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Japan's Sacred Sumo and the Exclusion of Women: The Olympic Male Sumo Wrestler (Part 1)

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Abstract: The 2020 Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo offer a fitting and timely point of departure to consider the religion-based exclusion of women and, by extension, to peer into the nation-culture-religion-gender nexus in Japan. The Japan Sumo Association, a quasi-governmental corporation, champions itself as the custodian of a divine affair cultivated by male deities and mortal men, and exclusive of women. The Sumo Association bans women and girls from entering or even touching the wrestling ring, lest they violate sumo tradition and taint their so-called sacred battlefield. Critics of sumo's female taboo denounce the Association's rule as anachronistic and sexist as well as illegal. The opposition focuses attention on the need for change, and justifiably so, but there exists an equally pressing need to think about why the ban prevails even with strong opposition. Olympic presentations of the male sumo wrestler open our eyes as to one such abetting force: persuasive and politically expedient visions of sumo wrestling as an ancient, sacred, and exclusively male endeavor.

Keywords: Japanese religions; gender; sumo wrestling; the Olympics; sports; sacred space; cultural nationalism



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1. Introduction

As the eyes of the world looked to Tokyo for the Games of the XXXII Olympiad, their gaze at some point fell upon the male sumo wrestler. Commemorative gold coins and medals minted for the occasion featured Nomi no Sukune, the patron saint and revered founder of professional sumo (*ōzumō*) (Figures 1 and 2). The legendary Sukune also loomed large on a mosaic mural installed at the new Japan National Stadium, an artwork that was considered sufficiently significant to be dismantled and relocated from its home in the former National Stadium (Figures 3–5). A professional sumo wrestler, *rikishi* or *sumotori* in common Japanese parlance, starred in promotional materials created within and outside Japan in new forms and placed within new settings to demonstrate his prowess. To give a well-publicized example, France's national public television broadcaster, France TV (France Télévisions), released a sumo-themed spot to promote its coverage of the delayed Tokyo Olympics. Represented as the Olympic athlete par excellence, a loin-cloth-clad grappler performs various Olympic disciplines within a landscape stylized as a premodern Japanese painting.¹ When *Le Sumo* finally lands in a grand stadium, poised to engage, the narrator declares, "Japan is ready for the Olympics" (*The Daily Brief* 2021). A life-size statue of a sumo wrestler positioned on the equestrian jumping course (Figure 6) made headlines for spooking several horses and perhaps contributing to disqualifications in the individual jumping event (*Seiner* 2021).



Figure 1. 10,000-yen gold proof coin issued as part of the Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020 Commemorative Coin Programme (3rd issue, 2019) and offered for public purchase at 122,223 yen (roughly one-thousand euros). Reproduced with permission from Japan Mint and the International Olympic Committee (IOC).



Figure 2. Obverse of Tokyo 2020 Official Licensed 10,000-yen commemorative gold coin. Reproduced with permission from Japan Mint and the IOC.



Figure 3. Hasegawa Luca's "Victory and Glory" mosaic mural at Japan's former National Stadium, 2019. Reproduced with permission from Ogikubo Kei; reprinted from Nikkei Business Publications.

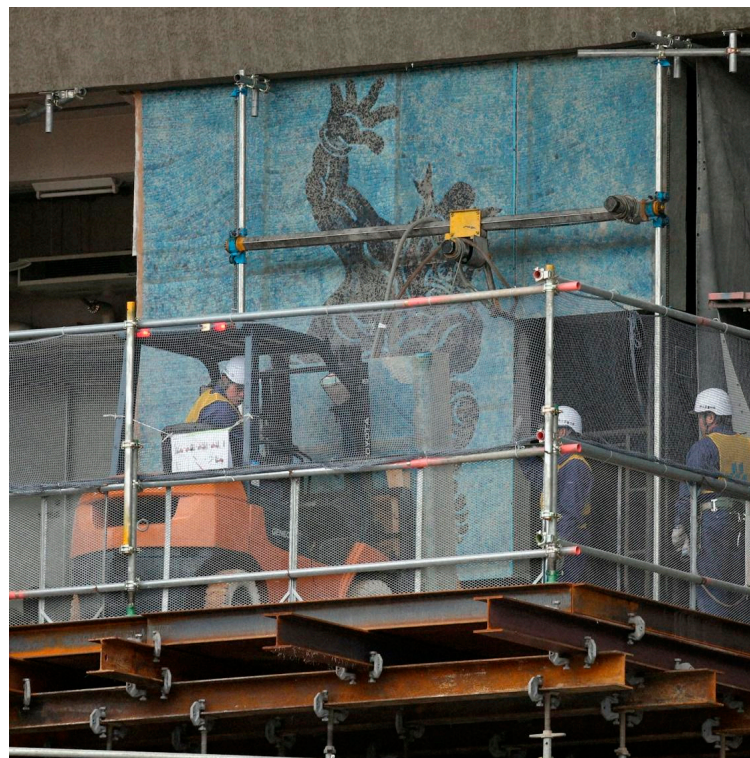


Figure 4. The dismantling of Hasegawa's Nomi no Sukune mosaic at the former National Stadium, 2016. Reproduced with permission from Kimitaka Takeichi, reprinted from The Mainichi Newspapers.

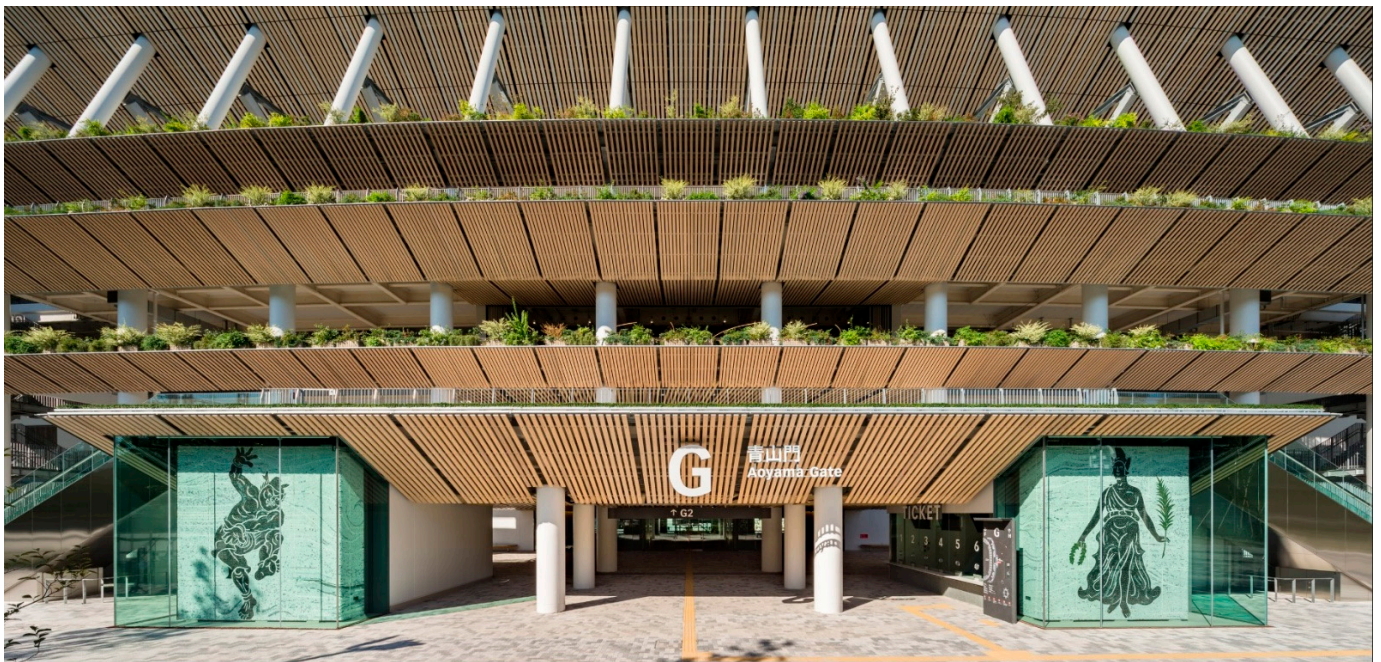


Figure 5. Hasegawa Luca's 1964 glass mosaic of the sumo god Nomi no Sukune and the Greek goddess Nike at the east gate of the new Japan National Stadium, 2021. Reproduced with permission from Japan Sport Council.



