



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Sumo

Dwindling popularity or a new chapter?

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Sigurrós María Sigurbjörnsdóttir

Maí 2010

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Japanskt mál og menning

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Abstract

The sport of sumo has been around in Japan in some forms since the beginning of time. It has evolved into an elegant professional sport enjoyed for hundreds of years by both emperors and commoners. When it comes to sumo there are vast differences of opinion about the sport. Some say it is much more than a sport, even go as far as calling it a lifestyle. Sumo has been described as one of the great spectator sports in the world. For a great part of 20th century sumo was the most popular spectator sport in Japan and it was not until the 1980s that baseball surpassed sumo in popularity. Recent decades it has had a decline in popularity as western entertainment has invaded the recreational landscape of Japan. The sport has though spread to countries all over the world as an amateur sport and is gaining popularity in a new field. Now at least 84 countries have their own amateur sumo circuit and are a part of the International Sumo Federation. This interest from abroad might be able to revive the popularity of the professional sumo that has been stained by scandals over and over again. The scandals include xenophobia on behalf of the Nihon Sumo Kyokai, cheating amongst sumo wrestlers, violence in the stables and gender discrimination.

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Introduction

From the dawn of time people have enjoyed watching and playing sports. In Japan sumo is one of the oldest sports. It has been enjoyed by spectators who admire the great professionals of the sport as well as it has been enjoyed by amateur wrestlers on all levels. When it comes to sumo there are vast differences of opinion about the sport. Some say it is much more than a sport, like former *yokozuna*¹ Akebono who goes as far as calling it a lifestyle (Kuhn). Sumo has been described as one of the great spectator sports in the world, “a sport rich with tradition, pageantry, and elegance and filled with action, excitement, and heroes – dedicated to an almost impossible standard of excellence down to the last detail” (Kodansha 272). Sumo has also been criticised widely, its old-fashion² ways do not always fit into Japan’s fast pacing modern society. Recent years various negative discussions on different aspects of sumo, mostly the traditional professional sumo, such as match rigging, xenophobia and violence, have shed a dark light on the sport. In the 1980s sumo was the most popular spectator sport in Japan but has dropped down to the third place after baseball and the world’s most popular sport, football³ (Kodansha 270, Y-N).

How did sumo become the national sport of Japan and gain the massive popularity it enjoyed for so long in Japan? What can explain the drop in sumo’s popularity in the last 10 years in Japan? Is sumo growing outside of Japan as an amateur sport and are we perhaps seeing a new chapter in the history of sumo? To answer these questions we have to explore sumo from the beginning and try to get a feel for the sport, both as a professional sport and on amateur level.

¹ A grand champion of sumo, see better in chapter 2.3 about rank

² Sumo is full of rituals and traditions that have not changed for centuries and many might find old-fashioned.

³ By football I mean the sport referred to as サッカー in Japan and soccer in the USA.

1. Origin and history.

The origin of sumo can be traced back centuries, myths about the sport go even as far back as the beginning of time in Japan.

1.1. Origin in myths

According to the *Kojiki*, *The record of ancient matters*, an 8th century chronicle, the origin of sumo can be traced back to the beginning of Japan. More specifically it can be traced back to a bout between the deities Takemikatsuchi (Brave-Awful-Possessing-Male-Deity⁴) and Takeminakata (Brave-August-Name-Firm-Deity). Takemikatsuchi was sent by the gods above to get the loyalty of Ōkuninushi (Master-of-the-great-land-deity) and his sons, Takeminakata was one of them. Takeminakata challenged Takemikatsuchi to a trial of strength, a sumo bout, where Takemikatsuchi won (Kojiki 121, Encyclopædia Britannica online). The outcome of this sumo bout is said to have marked the origin of the Japanese race, its supremacy in the islands of Japan was established with this victory (Nihon Sumo Kyokai webpage).

Another 8th century chronicle, *Nihon Shoki*, mentions sumo.

In the village of Taima there is a valiant man called Kuyehaya of Taima. He is of great bodily strength, so that he can break horns and straighten out hooks. He is always saying to people: -“you may search the four quarters, but where is there one to compare with me in strength? O that I could meet with a man or might, with whom to have a trial of strength, regardless of life or death.” (Nihongi 173)

Emperor Suinin, the reigning emperor, disliked that Kuyehaya was like a champion of the Empire so he sought after his own strongest man (Nihongi 173).

That same day the Emperor sent Nagaochi, the ancestor of the Atake of Yamato, to summon Nomi no Sukune. Thereupon Nomi no Sukune came from Idzumo, and straightaway he and Taima no Kuyehaya were made to wrestle together. The two men stood opposite to one another. Each raised his foot and kicked at the other, when Nomi no Sukune broke with a kick the ribs of Kuyehaya and also kicked and broke his loins and thus killed him. (Nihongi 173)

⁴ According to the translation of Basil Hall Chamberlain of *The Kojiki*

This magnificent victory immortalized Nomi no Sukune as he is called “The Father of Sumo” (Sharnoff 39). Both of these bouts were a lot more brutal than the sumo bouts we see today, one of them even ending with the death of the losing wrestler.

