and in the young burn up surplus energy that might otherwise be harmfully employed. Sumo has all of these features except maybe the teamwork since the wrestler always competes as an individual, even though he trains in what is called a 'heya', literally *room* and dubiously translated into English as a 'stable'⁴⁾. At present there are nearly forty 'heya', some consisting of thirty or forty wrestlers, some with only three or four. Experience has proved that between seven and eight hundred seems to be the optimum number of wrestlers that the Sumo Association (Sumo Kyokai) can control effectively and financially, and the large number of 'heya' is frowned upon by many of the older retired wrestlers, (called in Japanese,

3) By West I mean that of British or European origin, as I am in no way qualified to talk about the forms or cultures of other parts of the world.

4) A young friend put it succinctly when he said that on hearing the term 'stable' he expected to find all the wrestlers in stalls.

'elders' (toshiyori)), who after retirement have managed to buy shares in the Association (toshiyori kabu), thereby qualifying for the ownership of a 'heya' themselves.⁵⁾ In the past and especially at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries there were only a few 'heya', formed into groups or factions commonly known as 'ichimon', which practiced and toured together. These still exist and all 'heya' belong to one. There are at present six or eight 'ichimon', depending on how they are counted, Dewanoumi, Nishonoseki-Futagoyama, Tatsunami-Isegahama, Tokitsukaze and Takasago. Wrestlers never change 'heya'.⁶⁾ If one is dissatisfied with either his 'heya' or sumo he quits, in fact he probably has little idea of what life is like in another 'heya' anyway. Fraternalization, other than that which is good for practice or essential in such an organization, is frowned upon. For example, in the daily practice between tournaments it is common for 'sekitori' (wrestlers in one of the top two divisions) from a small 'heya' in particular to practice at 'heya' which have a lot of 'sekitori' and where they can get the practice needed to extend themselves. This is called 'degeiko' or literally *going-out practice*, and is usually carried out within 'ichimon', probably a carry over from the time when the

5) In order to stay in the Sumo Kyokai after retirement it is necessary for a wrestler to buy shares in the Association. These are called 'toshiyori kabu'. Qualifications, apart from of course finding the cash, are a minimum number of appearances in one of the top two divisions.

6) Although frowned upon by most masters as a form of disloyalty, a retired wrestler can leave a 'heya' to form a new one of his own, and while he is still fighting can recruit young wrestlers into the heya that he will then take with him when he goes. But wrestlers are never transferred from one 'heya' to another as they would be in baseball or European football, for any reason except possibly the death or disgrace of a master, as happened recently when the Master of the Hanakago-beya (Hanakago Heya) was expelled from the Association for using his shares (toshiyori kabu) as collateral for a loan.

'ichimon' always moved and worked together. But after practice is over the 'sekitori' that has come over from another 'heya' will always return immediately to his own 'heya' to have his post practice bath, breakfast and the balance of his night's sleep. In the past, when your life may have depended on your skill with a sword or other weapon, practitioners of martial arts were not expected even to watch another teacher until they had mastered all that their own teacher could teach them. Advanced instruction was secret and only between teacher and pupil.⁷⁾ It had to be since what they learnt might mean the difference between life and death. The pupil or student had one teacher, whose word was law, and in whom he had to have complete confidence. The same loyalty is expected nowadays of the Japanese company employee, and is reciprocated by the employer. Employment for most Japanese is life long. It is as difficult for a Japanese to understand why and how westerners can be always changing jobs as it is for westerners to understand how or why Japanese do not. To the Japanese their own system means stability and security, and the foreign one treachery. To the foreigner his, or her own system means incentive and innovation, the opposite inefficiency and lack of drive.