Figure 6. Realistic sumo statue on the equestrian course at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, Japan, 4 August 2021. Reproduced with permission from Adam Davy/PA Images; published by Alamy Stock Photo (image no. 2GCDM63).

Sumo wrestling has no formal place on the Olympic program, at least not yet, but the men of professional sumo were even set to wrestle at the 2020 Games. The Japanese government and Tokyo 2020 officials, in collaboration with the sport's governing body, the Japan Sumo Association (Nihon Sumō Kyōkai—established in its current form in 1958 and hereafter shortened here to the Sumo Association), scheduled a special professional sumo tournament between the Olympic and Paralympic Games to showcase “good ol’ Japanese traditional culture.”² The pandemic caused by COVID-19 forced a last-minute cancellation of the Olympic presentation of sumo wrestling, but had the event proceeded as planned it would have been the sole, albeit informal, outlier of what the International Olympic Committee (IOC) touted as the first truly “gender-equal Olympic Games” ([International Olympic Committee 2021](#)). Efforts to make amateur sumo wrestling an Olympic sport, begun around the mid-1990s, have progressed in recent years. The IOC officially recognized sumo wrestling as an Olympic sport in 2018, owing to intensive efforts by the International Sumo Federation (ISF), a Japan-based non-profit organization that promotes amateur sumo globally and lobbies specifically for Olympic recognition. But when the ISF applied to be included on the 2020 Olympic program the IOC rejected the application, in part due to inadequate female representation (the IOC ruled in 1991 that all Olympic sports recognized thereafter must include both men’s and women’s events).³ A distinct but telling fact is the absence of women, if not their abjection, in contemporary representations of sumo, the self-designated “national sport” (*kokugi*), and when it comes to the putative sacred space of the professional wrestling ring (*dohyō*).⁴

Here we metaphorically enter the hallowed ring space, turning to the Olympics as a fitting and timely opportunity to attend to the vexed topic of sumo’s exclusion of women. The taboo against women entering or even touching the sumo ring, and the larger culture of prohibitions against women within which we situate this case, merits attention for a host of reasons. The topic provides an excellent ground to consider the dynamic and multidimensional intersections of religion, culture, gender, and the nation-state, and it allows us to inquire into the ambiguities of Japan’s putatively secular public sphere. And the viewpoints presented on women and sumo help us better understand how a rarefied social practice (female taboos) persists despite being widely denounced as anachronistic and both internationally and locally charged as an illegal form of gender discrimination.

Characterized in Japanese as “prohibitions against women” (*nyonin kinsei*) and “proscriptions [lit., ‘boundaries’] for women” (*nyonin kekai*), these taboos entail the permanent exclusion of women from certain rituals and festivals, temple and shrine halls, and large swaths of mountainous lands, as well as from occupational realms like fishing, hunting, construction work, sushi making, sake brewing, and pottery making (see, e.g., [Suzuki 2002, 2003, 2017](#); [Faure 2003](#); [Katsuura 2009](#); [DeWitt 2015, 2016, 2018](#); [Kobayashi 2017](#); [Minamoto 2020](#); on sumo specifically see [Suzuki 2003](#), pp. 62–64; [Yoshizaki and Inano 2008](#)). Popular as well as scholarly discourse on female taboos routinely presents the phenomenon as an ancient and unchanged fact of Japan’s religious landscape or so-called traditional culture, with increasing emphasis on the latter. An assumption of continuity linking present-day practices with some primordial and decidedly Japanese form of cultic sumo wrestling underpins nearly every explanation offered for banning women and girls from the professional sumo ring.

When the Sumo Association enjoined Osaka’s female prefectural governor, Ōta Fusae, to stay out of the sumo ring in the year 2000, for example, Chairman Tokitsukaze (the retired upper-division sumo wrestler Yutakayama) reasoned that “professional sumo upholds a tradition of women not entering the ring based on kami rituals and we want to preserve that tradition” ([Suzuki 2003](#), p. 62).⁵ Chairman Hakkaku (the retired grand champion *yokozuna* Hokutoumi) drew from the same playbook in 2018 when his organization faced another barrage of public criticism over its strict no-women policy (see Section 3 below).⁶ An April 2018 statement attributed to Hakkaku clarified three reasons why men alone may access the professional sumo ring: first, because sumo’s roots lay in rituals dedicated to the gods (*shinji*); second, to protect the traditional culture of professional sumo; and third, on

the basis that the professional sumo ring constitutes a sacred battleground (*shinseina tatakai no ba*) and place of training for men.⁷

In separate publications forthcoming, I elaborate on the agents and processes responsible for emplacing a normative view of sumo history which venerates a slick fiction of sumo as a sacrosanct and male-only realm, and which denies the real presence of women in sumo, yea, *women's sumo*. The second publication of this project examines the contemporary politics of sumo's female taboo from 1978, when it first entered the realm of public discourse, and tracks public and governmental responses to the trio of gender-related controversies that unfolded in April 2018. In addition to establishing who contests professional sumo's male-only rule and on what grounds, and, conversely, who supports it and on what grounds, I probe the thorny issues that arise when the national government permits the Sumo Association, a powerful and patriarchal corporate body, to act as steward of the public interest in matters pertaining to religion, tradition, and the place of women. Part three of the project zooms out and investigates historical debates and discourse regarding the ostensible history of sumo's exclusion of women. There I show how the fantasies surrounding sumo obscure the richness and diversity of its history, a history that includes women, and how certain purposeful imaginings hide the multifaceted historical processes that determined the birth of the Olympic male sumo wrestler.

2. An Olympic-Sized "Gender Problem"

The (World Economic Forum 2021) *Global Gender Gap Report* ranked Japan 120th out of 153 countries surveyed and characterized its gender gap the year prior as "by far the largest among all advanced economies" (World Economic Forum 2020, p. 31). Indeed, Japan's so-called "gender problem" (*jendā mondai*) routinely elicits public censure.⁸ International and domestic press spotlight the relatively low social standing of women, male dominance in business and politics, the shame culture surrounding female sexual assault victims, exclusively male imperial succession, and many other forms of sexism.

That "problem," a pervasive culture of male dominance and female exclusion alongside disregard if not contempt for non-binary identities, was on full display in the months leading up to the beleaguered and COVID 19-related delayed Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Two high-profile sex-discrimination scandals unfolded in the spring of 2021, both involving a senior executive of the Tokyo Organizing Committee making demeaning comments toward women. First, former Prime Minister Mori Yoshirō, serving as president, ignited a public furor in February 2021 when, in discussions of increasing the number of female board directors on the committee from twenty percent to forty percent, he lamented that committee meetings with too many women go on forever because women are competitive and talk too much (*Asahi shinbun* 2021a; Rich et al. 2021). At a press conference held the next day, the eighty-four-year-old Mori expressed regret for making "inappropriate" remarks, and Olympic and ruling party officials did not call for him to step down.⁹ Mori's formal apology did little to tamp down the controversy, however, nor did his counteraccusation that critics misinterpreted his words and discriminated against him as an elderly person. Complaints flooded the offices of the IOC and corporate sponsors. People took to social media platforms and even the streets of Tokyo to protest. A female college student launched a viral hashtag (#DontBeSilent) and posted a petition calling for Mori's behavior to be "properly addressed" (*Mori Kaichō No Shogū No Kenō O Motomeru Yūshi* 2021; Park and Okamoto 2021). More than 150,000 people signed the petition in less than two weeks. Mori resigned of his own accord, but not before trying to handpick his successor, a man one year his senior. In the end, Hashimoto Seiko, one of Japan's two female Cabinet Ministers and a former Olympian herself (bronze medal for speed skating in 1992), succeeded him. Hashimoto's appointment was met with overall praise, but not without concerns that it merely papered over the larger problem at hand (*Mainichi shinbun* 2021; Rich 2021).

Just one month later, the organizing committee found itself in the glare of publicity again for allegations of misogyny, this time aimed at its creative director, Sasaki Hiroshi.

Sasaki tendered his resignation almost immediately after the weekly magazine *Shūkan bunshun* posted screenshots of messages he sent in a group chat with colleagues on a messaging application proposing that popular comedian and plus-size fashion designer Watanabe Naomi star in the opening ceremony as “Olympig” (*Shūkan bunshun* 2021; Inoue et al. 2021). The curious circumstances under which Mori appointed Sasaki, his close friend from the advertising giant Dentsu, to the position also raised eyebrows. Sasaki abruptly and without warning replaced the female director, popular dancer, and choreographer MIKIKO, according to multiple reports and the alleged victim herself. The brash move laid to waste months of planning and the scrapping of MIKIKO’s gender-balanced plan for the opening ceremony, which the IOC had already glowingly reviewed, and resulted in the loss of a once-in-a-lifetime job opportunity for MIKIKO and her 500-person team (MIKIKO 2021; Hamada 2021; St. Michel 2021).