1.2. Sumo’s development

In the 8th century sumo began to develop into the sport as we know it today. As it flourished, rules were established (Newton 48). In the Kamakura period, 1185-1392, the warrior class started to use sumo as a martial art and at that time the martial art *jujitsu* was developed from sumo (Sharnoff 40). In the Ashikaga period, 1338-1568, sumo dropped in popularity amongst the higher class, that preferred to watch *noh* theater. Sumo still stayed popular amongst commoners (Sharnoff 40). Sumo then regained its popularity and as the influences of the Ashikaga *shogunate* diminished, sumo was again used as a part of martial training and high ranking fans of sumo emerged. One of those fans was Oda Nobunaga and it was in a sumo tournament he held that the first examples of a *dohyo*⁵ were seen. Until then sumo bouts took place at an unmarked ground but in Oda Nobunaga’s tournament there was a circular field in which the bout would take place. The circular boundaries were meant to speed things up since many sumo wrestlers were scheduled to participate in the tournament (Sharnoff 40). This was a big step towards modern sumo and very important for the safety of the audience.

Professional sumo, or the predecessor of today’s professional sumo, began in the Edo period when the *daimyo*⁶ began to offer their patronage to the strongest sumo wrestlers (Sharnoff 41). As a result the wrestlers started to receive payments as well as gaining a *samurai* status. The tradition of the embroidered aprons seen on today’s sumo wrestlers can be traced back to this time. The *daimyo* had beautiful silk embroidered aprons marked with their name made for their sumo wrestlers. As time passed the sponsors naturally changed, instead of the sumo wrestlers being sponsored by the *daimyo*, big companies

⁵ Dohyo is the Sumo ring

⁶ Daimyo is one of the great lords who were vassals of the Shogun

started to put money into sumo in exchange for advertising. The advertisements were embroidered banners carried around the *dohyo* between bouts. Still today you can see the same kind of banners with the names of various companies at the sumo tournaments.

The *Edo* period was a good time for sumo, people enjoyed the peace and prosperity of the time and sumo became a popular entertainment. In the *Edo* period sumo saw its first golden age with the prominence of big stars like wrestlers Tanikaze and Raiden. The two were big in all senses, they were very popular and both unusually tall, at 189 cm and 197 cm, both would be considered tall in today's Japan but especially tall in the *Edo* time (Sharnoff 42). After the opening of Japan and the *Meiji* restoration sumo had some setbacks. The sumo wrestlers had financial problems since their sponsors, the *daimyo*, no longer existed⁷ (Sharnoff 44). The introduction of a new kind of entertainment from the west had an impact on sumo, those who could afford entertainment were often more interested in the new, western recreation (Sharnoff 44). The *Meiji* restoration and the fall of the *shogunate* perhaps threatened the very existence of sumo (Newton 55). A turmoil amongst sumo wrestlers and the sumo clubs did not improve the situation. Luckily the *Meiji* Emperor was a keen sumo fan and his presence at a sumo tournament in 1884 greatly benefited the sport and enhanced the respectability of the sport (Newton 56, Sharnoff 44). Since the *Meiji* emperor showed his support for the sport, sumo has enjoyed having more imperial fans, as both the *Showa*⁸ emperor and the present *Heisei*⁹ emperor are known sumo fans (Newton 56). The emergence of new strong wrestlers in the beginning of the 20th century again boosted sumo's popularity. In 1909 the *Tokyo Sumo Association* built the first *Kokugikan*¹⁰, the term *kokugi* was used to describe sumo as the national sport for the first time (Newton 56, Sharnoff 45).

⁷ The *Meiji* restoration marked the end of the *Shogunate*

⁸ The *Showa* emperor reigned from 1926-1989 and was the grandson of the *Meiji* emperor

⁹ The *Heisei* emperor is the present emperor and has reigned since 1989, when he succeeded his father.

¹⁰ *Kokugikan* is the National Sumo stadium; the present *Kokugikan* stands in the same area as the first one was built. Fires, earthquakes and bombs have destroyed or damaged the *kokugikan*, which has been re-built several times. The present *Kokugikan* was opened in 1985 (Sharnoff 45 and 59).

For a great part of 20th century sumo was the most popular spectator sport in Japan and it was not until the 1980s that baseball surpassed sumo in popularity. In the 1990s sumo was still enjoyed widely and the success of Japanese stars like the brothers Takanohana and Wakanohana, whose father had also been a well known sumo wrestler, played a big role in that (Newton 77-78). The absence of strong Japanese wrestlers and the growth of Western sports are a part of the reason for sumo's dwindling popularity in Japan. For a long time all tickets to sumo tournaments used to be sold out weeks before but now there are more and more empty seats in the stadiums. In addition television ratings of sumo have also declined the recent decade (Sims). It seems like the younger people of Japan prefer the western team sports rather than sumo (Sims). Sumo is now only the third most popular spectator sport in Japan after both baseball and football (Kodansha 270, Y-N).

