

Fieldwork in Japan: An Encounter with Japan's Big Boys

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It was unusually warm, that May day in Tokyo, when I set out looking for the sumo wrestling *heya* (training house) in which I hoped to do my fieldwork. My supervisor, Professor Yoshio Onuki, and I had met earlier at his University of Tokyo office. After pin-pointing issues and working out strategies, we set off for one of the forty-three *heya* which then made up the sumo world. We wanted to talk an *oyakata* (sumo master) into allowing the fieldwork - so I could collect detailed data (on everyday life, social relations, organization, rituals etc.) in situ.

At about 6:00 pm., our train passed above the *Kokugikan* (the National Stadium - the home of Japanese sumo) and got out at *Hirai* station. A middle-aged man was waiting for us at the exit. Immediately the section on courtesy from my Japanese textbook flashed through my mind. I had anticipated this meeting - I was ready! But Professor Onuki nudged me a discrete warning that my bows and greetings were just a bit over the top! This was not our man after-all. No, this was the *oyakata*' calligraphy teacher and he was only going to take us to the *heya*.

On the way Professor Onuki - thank Heavens he was with me - suggested we stop at a liquor store to pick up a present for the *oyakata*. Inside he asked the woman for *Sake* or *Shochu*. "Because the sumo world is very traditional and the customs must be respected" he explained. "For the *oyakata*, you said?" The shopkeeper had overheard. "*Sake*? No way! *Mateus Rose* for him!" She obviously knew what

she was talking about and Mr. Suzuki, the calligraphy teacher, nodded his agreement. Put firmly in our places and clutching three bottles of Portuguese wine we made our gateway. Just a few meters further on we came to a three-stored white-washed building. This, Mr. Suzuki assured us, was the *heya*. I say 'assured' because of our incredulous looks. We were astounded. This ordinary building? Hidden away in this little back street? Groaning inwardly, I tried not to let my crumbling images spoil my optimism. At least this was where I would have the wonderful opportunity of learning how the mythical Japanese sumo wrestlers live and how they have survived and preserved their tradition against increasing westernization.

We entered by a side door. A huge plank, hanging vertically to the left, announced in Chinese characters: "Michinoku-beya ("the school of Michinoku"). This was more like it! The name was exotic enough to conjure up images of Indiana Jones in the mind of any anthropologist: "michi (earth) and "oku" (depth). As the evening closed in the whole place took on a mysterious gloom. I could just make out the *dohyo* (training area) - the ring made of rice straw, the central stake decorated with sacred white paper, salt scattered over the clay surface. There was a little shrine on the wall. Excellent! I noticed a light on in one of the adjoining rooms. But there was no time to think about that before a young *sumotori* (sumo wrestler) indicated that the master's place was on the third floor. In spite of the western-style track suit I recognized the *sumotori* by his *chonmage* (topknot) like the ones I'd seen

on TV so often. Eventually my curiosity got the better of me and I stopped to have a closer look at the *dohyo*. But imagine my astonishment when, in a nearby room I spotted two western faces, cheeks bulging with broiled fish. Then this was not the virgin, untouched and completely Japanese world that I had hoped for. So where were Malinowski and his “paradise community” now?

However the looks of tranquillity on their faces, as they wielded the chopsticks like experts, told me that as far as they were concerned, this was all perfectly normal. “Where are you from?” one of them asked nonchalantly. “From . . . from Spain.” “Ah sos de España...? (you’re from Spain...?), nosotros somos Argentinos... (we’re Argentinians...).” So instead of finding the heart of the “real Japan” here I was, talking in my native language with these two guys dressed in *yukata*. Their bulk and oily topknots, perfumed with *binzuke* made it all totally surrealistic. “Argentinos?” I checked again just in case it was a dream. “Yes, both of us, from Buenos Aires,” they assured me, continuing to gobble the fish as if nothing were wrong. I felt that I was the only “Martian” in the place.

But the funniest thing was their *shikona* (fighting names) written in Chinese characters on one of the *dohyo* walls: *Hoshi-tango* (star of the tango) and *Hoshi-andesu* (star of the Andes) - “Tango” and “Andesu” for short. Later I would find out that ceremonial *shikona* generally used by the wrestlers are often related to a mountain, a river or something distinctive from their native province. The prefix “*hoshi*” (star) came from the name of

the master (*Hoshi Kabuto*) who had accepted them as apprentices and who we hoped to talk to. This ingenious choice of names gave Professor Onuki the idea of calling me *Hoshi no furamenko* (Star of the flamenco) to get me off to a good start. This anecdote was enjoyed by everyone in the department at the University since it’s also the title of a Japanese hit song.

