

Naki-zumo

A Battle Without Physical Contact

Text by Michiko Kodama

Photos courtesy of the Kanuma City Sightseeing and Products Association



Ready, steady ...

Ever heard of a form of sumo called “Naki-zumo”? Many have, and whilst it is a form of sumo, it is quite different from the professional Ozumo we see every other month, and also different to the amateur sumo fought in many countries around the world.

Originally, in ancient times, sumo was read ‘sumau’ or ‘sumai’ and did actually signify physical fighting. As is well known, the first mention of sumo in literature was in the book of Chronicles of Japan; a battle between Nominosukune

and Taimanokehaya. From the viewpoint of the sound of ‘sumau’ however, there is an opinion that the word sumo also referred to a form of dancing because the word ‘mau’ itself meant to dance.

Looking at the present pronunciation, ‘mau’ is still a verb meaning ‘to dance’ and the noun form of mau is ‘mai’ - as is used in ‘shimai’ - part of a Noh dance.

In fact, a dance relating to sumo exists and is titled “sumo no mai” in Japanese: in Nara Prefecture, where, during the autumn festival

at Yasaka Shrine two men wearing a costume and an ‘eboshi’ form of headgear in similar garments to those worn by goji today perform a dance using a fan. This ‘sumo’, as far detached as it is from the sport is played out purely as a dedication to god, not as a form of competition.

There are other examples of such cultural sumo in Japan; the “One Person Sumo” seen at Oyamazumi Shrine in Ehime Prefecture is acted out on the dohyo by a lone man in a mawashi in sight of a

gyoji as if facing his opponent. It is said the sumo wrestler is having a bout with a god resident in the paddies and is praying for a bumper crop of rice. Kagoshima Prefecture's "Kappa (Water Spirit) Zumo" is also a presentation to a deity in order to help prevent waterborne accidents. Incidentally, in Kappa-zumo, wrestlers are referred to as dancers. On the whole, these forms of ritual sumo revolve around people's prayers and wishes for happiness, safety or a good harvest coupled with a smack of fortune-telling.

Naki-zumo is one such ceremonial form of sumo, reflecting the affection of parents who hope their child grows up in good health. It is a battle involving crying fought by baby rikishi clasped and lifted high into the arms of a representative of the parish. Victory or defeat is decided based upon which baby wrestler begins to cry first after being swayed - thus the name 'Naki-zumo' as 'naku' means crying in Japanese.

These days Naki-zumo has become so popular that a lot of regions hold the event, but there are differences in the manner of the tournament held. In some places the baby who cries first is the winner as it is said that a lustily crying babe grows up to thrive; but in other areas where tears are not considered to be brave, the mini-rikishi who does not cry is the victor. Having said that, nowadays in most venues the gyoji declares a draw wishing for the happiness of both children.

As for the origins of Naki-zumo, it seems almost impossible to trace. There are several sites that can lay claim to being the founding point of this type of sumo. Nevertheless, among these, Ikiko Shrine in Kanuma City, Tochigi Prefecture seems to lead the pack judging from its lengthy history and associations to Naki-zumo as well

as to unique legends told about the activity in the local region. According to historical sources, Ikiko Shrine was built in the year 726AD when it was called Momiyama Shrine.

In 736AD a child of a parishioner suffered from smallpox and unfortunately passed away on December 24th. The parents were overcome with grief and offered a devout prayer to the shrine to bring the infant back to life. Three days later, the small child breathed again. After this miracle had taken place, the shrine started to be called Ikiko (meaning 'a child can be restored to life'). A sumotori who happened to be there at the

in Ikiko Shrine is designated as a national intangible cultural asset, and more and more babies enter this type of cultural sumo annually, at last count amounting to over 1200 entries. Times may change but a parents' wholehearted desire that their child should grow up happily and healthily has never changed.

- Tochigi Prefecture is the northern part of the Kanto Region, the largest prefecture in Kanto. Kanuma City is situated in the southwestern portion of the prefecture.

- These days Naki-zumo at Ikiko Shrine is held on the first Sunday



A pair of healthy little chaps let loose.

time picked up the child and wished openly for his/her health from that day forth. It is said that this is the true beginning of Naki-zumo.

Of course, a legend is a legend and although it is widely believed that Ikiko Shrine's Naki-zumo tournament commenced in 1861, the earliest records we can find in bibliographical sources date back to a description of sumo dated September 19th - in 1910. Theories aside, today, the Naki-zumo held

after September 19th. The costume worn by the gyoji was formerly used by the 23rd Shikimori Inosuke.

Main References:

Sougawa, Tsuneo, Sumo no Uchuron (in English, The Cosmology of Sumo), Heibonsha, 1993.

The Editing Committee of Kanuma City, Kanumashi (in English, The History of Kanuma City), Kanuma City, 2001.



And the winner is ...