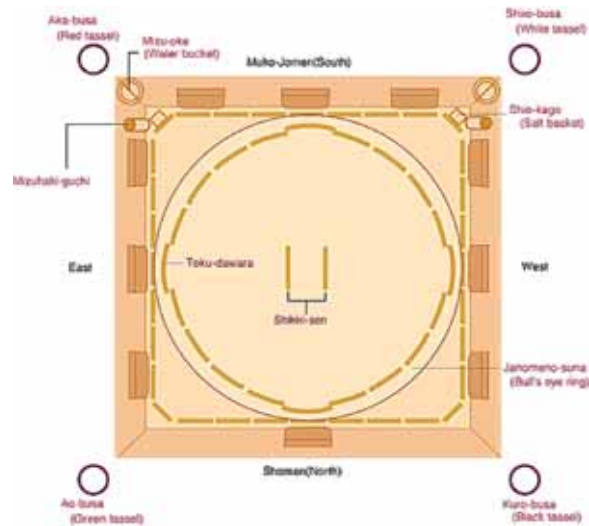
2. Rules, techniques and ceremonies of Sumo

Sumo is a relatively simple game. Two men wrestle until either one steps out of the *dohyo* or touches the ground with any other part of the body than the sole of the foot. Even if only the topknot touches the ground you lose. How one Sumo wrestler forces the other out of the ring or to fall varies. One can use belt grips, push and thrust techniques or throws (Newton 89). Even though the rules are quite simple, everything else is rather complicated, especially all the traditions and ceremonies of the sport, which might be exactly what interested the Japanese people. Sumo can appeal both to sport and art loving people. In order to understand the popularization of sumo one must get introduced to the rules and surroundings of the sport.

2.1. The *Dohyo*

The *dohyo* is the ring where the bouts take place. The circular boundaries are inside a rectangular area that rises a little over a half a meter from the ground. The *dohyo* is comprised of clay and rice bales, the literal meaning of the word *dohyo* by the way is "clay and rice bales" (Newton 18). The *dohyo* stands in the middle of the arena and is reconstructed for each tournament. Above the ring

hangs a roof called *yakata* resembling the roof of a *shinto*¹¹ shrine. When sumo bouts were held outside, in the *Edo* period, the roof served a functional purpose as it was a weather protection (Kodansha 271). The roof then stood on four pillars but those were removed after the matches moved indoors and television broadcasting



Picture 1: A dohyo

from the tournaments began (Newton 62-63). Now, replacing the pillars are four differently coloured tassels that hang from each corner of the roof. The colors, green, red, white and black, are derived from *shinto* and symbolize spring, summer, autumn and winter as well as various gods (Sharnoff 72). Before each tournament the *dohyo* is purified by a top *gyoji*¹² in a *shinto* style. Chestnuts, kelp and cuttlefish are placed in the ring as offerings and the *gyoji* prays for the safety of the contestants of the tournament (Newton 18).

2.2. Techniques

Categorization of the techniques of sumo vary greatly, in her book “Grand Sumo” Lora Sharnoff offers a simple way to categorize the most common techniques. “Broadly speaking, the methods of winning can be divided into two categories: those who depend on the use of the belt and those who do not” (122). The techniques of sumo developed over 1000 years ago. There are 70 winning techniques recorded, many of which are rarely used nowadays. Of these 70 techniques 48 are considered the “classic techniques” still only half of the “classics” are commonly seen. A wrestler is likely to have around 6-8 techniques which he knows well, 3 or 4 of those he might use often (Kodansha 271). Good control over the many different techniques of winning will get a sumo wrestler very far, it is especially important for the lighter and smaller sumo

¹¹ Shinto is an old Japanese religion. Along with Buddhism Japan’s major religion.

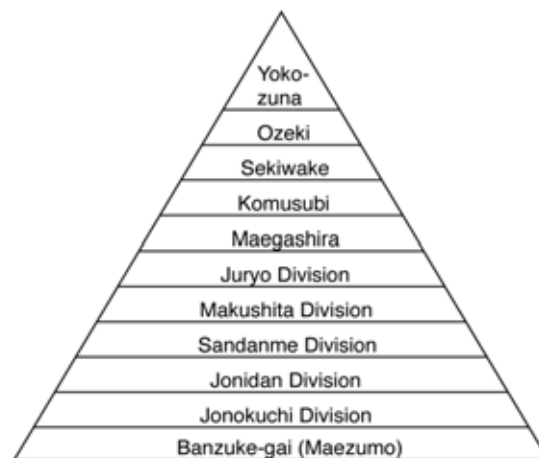
¹² Gyoji is a referee in Sumo

wrestlers who often have to fight opponents twice their own size. Techniques involving the belt are very important and it has been said that the wrestlers who are good at the belt enjoy longer and more successful careers (Kodansha 271).

2.3. Rank

In professional sumo there are no weight categories but sumo wrestlers are still ranked differently. The broadest distinction in rank in sumo are the nonsalaried and salaried sumo wrestlers.

Amongst nonsalaried sumo wrestlers there are 5 ranks. To go up a rank a sumo wrestler must have a winning score. In the lower ranks each tournament has 7 bouts for each sumo wrestler. Winning 4 or more bouts will result a winning score. Getting promoted from *Makushita* division, the highest



Picture 2: Sumo wrestler's rank

division of the nonsalaried ranks, can be hard. The reason for that is the limited number of sumo wrestlers in the higher ranks. For a wrestler to get up to *Juryo* division another one must go down or retire. In *Juryo* division and higher there are 15 bouts each tournament, one per day. A winning score in the higher ranks is therefore 8 wins or more. A sumo wrestler can be demoted as well as promoted from all ranks except from the highest rank, *Yokozuna*. *Yokozuna* is a special rank, once a sumo wrestler has reached it, he can not be demoted. If a *Yokozuna* starts to get a losing score or not a high enough winning score he is expected to retire (Sharnoff 100-107). A list with the ranks of all the sumo wrestlers is published 13 days before each tournament, the list is called *banzuke*. The *banzuke* is handwritten by two high-ranking referees. They write the *banzuke* on a large sheet of paper which is then copied and printed on smaller sized sheets (Newton 20). The highest ranked wrestlers get their names written in big letters but the lowest ones in so small letters that they are called "magnifying-glass letters" (Kodansha 272).

