



The Present Situation of Transmission of Traditional Tug-of-War in Japan

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First of all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the ICHCAP, Dangjin City, and Korean government for inviting me to the “International Symposium on Traditional Tug-of-War in East Asia,” and for giving this opportunity to introduce the present situation of traditional tug-of-war in Japan.

1. General Information Concerning Tug-of-War in Japan

A custom of Japanese traditional tug-of-war, or *Tsunahiki* (綱引), can be outlined as follows:

- It is practiced on the occasion of different annual events, such as *Ko-syogatsu* (小正月, or New Year celebration around January 15th according to the lunar calendar), *Obon* festival (盆, or celebration around August 15th), the Boys’ Festival on May 5th, (端午節句), or the 15th night of August of the lunar calendar (八月十五夜).
- The ropes of tug-of-war are made of either straw, *kaya* (kind of cogongrass often used as traditional roofing materials), or *shobu* (菖蒲, or sweet sedge) etcetera.
- A village is divided into two groups of farming vs fishing area, eastern vs western area, upstream vs downstream area, and in some cases, the two groups are subdivided into smaller groups such as children vs young adults, men vs women.

- By these groups, the rope is tugged, or dragged around, or slammed against the ground, or sometimes cut into pieces.
- The purpose of this traditional event is said to forecast the amount of coming harvest, or to ward off evil spirits, or to pray for a peaceful life.

Although the traditional event of tug-of-war has been handed down in many places throughout eastern, western, and southern Japan, it has been gradually declining or changing its shapes, just like other folk cultures, because of the drastic socioeconomic changes in modern Japanese society. In recent years, the day of this event has been moved to weekends or to national holidays in many cases, due to the changing life styles of the performers, who used to be engaged in primary industries but are office workers now. In addition, depopulation in local communities, caused by ongoing decrease in the number of children and increase of aging population, makes transmission of its tradition more and more difficult. These undesirable changes tend to be observed especially in remote rural areas, where rather old-fashioned and thus valuable customs were preserved.

The Law “Protection of Cultural Properties” was enacted in 1950 to promote preservation of the intangible folk traditions including tug-of-war, but considerable numbers of folk traditions failed to go against the current trend and thus declined. The former National Commission for Protection of Cultural Properties defined these folk traditions as “intangible folk materials” in 1954, and since then, continued recording and documentation of the important intangible folk materials selected as the materials “requiring documentation and other measures.” However, the Law “Protection of Cultural Properties” was amended in 1975 as a result of the remarkable decline of those folk traditions during the rapid economic growth in the 1960s and the 70s. In this amendment, the wording “intangible folk materials” was replaced by “intangible folk cultural properties.” Also a conservation policy was introduced to designate important folk traditions as “important intangible folk cultural properties,” and since then the policy has been enforced till this day.

The following list shows 20 cases of traditional tug-of-war events observed in Japan, including ones that are designated as “important intangible folk cultural properties,” or selected as “intangible folk cultural properties requiring documentation and other measures.” Some of them are designated as “folk cultural properties” by each prefectures; Number 2 is of Akita, 9 of Kyoto, 15 and 17 of Kagoshima prefecture. In this manner, 47 prefectures of Japan are allowed to promote preservation measures regarding intangible folk cultural properties located in each administrative district, based on their own Ordinance for the Protection of Cultural Properties.

(See Annex 1: List of the Traditional Tug-of-war in Japan)

2. Patterns Observed in the Tug-of-War Custom in Japan

Please see the distribution map (Annex 2) with 20 types of tug-of-war from the list. Only with a few exceptions, you can see that most of the customs are distributed in the regions along the *Nihon-kai*, or the East Sea; in other words, such regions as north and south of Kyusyu, and Southwest Islands (including Amami Islands and Okinawa Islands) are facing the Asian continent.

Regarding the purpose of tug-of-war event, or the significance of using ropes, there remain some questions to be unraveled, but for the sake of simplicity, I would like to classify the events according to patterns of the transmission. One of the patterns is what we call “mono-type” custom, in which people play tug-of-war as the main and only event of a festival, and the other is the “complex-type,” where not only tug-of-war but also several events are combined in a festival. As you may notice, mono-types are twice as many as complex-types.

