

Naki-zumo

National competition

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Photos courtesy of the Executive Committee of Bishamon Matsuri

In the last issue, I mentioned the existence of Naki-zumo which is a distinctive form of Japanese cultural sumo. Among the many venues holding baby sumo I chose Ikiko Shrine in Tochigi Prefecture because it has a unique legend and long tradition. As I wrote there, it is almost impossible to trace the origin of Naki-zumo, but there is one more place that I would like to touch upon: Hanamaki City, Iwate Prefecture.

Iwate Prefecture is on the Pacific side of the Tohoku Region (northeast Japan), and Hanamaki City is situated in the middle of it. The city is the birthplace of Kenji Miyazawa, a popular Japanese writer of children's stories and poetry, and also houses the memorial hall for Nitobe Inazo who wrote a world-famous book: 'Bushido, the Spirit of Japan.'

In an area called Towa-cho, Hanamaki City, there is Mikumano Shrineⁱ which has a long history. At the shrine, a particularly interesting form of Naki-zumo has long taken place. Going back in history, it is said that during the imperial era of Kanmu (782-806), a barbarian-quelling generalissimo Sakanoueno Tamuramaro erected the holy place while subjugating the navy of Ezo (a Japanese northerner). According to legend, the general made his subordinates fight sumo bouts at the site, and the sumo by young adults was handed down through

generations.

Gradually, though, the sumo came to be used as a fortune-telling about which zone would have a good harvest. As a result, very sadly, one sumo match caused bloodshed. After the tragic incident, in 1706 the competition began to be comprised of twelve one-year-old babies – all the eldest sons of the parishioners taking part in Naki-zumo bouts. A rule declaring the baby who starts crying last as the winner was decided upon. The tradition is still carried on today and baby sumo is performed solemnly as one of the ritual services in the great autumnal fete of the Mikumano Shrine on September 19th, wishing for the happiness of children and a bumper crop. (The date of the festival is exactly the same as Ikiko Shrine's Naki-zumo day, meaning it thus acquires additional interest).

As time goes by, more and more people began to hope that not only the eldest sons of parishioners but also younger sons and even girls of other districts would be allowed to enter the game. To fulfil such demands, in 1988 under the banner of a spring festival at the shrine, the first Naki-zumo National Competition was held during the so-called Golden Week (a series of national holidays from late-April to early May). The event reached its 22nd anniversary this year. It is literally a 'national' meet because the participants hail from

the northernmost part of Hokkaido to the most-southerly Okinawa Prefecture. The qualification for entry is only the age of a baby: between six and eighteen months old. Nowadays the baby sumo has become so popular that a list of rikishi waiting for a cancellation to take part in it is made, with only the first 800 applications being permitted.

One of the unique features of Hanamaki zumo is its "kimarite (winning / losing technique)." Soon after a gyojiⁱⁱ decides the outcome of a match, a highly humorous kimarite is declared in a loud voice, just as a winning move is announced in Ozumo; and all spectators are moved to laughter. In accordance with the ruling of traditional Naki-zumo, a 'mame' rikishi (the competitors in this battle are called mame rikishi; 'mame' means small in Japanese) who either does not cry or cries last is the victor.

Even though the National Naki-zumo Competition makes for merry entertainment, it is evident that the event is believed to be ritual. Before the game starts, the shrine holds a liturgical ceremony hoping for healthy growth of children, where mame rikishi can become purified by the priests of the shrine. Also, just like parishioners who carry a sacred palanquin in celebrating their presiding Shinto deity, all the mini wrestlers wear a happi coat,

harakake (a kind of underclothing) and a towel to twist around their head when they step onto dohyo. Each year they change the colour of the happi so that siblings can enjoy their own distinctive colours.

In an essay published to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Naki-zumo, a lot of parents wrote that they felt glad their children could share in the happy event, and that they are hopeful of the retention of various sumo cultures. The big dream of the host organisation is that the 'national' competition will become an 'international' one. Therefore, why don't you bring your child and join the mame rikishi battle?

Reference

An Executive Committee of
Bishamon Matsuri,
Hohoemigaeshi, Kawashima
Printing & Co. Ltd, 2008.

ⁱ Mikumano Shrine is known for its precious statue of Bishamonten (the God of War and Treasure) which is a nationally-designated important cultural property. It is the tallest sculpture in Japan that has been sculpted from a Japanese zelkova tree.

ⁱⁱ The role of gyoji has been done by Kagetora who was once a Makunouchi rikishi and retired from the world of Ozumo in 1981.

