

Sumo: the second encounter

Discovery of an old tradition by a young Frenchman

by Dorian Marcellin

As far as I can remember, my first encounter with sumo came hand-in-hand with my early interest in Japanese culture, near fifteen years ago. For a young French boy, seeking exoticism, sumo was only another part of the mysterious Japan, as were samurai, ninja and manga. I admired this country (and still admire it), even if I surely had in mind only prejudices about most of its traits. (At this point, I think sumo fans will sadly remember the times they had to correct again and again the coarse misconceptions of friends and relatives.

So I will focus on my “second encounter” with sumo. A far more recent encounter : the 2010 Aki Basho. I was searching for information within the Japanese media, when I saw, by chance, one of the summaries done by NHK about the tournament. It was a brief overview, but also a fine opportunity to watch real matches carefully, including one with a big boy I didn't know yet: Yokozuna Hakuho. That small window on the Kokugikan piqued my curiosity and made me ask: “What truly is sumo?”

Blame it on my vocation as a journalist, but I began to search for more precise information on Internet. I discovered hitherto unknown words such as rikishi, kimarite, and kachi-koshi. I finally found myself with more questions than answers, and the distasteful feeling that I only saw the upper part of the iceberg. Thereafter, I wanted to watch a

full day of a tournament. Needless to say, French TV was not very helpful but, fortunately, the internet is magic. I discovered a streaming link, to follow live transmission of the makuuchi matches on the website on which I searched for most of sumo's technical glossary. From that day, I woke up every morning to observe the last part of the Aki Basho. Image quality was bad, but I could not be choosy. After the final day of the tournament, I realized that I would have to wait two months to watch Hakuho and Kaio again (the only two wrestlers I could recognize easily, at this time). So, the quest for background information went on: banzuke, heya life and above all eye-witness reports (thanks to some French sumo fans who report on Japanese news).

A big leap forward happened a few weeks later. I was searching for old videos on Youtube, and suddenly discovered that NHK, which covered each basho, was also offering commentary in English. Better still, some good guy was actually broadcasting these daily tournament videos on a well-known torrents website! This absolutely changed my life! Now, finally, I have the best-quality videos with a precise commentary that I am able to understand.

While my interest for sumo evolved into some kind of passion, I wondered what exalted me so much about this Japanese tradition? I am of low constitution. I don't have anything against sport; in fact, I like jogging

and I used to practice a certain number of martial arts. But wrestling? No – not a chance! I guess it never crossed my mind that I could have something to do with such a physical sport.

And so, I was taken by the strength that comes out from sumo. I suppose that I never saw rikishi as “fat guys”, unlike most people I know. And after I learned about their harsh training, I admired these true athletes more and more. As I don't know much about wrestling, I am impressed every time by these fights, from the technical aspects to the great physical power of rikishi.

But it is also the sumo rituals as a whole which enchant me. There is an amazing strength, from the dawn of ages, which expresses itself when wrestlers are preparing and adjusting themselves to their opponent during the final four minutes. The extensive preparation is especially amazing given that the real showdown will only last for few seconds. I always had a fine sensibility to “far east philosophies”, particularly thanks to my practice of aikido. I think I found an echo to this way of thinking in sumo. Far from exoticism and originality, I found in it an expression of a life force.

That's why I always prefer those rikishi who are of high and impressive stature, with good proportions, and who show great dignity and serenity. Those who seem to walk a “path of life” rather than only move themselves on the sand of a wrestling ring are the

ones who I invariably want to support.

I know that sumo is plagued by its links with organized crime and by scandals related to its internal

workings (I'm not naïve or blind), but I think there is something else about this highly special sport that transcends these flaws. Call that the blinkers of the neophyte if you like, but until now this feeling has

always urged me on to look relentlessly over old tournaments. Of course, I am just as eagerly awaiting coming events.