A day in the life of a wrestler begins at four or five for practice which will last until almost noon. This is followed by a bath and breakfast, and then sleep for three or four hours. Wrestlers eat only twice a day, in the morning after practice and once again in the evening. It is this constant cycle of practicing on an empty stomach, then eating and resting that helps them put on weight and stops them from becoming merely fat. For this reason the joking remark about a fat boy making a good wrestler is fatuous. The opposite is more the norm, in fact it is unlikely that a boy who is merely fat will ever make a good wrestler. During the first few

7) An old 'dojo' (practice hall) had windows only for ventilation or a little light. They were so high up that it would be impossible for anyone to see in through them.

month or years of sumo life the young wrestler usually loses weight, due to the unaccustomed exercise, and it is only after he has been practicing for some time that he attains the girth that most people naturally think of when they hear the words 'sumo wrestler'. This is true as much of Japanese as of Westerners, since very few Japanese know anything of the behind-the-scenes life of a sumo wrestler, or ever see one when he is not actually wrestling or taking part in some publicity stunt. It is paradoxical that one of the reasons for the recent popularity of Japanese food in the West is the belief that it is because of the food they eat that the average Japanese is slim. Sumo wrestlers are not a special breed, either, as is believed by some westerners. They start off the same size as any normal Japanese but get big on Japanese food, which they eat in enormous quantities, in fact they force feed themselves. Many eat literally from six to ten times what a normal person can eat without seeming at all uncomfortable.

The 'heya' is self-contained, with the younger wrestlers doing all the cooking, and many that don't succeed in sumo often open 'chanko' restaurants.⁸⁾ Sumo is fought in a 'dohyo' (circle of rice bags), just under six metres in diameter, and one wins more often than not by forcing an opponent out of the circle. For sumo, therefore, weight is essential, and the heavier and stronger the wrestler the more likely the chance of his winning. But the tradition for Japanese, especially the 'bushi' or warrior was never to eat more than eighty per cent of his capacity. Overeating causes lethargy, which would be considered a weakness. Although 'ukiyo-e' prints often show warriors eating and drinking to excess the true warrior would never let himself be caught in a position or state of unpreparedness, such as would be caused by excessive eating or drinking. The daily or party eating habits of the modern Japanese are also

8) 'Chanko' is sumo slang for food as a whole but has come to mean to the uninitiated the pot stew, called 'chanko-nabe' (chanko stew) that forms the basis of the sumo wrestler's diet.

very different from those of the Westerner. In the West guests are expected to eat all that is put before them and this is often considerable because the host and hostess do not want their guests to leave the table feeling unsatisfied. Most would rather err on the positive side and will therefore usually provide more than is really necessary. Not to eat all that is put before one might be taken as an insult to the hostess's cooking so the guests will more often than not leave the table feeling bloated and uncomfortable. This coupled with lack of exercise produces the middle-aged spread and the unhealthy corpulence that is so common in the West. In Japan the hostess does not normally eat with her husband's guests but will continually ply them with food until they are full. It is not rude to leave food on the table uneaten. This also applies to drink and accounts for the full glasses of beer that are usually left at the end of parties, and which seem to many westerners to be so wasteful.

In the 'heya', the pecking order in eating, and the order of practice are reversed. The lower wrestlers are expected to wait at the table of the 'sekitori' and his guests, or of his supporters (the 'kokenkai'). They are the first to rise in the morning, clean the 'heya' and finish their practice so as to be ready to carry out their various duties by the time the 'sekitori' gets up, at a more reasonable hour. Each 'sekitori' has at least one lower wrestler assigned to him permanently, his 'tsukebito', who will even wash his back for him in the bath and, possibly for the extra large ones, help them in the toilet. These are the 'fags' of the English public school, the 'batmen' of the army. The lower ranks are the last to eat and more often by the time it is their turn there is nothing much left except a little rice and the remains of the stew. Since the lower wrestlers are not paid a wage but live on pocket money given them by their boss, the master of the 'heya', they can not go out and get themselves a good feed from time to time, either. There is therefore plenty of incentive to get on and become a 'sekitori'.

In sumo it is only possible to rise through the ranks by winning,

since the number of wins and losses you accumulate each tournament determines your position in the next tournament. As mentioned above, there are between seven and eight hundred wrestlers in the Sumo Association, listed before each tournament on what is called a 'banzuke' (list of rankings), in six divisions which range from the lowest, 'jonokuchi' through 'jonidan', 'sandanme', and 'makushita' to the two top ranks, 'juryo' and 'makuuchi', at the top of which are found the 'ozeki' and 'yokozuna', *champions* and *grand champions*, respectively.⁹⁾ Until May 1957 all 'rikishi' received only what they were given by patrons, were able to win from bouts, or were given as handouts from the master of the 'heya'. In a sense they were a kind of male 'geisha'.¹⁰⁾ As a result of the pressures of modern democracy, the top two divisions, 'sekitori' are now paid a salary by the Sumo Association, as are all the other support staff including 'gyoji' (the quaintly dressed referees), the 'yobidashi' (the men who first call out the names of the wrestlers before they fight), and the administrative staff

