Ritual and Cosmology in Sumo

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There are two levels of sports that we should take into consideration: the physical level, and the cultural level. The cultural level is heavily conditioned by cultural context, while the physical level is dominated by power and strength.

Sport as human activity can be defined by the way it uses the body as a sign of power that exceeds human control. It is for this reason that sports in many cultures are charged with mythical and cosmological symbolism: and these elements are expressed through the theatricalization of the sports events.

As in Korea, sumo (Japanese wrestling) has remained one of the most popular sports throughout the various social strata in Japan. There are two main forms of sumo:

1) Sumo as a courtritual. As a form of ritual, sumo seems to have developed in north–east Asia, and was transmitted to Japan in the eighth century by an exiled Korean prince. It can be seen from a painting on the rock wall of an underground cave that wrestling in North Korea was a cosmological ritual that was explained by use of the I–Ching. This apparently provided the principle for the construction of the mound on which sumo wrestlers fight.

2) Sumo as a village ritual. In folk culture, villagers used to organize sports events as a means of divination for the coming year's harvest. In this context, tug-of-wars, archery, archery on horseback, and wrestling were perhaps the most popular sports. These games were based on a cosmological dualism that reflects a mythical antagonism between mountain and river, heaven and earth, and upper and lower.

Apart from these two levels of sumo, between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries sumo developed as an urban entertainment. Sumo and kabuki (an urban theater also developed in the 17th–19th centuries) have many elements in common, including costume, the pathway to the stage area, and so on. As kabuki is considered an art of specific stylized movements, so sumo also is explained in terms of 48 different styles of winning. Furthermore, sumo and kabuki are
founded on the idea that divine will is expressed by, and power is manifested in, the most refined style of performance and aesthetic accomplishment.

In these ways, sports can be identified with theatre. And while in general sports express cosmic antagonisms and the uncertainty in these antagonisms, they find solutions to these general uncertainties in specific ways that are culturally defined.