2.4. Ceremonies and rituals

In sumo, a bout between two wrestlers may take on average 5 minutes, the actual fight only takes up 30 seconds of that time (Kodansha 271). The rest of the time goes into staring, stomping, salt throwing and a drink of water. These pre-bout rituals are called *shikiri*. To begin with each wrestler stomps his legs in his corner, then rinses his mouth with a sip of *chikaramizu* or “strength water”. He then performs the ritual *chiri-chozu* where the wrestler opens his palms, spreads his arms and then claps in order to show that he has no hidden weapons. Next a wrestler will throw salt. Sumo wrestlers throw salt on the *dohyo* in means of purifying the ring. Now when the wrestlers seem ready and take their position on the starting lines, the staring starts. The wrestlers may stare for a while and then stand up again to throw some more salt. All this is a part of the bout and creates anticipation amongst the audience as well as being a way for the wrestlers to make their opponents nervous (Newton 28).

In a sumo tournament there are also many ceremonies that are just as important as the fights them self. “The world of sumo is filled with ceremonies large and small, all of which must be performed precisely down to the last detail” (Kodansha 272). Amongst these ceremonies is the ring entering ceremony of the grand champion, *Yokozuna dohyoiri*. A *Yokozuna* performs this ceremony together with two other wrestlers that serve as his “dew sweeper” and “swordbearer”.

All three enter the ring and squat at the west side facing east. The yokozuna spreads his arms wide and brings them together in a mighty clap, rubs the palms up, and repeats the gesture, which is supposed to symbolize purifying the hands and body with grass before battle and also indicates “no hidden weapons”.

The yokozuna then stands, strides grandly into the middle of the ring and turns to face north, which is the *dohyo*'s *shomen* (“front”) and the side on which the emperor sits. Placing his feet wide apart he then proceeds to do a very elegant form of *shiko*, the basic sumo exercise, complete with graceful and strangely evocative arm and hand movements. When he slams his foot down in the sand, the crowd roars its approval. Performed three times, this stamping ritual is supposed to frighten evil spirits from the ring and at the same time demonstrate the champion's

determination to trample his opponents in the dust. The yokozuna then returns to his original position, squatting between his two attendants, repeats the hand-body purifying ritual, and leaves the ring.(Kodansha 272)

This vivid description is from the Kodansha encyclopedia where it is also mentioned so accurately: “There is nothing in Sumo that does not have some very special significance” (Kodansha 271). Sumo is closely knitted with *shinto* religion, which is along with Buddhism Japan’s major religion. The relations with *shinto*, the traditions and beauty of sumo may have played a big part in the popularity of sumo in Japan.

3. Life of sumo wrestlers.

Sumo is far from being just a sport. It is a whole lot more, the traditions related to it make sumo what it is now and has been for centuries, Japan’s national sport. Every element that contributes to the beauty of sumo is rooted in tradition (Newton 42). Whether it is the beautiful hairstyle, *mage*, the clothes the wrestlers wear inside or outside the *dohyo*, the beautiful ceremonies or even the food they eat, it all has a long history. But being a sumo wrestler is no fairytale, no one will deny that the life in the sumo stables is tough and hard. All the wrestlers have to go through the same kind of toughen up program. First they must suffer before they can live the sweeter life of the salaried sumo wrestler.

3.1. Daily life, looks and diet

The daily lives of sumo wrestlers are greatly dependent on their rank. All wrestlers belong to a stable and there they live and train together (Newton 110). The stable is one of sumo’s unique and influential institutions (Kodansha 273). Inside the stables there is a strict hierarchy. Lower ranked wrestlers live together in a communal room with little or no privacy while the higher ranked wrestlers have single rooms (Kodansha 273). The days start early for the lowest ranks who get up before the break of dawn to start practicing. As the time passes higher ranked wrestlers join in with the highest ranked showing up around 8 o’clock (Kodansha 273). At around 11 o’clock the senior wrestlers take a relaxing bath followed by breakfast. The junior wrestlers must wait to use the