In the meantime the wrestler who had gone upstairs told us the master wasn’t ready yet. He suggested we go to the *nomiya* (Japanese bar) across the street and wait there until he came. This we did. After taking off our shoes and stepping up onto the *tatami* (rush mats) we sat around an old dark wooden table. The bar was run by the *oyakata*’s wife so they already knew about us. Almost as soon as we finished greeting the *okamisan* (the *oyakata*’s wife), her sister and her mother the door opened again. It was him! At last, the *oyakata*, the master who as mentor would help open the door to the exclusive and hermetic sumo world. He was about sixty, tall and still well-built with a rather hangdog, poker-face expression. He didn’t look at me or anyone for that matter. He didn’t talk. And if anything did escape his mouth it seemed to cost him an enormous effort. I wanted to run away or call home and tell them to throw away all the travel guides and embassy pamphlets which claimed that the “real” and “true” Japanese have the most sophisticated forms of etiquette in the world.

As introductions and *meishi* (business cards) were exchanged I saw my chances of backtracking to do fieldwork on farmers fade away. Professor Onuki and Mr. Suzuki did what they could to draw some conversation from him. Amidst his: mmm...ahahs...ees the *Mateus* was presented. He appeared to ignore

it. The three of us were in *seiza* (kneeling in the most ceremonial greeting position) and were invited to relax only after our legs had turned to logs. We weren't, of course, in the presence of one of those benevolent martial arts masters like in David Carradine's movies. "*Kakko wa dame da*" ("no show-offs") which he shortened to a kind of repetitive, multilingual "*kakko...no, kakko...no*" were the only words he addressed to me the whole evening.

I hadn't been talked to in such impolite Japanese before (well, except at the immigration office, of course). It would take some time before I would understand his rude manners. So I decided not to let them worry me. Later I was to visit him in hospital where he was being treated for a stroke. The nurses and doctors were complaining about his naughty attitude. "Naturally," the *okamisan* commented quietly to me at the time, "he has given orders and reprimands all his life. He just doesn't know how to talk to those outside the sumo world." I suddenly felt petty as I realized how difficult that first meeting must have been for him. He had been brought up, as all *rikishi* (wrestlers), in a highly ranked world where he saw reality as a ladder and he occupied one of the top rungs.

Equality in the sumo world is unknown. Superiority vs. inferiority is the lever that drives the wrestlers lives and forms the basis of social relations. So it would be impossible for this man to speak to me in a neutral way. Sometimes, in fact, I had the feeling I was talking with a *yakuza*. The rigid sumo hierarchical structure with its related values closely matches the *yakuza* groups as described by other anthropologists. The sense of personal dignity and 'face-saving' are shared by both groups. Besides, many *heya* and *rikishi* have

been financially supported by *yakuza* members through their fan clubs and as individual patrons. I myself would have some encounters with the *yakuza* underworld while taking part in several sumo ceremonies and parties.

I would learn by experience that communication goes in one direction only from top to bottom, and that it is impossible to try to exchange ideas. I was also to notice that most of the troubles I experienced in my relationships with the *heya* members began by my more or less horizontal and egalitarian view of the world. I didn't want to be called "*sensei*" (teacher) or to be elevated to the status of "*okyakusan*" (honorable guest) with all its prerogatives. At the beginning whenever I tried to help with meal preparation or the daily shopping I would be stopped by "*oyakata ni okorareru*" ("if I let you do it the *oyakata* will scold me"). However, since I had so little to offer they gradually allowed me to do more things and my chances of interaction increased, especially in the out-of-Tokyo tournaments where lodging and maintenance conditions meant that they appreciated extra hands.

Sometimes this wish to participate as an equal in their tasks was to take on unexpected, even painful, forms. Apart from making and organizing my fieldnotes, planning interviews and taking photos, attending early morning *keiko* (sumo training) and going to the stadium at noon, I helped them in the kitchen cutting vegetables and washing pots, setting tables and getting gas cookers ready for patrons and *koenkai* (fans), sweeping tatami and taking out the garbage on icy nights. The result of all this was a cold. A young trainee gave me some little bags of magic powder

which were not “so strong” for them, but for me, well, it zapped my cold in a few hours.

With all these activities many contradictions would become apparent. For example, sometimes I would do the serving. Gradually I became aware of the hierarchy present everywhere and at all times - in getting up in the morning, bathing, having meals. And I was breaking their points of reference because I did not fit onto any rung of the ladder. I had no recognizable function in their vertical relations system. Firstly, I could not participate as a wrestler because of size and weight differences. This I found out the hard way, within the first few months, in what some of my colleagues would no doubt call my first “rite of passage” in the field. Unexpectedly, I had a 160 kg mountain of flesh and bones land on me. A dull cracking sound rent the air as one or two ribs broke. So what for them was a career, for me could only be something to observe and write about in relative safety. I couldn't be a patron either. And this, together with becoming an *okamisan* (wife of an *oyakata*) was the only way to get into the sumo world from outside. I would sometimes contribute small presents, but becoming a patron of the *heya* or of a particular wrestler was out of the question both academically and financially. So with no particularly identifiable role I was becoming less and less noticeable. I'm sure I was considered a minor misfortune, something that couldn't be helped. Gradually they stopped thinking it strange to have me sharing their *furo* (Japanese bath), each day, putting out my futon next to theirs or just playing baseball video games with them at nights. Finally, one day, something occurred which made me feel as though I've definitely been accepted as a member of the group.