3. “Women Please Come Down from the Ring”

Religion-based female taboos (*nyonin kinsei*, *nyonin kekka*) occasionally generate media attention and public outcry as part of Japan’s gender problem, too. As I’ve discussed elsewhere, the strict male-only entry policies of two sacred sites, the mountain Sanjōgatake (a.k.a. Mt. Ōmine) in Nara prefecture and the island Okinoshima in Fukuoka prefecture, drew scrutiny within and outside Japan in 2004 and 2017, respectively, when UNESCO designated each as World Heritage Sites (DeWitt 2020). But the disapprobation whipped up over these occasions proved to be no match for the groundswell of criticism and debate provoked in the spring of 2018 by the very public ejection of women from a professional sumo ring.

In early April 2018, at the height of Japan’s famed cherry blossom spectacle, a large crowd gathered in the coastal town of Maizuru, northwest of Kyoto, to relish the similarly iconic scene of sumo wrestling. Three-thousand women, men, and children packed the main arena of the Maizuru Culture Park Gymnasium on April 4 for the 75th annual spring regional tour of professional sumo.¹⁰ Before the main attraction of 250 burly young men grappling in loin cloths and matching topknots commenced, the city’s mayor mounted the ring, an earthen platform embedded with half-buried mats of rice straw, to deliver a welcome speech. The sixty-seven-year-old male physician spoke with exceptional vigor that day, one spectator later reflected, yet minutes into the speech he suddenly lost consciousness and collapsed backwards (Ōkubo et al. 2018). The audience gasped. A frenzy of action erupted around the ring. Men scrambled to the mayor’s side and some crouched low around his prone body, seemingly loosening his clothing but attempting little else. No other interventions occurred until thirteen seconds later, when one woman ascended the platform. She pushed past idle men and initiated cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR). Another woman soon joined her. The two women called out to the men around them to time the compressions. Before long, two more women climbed atop the ring.

Forty-seven seconds into the life-saving activities, the audibly panicked voice of a young man flooded the auditorium’s loudspeaker:

“Women please come down from the ring!” (*Josei no kata wa dohyō kara orite kudasai*)

“Women please come down from the ring!”

“Women please come down from the ring, men please enter the ring!” (*Josei no kata wa dohyō kara orite kudasai, dansei ga oagarikudasai*)

Men in uniform then suddenly appeared in line formation, jogging from the perimeter into the ring. The first two women in the ring, unperturbed by the loudspeaker request, continued chest compressions on the unconscious mayor. The third and fourth women, still at the outer edge of the crowd, started to move down from the ring, hands touching, then one linked her arm with the other, clearly pulling her back multiple times. All the while the loudspeaker voice continued, and, over it, laughter became suddenly audible throughout the audience in response to the slapstick commotion: idle men standing up, others crouching down again, uniformed men squeezing in, new arrivals exchanging

comments and orders among themselves over the collapsed mayor, and the women all staying put. The laughter dissipated, and a male emergency worker stepped in to relieve the women's aid twenty seconds later. A male security guard waved to the women and guided two of them down from the ring. The remaining two women climbed down shortly thereafter.¹¹ The tournament continued as planned, but not before men tidied the sand on the ring and doused it with many handfuls of purifying salt.

A deluge of news reports, television segments, blog posts, and tweets began to wash over the internet, within Japan and from abroad, almost immediately after women exited the ring in Maizuru. Several mobile-phone videos posted on YouTube reached more than one million views.¹² Major domestic and foreign media outlets crafted headlines that varied in degrees of sensationalism. "Large Amount of Salt Sprinkled on Sumo Ring after Women Save Fallen Mayor's Life" (*Asahi shinbun* 2018). "Japanese Women Attempting to Save Man's Life after Suffering Stroke in Sumo Ring Ordered to Leave for Being 'Ritually Unclean'" (*Greenwood* 2018). And most sharply astute of all, "Women Barred from Sumo Ring, Even to Save a Man's Life" (*Rich* 2018).

Shockwaves rippled out from Maizuru, then two days later the spring sumo tour landed in Takarazuka, Hyogo prefecture—coincidentally, but further to the uncanny events unfolding, a city famed for its all-female theatre revue (Takarazuka Gekidan). For the Takarazuka tour stop, too, the city's mayor would normally have been asked to offer opening remarks from inside the ring. However, Takarazuka's mayor was a woman, Nakagawa Tomoko. One year earlier, Nakagawa gladly accepted the invitation to give a *ringside* speech, oblivious to the double standard. Incensed to learn indirectly through news coverage of the Maizuru drama of her unequal treatment, Nakagawa immediately contacted the Sumo Association and asked to speak from within the ring. The Association denied her request and again entreated her to speak from below (*Nakagawa* 2020, p. 22).

Nakagawa stood beneath the earthen dais on April 6 and addressed the audience, but she forewent the typical welcome words for an impassioned speech on the injustice of the situation. "I am a female mayor, but I am a human being," the mayor voiced with palpable emotion (*Mainichi shinbun* 2018a). "Because I am a woman, and even though I am the mayor of Takarazuka City, I cannot offer a greeting on the ring. This is mortifying (*kuyashii*). It's painful (*tsurai*)."¹³ Nakagawa ended by imploring the audience, and the Sumo Association, to think about the meaning of tradition: "We change what must be changed while preserving tradition. Isn't it important to have the courage to change?"¹³ A fresh outpouring of media reports followed the event. "The Women-and-the-Sumo-Ring Problem: At Takarazuka Regional Tour Female Mayor Orders 'Sumo Association to Have the Courage to Change' from below the Ring" (*Mainichi shinbun* 2018b). "Sumo: Female Mayor Barred from Giving Speech on Sumo Ring in Wake of Furor" (*Kyodo News* 2018).

Adding more fuel to the fire, the Sumo Association handed down a last-minute directive banning girls from an April 8 children's sumo event in Shizuoka. "Little Tykes' Sumo" (Chibikko Sumō), mock training sessions between elementary-school children and top-tier wrestlers, had in the three previous years welcomed both boys and girls into the ring. Yet on April 4, the same day the Maizuru controversy erupted, association executive Araisō (formerly the *yokozuna* Kisenosato) ordered tour organizers to include boys alone in the exhibition. The decision abruptly sidelined five young girls from local sumo clubs whose participation had been planned for months. At the event, Shizuoka Mayor Tanabe Nobuhiro used his moment in the ring to deliver a message to the Sumo Association: permit all mayors the same privilege and adapt to the current times.¹⁴ A third wave of public commentary ensued. "'The Girls Looked Lonely': Even Little Tykes' Sumo 'Prohibited to Women'" (*FNN* 2018a). "'Little Tykes' Sumo' Also Off Limits: Sumo Association Demands That Girls Not Enter the Ring" (*HuffPost Japan* 2018).

The Maizuru scene offered the world a captivating snapshot of a life-threatening crisis interrupted by mechanical actions to protect tradition, the tradition of barring women from the putative holy space of an earthen ring. The domino effect made ridiculous the smallness of the adjudicators, as they moved from discrimination toward female mayors to

inequities for schoolgirls, all in the name of sumo history and sacred tradition. Nestled within the sport and spectacle of professional sumo wrestling in Japan, with its abundant ceremonial accoutrements and religious pageantry, the drama that unfurled on the shores of Lake Biwa, and subsequently in Takarazuka and Shizuoka, gripped the attention of the nation and international news channels, at least for a few weeks. The quantity and the quality of media coverage on the controversies, especially scrutiny from outside the archipelago, became topics of interest in their own right (*Nikkan Sports* 2018b; *BuzzFeed Japan* 2018; *FNN* 2018b; Yoshida 2018).