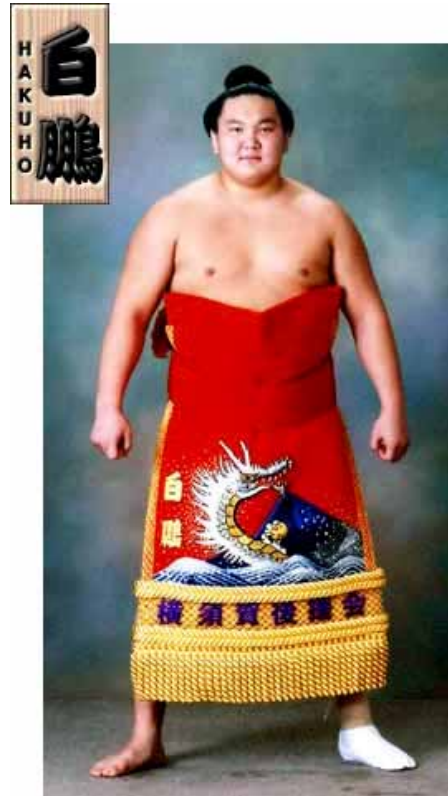
bathing facilities as well as waiting for a place around the breakfast table (Kodansha 273). When a wrestler reaches *Juryo* rank (see chapter 2.3 on rank) he first starts receiving salary. The vast difference between the privileges of wrestlers is an ample incentive to climb to the top (Kodansha 273). Sumo wrestlers live in the stables throughout their careers as professional sumo wrestlers and some even continue to do so after their retirement (Kodansha 273). When a sumo wrestler marries he moves out of the stable and in with his new wife, that is the only exception to the live-in rule of the stables. Most sumo wrestlers do not marry until they have reached the salaried ranks and established a financial independence, thus the majority of the wrestlers spend most of their careers living in the stables (Kodansha 273).

The first thing that pops into most people's heads when thinking about the looks of a professional sumo wrestler is its body structure. The majority of sumo wrestlers are what you might call big boned. Having a little extra baggage seems to be a benefit in the sport, but most of all, the sumo wrestlers are immensely strong. The sumo wrestlers all have long hair which is combed up in a topknot called *mage*. For hundreds of years Japanese men wore their hair in a topknot but as the country Westernized the government ordered all men, except for the sumo wrestlers, to cut their *mage* (Newton 42). The *mage* has since then become a trademark for sumo wrestlers, they can be recognized anywhere. The nonsalaried sumo wrestlers wear a less elaborate *mage* than their superiors. Both knots are really difficult to make and a sumo hairstylist usually needs 10 years of training to master it. The hair of the professional sumo wrestlers is not their only distinct feature, their clothing also is. Outside of competitions in public they wear *yukata*¹³ or *kimono* (Kodansha 273). The lower ranks can only wear the thin cotton *yukata* all year long, with it they wear wooden sandals called *geta*. The sumo wrestlers ranked in the higher two ranks of the nonsalaried ranks are allowed to wear a jacket over their *yukata*. The salaried sumo wrestlers have the choice of fine *kimono* robes of silk.

The diaper like clothing worn during competition is called *mawashi*. The *mawashi* is a long strand of fabric wrapped in a particular way to form the belt

¹³ Yukata is a traditional cotton robe

and to cover the genital area. For the smallest sumo wrestlers the *mawashi* has to be at least 6-7 meters long and for the biggest ones it may need to be twice that (Newton 45). The nonsalaried wrestlers are only allowed to use black cotton *mawashi* while the higher ranked wrestlers have the choice of any color in silk. *Keshomawashi* is one of the especially beautiful clothing worn during tournaments. *Keshomawashi* is a decorative ceremonial apron. The aprons are hand embroidered and made from the finest silk and are therefore very expensive. The price of a *keshomawashi* may range from around ISK 1.5 million to ISK 15 or 30 million (Newton 43). The sumo wrestlers do not have to buy their own aprons since they are usually gifts from patrons of the sumo wrestlers, this tradition can be traced back to the *daimyo* (see chapter 1.2.). The *keshomawashi* are worn during the ring entering ceremony, where each contestant in the higher ranks is introduced.



Picture 3: Present yokozuna Hakuho wearing a *keshomawashi*

Since a part of being a sumo wrestler is gaining weight and becoming big, the diet must be very important. One might think that sumo wrestlers are constantly eating but the fact is that they only eat twice a day. After morning practices in the stables, the lower ranking wrestlers who have kitchen duties prepare a meal for all the stablemates. A typical breakfast at the stable is a kind of stew, *chankonabe*, containing vegetables, seafood and meat (Newton 126). The lowest ranking sumo wrestlers often do not get to eat until noon, despite being up since 4 o'clock (Kodansha 273). For the lowest ranked start earliest to practice but they get to eat last. *Chankonabe* by itself is not necessarily fattening, but what is eaten with it and the amount eaten is what gives that little extra baggage. With the *chankonabe*, various side dishes are served, rice, fried

chicken, grilled fish and dumplings are common. The preferred drink with this wholesome meal is beer (Sharnoff 28-29). After a big meal a sumo wrestler is prone to take a nap, which helps him to gain weight. For dinner the wrestlers that can afford it go out to eat, the meal is similar in size as the earlier meal but there is more variety in the food. Again everything is washed down with a cold beer.

3.2. Hard life in the stables

It is possible that the completely controlled lifestyle of sumo wrestlers is not very appealing to young men in Japan today. The wrestlers have to follow all the customs and rules of sumo, not only during practice or competition but also in their free time. Moving away from ones family is very hard for a 15 year old boy, but that is the prime time for boys to join a stable if they want to become a sumo wrestler. In 2007 the Nihon Sumo Kyokai had to call off tryouts supposed to be held in relations to the Nagoya tournament. The reason being that no one showed up, for the first time in sumo's history. The unappealing lifestyle of beginner sumo wrestlers probably is the reason for the lack of interest in becoming a sumo wrestler. Especially after the horrible stories of bullying and harsh conditions in the stables.

