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Sport and Dance in Classical Japanese Literature

By *Shuko Homma**

I. Introduction

The main body of Japanese literature provides us with little detail concerning the nature of the various sports and dances of ancient and medieval Japan. However, in this paper I will endeavour to trace an overall picture of these activities, using what little information there is available from classical Japanese literature.

The history of Japan is usually divided into a number of periods, beginning with the Asuka and Nara (593–794), the Heian (794–1192), the Kamakura and Muromachi (1192–1593) and the Edo (1593–1867), leading up to the Meiji Restoration of 1868, which ushered in the modern era. Careful study of the literary works of each of these periods enables one to build up a picture of each age, to understand the life styles and activities of the Japanese people. One also discovers that the sporting activities which were popular in each age reflected the political, economic and social characteristics of the time.

The Heian Period, for instance, was characterized by centuries of relative peace in which courtly culture basked and blossomed. One of the most popular outdoor sports at this time was a gentle, playful ball game known as *kemari* (note 1). In contrast, warlike medieval Japan fostered such military sports as horse racing and archery. Just as the reins of power were lost by the aristocracy to the warrior class, and Japan became a feudal society, so to did sports become more practical and combative in nature. Later on, when peace once more held sway and the merchant classes prospered, wrestling became a popular spectator sport. As the nobles, the samurai and the town dwellers each make their appearance in the grand pageant of history, the character of Japanese sports changes, reflecting the interests and life styles of each social group.

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II. The Characteristic Sports and Dances of Each Period

1. Ancient Japan

(1) Asuka and Nara Periods (593-794)

The Asuka and Nara Periods were notable for the large-scale importation of Chinese learning and culture into Japan. This powerful continental influence can be seen in the customs of horse riding and playing *kemari*. This is not to say, however, that sporting activities of more native origin did not exist; we can find mention in classical literature of grappling matches, a recreation which was to develop into what is now known as *sumo* wrestling. Both the *Kojiki* (note 2) and the *Nihongi* (note 3), which are representative works of this period, contain references to these sporting activities.

< i > *Sumo*

a. *Nihongi*

In the *Nihongi* we find the tale of a strong man called Takama-no-Kuehaya. This man, who lived in Takima village, boasted that there was surely none stronger than he, though he yearned to meet and fight with such a man, pitting his life against that of his opponent. Eventually such a man did appear: Nomi-no-Sukune from the province of Izumo. In the contest that followed, Nomi-no-Sukune succeeded in killing the braggart of Takima, breaking his ribs and pelvis. As a reward, the Emperor presented Nomi-no-Sukune with the lands of the dead man. This trial of strength between Takama-no-Kuehaya and Nomi-no-Sukune, which is also described in the *Kojiki*, is commonly considered to be the first example of *sumo*, a type of wrestling which was to become the national sport of Japan.

A study of such references in classical literature reveals that *sumo* formed the nucleus of sports in ancient Japan. At the same time, however, archery, which was later to develop into a proper sport, can be said to have its roots in the hunting which went on in this period. It was in the Heian Period, with the appearance of the custom known as

sanjūsangendō-no-tōshiya (note 4), that archery became a sport. Also, while warfare was not uncommon in ancient Japan, it was not until the feudal period that fencing was practiced as a sport in the true sense. *Sumo*, on the other hand was performed in much earlier times, and is probably the oldest existing Japanese sport. It is thought that those who enjoyed watching this wrestling included the common people as well as the aristocracy, but unfortunately the provincial chronicles of the ancient period, called *Fudoki*, make no mention of *sumo*.

(2) Heian Period (794–1192)

The literature of the Heian Period contains many references to the pursuits of *kemari*, dance and *koyumi* (a form of archery). *The Tale of Genji*, the most famous work of the period, indeed of all Japanese literature, often makes mention of the aesthetic importance of poetry and dance in the aristocratic society of Heian.

< i > *Kemari*

- a. Mention is made to *kemari* in the 215th passage of the *Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon* (for which see the section on *koyumi*).
- b. In the chapter entitled “New Herbs, Part One” of *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu, one finds a number of references to *kemari*. In one passage, General Yūgiri organizes a game of football in the town of Ushitora. We read that *kemari* requires considerable skill and that it is very energetic (the players “romp about”). Despite its lively nature, the Heian courtiers are quoted as saying that it still appears graceful because of the graceful personalities of the players and the beautiful surroundings. It would seem that that *kemari* formed an important part of their daily lives.