Recruitment into the 'heya' is carried out mainly by recommendation, still very important in almost all walks of Japanese life.¹¹⁾

9) Juryo comes from the amount of money, ten 'ryo' that 'wrestlers' were formerly given as attainer, 'makuuchi' from 'makunouchi', the top rikishi who were presented to the 'shogun'.

10) Geisha are not prostitutes, as is often believed in the West, but highly trained entertainers, who were expected to wait on customers at high class eating and drinking establishments. Their training began at an early age and many were accomplished in the literary arts as well as music. Top geisha would also have patrons.

11) An American that I knew who had come to Japan to work and see the country spent a lot of time during the first few months he was here going round companies and schools offering his services as an English teacher, for which he was very well qualified, being the proud possessor of two university degrees. In spite of his qualifications he got no response at all from well established colleges or large businesses, and had no work until someone he had met *in-*

Of course, if some promising lad walked up to a 'heya' and asked the master if he could become a wrestler he would not be refused, and some famous wrestlers have started out this way. But every 'heya' depends very heavily on support groups, especially local ones connected with the master when he was a 'sekitori', and it is often these that recommend young boys to the 'heya'. A boy must be at least 1.73 m and weigh in at not under 75 kg at age 18. In the beginning, apart from his duties and training in the 'heya' he must attend the school run by the Association, where he is taught the principals behind the art, the history and to a certain extent general etiquette. But he learns most from older wrestlers, who have as much power over him as the boss, since training is often in their hands. Although every 'heya' has the same outer trappings, a 'dohyo' for practice, rooms for the wrestlers, etc., watching practice one can often see very subtle differences. And being able to go round the different 'heya' is a luxury enjoyed probably by only foreigners and Japanese newspaper reporters. As mentioned above, in Japan one traditionally has only one master, and supports only one faction, or in the case of sumo, one 'heya', or 'ichimon'. Even if he had time, the normal Japanese would probably not watch practice at more than one heya. But it is interesting to see the differences between 'heya' and masters, and this can probably be done best in the provinces, where the quarters are only temporary, usually a

troduced him to the director of a small "conversation" school. The same thing applies to letters sent by foreign graduates and teachers writing to Japanese universities or companies. The letters are politely put aside and ignored. Japanese universities are more likely to ask for recommendations when recruiting staff, even foreign staff, and Japanese companies go to universities for their recruits, often through former graduates who ask their old professors to recommend likely students. The advertising of work and searching for jobs through advertisements is almost unknown. On the other hand in Japan hospitals and doctors advertise, a phenomenon unknown in England except in specialist literature.)

temple or shrine which has plenty of space for a 'dohyo' and large, spare dormitory style rooms for the wrestlers to sleep and live in. The wrestlers and the masters are also much more accessible. The attitude of the masters to spectators and the public at large is much more obvious. In Nagoya, for example, sumo arrives at about the beginning of the rainy season so of course the dohyo must have a roof, but this sometimes does not extend much further than the edge of the 'dohyo', which means spectators must stand in the rain and watch. Most 'heya' provide sheltered seating for members of their support groups, the more considerate 'heya' do the same even for the casual visitor. In most 'heya' visitors watching practice are requested not to talk, smoke or wear hats, but the degree of enforcement varies according to the 'heya', ie the master. In some 'heya' the master will supervise practice from early morning until he deems it time to finish. In some, practice seems to be under the complete control of the senior wrestlers with varying degrees of success. On entering the practice area, a wrestler should bow to the 'dohyo', and to the master or person that is supervising practice¹²⁾. This is strictly observed in the stadium during tournaments, but doesn't seem to be so strictly observed during provincial tours or at many of the 'dojo' (practice halls) used by modern martial arts enthusiasts. It is obviously part of what seems to be a worldwide trend towards a relaxation of etiquette and manners brought about possibly by the mistaken idea that both are old-fashioned or feudal. The consideration for other people that really forms the basis of good manners, and the training that forms the basis of etiquette, especially among warriors, is lost as a result. In the west the salute is now merely etiquette but developed as a signal showing that no weapon was concealed in the hand. In Japan 'ma-ai' (keeping one's distance, even when bowing), is etiquette, but also protects oneself from an adversary. A 'bushi' (warrior) was

