

## The Origin of Sumo in Japan

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Japanese sumo assumes various forms and can be divided into two categories. One is the sumo as a popular sport engaged in by amateurs and professionals as a test of strength. The other is the sumo dating back to ancient times that evolved in connection with the ritual worship of the gods. The latter type, which with this paper is concerned, while involving competition, is ultimately not for the sake of sport, but for divination or fortune telling. In the *Suininki* section of the *Nihonshoki* (Chronicle of Japan), Taima-no-ke haya and Nomino-sukune engage in a form of sumo in which "two persons face each other, raise their feet, and tread the ground." In the *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters), it is said that when Susano-ono-mikoto ascended to the heavens, Amaterasu-omikami tread her feet heavily in consternation. Thus the act of treading the feet can be regarded as a form of incantation by which the opposing forces can be driven back by threatening and scolding. As incantation, it is adapted into dance form in the funeral rites periodically conducted for the repose of the souls of the deceased, with the purpose in mind of shutting in or pacifying the spirit world. This suggests the original significance of the performance of sumo at autumn festivals, at which time the spirits of the ancestral gods are worshiped.

That sumo was performed at funerals, in particular at gravesites, is reinforced by the fact that four corners, possibly vestiges of the *mogari*

structure, were once part of the sumo ring. Before the aristocracy, sumo of *sechie* was performed, and even in its more popular forms, sumo was often performed at sacred sites set aside for the worship of ancestors or for invoking their spirits.

The Taima and Nomi clans, who appear in the *Nihonshoki*, are said to have performed sumo in connection with memorial services, and people may have associated the practice of treading the feet with the power to shut in and pacify spirits. In their awe and respect of the supernatural, they may have come to regard such activity as a manifestation of divine power and to regard those so endowed as divine beings.

Sumo is performed with two persons facing each other. It is not difficult to see that sumo came to be regarded as a form of incantation, since the treading of feet was associated with the supplication of the spirit world. As a further development of sumo for the worship of the ancestral gods, the added techniques of pushing and thrusting with the hands were later used.

Sumo as handed down to us can be said to have been adapted from an ancient form of ritual connected with ancestral gods to the funeral rites, in which the treading of feet was regarded as a divine activity pacifying the spirits of the deceased.