It was at a *senshuraku* (sumo party) where I unexpectedly found myself holding two bottles of beer. A very high ranking wrestler had given them to me and told me follow him. While he served the beer to patrons and other important guests I tagged along behind him bringing refills as the bottles ran out. I had seen this kind of behavior at parties before - I was being treated like a “*tsukibito*” (attendant wrestler). Good start, I thought ironically. What surprised me most was that although this might have seemed strange to some of those present, neither the wrestler, the *oyakata* or the *okamisan* considered it odd. But it would take more than two years to get that far. It certainly was not the case that day in May when I sat in the bar, a gigantic wrestler on my right and a bad-tempered *oyakata* on my left. And to top it all off, Mr. Suzuki kept eyeing me with some amazement. Was I eating *sashimi*, *chawanmushi*, *nattô* and other typical Japanese foods? He often stopped in the middle of a sentence with “*yappari, omowazu eigo ga detekichau*” (“English words keep flitting through my mind”) thinking it odd to be talking in Japanese to a *gaijin* (foreigner).

At that first meeting nobody had really understood what was what. Personally I had the world upside-down. I couldn't explain the contradictory impressions that followed one after another. For example how was it that massive “*sekitori*” (high ranking wrestler) of thirty-three could look like a child. In fact, just like a child, he had been a little detached, saying almost nothing. If someone spoke to him he nodded his head, laughing noisily with his mouth full as if devouring the food would ease the situation. All kinds of dishes passed in front of his innocent face that night: ham with green

asparagus, a bowl of sliced porked ears, all varieties of *sashimi* - squid, red fish, octopus, sea urchin, colored shells and many other delicacies... When a bowl containing a dozen pork's paws passed Professor Onuki lunged for ward and miraculously got one before the wrestler could reduce the lot to bones. As in Rome I did the same. He (the wrestler) was sitting on my right occupying one whole edge of the table. Taking the hint from Professor Onuki I served him beer. [You are not supposed to serve yourself in Japanese social etiquette. Another person should do this. Bottles allow better socializing and communicating, that is why they haven't been replaced by cans in this country.] Usually the person who begins to serve is the lowest status - women serve men, employees serve bosses, students serve professors... and anthropologists serve natives. Glasses are usually left half full to suggest the wish to go on drinking. But that evening, as soon as I had poured out I had to fill the glass again because he drank it up so quickly. Like magic! Little did I realize that in less than two years he would succeed as master with all the responsibility of the *heya*.

While all this was happening, the *oyakata* finally gave in to the greater temptation for something Portuguese. A porcelain glass decorated with green and red Chinese motifs was brought to him. Obviously it was his favorite glass for drinking rose. The atmosphere, that late at night, had become quite jovial and drunken. The wrestler had gone to bed since it was a tournament period and he had to fight next day. So the *oyakata*'s wife took his place. She was a cheerful, thickset woman of forty-odd with short curly hair, whose only makeup was lipstick. After complementing my Japanese (a really Japanese thing to do when talking

to foreigners) she asked me straight out if I liked "*geisha*-girls". My beer-befuddled brain softened what, coming from a Catholic country, I might have thought an impertinent question. "If you are supposed to live with us," she argued, "this is an important matter." And I should have considered it more seriously. Because later I would find myself in unexpected "field experiences" that were very hard to explain theoretically and tough to justify to my wife. But that's another story. That night, of course, ended with *karaoke*. I realized that knowing how to sing *karaoke* was going to be indispensable to my fieldwork. So later I set myself the homework of learning the hit parade songs, and it was worth the effort. But luckily, that evening, singing "*bésame mucho*" was okay because the words were put up on the video. Actually our biggest problem was trying to get the mike from Prof. Onuki. After "*quizás, quizás, quizás*" he entertained us with some Japanese songs and finally rounded off with two Korean numbers. Then everyone started singing *enka* (Japanese songs). The few remaining clients "the same old ones," said the *okamisan*, ended up fighting for the mike. We were all pretty far gone by then and finally everyone pitched in to get the *oyakata* out of the bar.

One of the clients especially, attracted my attention. He looked as if he had just stepped out of a nineteenth century Madrid backstreet - white cloth cap, white trousers and shoes with a grey checked jacket. I thought he had escaped a *zarzuela* operetta. I was just about to ask him where he left the barrel organ when another cloth cap appeared at the door. The whole *zarzuela* troupe, I thought? Wrong. He was the taxi driver called by the *okamisan* to take us home.