12) The dohyo is considered sacred and the person bowing will do so for the same reason that a Christian will bow towards an altar.

taught not to get within range of a potential enemy's sword, or to be at the right distance to be able to disarm an adversary or defend himself if necessary. The defensive driving traditionally taught in some western countries is an extension of this. In Japan as yet there is no tradition of driving, hence the large number of senseless accidents among both young and old which better manners and etiquette would largely prevent.

As well as being the source of new recruits support groups are essential for the extra funds required to run 'heya' and pay for the increasing expenses of the wrestler as he goes up the ladder. During practice, too, 'sekitori' can be distinguished from other wrestlers by their white training belt (mawashi). On becoming a 'sekitori' they need a 'kesho-mawashi', an embroidered apron which is worn by each wrestler for the 'dohyo-iri', the ceremonial entrance at the tournament, when each wrestler is announced to the spectators. These can cost anything up to a million yen (three matching 'kesho-mawashi are needed by a 'yokozuna'), and are made with the name of the wrestler and the sponsoring support group or benefactor woven into them. In the past these used not to be displayed very prominently. Now that they are many companies will buy a 'sekitori' a new 'kesho-mawashi' as a form of advertisement, and the dohyo-iri, or grand entrance into the dohyo of all the sekitori before they fight is one of the spectacles of the day.

But for most Japanese sumo is only 'Ozumo', the 'basho' or in English the Grand Tournaments that are now held six times a year: in Tokyo in January, May and September, at the Kokugikan (literally National Sports Hall, the home of sumo, in which there is a museum, school and the administrative offices of the Sumo Association), and in Osaka, Nagoya and Fukuoka in March, July and November respectively.

Tournaments last for fifteen consecutive days and always begin and end on a Sunday, probably for convenience and in keeping with modern times. The top two divisions, juryo and makuuchi ('sekitori') fight on all fifteen days, makushita and below on only seven days.

Promotion depends on performance, the primary aim being to win more than half one's bouts, ie. either eight or four depending on how many days one fights. Winning is called 'kachikoshi', losing 'makekoshi'. Of course a better record will mean more promotion and maybe eventually the title of 'ozeki' or 'yokozuna', but the road is difficult and the chances slim. From the end of 1979 until the beginning of 1986, while just over seven hundred boys entered sumo, only six 'ozeki' and one 'yokozuna' were created. Wrestlers never fight more than once a day, unless there is no clear decision and they have to fight a replay, or for play-offs on the last day to determine the winners of each division. Bouts are normally short, often lasting only a few seconds. Should they go on for three minutes an interval 'mizuiru' is allowed for sekitori only, after which the bout continues from the very point at which it was halted. The same situation among lower ranked wrestlers means a re-match two bouts later. The top prize is the Emperor's Cup, and there are three other cups for Outstanding Performance, Fighting Spirit and Technique, all of which are accompanied by cash prizes and certificates (clear evidence of the degree to which sumo is now a sport). These can only be won by 'makuuchi' rikishi. As of January 1986 the prize money for the outright winner of the tournament, has been five million yen, with one million each for the other three prizes. The winners of each of the other divisions also get certificates and money awards.

Bouts usually begin around nine-thirty in the morning and carry on until six, depending on the number of bouts. Towards the end of the tournament, once most of the lower 'rikishi' have fought their seven bouts, the day begins later, possibly as late as ten-thirty or eleven, but the last bout must finish at six to coincide with TV coverage, which as mentioned above is live from three to six. The atmosphere and tension gradually builds up during the day, until the last bout, which is always between a 'yokozuna' and another 'sekitori' (unless, for some reason, there is no yokozuna still in the tournament). Hence the recent development of the star system, whereby

popular rikishi are promoted, even to the rank of yokozuna, and sometimes before they are ready, in order to draw the crowds to the basho. The average spectator goes to see his favourite star, not the sumo, as is the case with all popular sports in East and west. To a certain extent the gradual building up of tension at sumo can be compared to an evening of boxing. But although people in the west seem content to watch a day's racing, tennis, golf or cricket, the day's watching is very relaxed with only occasional moments of excitement, and it is difficult to imagine a day's boxing or baseball. Even in racing the most important race of the day is often not the last race.