Waking up at 4 o'clock, training for hours, not eating until noon and having to serve your seniors seems to be a tough enough treatment. But that is only half of it. In practices when the junior wrestlers are stretching it is a standard for a senior wrestler to stand on his back to maximize the stretch. The senior wrestler then often asks, "are you crying?" and the junior wrestler replies painfully, "no just sweat in my eyes" (Kodansha 273). When sumo wrestlers are beginning their careers it often proves hard for them to get in the habit of eating such big meals as is usual in the sumo stables. Many of the young wrestlers end up throwing up after their stablemates have forced them to eat far beyond the capacity of their stomach. The worst case scenario has come true in stable bullying. In 2007 a young wrestler died in his stable after being repeatedly beaten with a baseball bat and a beer bottle. The youngster was covered in bruises and cigarette burns. The beating took place at practice and both his

trainer and his fellow stablemates took part of it. A dark side of the sumo world is now visible. It seems that a metal baseball bat is a part of the standard equipment of the sumo stables (Harden). The death of the young wrestler was not only very serious for the sumo world but it also disgraced the police who tried to cover up with the stable master by pronouncing the death as a result of a heart disease. It was not until the family of the deceased teenager pressured the authorities to perform an autopsy that the truth came out. The cause of death was that his heart gave up as consequence of an excessive beating (Harden). The case was taken very seriously and caused despair amongst the Japanese nation. Then prime minister Yasuo Fukuda remarked: "That this happened in sumo, the national sport and symbol of Japan, is a serious matter". Naoki Ogi, a professor of Education at Hosei university, expressed his concerns that bullying was not only confined to sumo but "this happens all across the country, in schools and workplaces, and it is probably one of the cultural characteristics we have in Japan" (Harden).

4. Sumo and the world

When commodore Matthew Perry visited Japan in the 1850's he had the opportunity to witness a sumo bout as well as receiving help loading his ships



Picture 4: Commodore Perry receives help from sumo wrestlers loading his ships.

from the immensely strong Sumo wrestlers. This was likely the first time a Westerner saw sumo (Newton 55). Since then sumo has been introduced all over the world. As Japanese emigrants have moved to various places they have taken their cultural heritage with them. Sumo has often been a part of that heritage.

4.1. Foreigners in Sumo

Since 1934 there have been foreigners in sumo, then the first of several Japanese-American sumo wrestlers emerged (Sharnoff 154). There were also a number of Korean wrestlers but many of those have not been considered foreign since Korea was a part of Japan 1910-1945 (Sharnoff 154). In 1964 Takamiyama, a Hawaiian wrestler, became the first non-Asian to make it in sumo (Sharnoff 157). Takamiyama was the first of many Hawaiian born wrestlers who would make their mark on the world of sumo. The first foreign *ozeki*, Konishiki, and the first foreign *yokozuna*, Akebono, were also Hawaiian. When the Japanese started emigrating in the 1880s Hawaii became their first destination. The Japanese immigrants in Hawaii were extremely poor and did labour work in the pineapple and sugar fields (Newton 70). These Japanese kept their interest in sumo but not being able to follow what was going on in Japanese sumo they started their own network of amateur sumo (Newton 70). This introduction of sumo in Hawaii has resulted in the aforementioned wrestlers going to Japan and trying out in professional sumo. The first foreign wrestlers were mostly Hawaiian but now there are wrestlers from all over the world. Most prominent are the Mongolian wrestlers who have dominated the sumo world the last few years. Now there is only one *yokozuna*, Hakuho, and he is Mongolian, recently retired *yokozuna*, Asashoryu is also Mongolian. In the top ranks of sumo there are more Mongolians as well as Bulgarian, Estonian, Russian, Georgian, Korean and Chinese wrestlers (Nihon Sumo Kyokai webpage). The invasion of foreign born sumo wrestlers has upset many Japanese fans of sumo. The Nihon Sumo Kyokai¹⁴ has tried to reduce the number of foreigners in sumo, each stable was only allowed to have two foreigners but that number has been lowered to one foreign wrestler per stable (Faiola). The responses of the Nihon Sumo Kyokai and fans of sumo towards foreigners in sumo has caused a stir, allegations of the Nihon Sumo Kyokai being xenophobic have been common. Whether the reason for those actions on behalf of the Nihon Sumo Kyokai is because of a fear of sumo losing its purity or simply a fear of not being

¹⁴ Nihon Sumo Kyokai is the Japanese Sumo Federation.

the best in their own national sport, these measures seem rather drastic and outdated, seeing how internationalized Japan is becoming.

4.2. Sumo abroad

As mentioned previously Japanese immigrants in Hawaii brought the sport with them, the same occurred in Brazil where a big group of Japanese emigrants settled. Amateur sumo networks have been building up in Brazil as well as around the globe. In Brazil, sumo tournaments attract tens of thousands of spectators every year and a national final is held for the best sumo wrestlers (Faiola). The first organized attempt to bring sumo to the rest of the world was made in the early 20th century, around the time the first *Kokugikan* was built. The very popular *yokozuna* Hitachiyama traveled to the United States where he met with President Roosevelt. Around the same time wrestlers from Kyoto went to London to participate in a demonstration of sumo (Newton 56-57). Recent years a multi-million campaign for making sumo an Olympic sport has spurred sumo's popularity internationally. Now at least 84 countries have their own amateur sumo circuit and are a part of the International Sumo Federation. In the amateur sumo world championships are held all over the world, with three weight categories for both men and women (California Sumo Association Webpage). Though international sumo is still mostly amateur, the United States did try to have their own professional sumo tournament in Las Vegas (Faiola). The success of foreign wrestlers in Japan has boosted popularity in their native countries, for example all bouts of the Bulgarian born Kotooshu are broadcasted nationally in Bulgaria (Faiola). In Georgia, who has had a few successful sumo wrestlers in Japan, a *dohyo* has been built at Georgia's National Sport Arena. There local sumo wrestlers practice three times a week (Faiola).