Oppositional voices tend to dominate public commentary on sumo's exclusion of women, but right alongside them flow equally if not more powerful countercurrents, some overt and others surreptitious, that sanction and thus preserve the misogynistic status quo. We can divide the forces at work keeping the sumo ring free of women into active and inertial varieties. Active forces concern the operative efforts deployed to validate the exclusion of women as a necessary condition of sacred sumo tradition—and not, as critics charge and scholars agree, out of concerns that the female body might pollute the ritually purified space of the ring (the second publication of this project examines this and other exclusionary logics in greater detail). The Sumo Association and its affiliates play the driving role in actively defending the female taboo, but they do not work alone. Here the inertial forces come into play. Larger social structures buoy the ring ban, as do the institutions and institutionalized dynamics that shield the association's preferred mode of operating, that is, without women. The Olympic male sumo wrestler attunes us to one such abetting force: persuasive and politically expedient visions of sumo wrestling as an ancient, sacred, and exclusively male endeavor.

4. Victory to the Olympic Male Sumo Wrestler

Gold, silver, and bronze alike, every medal granted to the victorious male and female athletes at the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo boasts on its obverse side Nike, the winged goddess of Mount Olympus who personifies victory and serves as its judge (Figure 7). The medal shows Nike descending in flight with her left foot gently landing on the Panathenaic stadium, a storied site of ancient contests reconstructed for the first modern Olympic Games in 1896. The goddess' draperies billow in the wind, clinging to her female form and revealing her body's shapely curves. Her left breast is bare, and her right hand clasps a palm frond. The Acropolis rises in the background, home to the great protector divinity Athena, Nike's intimate associate. A victory ode by the poet Pindar in the fifth century BC, etched on the medal's reverse, reads, "Mother of golden-crowned contests, Olympia, queen of truth!"¹⁵ The Greek goddess Nike, or her Roman refashioning Victoria, adorns most Olympic medals cast since the medal tradition began in 1896 and all Summer Olympic medals as far back as 1928. IOC regulations today stipulate that the principal medal design must include Nike.¹⁶ Celebrated and supplicated for the Olympic Games, past and present, and in myriad other contexts across time and space, all related to victory, Nike enjoys great currency. As such, her likeness graces a splendid array of material objects from as far back as the fifth century BC and as recent as 2020 (see, e.g., Scott 2017; Dubois 2016; and Töpfer 2015). Nike herself constitutes a currency, we might even say.



Figure 7. Gold medal of the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo. Reproduced with permission from IOC. Image source: “Tokyo 2020 Olympic Medal Design,” Tokyo 2020, <https://olympics.com/tokyo-2020/en/games/olympics-medals-design/> (accessed on 28 August 2021).

The ancient Olympic Games featured neither medals nor female athletes and rules forbade the presence of women altogether; however, female divinities played an integral role, especially Nike.¹⁷ Winners at Olympia bowed before a statue of Nike, enshrined high on a marbled perch at the Temple of Zeus, to receive the winner’s crown of wild olive and the promise of eternal renown.¹⁸ Waxed the fifth-century lyric poet Bacchylides, “Now, beside the altar of Zeus, the mightiest ruler, the garlands of glory-bringing Niké nurture dazzling fame for men throughout their lives—anyway, for a few—and when the gloomy cloud of death covers them over, the everlasting *kleos* [glory] of their fine deed is left behind, immutable and secure” (Slavitt and Bacchylide 1998, p. 56). Nike’s image and attributes carry serious weight in the modern Olympic Movement too, which French aristocrat and educational theorist Pierre de Frédy, Baron de Coubertin, formalized in the late nineteenth century. So, too, did the revived Games, envisioned by Coubertin as a “solemn and periodic exaltation of male athleticism . . . with the applause of women as a reward” preserve the male-only rule well into the twentieth century (Coubertin 1912, quoted in Polley 2014, p. 31).

Accoutrements of the Summer Olympics 2020 on display in Tokyo and elsewhere sustain this observation concerning the effect and efficacy of Nike. Nike’s image appears on gold coins produced by the Mint of Japan, on behalf of the Ministry of Finance, to commemorate the 2020 Games (Figures 1 and 2), and on solid gold medallions cast in honor of the new stadium’s completion.¹⁹ In fact, the goddess’ likeness on the 2020 coins and medallions replicates a striking five-meter-tall mosaic mural (Figure 3) that presided over the main stadium for the historic 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games, an enduring symbol of modernity in Japan’s self-representation. Artist Hasegawa Luca (1897–1967), a pioneer of fresco and mosaic techniques, and his students created the artwork for the event.²⁰ Today, Hasegawa et al.’s massive mural of Nike greets visitors at the Aoyama Gate entrance to the 2019-completed Japan National Stadium, following a long process comprising dismantling, storage, and—after experts certified its cultural heritage value—reinstallation in the new stadium, all at enormous expense (Figures 4 and 5; Takagi and Matsuura 2016). Nike clearly has currency (and is currency) in Japan too, but her status and function assemble differently in these Olympic representations.

Nike no longer commands solo spotlight as she typically does on other medals and coins. Hasegawa’s mosaic pairs Nike with the mythical Nomi no Sukune. Sukune’s renown as a mortal man and his modern deification traces to a short passage in the *Nihon shoki*

(720), Japan's most ancient imperial chronicle. The entry for the seventh day of the seventh month of the seventh year of the legendary and likely fictionalized ruler Suinin's (r. 29 BC?–70 CE?) reign relates a deadly wrestling match between two strong men: the boastful Taima no Kehaya of Yamato (present-day Nara prefecture) and a "valiant man" (*yūshi*) from the far-off land of Izumo (present-day Shimane prefecture) called Sukune. The fight ensued, the story goes, because the ruler Suinin caught wind of Kehaya's bragging and so dispatched his official to find a worthy challenger. Sukune received a summons and so, according to the text:

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 Kehaya and also kicked and broke his loins and thus killed him. Therefore the land of Taima no Kehaya was seized, and was all given to Nomi no Sukune.²¹

Events in the *Nihon shoki* ascribed dates before the seventh and eighth century, including the wrestling match in question, must be given particular scrutiny. In this sense the *Nihon shoki* is a mythology, a fact traditionalists and apologists tend to obfuscate, instead preferring to depend on the legitimacy that such a so-called historical text affords dates and events that are spurious. Readers may be interested to learn that a similar story appears in the *Jinshu*, the official dynastic history of China's Jin Dynasty (265–420) compiled in 648. An episode in fascicle ninety-two tells of a wrestling match organized at the request of a sovereign ruler, Jin Wudi (265–290 AD), pitting a soldier thought to be the best grappler in the land against a strong man summoned from the distant steppe (Christopoulos 2013, p. 237). The ruler had the men compete in his tent, and then subsequently fight to the death doing sumo (Ch. *xiangpu*).

Writers advocating sumo's religious origins in Japan, beginning with the nativist and ethnologist Orikuchi Shinobu (1887–1953) in the early twentieth century, have stressed the simultaneous timing in the *Nihon shoki*—the seventh day of the seventh month—of Nomi no Sukune's wrestling match, early records of sumo wrestling performances at the Yamato court (*sechiezumō*), and the "seventh night banquet" (i.e., Tanabata). Tanabata marks the once-a-year meeting of the Altair and Vega stars, the Weaver Maiden and Cowherd astral deities, respectively. The Weaver Maiden and Cowherd cult, part of the Chinese nodal calendar since the Han period (202 BC–220 AD), became integrated into ancient Japan's mytho-religious landscape from the seventh or eighth century, and sumo scholars Nitta Ichirō and Hasegawa Akira view the Tanabata correlation as a deliberate positioning of the sumo wrestling motif within an emerging narrative of national identity in the eighth century (Nitta 1994, p. 50; Hasegawa 1993, pp. 27–30; see also Como 2009, esp. pp. 33–39; Reider 2015; and Duthie 2014, p. 11).

In addition to the highly questionable authenticity of Sukune's victorious match, we need to acknowledge the stark incongruities with the formal rules of professional sumo, laid down beginning in the eighteenth century, which prohibit kicking much less killing one's opponent. Never mind, moreover, that the word used today for *sumō* first appears in the *Nihon shoki* during the slightly more historically verifiable reign of the sovereign ruler Yūryaku (418?–479?) to describe an activity in which two women engaged.

The key point to be made here though concerns Sukune's memorialization as the founding sumo wrestler, a god in his own right, in the modern period at the manly hands of the Sumo Association. Historian Harold Bolitho is instructive on this point, explaining the value of the Nomi no Sukune story as "an easy way of claiming antiquity, and hence, in a society where the richer the patina of the past the greater the degree of public respect—it is a way of achieving respectability, and this has long been a matter of crucial concern in the world of sumo wrestling" (Bolitho 1988, pp. 18–19). These matters will be elaborated somewhat below, and more fully in subsequent parts of this project.