Before the stadium opens the sound of the 'taiko' (drum) can be heard inviting or 'calling' people to the scene. This is struck by a 'yobidashi' (lit. caller) at the top of a wooden tower and in the past could be heard from four in the morning onwards. Nowadays, due to complaints about noise pollution this is restricted to half an hour in the morning, from eight-thirty to nine, and about the same time in the evening, after the day's events are over, bidding the spectators come again the next day. The drum can also be heard the day before the tournament begins, during the 'dohyo matsuri' (ceremony of purification), and afterwards when the 'yobidashi' call at each 'heya' and, as a kind of advertisement, on any patron that cares to pay for the privilege.

Inside the stadium, in the centre is the 'dohyo' (lit. earth and rice bales), which is in the shape of a circle and in which the wrestlers fight. This is now made on the top of a raised square mound, making it easier for the spectators at the back to see the action, and in the new Kokugikan in Tokyo can be lowered and covered so that the stadium can be used for other events when it is not needed for sumo, a great means of helping to make the stadium pay for itself, especially as it is used for sumo for less than one quarter of the year. Seating closest to the dohyo is on cushions, and is called 'suna-kaburi' (lit. *sand splattered* because the sand kicked up by the 'rikishi' when they are fighting often

covers spectators sitting that close.) These seats are very difficult to obtain and can never be bought on a daily basis, in fact many of them have been occupied by the same people or families for generations, the real aficionados of sumo. These are the equivalent in the West of the box holders at the opera, the frequenters of the Green Rooms. The owners give extra prizes, often eat with the wrestlers, wine and dine them, and occasionally go bankrupt in the process. They also help to maintain the traditions in sumo.¹³⁾ They often form exclusive, club type associations called 'tamari-kai', known in Osaka as the 'Tozai-kai' (East-West Club, because members sit on the east and west of the 'dohyo', with their own distinguishing 'haori', a kind of happi jacket). In Fukuoka there is a similar group which calls itself the 'Koichi-kai', (because the members sit behind the dohyo — mukojomen). Tickets are obtained from the Sumo Kyokai through masters of 'heya' who hand them on to support groups or from 'chaya' (tea houses). These are paid for on an annual basis, patrons in Tokyo receiving a book of fifteen tickets before each of their three Tokyo tournaments, and in the provinces for their one tournament.

Stretching back behind the 'sunakaburi' cushions are rows of square enclosures, called 'sajiki' or 'masseki' (because of their likeness to a square box, a 'masu' used for drinking 'sake'), each one big enough for four people, and in which one can eat, drink and make merry, as spectators have no doubt been doing at sumo for hundreds of years, and as they did at kabuki before the modern Kabukiza was built. In these boxes there is always a festive atmosphere and spectators will often call out the names of their favourite wrestler, something which the aficionado occupant of a 'sunakaburi' cushion would never dream of doing. These can also be bought on an annual basis, through support groups or from tea-houses, at

13) The author was told by one that he never attended 'senshuraku', the final day, it wasn't done, and in any case the outcome was already decided. He usually gave the ticket for that day to a maid.

which time an amount is added for a glossy booklet of photographs of the main wrestlers, lunch and 'sake' or beer, plus a souvenir. In order to support sumo, companies will often buy boxes or rather pay for them in the same way that they make political contributions. The company will then sometimes give a day's ticket to a customer as a form of goodwill, helping sumo and themselves at the same time. The less popular seats are even farmed out to playguides and theatre ticket bureaux where they can be bought on a daily basis. In the modern buildings now used for sumo there is usually a gallery in which individual and unreserved seats can be purchased. For reasons of security, in the Kokugikan the Emperor has a box in the front of the gallery on the north, traditionally the direction reserved for the Emperor, although in the past the Emperor would not have gone to watch sumo, sumo would have gone to the Emperor. The present Emperor is a keen follower and usually attends once during every Tokyo tournament, at which time the event is called 'tenran-zumo' (Emperor-viewing sumo). Although the Emperor's seat is the best possible for someone in his position, he is so far from the dohyo it must be difficult for him to see the action in detail, and unlike a normal fan he obviously cannot use binoculars.