< ii > *Dance*

- a. *The Tale of Genji* also includes many references to various dances that were popular in Heian Japan. Although one cannot class these as sports, they nonetheless involve physical exercise and prowess, and often took place outdoors. For this reason, I am including a brief description of a representative dance of the period.

One memorable passage in the *Tale of Genji* describes a dance performed by Prince Genji, the hero of the tale, and his friend, Tō-no-Chūjō, to celebrate the autumnal tints. This dance, for which the pair received so much praise and admiration, was the *seigaiha*, a court dance for two which has been transmitted down to the present day.

As well as the usual robes worn by the nobility at that time, the dancers would wear in under-robe patterned with sea waves, which in fact is responsible for the naming of the dance. The dancers also wore a special head-dress resembling the *hohoh*, a mythical bird somewhat similar to a peacock. Originating in China, this *seigaiha* was thus performed by the Japanese nobility in ancient times, and later during the Edo Period, when it appeared in *kabuki* drama. It is also mentioned as far back as the Nara Period, in Japan's oldest poetic anthology, the *Man'yōshū*.

<iii> *Koyumi*

- a. In the *Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*, we can find references to both *kemari* and *koyumi*. *Koyumi* is a playful form of archery in which miniature bows are employed. The famous essayist Sei Shōnagon tells us that she finds both *koyumi* and *go* (a Chinese board game) diverting; *kemari*, she says, is interesting, though it looks "somewhat funny". It would seem from this description that *koyumi* and *kemari* were the two most representative outdoor games of the Heian Period.

We have seen what kind of recreations were popular among the nobles of this time, but what about the commoners? Unfortunately, virtually all of the literature is concerned solely with life among the aristocracy. It is true that the voluminous collection of stories called *Konjaku Monogatari* does provide some description of life outside the court, but little mention is made of sports. One can assume, though, that some form of archery was practised.

2. Feudal Japan

By the end of the twelfth century, political power in Japan was transferred to the

hands of the warriors. Although the capital of Heian had flourished culturally under the de facto rule of the powerful Fujiwara clan, the nobles had neglected the provinces which provided the economic base of power. It was common for the land-owning aristocrat to appoint managers to look after the manors and estates which he held but never visited. But, while the nobles devoted themselves to aesthetic pursuits, a new provincial class developed, whose members were more concerned with land and military might. Eventually civil disturbance grew beyond the point of control and a military clan set up a feudal government in Kamakura under Minamoto Yoritomo. For the next four centuries, the country was involved in almost continuous warfare, as one clan vied with another. It was not until Tokugawa Ieyasu succeeded in defeating all his enemies at the end of the sixteenth century that peace returned to Japan. This Tokugawa, or Edo, Period brought two and a half centuries of peace to the country, but it was a strict feudal society, nonetheless.

(1) Kamakura and Muromachi Periods (1192-1593)

The first four centuries of feudal Japan were marked by continuous civil war. It is therefore not surprising that combative sports came to be esteemed. The warriors, who had been despised by the aristocrats in earlier times, developed their own aesthetic and moral code. As the nobles had esteemed culture, the warriors esteemed bravery. The martial arts, which focussed mainly on archery and fencing, were a very practical form of sports for these men who could be called upon to fight at any time. There is, however, evidence that *kemari* was still performed; in the Muromachi Period, instructors were licensed by the court and employed by the warrior class to train them in this aristocratic pastime.

Such martial arts as archery and fencing would naturally take on a sporting nature during peaceful lulls, allowing the samurai to hone their skills, without actually injuring anybody. However, even in wartime, people felt such admiration for these skills that the question of friend or foe might be momentarily forgotten, as is illustrated in a famous passage in the war chronicle, *Heike Monogatari*.

< i > *Archery*

a. *Heike Monogatari*

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The famous exploit of the champion archer Nasuno Yoichi is related in Volume 11 of the *Heike Monogatari*. One evening, as the soldiers of both the Minamoto and Taira clans began to withdraw from battle, to wait for the morrow to bring either victory or defeat, a Taira boat appeared in the offing. Attached to the top of a mast was an open fan, and the women on board beckoned to the Minamoto troops, challenging them to hit the fan. In reply, Yoshitsune, who led the Minamoto force, ordered Nasuno Yoichi to shoot the fan down with an arrow. This he accomplished with such panache that he was applauded by both the Minamoto and Taira, the women banging on the boards of the boat in praise. There was much loss of life and the Taira eventually were defeated, but amidst the clamour of war, they were able to calmly appraise the skill of an enemy archer.