Circling back to Hasegawa's mural now, how did the Japanese sumo god fare when faced with the Greek victory goddess? We find telling clues in the artist's description of his Olympic duo:

On the right side of the tower is a four-meter-tall standing image of a Greek goddess. She carries the meaning of glory and holds a *Canarium album* (sometimes translated as olive but of a different type) and a laurel wreath. It is a “symbol of beauty.”

On the left is a “symbol of power” with Nomi no Sukune, the founder of sumo, called the national sport. It is the same size as the statue on the right.

The black and white mosaic is expressed in a straightforward manner, and the white part is mixed with light colored glass to clarify the nuances of each. ([Nihon Supōtsu Shinkō Sentā \[Japan Sport Council\] n.d.](#), p. 6)

Hasegawa aimed for and achieved a high level of contrast in his design. Material elements like light-colored glass certainly enliven the visual impact of the mosaic pair, but two oppositional binaries accentuated in the mural arguably pack the strongest punch. The east-west juxtaposition captures the symbolic politics of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, the first Games held in Asia ([Kida 2013](#); [Tagsold 2002, 2011](#)). However, here our attention shall briefly alight on the second foregrounded dichotomy in the Olympic stadium mural, that of gender.

We experience the mosaic’s high gender contrast most obviously through the normatively heterosexual features of its characters. Sukune’s powerfully muscular and archetypal masculine figure recalls the iconography of wrathful Buddhist divinities, figures described in Buddhist texts as demonic forces converted by the virtue of Buddhist teachings into benevolent protectors (see [Bogel 2020](#); [Faure 2015](#)). We can even identify the likely model for Hasegawa’s archetypal sumo wrestler: the 1960s mosaic figure bears a remarkable resemblance to an eleventh-century wooden relief carving of Mekira (the name a later attribution) in its strongly similar dynamic pose, raised arm, depiction of the raised right foot, musculature, and facial expression (Figure 8). Mekira is one of the Twelve Divine Generals (*jūni shinshō*) that form the retinue of Master of Medicine Buddha (Yakushi Nyorai). The famous set of twelve relief panels are held by the temple Kōfukuji in Nara and were designated as a National Treasure (Kokuhō) in 1958, a date that further supports the likelihood that the artist knew the temple work and may also suggest he sought (or the commissioners preferred) reference to a sacred work of expressive power. In the gender arena, Sukune’s menacing and hyper-masculine physique, a fitness capable of destroying evil forces, violently contrasts the Greek goddess’ soft and curvaceous female form. The fingers alone speak volumes.

The artist’s description of the work cited above and titled “Victory and Glory” convey even more about gender polarity, and about the unequal dynamics embodied by and promoted from the work. Hasegawa created the sumo god and the Greek goddess equal in terms of size, but their parity ends there. We can discern Sukune’s domination of Nike, first, through their symbolic associations with power and beauty, respectively. The names of the deities further illuminate the bias. The artist identifies the male image as Nomi no Sukune, and even clarifies the tree species of the branch placed in the hand of the female figure, but he describes the female figure herself only in general terms as “a Greek goddess who carries the meaning of glory.” Context (the Olympics) and iconography (female figure with windblown garments, left foot prominent, palm frond, laurel wreath, bare left breast) alone tell us she is Nike. In other words, the artist clearly positions the male as the subject and the female as the object (literally, an “image”). Finally, notice the title of the work: “Victory” (Nomi no Sukune) and “Glory” (Image of a Greek Goddess).



Figure 8. Eleventh-century relief carvings at the National Treasure Hall of Kōfukuji Temple, Nara, of two of the Twelve Divine Generals who accompany and guard the Master of Medicine Buddha (Yakushi Nyorai). The figure on the right, named Mekira today, likely served as the model for Hasegawa’s Nomi no Sukune depiction. Photograph by Sakamoto Manshichi, published in *Nihon bijutsu zenshū* vol. 3 (Tōto Bunka Koeki Kabushikigaisha, 1953), reprinted from Wikimedia Commons. Image in the public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Twelve_Heavenly_Generals_Relief.JPG (accessed on 28 August 2021).

5. Setting the Olympic Stage in Nagano

The opening ceremony for the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics offers another clear proof of what can only be described as a fantasy history and idealized modern presentation of sumo. As such, a brief sketch is in order here. The organizing committee, a collection of male politicians and business leaders, envisaged the February 5 event as a “simple,” “dignified,” and “spiritual” affair on a massive stage fashioned as a professional sumo ring (NAOC 1998, p. 2). The resulting extravaganza was far from simple, however.

For the first act, teams of men erected towering wooden pillars in the four cardinal directions, thereby consecrating the space. Fir trees felled from the vicinity of an important shrine, Suwa Jinja (Nagano prefecture), provided the lumber. What took place on stage constituted a reenactment of the shrine’s Onbashira festival. Once every six years, men mount giant logs and ride them down the mountainside whereupon the fresh logs replace the old poles used to delineate the sacred precinct of each shrine building, their emplacement marking the symbolic renewal of the religious complex (called the Shikinen Zōei Mihashira Taisai). Why was Suwa Jinja’s festival chosen for inclusion? Significantly, the shrine’s principal deity, Takeminakata, is revered as the male god of hunting and agriculture and appears in the classical literary myth-history, the *Kojiki* (712), as the loser of a mythological strength contest that determined the fate of the archipelago and, for sumo devotees, marked the divine origins of Japanese sumo wrestling. According to the text, Takeminakata battled with the male divinity Takemikazuchi on the shores of Izumo (present-day Shimane prefecture) and the latter’s victory resulted in his usurpation of powers on the archipelago for his kin, the putative ancestors of the imperial line (Takeda [1977] 1996, p. 244; in English, see Philippi 1968, pp. 132–3). Defeated, Takeminakata fled to the Suwa Lake and

built his dwelling there after uprooting the local gods. Samurai and warlords, including the military ruler Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616), patronized Suwa Shrine in the medieval and early modern periods, as did the men of professional sumo from the early modern era. Installed within the shrine complex is a large bronze statue of the famous wrestler Raiden Tameemon (1767–1825) as well as a permanent earthen sumo ring.

The second act of the 1998 opening ceremony began with thirty-seven top-tier professional wrestlers parading in from the east and west outfitted in embroidered ceremonial apron-style belts (*keshō mawashi*). An elite referee (*gyōji*) led each side, cloaked in priestly vestments modeled on eighth-century styles and armed with a medieval-style military fan. The wrestlers mounted the stage as ushers called their names and then performed an abbreviated version of the ritual ring-entering ceremony (*dohyō iri*). The men slowly raised and clapped their hands to the sounds of wooden blocks and sumo's characteristic *yosedaiko* drum to (re)purify the space. The official media guide explained the style of entrance ceremony as an exceptionally rare arrangement reserved exclusively for imperial viewings by the Emperor or Crown Prince (NAOC, p. 25).

Once Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko took their seats in a south-facing Royal Box, the master of ceremonies (NHK's Isomura Hisanori) announced, "Akebono will henceforth drive away evil spirits." The *yokozuna* Akebono (given name Chad Rowan) moved to the center of the ring, his countenance frozen in a fierce expression. The near-naked giant wore a white rope brocade wrapped around his waist, the signature accoutrement of a grand champion which flaunts his godliness. With ritual precision, Akebono lifted his monstrous legs one at a time and forcefully stamped his feet (Figure 9). The audience chanted "Yoisho!" with each pound. The remainder of the program reenacted mythological episodes recorded in the *Kojiki*, with each episode presented on the sumo-ring stage. Framing the entire spectacle, the official media guide described sumo as Japan's "sacred sport" with "origins traceable back to Japanese mythology" (p. 24).

Academic literature is rich with claims of the importance of international mega-events like the Olympics, offering as they do a grandiose global stage to showcase a nation's cultural character and thereby secure or strengthen global footing (Roche 2000; Dinnie 2008; Guajardo 2016). Anyone familiar with Japan's national-cultural performances and discursive rhetoric knows well the central significance of religious tropes and themes in such theaters, most often some version (or vision) of Shinto. The 1998 Olympics opening ceremony in Nagano, like the Hasegawa mosaic, celebrates Japan's unique national character through the window of an imagined cultural tradition, Japanese sumo wrestling, that is traced back to the age of the gods. Professional sumo wrestlers served to embody that idealized ethos, yet a foreign-born man from Hawai'i (Akebono/Rowan) as protagonist was apparently not seen as contradictory. The spectacle of religio-cultural nationalism also served to reify a particular configuration of gender relations, with the hulking male sumo wrestlers doing much of the heavy lifting, or rather stomping. Only after the show had been "thoroughly tamed by the patriarchal control of almost every aspect of the ceremony," as Taeko Teshima and Andrew W. Jones aptly put it (Teshima and Jones 2011, p. 40), did female actors, including the all-important sun goddess Amaterasu, appear in the show.