And it is in the seating that another interesting contrast can be seen between what is accepted and encouraged in Japan but would be unthinkable in the west. As mentioned above, most people watch only the last two or three hours, that is from the beginning of the 'juryo' bouts onwards. Until this time the seats near the dohyo are often occupied by fans who have seats further back but cannot afford or obtain 'sunakaburi' or the better masu seats. They are allowed to sit in the front unheeded, as long as they do not lounge about, until the juryo bouts begin or, if earlier, until the proper occupant arrives, at which time they will calmly move over to another free seat. This ensures that the seat is not wasted and that even the lower wrestlers have an appreciative audience that is near enough to spur them on. In the west sitting in such a seat

without a valid ticket would be considered a form of stealing, and probably cause for eviction from the stadium. In Japan both the spectators and performers benefit from an obvious carry over from a previous age.

Bouts are ostensibly judged by the 'gyoji', a kind of referee or umpire, who lines the proponents up, tells them when they can start, declares the winner and gives him any 'kensho' there may be.¹⁴⁾ But in reality it is the 'shimpan', the five masters that sit round the dohyo who referee. Should there be any dispute it is they who decide and their word is final. They sit one each to the north, east and west, and two to the south so that one can see if the view of the other is obstructed by the gyoji. The one at the south east also acts as time-keeper, and sees that all the bouts finish by six o'clock. In the past there was no time limit, and bouts started when the wrestlers thought they were psychologically best able to win. Even now, psychology has a lot to do with the result, as it has with all martial arts, and often has with the street brawls you find all over the world. Threatening language and poses are supposed to convince a would be-adversary that he is sure to lose or even be killed. In sumo the psychology is usually much more subtle. In other Japanese martial arts it is referred to as 'ki' (often translated as spirit but maybe more akin to composure, confidence, or even psyche.) The introductory few minutes of a

14) Giving 'kensho' (certain amounts of money) is sponsorship and advertising at the same time. Kensho must be placed on one particular wrestler for all fifteen days. A banner is then prepared on which is displayed the name of the sponsor. This is paraded around the dohyo before the bout in which that particular wrestler is fighting. At the end of the bout the winner, not necessarily the wrestler on whom the money was placed, receives the kensho in a ceremonial envelope. Kensho are usually placed on popular wrestlers, and thus when two popular wrestlers meet the number of kensho taken home by the winner can be considerable.

sumo bout are used to try to psyche out an opponent. often successfully, especially with opponents less experienced and not one hundred per cent confident. A wrestler wins by forcing an opponent out of the circle, or by making any part of him other than the sole of his foot touch the ground. Slapping is permitted but not kicking, grabbing the hair or vitals, punching or touching the eyes. Surprisingly there are very few major injuries, mainly because of the methods of training, which concentrate on producing very resilient bodies and flexible joints, and the amount of falling that a young rikishi has to do on his way up through the ranks. Neither winner nor loser is supposed to show any emotion. One lower ranked rikishi that recently did make a victory sign after beating a yokozuna was given a real roasting by his teacher the same evening. Once they are in full view of the spectators, no word or sign of recognition is shown by anyone, be they rikishi, shimpan, gyoji or yobidashi, and by western standards one would think they were all complete strangers, well, at least had never been introduced.