5. Amateur sumo

As mentioned in previous chapter sumo is not only a professional sport but amateur sumo is gaining popularity all over the world. In Japan it has off course been a participating sport for a long time for people of all shapes and sizes. Sumo on amateur level is both a competitive sport as well as being a festive ritual.

5.1. Competitive amateurs

High schools and colleges in Japan have for a long time had sumo competitions, many of the top professional sumo wrestlers began their careers in those competitions. Since 1992 world championships have been held with wrestlers from all over the world competing. First seven world championships were in Japan but in 1999 it was held in Germany, which was a clear indication of the internationalization of amateur sumo. In 2001 the first women's world championship was held in Japan and has become an annual event (International Sumo Federation webpage). Now all continents have their own championships to prepare their wrestlers for the world championship. Amateur sumo is a little different from professional sumo, the basic rules are the same but the rituals and ceremonies that take up much of professional sumo's time have been abbreviated and the amateur sumo wrestlers do not have to live the strict lifestyle of the professionals (California Sumo Association Webpage). In addition, amateur sumo has weight categories and women and youngsters are also allowed to participate. Last years, sumo federations all over the world have campaigned to make sumo an Olympic sport (CSA Webpage). The Olympic campaign was the basis for the weight categories being established which has made sumo a more of a modern sport. Sumo's origin will surely not be forgotten since the amateur sumo wrestlers show great respect for the sport and its tradition though they are ready to compromise to bring it to new followers. The internationalization of amateur sumo has worried many Japanese enthusiasts of traditional sumo, since they are afraid that the sport will lose its cultural and spiritual aspects (Parry). As mentioned in the previous chapter the Nihon Sumo Kyokai has further limited the number of foreigners joining professional sumo

and they now insist that all their sumo wrestlers speak Japanese, thus closing professional sumo even more. 2005 US Sumo open champion Kena Heffernan is a clear example that despite being foreign and not a professional sumo wrestler he respects the sport and knows its essence. In a 2005 interview with the Yale alumni magazine he stated: "Sumo is not really just a sport. It's a lifestyle. It's about how to accept victory and defeat graciously no matter what. At the end of a match, nobody should be able to tell whether you've won or lost by looking at your face" (Davis). Japanese sumo fans should perhaps not worry about sumo losing its originality; amateur and professional sumo can easily co-exist and together introduce this beautiful Japanese tradition to people all around the world.

5.2. Sumo and festivals

Amateur sumo is also affiliated with *shinto* festivals. Various festivals held on *shinto* shrine grounds include sumo. Sumo tournaments were held on the grounds of the shrines in order to entertain the gods as well as to raise money for the shrines (Sharnoff 41). A very interesting festival including amateur sumo wrestlers is held each year in the Sensoji temple in Tokyo. It is a baby crying festival, sumo wrestlers



Picture 5: Amateur sumo wrestlers try to get babies to cry

hold toddlers and try to make them cry, the baby who cries the most and longest wins. The purpose of the festival is to keep the babies in good health and to ward off evil spirits. The crying contest even has a *gyoji* that judges the crying (Oddity Central webpage).

6. Criticism

Xenophobia and violence have not been the only negative features of sumo. Sumo like other sports has had its share of criticism. Cheating and fixing of

matches seems to be common amongst sumo wrestlers. Women have been kept out of the sport and gender discrimination is far too common in the sumo world.

6.1. Cheating in Sumo

The authors of *Freakonomics*, Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner are amongst those who have pointed out that cheating seems to be common amongst sumo wrestlers. They have found out through looking at results from bouts in the *makuuchi* division that on the last day of tournament a wrestler with a 7-7 score fighting against a 8-6 wrestler is much likelier to win (37). The wrestler with the 7-7 score should have around 50% chance to win a 8-6 wrestler under normal circumstances. In reality he wins almost 80% of those bouts (37). Looking at these numbers Levitt and Dubner claim it is hard to believe that there is not match fixing in sumo (40). Despite all this data, match fixing has never been proven in sumo. In the late 90's two ex-wrestlers stepped forward to name names in relations to match fixing. A few days before their scheduled press conference both wrestlers died in the same hospital of a mysterious respiratory ailment (Dubner, Levitt 40). Sumo has usually been considered a very elegant sport and its participants known for supreme sportsmanship (Kodansha 271). Allegations of cheating have therefore caused a negative image of sumo wrestlers and very likely discouraged people to follow the sport. In addition to match fixing allegations, sumo is said to have strong ties with the *yakuza*, Japan's mafia (Kaplan 62).