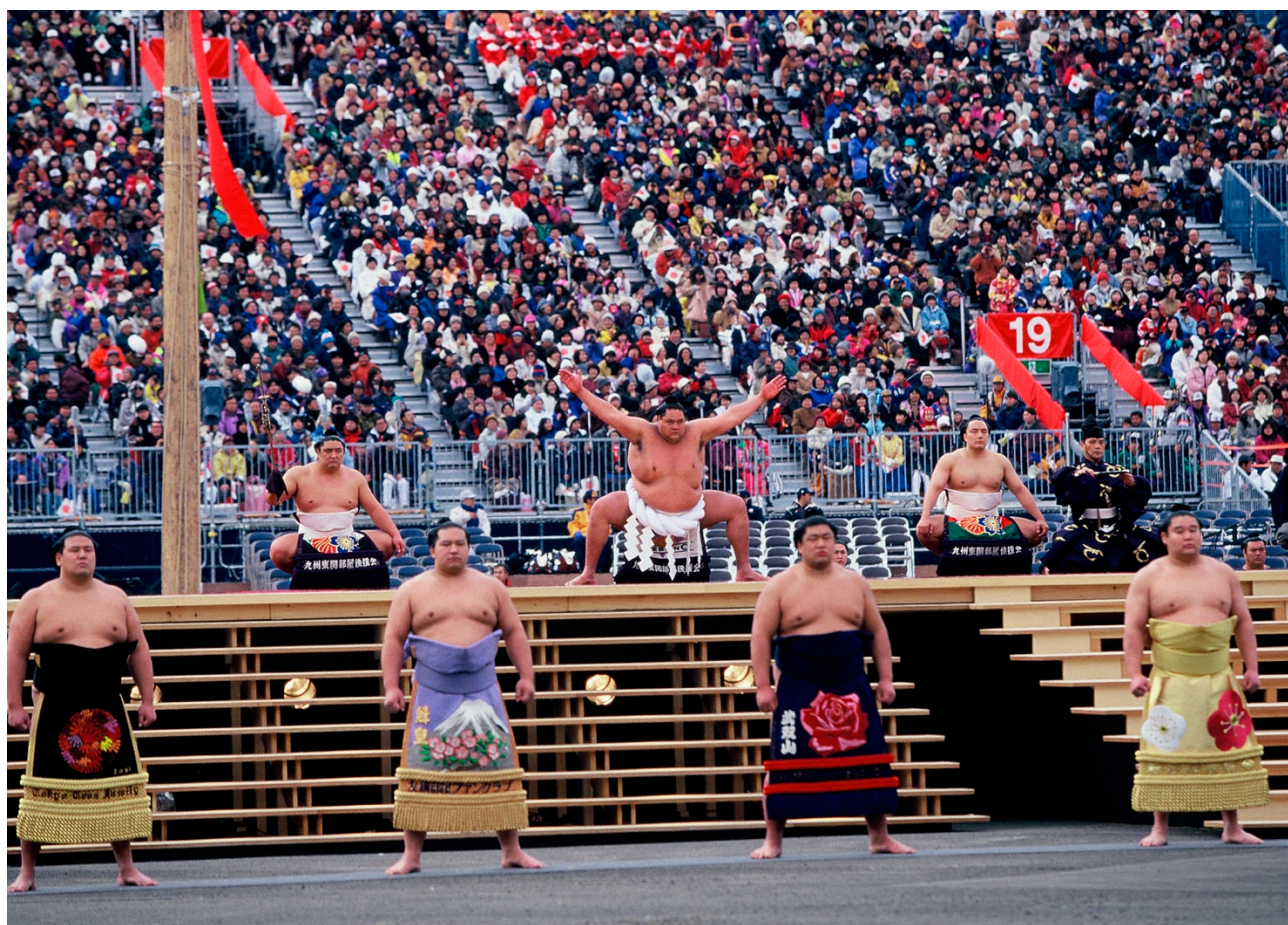


Figure 9. The *yokozuna* Akebono and professional sumo wrestlers performing at the opening ceremony of the XVIII Olympic Winter Games in Nagano, Japan, February 7, 1998. Reproduced with permission from Koji Aoki/AFLO SPORT; published by AFLO (image no. 4442718).

6. Enshrining the Olympic Male Sumo Wrestler

The medium differs but the message remains the same. Visit Sumo Shrine (Sumō Jinja) in Sakurai City, Nara prefecture, and you will find Hasegawa's 1964 mosaic version of Sukune etched onto a large stone stele at the entrance (Figure 10). His Olympic counterpart Nike has disappeared altogether, although the goddess' absence here is unsurprising given the context. Constructed in 2013 under circumstances to be described below, the monument pays homage to the Olympic male sumo wrestler and grants him an even more exalted status than the mosaic: here he takes the name "Holy Victory" (*shōri no sei*).

A large green banner advertising "The Birthplace of the National Sport" beckons passersby to the tiny plot of land (Figure 11), situated adjacent to the historic Anashi shrine complex and recognized today as an official auxiliary of it. That religious complex has, since the fifteenth century, consisted of three shrines accorded high ranks in registers from the Nara period (710–794): Anashinimasu Hyōzu Jinja, Makimukunimasu Wakamitama Jinja, and Anashi Daihyōzu Jinja. Apart from local lore, I have been unable to locate any historical connection between the Anashi shrine complex and sumo wrestling or Sukune predating the modern period. Local people in the Izumo area of Sakurai, Nara prefecture, honor as Sukune's grave a small stone pagoda thought to be from the Kamakura period (1192–1333). The pagoda stands today roughly five kilometers to the southwest of the Anashi complex on the grounds of the small shrine Jūnibashira Jinja, apparently moved from a rice field some 150 m to the south in 1883.



Figure 10. Stone stele “Holy Victory” featuring Hasegawa’s Nomi no Sukune at Sumo Shrine in Sakurai, Nara. Reproduced with permission from Seimenjo; published by photolibrary.jp (image no. 6130075) (accessed on 28 August 2021).



Figure 11. Entrance to Sumo Shrine, Sakurai City, Nara. Reproduced with permission from 1971; published by photolibrary.jp (image no. 5402901) (accessed on 28 August 2021).

The Sumo Association directly patronizes Sumo Shrine and played a key role in its 1962 consecration. Yasuda Yojūrō (1910–1981), a Sakurai native whose writings figured

prominently in the Japanese Romantic Movement of the 1930s (and drew wide rebuke postwar for their polemical tone and fascist rhetoric), served as the driving force behind the shrine's creation. Yasuda and local officials banded together in 1961 to repair the Anashi shrine complex, as it was badly damaged during WWII, and at the same time to revive interest in the shrine and revitalize the struggling rural economy. In collaboration with Sumo Association executives and advisors, the men's plan came to fruition in the autumn of 1962.²² Along with aiding in the planning and financing of the endeavor, the Sumo Association dispatched every single executive and top-tier professional sumo wrestler, including two grand champions, to the October 6 inauguration of Sumo Shrine. A crowd reported to exceed 100,000 gathered for the event. The two *yokozuna*, Taihō and Kashiwado, performed a ring-entering ceremony, and all the men of professional sumo bowed before a small wooden shrine and offered prayers to their deified forefather Sukune ([Sakurai City Public Relations 2020](#), p. 5).

Fast forward fifty years, and local officials seeking to reinvigorate Sumo Shrine and its surrounding municipalities devised a plan to relocate Hasegawa's mosaic panel and permanently install it on the shrine grounds. In that effort they failed, but the campaign secured enough funds to commission a two-and-a-half-meter tall stone stele engraved with the Sukune portion of the mosaic. An estimated seven-hundred guests attended the stele's 2013 unveiling, among them members of the Hasegawa family and various active and retired professional wrestlers. Hakkaku, then serving as a Sumo Association executive, delivered a sentimental speech before pulling away a white curtain to reveal the monument. (Hakkaku became chairman of the Sumo Association in 2015 and remains in that role today.) To drive home the history to the participants, the ceremony took place on July 7 (i.e., seventh month, seventh day), a symbolic date chosen to match the date of the *Nihon shoki* entry on Sukune's violent dispatching of Kehaya—even if historically inaccurate, as in the premodern calendar that date would have fallen in the month of August. The *Nara shinbun* hailed the affair as Sukune's "homecoming" ([Nara shinbun 2013](#)).