It is probably the clothing of the gyoji, yobidashi and 'dekata', the ushers that work for the tea houses, showing customers to their seats and generally looking after them, that give the stadium and the day's show its unique Japanese flavour. The gyoji, who have ranks equivalent to the rikishi they are refereeing, dress in a costume that goes back to the 8th or 9th century, and looks like the costumes worn by Heian Period courtiers. Their obvious connection with Shinto, the indigenous religion of Japan, can be seen in the fact that they double as priests for such Shinto ceremonies connected with sumo, as the 'dohyo matsuri' when the gyoji uses alternately the 'shaku' of the priest, and gumbai (metal fan) of the 'bushi' (warrior)¹⁵). From juryo upwards they are allowed to wear 'tabi' and the top gyoji wear 'zoori' (a kind of sandal) and a short

15) Over the 'dohyo' is now suspended a shrine shaped roof, another obvious connection with Shinto, since it was at Shinto shrines that ancient sumo was probably first performed or enacted. This roof

sword, originally used to commit 'seppuku' (ritual suicide) should he make a mistake. They first announce the names of the competing rikishi, repeating what has been done by a 'yobidashi', and after ensuring that the bout is fought according to the rules declare the winner, 'kachinanori' and give him any 'kensho' that may have been put up by sponsors for that bout. Apart from when a bout is in progress and he is urging on the protagonists, his movements are always slow and studied, more like some oriental tapestry or a 'noh' play. All have a meaning and add to the atmosphere of the show.

The yobidashi seem to do the most work and be the least appreciated. They make the 'dohyo' before the tournament begins and beat the drum that announces the beginning and end of each day. They also strike the 'ki' or 'hyoshigi' that signal to everyone behind the scenes the beginning and end of acts or divisions. They clean, water and sweep the dohyo and bring on the various announcements and the kensho ads at the beginning of a bout. The yobidashi announce the names of the rikishi before the bout and sing during festive sumo occasions. To come anywhere near perfection their jobs takes thirty or forty years and yet their names never appear on a banzuke or programme. Like the gyoji the movements of the top yobidashi are slow and studied. And everything they do has some meaning. For example the sand that surrounds the dohyo is called 'janome', (snake's eye). It is carefully smoothed over after the preliminaries and before there is any action so that the impression of even one toe or a heel placed outside the circle can be clearly seen by the gyoji or one of the shimpan.

To conclude, it is in many of the finer points, not only the more obvious ones like the similarity of the roof over the dohyo and the entrance to the kabukiza, the clothing of the gyoji and that of

used to be supported by four posts, which were finally removed about thirty years ago to enable spectators to see better, and because they could hurt a 'rikishi' that hit one.

Shinto priests, the same posturings of the rikishi as in kabuki plays, the use in sumo and kabuki of 'ki' or 'hyoshigi' etc., that make sumo interesting as an aspect of Japanese life and custom. The behaviour of the audiences and spectators is similar, and both sumo and kabuki are now affected by television. Nowadays fewer people have the time to devote a whole day to anything. Sumo begins at nine or ten and lasts until six. Kabuki runs from eleven until four, for the afternoon performance, from five to nine or ten for the evening one, but in the past must have been one whole day's show. Noh performances still are. The only people nowadays who have such time are elderly, retired people or groups such as farmers after harvest time. They are used to watching on television at home, and therefore think nothing of talking at vital points during a kabuki performance, or of getting up to go to the toilet at the vital moment in a sumo bout. Whole groups will come in during a dohyo-iri making it impossible for people a little further back to see anything. In the past people ate during kabuki performances, as they do now at sumo, and took with them their food and drink, and no doubt their servants.

The sumo world is male dominated and very chauvinistic. The dohyo is the equivalent of an altar and no woman is allowed to step on it, for any reason. For me as a man, it is therefore interesting to compare the attitudes and reasons that Japanese and Western women are attracted to sumo. Western women will watch in the same way as western men. Many Japanese women, especially the younger ones, seem interested only in the handsomer wrestlers and sometimes never watch the sumo itself. It is as if a rock fan was interested only in the musician and not the music. The Japanese themselves are very lenient towards westerners (ie. foreigners) and other Japanese who infringe on etiquette, merely reprimanding them, but not throwing them out of the stadium as they would in some countries.