(2) Edo Period (1593–1867)

Towards the end of this period of continuous strife, a succession of powerful feudal lords took turn in attempting to gain control of the whole country. The first two of these, Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi were only partially successful; the third, however, was able to vanquish all opposition and unify the country. His name was Tokugawa Ieyasu, and his family ruled Japan for over two and a half centuries. Although society was extremely rigidly delineated and controlled, the Japanese were no longer plagued by the threat of war, and were able to enjoy various prescribed sports and amusements.

During this period, the merchant class grew steadily richer at the expense of the samurai. The samurai had absolute authority, but peace had reduced their role to that of bureaucrats. The flourishing of the merchant class engendered the emergence of an urban culture and urban literature; one of the most popular writers of this period was Ihara Saikaku, a man who showed outstanding wit and style in depicting the society in which he lived. His works provide us with a picture of how the townspeople amused themselves.

< i > *Sumo*

- a. One of the popular sports enjoyed by the merchant class of the Edo

Period was *sumo* wrestling, which—as I have described—has its roots many centuries back in the history of Japan. It was not, however, without its critics, as is illustrated by a story found in *Honchō Nijū-Fukō*, a collection of twenty examples of unfilial behaviour, written by Saikaku.

The tale tells of a merchant's son who used to brag about his strength and beat all comers in the *sumo* tournament held at the local shrine. His parents, however, were far from pleased by this behaviour, considering wrestling to be an unsuitable pastime for the son of a respectable merchant. The boy's parents tried everything possible in order to lure him away from *sumo*, even to the point of suggesting that frequenting brothels would be more fitting. The son ignored their entreaties and continued to brag of his prowess, which succeeded in earning him the ill-will of his neighbours. In the end, he fell badly in a *sumo* match at the shrine and was crippled.

What we can learn from this story is not just that *sumo* was despised by some, but that activities such as these were considered to be merely a form of amusement, a pastime. This is in contrast to the warrior's attitude towards the martial arts, such as archery. There were many "sports" in the Edo Period—including *go*, *utai* chanting and games with *mari* balls—but these were considered on the same level as womanizing and other amusements.

III. Conclusion

In this paper I have traced the representative sports—and dance, in the case of Heian—of each period, from the ancient through to the beginnings of the modern.

In the earliest works of Japanese literature, we can find the roots of two sports which were to develop later: *sumo* and archery. Then, in the courtly world of Heian Japan, gentle pursuits were esteemed: *kemari*, *koyumi*, poetry and dance. With the coming of feudal society, martial arts rose to the fore; the emphasis was on the practical, although there was a "sporting ethic". And finally, as the merchant class came into its own, the majority of the population learned to enjoy sports, though

they were considered often as frivolous amusements.

In the literary works of each period, we are able to gain a picture of each of these societies, the ways people lived and thought. The aristocrats spurned rough pursuits; the warriors sought glory in battle. At the same time, we can see how the sports activities of each society reflect the mental atmosphere of the time. I would like to offer three conclusions from this study:

- (1) The physical, sporting activities of any period reflect the attitudes of the ruling class. Perhaps an exception to this is provided by the support for *sumo* among the merchant class of the Edo Period; however, although they had no political authority, they were steadily gaining ground economically-Incidentally, it is this broad support for sports among the townsfolk that provides a link with modern sports.
- (2) Whereas the aristocrats of the Heian Period favoured sports and dances that were imported from the continent, the warriors of the Middle Ages pursued and developed martial arts which were native to Japan.
- (3) Rather than just developing physical strength and skills, the harmony of body and mind was an important objective of these sports, until perhaps the degeneration that occurred in the Edo Period. Whether nobleman or samurai, sport played an essential role in their lives, a role which was bound up with the whole mental atmosphere of the society.

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Notes

1. *Kemari*

Kemari is a sort of football, introduced from the continent. It is played on a court 14 metres square, with a cherry, a willow, a maple and a pine planted to mark the four corners. Eight players, dressed in court finery, take turns to kick a ball, preventing it from touching the ground.

2. *Kojiki*

The oldest extant literary work in Japan, the *Kojiki* is a mixture of myth and history. Completed in 712, it was written partially to provide proof of the divine authority claimed by the imperial clan.

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3. *Nihongi*

Completed in 720, the *Nihongi* (or *Nihonshoki*) treats much of the same material as appears in the *Kojiki*, though there is more emphasis on fact and chronological detail.

4. *Sanjūsangendō-no-tōshiya*

This was a form of competitive archery performed on the veranda of a shrine. Competitors would shoot arrows the length of the 130 metre veranda, but only those arrows that touched neither floor nor eaves were counted in the score. The competition would carry on for a whole day and a night. This sport became particularly popular in the Edo Period.

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