6.2. Gender discrimination

Women have never been prominent in the sport of sumo. They have rarely had the chance since they are not even allowed inside the *dohyo*¹⁵. Still women have strived to participate in sumo, until the 1960s female wrestlers competed in amateur tournaments in Japan wearing the *mawashi* over their underwear (Yamazato). As early as the seventeenth century female sumo had emerged. It had a little different emphasis than now as it was primarily performed in the red

¹⁵ In professional sumo women are not allowed to step inside the *dohyo*.

light districts (Sharnoff 171-172). In the nineteenth century sumo bouts between women and blind men were quite popular (Ikkai 178-179). Nowadays women and girls from all over Japan have started to pursue sumo. Wearing their *mawashi* over leotards they have raised many eyebrows (Morse). The women in sumo respect the tradition of the sport but they are trying to brake down stereotypes and to make their mark in the male-dominating society of sumo (Morse). Nihon Sumo Kyokai's response to women in sumo does not surprise. They agree that it is fine for women on amateur level to compete in sumo but they dislike the thought of women in professional sumo, tradition and rules will not be changed so women are still not welcome to the world of professional sumo (Morse). Gender discrimination has many times damaged the reputation of sumo. In 1991 a 10 year old girl who won a tournament in Tokushima prefecture was denied her prize. The boy who came in second place was presented with the gold medal and the chance to compete in the National Championship instead of the actual winner, the girl (Sims). The bias does not only apply to female wrestlers, no woman is even allowed in the *dohyo* during the professional sumo tournaments. According to *shinto* believe women are impure and allowing them in a sacred place, like the *dohyo* is, is forbidden. In 2000, Fusae Ota, then newly elected governor of Osaka prefecture, came head to head with the Nihon Sumo Kyokai. As governor, Ota was supposed to present a prize at the spring tournament in Osaka. Never before had a woman been governor so this situation had never come up before. Ota fought and tried to persuade the Nihon Sumo Kyokai to let her do her job like a male counterpart would do. The conflict received a lot of attention from the media as well as the public. In the end Ota gave up and her male subordinate presented the prize (Buckley 485, Sims). Many felt like Ota being elected was a big victory for women in Japan but the narrow-mindedness of the Nihon Sumo Kyokai was a harsh reminder that still little had changed (Sims).

Conclusion

Sumo has been around in Japan for so long. It has been enjoyed by emperors and commoners alike. Its rituals and ceremonies are closely tied with *shinto* and have hardly changed for centuries. Pride and love for traditional things is what has made sumo so popular. The support of members of the imperial family also affected the popularity. Sumo survived a lot of changes in Japan, the fall of the *shogunate*, eliminating sumo's prime sponsors, and the opening of Japan to western things. After proudly surviving that, the Japanese built a stadium just for sumo and started referring to sumo as their national sport.

Through out a major part of the 20th century sumo was the most popular spectator sport in Japan. Though with its ups and downs. Strong sumo wrestlers have often become national heroes and brought new fans to the sport. But in the last decade the sport of sumo has had many setbacks. Scandals upon scandals have surfaced and badly hurt the reputation of the ancient sport. The scandals include xenophobia on behalf of the Nihon Sumo Kyokai, cheating amongst sumo wrestlers, violence in the stables and gender discrimination. All have turned fans away in Japan. What once was the most popular spectator sport now has to settle for the third most popular, with the majority of its audience being of the older generation. Television ratings have gone down and more and more empty seats can be seen in the sumo tournaments. The elegant sport of sumo with all its beauty and tradition is too valuable to be lost in the wildness of ugly scandals. Although it is important to retain the traditions of the sport some comprimizes must be made to allow women to fully enjoy all aspects of sumo. Off course xenophobia and violence in the sumo stables has to be eliminated.

Times are not all dark for sumo though, recent years more and more foreign sumo wrestlers have started participating in sumo in Japan. All around the world amateur sumo circles sprout up. The success of foreign sumo wrestlers has had an effect in their birth countries where interest in sumo has aroused greatly. Perhaps it will not be long until sumo will be a part of the Olympics.

Many traditionalists feel that the growing success of amateur sumo threatens the existence of professional sumo. It is feared that modernization of the highly traditional sport will ruin it. Rather than fearing the spread of amateur sumo around the world professional sumo fans should accept that times are changing and professional and amateur sumo can easily co-exist and work together in making sumo even a greater sport. Just by allowing women in the sport a whole new group of participants and fans emerge.

Sumo's popularity in Japan might be diminishing and a series of action must be taken to re-establish the respect of professional sumo. But increased popularity of sumo as a amateur sport for men and women, in and outside Japan is evidence that sumo is not dying, merely opening a new chapter.

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Picture list

Picture 1: Dohyo – Nihon Sumo Kyokai webpage

<http://sumo.goo.ne.jp/eng/ozumo_joho_kyoku/shiru/kiso_chishiki/beginners_guide/rules.html>

Picture 2: Rank

Picture 3: Present yokozuna Hakuho wearing a *keshomawashi*. Nihon Sumo Kyokai webpage <<http://www.sumo.or.jp/kyokai/goannai/0023/index.html>>

Picture 4: Woodblock print from a newspaper with sumo wrestlers carrying rice straw bags, (Edo-Tokyo Museum) <<http://www.nagoya-boston.or.jp/english/exhibition/past/perry-200810.html>>

Picture 5: Sumo wrestlers try to make toddlers cry.

<<http://www.odditycentral.com/pics/baby-crying-festival-held-in-japan.html>>