The message communicated at Sumo Shrine, nestled within the Yamato Basin with its trove of prehistoric ruins and cultic sites, is crystal clear even without Nike. The Greek goddess' absence may transmit the dispatch all the more clearly. That is, sumo wrestling is a timeless and changeless Japanese affair crafted by and for men-cum-gods, beginning with the legendary Sukune and continuing in an unbroken chain with today's professional wrestlers. As Yasuda reflected in a 1963 commemorative booklet:

Sumo's mythical origins first appear in the "land-ceding" tales [of the *Kojiki*] at the time of the heavenly ancestors' descent, and they reappear in the national history in the context of a sumo match viewed by the ruler. Local people have long regarded these grounds as the historic ruins of "Ketayakeshi" (lit., "extinguishing" [*keshi*] on the "ring" [*kataya*]), where the sovereign ruler (*tennō*) beheld a sumo match, thus we erect here a modest and pleasing shrine. Far from a simple combat technique, sumo, the national sport, constitutes a kami ritual . . . a sacred affair performed in an agrarian nation to quell evil spirits. Successive generations of national histories, beginning with the *Nihon shoki*, clearly articulate sumo's origins and purpose as such. ([Yasuda 1988](#), pp. 299–302)

The Sumo Association's constructed ties with various other esteemed sites throughout the archipelago dedicated to Sukune similarly reify that vision. In Tatsuno City, Hyogo prefecture, for instance, professional sumo referees donated a stone fence to enclose a mound of earth purported to be Sukune's grave and on it etched the names of eighty-four professional wrestlers from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century ([Hyogo Prefectural Museum of History 2007](#)). The shrine Jōgū Tenmangū in Osaka also claims to be Sukune's final resting place. There, professional wrestlers funded the construction of a stone fence to line his alleged tomb and on it carved wrestlers' names and records of modern sumo events. The Sumo Association even maintains its own religious site, Nomi no Sukune Jinja (est. 1884; [Figure 12](#)), in Tokyo near their headquarters and the so-called spiritual home of sumo, an indoor arena called the Ryōgoku Kokugikan. Professional sumo wrestler

Takasago Uragorō, founder of the Takasago stable (i.e., training quarters), established the shrine in 1884 on the grounds of a former feudal lord's residence ([Bēsubōru Magajinsha 2017](#), p. 11). These narratives and histories execute their power by reinforcing a perception of continuity between the deep past, selectively imagined, and modern professional sumo, all to great effect. They may be understood as a strong force in allowing the ring ban to persist.

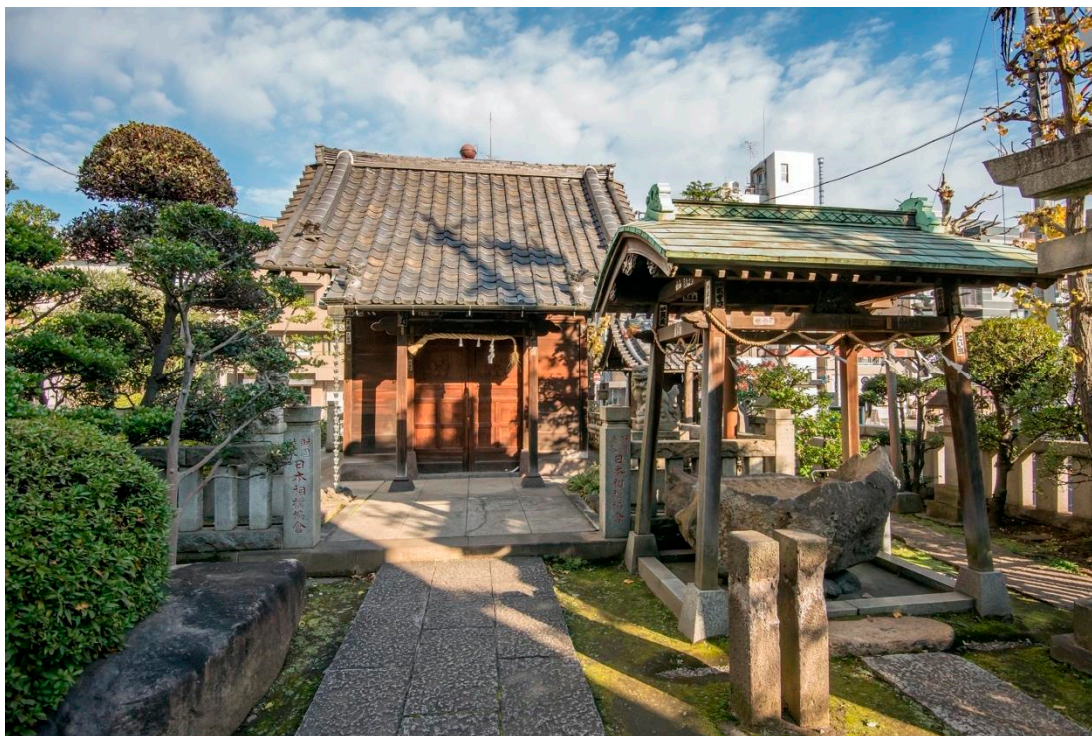


Figure 12. Nomi no Sukune Jinja, Tokyo. Reproduced with permission from Seimenjo; published by photolibrary.jp (image no. 5388785) (accessed on 28 August 2021).

7. Entering the Ring

For most ordinary people, the word sumo evokes an image that blurs myth and reality, melds past and present, and assuredly takes the form of an enormous Japanese man. Indeed, why should it not? The forces that be in professional sumo have carefully and painstakingly nurtured that vision for more than two centuries now, and these men have had generous help. Powerful statesmen validate and champion their cause. Male intellectuals and popular authors romanticize and dignify the sumo wrestler in the firm ground of the written word. Male journalists popularize and elevate the “embodied lives” ([Akanuma 2010](#), p. 2) of professional sumo wrestlers (see [Plugh 2018](#) for a study of contemporary representations). To this list we add the innumerable and ever-loyal supporters and fans who live in the self-styled “sumo world” (*kakukai*), kneeling at the altar of sumo tradition and eagerly consuming its semi-fictitious and always gendered narratives. When women do appear within the mainstream sumo narrative, either as female deities positioned above the ring (typically a nondescript goddess known primarily through her defining attribute of jealousy toward women) or as real women positioned below and outside of the ring, they are never on equal footing with men.

With the above we have stepped into the ring and begun to grapple with its gender problem, replete with hypocrisies and idiosyncrasies, alongside the equally vexatious narratives of tradition, nation, and history that foster it. As if piloting Nike’s chariot himself, the Olympic male sumo wrestler drives home a message of sumo’s sacred status and exclusive maleness, a message wrought by and well-suited to the patriarchal social structures