(1) Mono-type Custom

The mono-type customs in the above list are as follows; number 1, 2, 7, 8 and 14 are performed at *Ko-syogatsu* (around January 15th), number 10 to 13 at the Boys’ Festival (May 5th), and number 4 during *Obon* (around August 15th). Number 15 is also a mono-type custom conducted on September 22nd (it was originally conducted on August 14th and 15th of the lunar calendar). Number 20 is from Okinawa, where it is performed either for the harvest festival, *Obon*, or for the full moon festival held in June, July, and August.

In many cases, two ropes called *me-zuna* and *o-zuna*, or female rope and male rope, are tied together into one rope, and two groups tug the rope and forecast the amount of coming harvest. Before this main event, people sometimes walk about holding the ropes, drag them around, or slam them against the ground. In the case of Hiruga (number 8 in the list), people try to break the rope during the tug match. In some cases, people unfasten the twisted ropes, cast them away into rivers and seas, or dedicate them to shrines after the match is over. In the case of Yuzukami (number 4) and Inaba (number 11), they make a *sumo* ring with the used ropes after the tug match, and play *sumo* wrestling.

Usually people use straw as materials to make these ropes, but when tug-of-war is performed at the Boys’ Festival (number 10~13), they twine *Shobu* or *Yomogi* (蓬, or Japanese mugwort) into straw. In Misasa’s case (number 12), people make use of wisteria vines.

In the tug-of-war during the Boy’s Festival on May 5th, children team tugs the rope against adults team.

In northern Kyusyu and Okinawa areas, it is common to divide people into men group and women group for the tug match. In this case, it is said that women group is supposed to win the match.

(2) Complex-type Customs

Now let us see the complex-type custom; New Year's *Igomori* festival of Hosono, Kyoto (number 5), full moon festival on August 15th in the lunar calendar observed in southern Kyusyu to Yolon Island of Southwest Islands (16-18), and *Hohnen* festival, or harvest festival, in Ishigaki Island of Okinawa (20). In these cases, the tug-of-war composes only a part of the whole event, and performing arts are much more emphasized than the tug-of-war as in the cases of 17 and 18.

First, *Igomori* festival (9) is a New Year's ritual made by confining oneself in a shrine for a prayer. It starts with *Kami-kanjyo* (神勸請, or rites for ceremonial transfer of gods) and *Onda* (御田, or rites for advance blessing of the coming harvest), and then the tug-of-war follows. The rope they tug is round-shaped, and is burnt up after the match.

Among the full moon festivals (16 to 18), number 16 and 17 are quite interesting; they have a tradition to cut the rope during the match, or to make a *sumo* wrestling ring by laying down the used rope. In southern Satsuma area (16), children make not only towing ropes with *kaya* plants gathered in the woods, but sometimes make a loop representing the moon, and hang it on trees. In other cases in Satsuma, they do "make the moon" on the ground by making a circle with fragments cut from the rope. These customs may suggest that there existed some relation between the moon worship and the tug-of-war. In addition, ONO Jyuro (1911-1995), a Japanese folklorist, refers to custom of making ropes by twisting *kaya* plants with stems and leaves of such crops as millet (粟), Japanese millet (稗), or sweet potatoes. He then deduces that the tug-of-war custom in southern Satsuma area might not be originated in the rice cultivation era but can be traced back to the more primordial dry field farming era. Many of these valuable customs of full moon festival, however, are now shortened and simplified, or in some cases, abandoned altogether because the number of children are decreasing drastically by depopulation and low birth rates.

(3) Customs Resembling the Tug-of-War

Among the cases in the list, number 3, 5 and 6 are the ones that are not exactly tug-of-war, but are closely similar to it, and can be regarded as its variations. *Funa-hiki* festival, or boat tugging festival, of Bandai Shrine (number 3) is an event to tug ropes that are tied onto a boat, which has three straw rice bags (俵, *tawara*) placed on it. In *Sagicho* of Oiso (5), the rope is tied to a temporary shrine placed on a sleigh, and people on the land and people on the sea tug the rope. Some says that *Gongan* ritual (6) was originally associated with tug-of-war, but nowadays it is an event where youngsters make a giant straw snake, drag it around, then cut it up into pieces and throw them into a river.

Just like in this case, ropes for tug-of-war are often associated with snakes or dragons, or are related to God of Water in many places.