It is also interesting to compare sumo with pure martial arts (bujutsu), and sports that have developed from them like judo,

aikido and kendo. A sumo bout is decided in one go. There is no second chance. In the past it was the same with tests of swordsmanship, and in the American west with gun battles. The man who lived was obviously the better, and everyone wants to be the best. For this reason in 'jutsu' only the forms, (called in Japanese, 'waza'), can now be practiced. These still help to develop the individual physically and mentally, but can never be really tested, as they can in sumo, judo and kendo. Nevertheless the spiritual side is emphasized in these sports even though near perfection is impossible to attain, because times have changed. The masters that first taught the spiritual aspect did so by example and from experience. It is impossible, fortunately, for us to realize the same experience.¹⁶⁾ But a similar point can probably be reached through the self discipline needed to become a master in traditional Japanese forms like kabuki, noh and the tea ceremony. It is also interesting to speculate on the influence of Japanese religious beliefs, on the spiritual development of the practitioners of the above arts and forms. But that would probably make a paper on its own.

The study of anything in Japan requires time and perserverence. This may sound rather trite but is one of the first problems for foreigners in Japan, or possibly in any other Asian country, especially in the present where the craze is for 'Instant' everything, from food to knowledge. During my own initial contact with 'Things Japanese', in England, I attended an exhibition of the tea ceremony given by the wife of a British diplomat who had spent some time in Japan and I was struck by a remark that she made in introducing the exhibition. She said that when she had first said that she wanted to learn how to perform the tea ceremony her teacher had told her she wouldn't learn much during the first twenty years. Very few foreigners have even half that much time in Japan, or if they do have are prepared to spend it studying or learning just one

16) In order to become a master he had to have killed any number of adversaries and realized the fruitlessness of killing.

thing. And yet it is the time aspect that makes all the difference between Japan and the West even in sport. In the West a sportsman or woman often reaches his or her peak at an early age and within a few years has left the sport and is forgotten. In Japan when one is too old to compete one teaches, and then really starts to learn. Some things are never actually taught but only implied or worked out by the student or teacher himself. Many of the forms or 'waza' in traditional Japanese martial arts are not passed on by teachers when there are no pupils around capable of understanding them. They are lost and will have to be re-discovered at some other date when they are once again needed. It is this knowledge that there is always something else to learn that makes learning so fascinating. Advanced forms in Japanese are called 'oku', meaning the 'inner depths'. In Japanese there is an expression, 'oku ga fukai' meaning something like 'there is no limit'. The same applies to sumo. Which is one reason why so many 'toshiyori' want to open their own 'heya'. Only when they become teachers do they really start learning about sumo. In the west many popular sportsmen become so rich that by the time they are in their mid-twenties or early thirties they then leave the game. Few stay in now just because they like it. This, I think, is a loss for the west. In the world of sumo we get a glimpse into the past, a part of Japanese life that seems to have gone, even though many of the cultural aspects still remain. (received 10th July 1987)

**Glossary of words and Japanese characters as
they are used in sumo or this article.**

- banzuke (番づけ) list of rankings published two weeks before each tournament
- bujutsu (武術) martial arts
- dohyo matsuri (土俵祭り) festival of purification before a tournament
- dohyo-iri (土俵入り) grand entrances of all the sekitori (one for

juryo and one for makuuchi, plus one each for
the yokozuna)

dojo (道場) training hall or centre
gyoji (行事) referee
heya (部屋) 'stable'
ichimon (一門) group of 'heya'
jonidan (序二段) fifth division from the top
jonokuchi (序の口) sixth division from the top
juryo (十両) second division from the top
kachikoshi (勝ち越し) winning more than half one's bouts
kensho (懸賞) money placed daily on certain wrestlers as a kind
of advertisement
koenkai (後援会) support groups (for heya and wrestlers)
kokugi (国技) national sport
kokugikan (国技館) National Sports Hall (the home of sumo)
makekoshi (負け越し) losing more than half one's bouts
makushita (幕下) third division from the top
makuuchi (幕内) top division
mawashi (まわし) belt
ozeki (大関) champion
sandanme (三段目) fourth division from the top
sekitori (関取) wrestler in one of the two top divisions (wears
white mawashi when practicing)
soto (外) the others (as opposed to one's own group)
sunakaburi (砂被り) seating nearest the dohyo
sumo (相撲)
Sumo Kyokai (相撲協会) Sumo Association
toshiyori kabu (年寄り株) shares in the Sumo Association
toshiyori (年寄り) 'elder'
tsukebito (着け人) young wrestler that waits on a sekitori
uchi (家) self or own group
wrestler (力士)
yobidashi (呼び出し) lit. caller
yokozuna (横綱) grand champion