and male prerogatives that steer the nation. Whether coin, medal, mosaic, monument, or living man, he stands as an object lesson in the power of “manful assertions” (Roper and Tosh 1991, p. 1) and their political and ideological uses when it comes to producing and maintaining authority, asserting cultural identity, and naturalizing masculine domination (Bourdieu 2001). In these capacities, and others to be detailed in the subsequent publications of this project, the Olympic male sumo wrestler teaches us about the female taboo in professional sumo—how it has survived more than forty years of objections, and why it might very well continue for another forty years, if not more.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ “Sumo Wrestler Plays All the Sports in France TV’s Tokyo Olympics Spot,” *The Daily Brief*, Promax, May 21, 2021, <https://brief.promax.org/article/sumo-wrestler-plays-all-the-sports-in-france-tvs-tokyo-olympics-spot> (accessed on 28 August 2021).
- ² “Orinpikku e no torikumi: Ōzumō Tōkyō 2020 Orinpikku Pararinpikku basho,” Nihon Sumō Kyōkai, <https://www.sumo.or.jp/Efforts/olympic/> (accessed 20 May 2021).
- ³ The Japan Sumo Federation (JSAF; Kōeki Zaidanhōjin Nihon Sumō Renmei, est. 1946), aiming to make sumo an official sport of the Olympics, established an affiliate federation in 1996, the Osaka-based New Sumo League (Shin Sumō Remmei), to develop and promote women’s sumo. The JSAF apparently selected the word “new” in the title, rather than “women’s” or “girls” in order to skirt the negative image associated with the mixed-gender wrestling shows of the Edo period (Ikkai 2010). The organization was renamed as Japan Women’s Sumo Federation (Nihon Joshi Sumō Renmei) in 2007. In 1997, Japan hosted its first national competition for women, and the inaugural international women’s competition took place in Germany in 1999. On contemporary women’s sumo (see Pauly 2008; Shimokawa et al. 1999, esp. pp. 82–88; Ikkai 2010; Gilbert and Watts 2014, esp. pp. 171–73). On the successful refashioning of judo, another male-dominated Japanese sport, as an Olympic discipline in 1964, see Niehaus (2006).
- ⁴ The term sumo designates a rich variety of stylized wrestling forms with a provenance that extends over several millennia and spans multiple continents. Professional sumo refers specifically to the Japanese sport organized and managed by the Japan Sumo Association, since 2014 a Public Interest Incorporated Juridical Person (Kōeki Zaidan Hōjin) operating under the nominal supervision of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (Monbukagakushō, or MEXT).
- ⁵ Stage names and name changes are standard in professional sumo. Most professional wrestlers adopt ring names imbued with mythical symbolism (*shikona*) as they rise through the ranks. High-ranking wrestlers who become Sumo Association elders (*toshiyori*) after retirement typically assume the name associated with the “stock” they acquire or inherit. Elders hold equal shares of the organization (105 in total), which function like stock holdings. These men control all facets of the profitmaking Japanese sport. On the complex and secretive elder system, see West (1997, 2005).
- ⁶ *Yokozuna* (lit., “horizontal rope”) refers to the highest rank in professional sumo and takes its name from the white woven rope that adorns the waist of a grand champion wrestler. Modeled on hemp ropes or twisted rice straws used for ritual purification at shrines (*shimenawa*), the rope functions to visually distinguish the wrestler as a sacred being. On the late-nineteenth-century invention of the *yokozuna* system, see Thompson (1998).
- ⁷ “Kyōkai kara no oshirase: Rijichō danwa,” Nihon Sumō Kyōkai, <http://www.sumo.or.jp/IrohaKyokaiInformation/detail?id=268> (accessed 20 May 2021).
- ⁸ A Google Scholar search reveals thousands of instances of the phrase “gender problem.” In the Japanese context, the phrase appears in, e.g., Hara 2004; and *Asahi shinbun* 2021b.
- ⁹ Apologies in Japan are often given as a prerequisite for avoiding formal penalty. Gender conservatives rallied to Mori’s defense. Takasu Katsuya, for instance, a cosmetic surgeon known for his public denial of military sexual slavery in the Japanese colonies Imperial Japan and of the Nanjing Massacre, expressed sympathy for the aged Mori on Twitter and reminded his followers that the Olympics were originally prohibited to women (Riaru Raibu 2021).
- ¹⁰ In addition to six official sumo tournaments (*honbasho*), the Sumo Association organizes provincial tours (*jungyō*) each season which fan out all across the Japanese archipelago.
- ¹¹ The two women who took action, later identified as nurses, chose to remain anonymous. Independently, (Mr.) Dr. Ōfusa Yukihiro of the Japanese Society of Emergency Medicine and Director of Anesthesiology Department, Showa Inan General

- Hospital, a CPR expert, chose to analyze videos of the incident and evaluated the action of the women as a “perfect” first response (Kinkōzan 2018).
- 12 The most popular videos of the incident have for reasons unknown been removed from YouTube. At the time of writing (July 2021), the following link remained active: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpAMLJBfP8g&ab_channel=Throlouldabc (accessed on 28 August 2021).
- 13 A video of the speech can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GW_YZOwlOI8 (accessed on 28 August 2021). For a transcript of Nakagawa’s speech, see *Mainichi shinbun* (2018a).
- 14 “I spoke out on behalf of my fellow mayor friends,” he later reflected (*Nikkan Sports* 2018a). Not all male mayors showed the same courtesy, however. When the tour appeared in Kakegawa City, Shizuoka prefecture on April 9, Mayor Matsui Saburo opened his speech by stating, “I’m very grateful to be permitted to stand in the ring . . . I’ll do my best not to collapse, but if I do there are male doctors nearby.” In response to charges that his statement was inappropriate, the mayor claimed that he had been “really nervous” but that he had “no awareness whatsoever” about what happened in Maizuru (*Sankei shinbun* 2018).
- 15 The design, created by Greek artist Elena Votsi for the 2004 Athens Games, drew inspiration from the famous marble statue carved by Paionios in the fifth century BC and offered as a war trophy to Zeus, the supreme deity of Mount Olympus (Fasel 2016).
- 16 “Tokyo 2020 Olympic Medal Design,” The Tokyo Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games, 2020, <https://olympics.com/tokyo-2020/en/games/olympics-medals-design/> (accessed on 20 May 2021).
- 17 On the exclusion of women from the ancient Olympic Games, see Patay-Horváth (2017), Mouratidis (1984). Patay-Horváth urges us to think of the strict male-only rule at Olympia as a vestige of hunting cults there dedicated to the goddess Artemis that predated the cult of Zeus and the Olympic Games. He bases this provocative speculation on evidence from the Artemis cult site at Ephesia, and from global research on the rituals and taboos of hunting cultures, especially those related to the avoidance of menstrual blood and sexual intercourse as necessary conditions for successful hunts. Lore of jealous female deities whose proper supplication entails the complete avoidance of women circulates in the Japanese archipelago as well, especially associated with mountainous hunting cultures, and proponents of sumo’s female taboo frequently cite that lore. Mouratidis, in contrast, traces the female taboo to the figure of Herakles, the hero-athlete turned divinity around whom worship cults developed prior to the introduction of Zeus at Olympia. Mouratidis additionally implicates pre-Hellenic cults to the goddess Artemis, pointing out that the only real woman permitted to observe the games was the priestess of Demeter Chamy who, according to the author, assumed Artemis’s primary functions as a fertility and vegetation goddess. We learn from Mouratidis that earlier scholars interpreted the gender ban as an effort to protect warriors and heroes from having their energy diminished by the distracting powers of women (Gardiner [1910] 2016; Farnell [1921] 2017). The parallels between the Greek and Japanese exclusionary logics and their prominent tropes will be revisited in more depth in a separate publication.
- 18 Paionios’ Nike, a marble statue rising more than two meters tall, was situated thirty meters to the east of the Temple of Zeus façade, erected atop an eight-and-a-half-meter tall marble pillar. Art historians typically date the statue to ca. 420 BC (Barringer 2015, p. 32).
- 19 “Kokuritsu kyōgijō kinen medaru jun kinmedaru (Dai),” Japan National Stadium, <https://kokuritsu-official-store.com/items/60efe3e1053624633ec45829> (accessed 7 September 2021). The large-size medallion carries a price tag of 1,089,000 yen (more than 8000 euros).
- 20 Hasegawa, a celebrated Japanese artist and fashion historian known for his religious paintings of Christian themes (Hasegawa was Catholic), is attributed with formally introducing fresco and mosaic techniques to Japan. While honing his artistic skills in Europe, Hasegawa copied Buddhist mural fragments collected by the Berlin expeditions to Central Asia, in particular murals from the Kizil caves along the Silk Road. (National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, Tokyo 2019; SANPAOLO [Sei Pauro Shūdōkai Sanpauro] and Mizuno 2017).
- 21 Bolitho (1988, pp. 17–18); adapted from (Aston [1896] 1972, p. 173). The full text of the *Shoki shūge* (30 vols.) version of the *Nihon shoki*, written by Kawamura Hidene and printed by Ritsuanzō in 1785, accompanied by Aston’s English translation, can be found online at <https://jhiti.berkeley.edu> (accessed on 28 August 2021) courtesy of the University of California at Berkeley’s Japanese Historical Text Initiative.
- 22 Sumo Association Chairman Tokitsukaze (the former *yokozuna* Futabayama), director Hidenoyama (the former upper-division wrestler Takagiyama), and two members of the Yokozuna Deliberation Council (Yokozuna Shingi Iinkai), right-wing figures Miura Giichi and Ozaki Shiro. The Yokozuna Deliberation Council, established in 1950, is a group of roughly ten high-profile laypeople with an understanding of sumo (e.g., writers, celebrities, academics) who independently advise the Sumo Association on the promotion and retirement of *yokozuna*.

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