

## Column 1

# Bullfighting on Tokunoshima Island

On Tokunoshima Is., which is the second largest island in Amami Archipelago, one of the most popular forms of entertainment is bullfighting. Bullfighting is prevalent in several societies in East and Southeast Asia, such as Okinawa Is. (Okinawa Prefecture), Oki Is. (Shimane Prefecture), Yamakoshi (Niigata Prefecture), and Uwajima (Ehime Prefecture) in Japan; Cheonju (Gyeongsan Bukdo) and Jinju (Gyeongsan Namdo) in Korea; and Jinhua (Zhejiang Province) in China. In addition, bullfighting featuring water buffalos is held in some areas in Vietnam and Chinese Guizhou Province, primarily by minorities such as Miaos. A common yet remarkable kind of bullfighting is when two bulls fight each other in a stadium or an open space, in contrast to bullfighting in Western Europe, where a bull and a human fight (ISHIKAWA 2009).

Generally speaking, societies that host bullfighting in Asia are located in relatively remote areas from the center of each nationwide administration network. Thus, it can be assumed that bullfighting may have been a type of survival technique, which was more widespread in East and Southeast Asia at one time. If it is true, today's bullfighting can be viewed from the standpoint of diffusionism which tries to clarify the origin and route of diffusion historically. However, as an expanded discussion of bullfighting is beyond the scope of this essay, only the current status of bullfighting on Tokunoshima Is., based on my field research data, is presented.

### Detail of bullfighting

On Tokunoshima Is., approximately 20 bullfighting tournaments are held every year. Each tournament consists of around 10 matches, and adult ticket prices for a tournament are JPY ¥3,000.

Among these tournaments, championships for zento-ichi (No. 1 in the whole island) are regarded by the local people as the most spectacular matches, and because earning the zento-ichi championship flag is the most authoritative and prestigious reward

for every bull owner, it can be said that they raise and train bulls for this occasion.

No special breed of bulls is required for bullfighting, but wagyu (Japanese cattle), which are mainly utilized for meat, or its hybrid, called F1 by locals, are interbred with a larger breed such as Holstein. Basically, they select and purchase a male calf after determining its skill in bullfighting, and then raise and train it for competitions. This is in contrast to other calves' general fate, which is to be castrated and raised for beef to provide the owner with some income. Even though bull owners receive performance fees from the local association of bullfighting when they send bulls that have no record of victory or defeat to tournaments, it is not worth their effort to train a strong bull.

When a bull acquires a higher status, such as zento-ichi champion, the owner generally serves a large feast at his/her house, inviting numerous guests to celebrate the bull's victory. On the contrary, when the bull is not as strong as the owner wishes for his bull to be, or it becomes too seriously injured to recover in a match, the owner may decide to abandon it; in reality it will be sold very inexpensively to a trader as beef cattle, as bull meat is so tough that it can only be used after processing.

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Photo: A champion bull on Tokunoshima Is. (Oct. 2005).

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Participating in bullfighting is exhausting on many fronts. It is very clear that the bull owners' passion for bullfighting is not derived from economic gain but from social and cultural elements such as prestige. A local informant contended that owning a strong bull was essential for a man on Tokunoshima Is. to be recognized as "successful" by others. Even if this opinion may seem a bit of an exaggeration, it can be considered as one of their typical ideas about bullfighting.

In addition, some local informants agreed that bullfighting can have a preventative effect for the under-populated island of Tokunoshima, where no universities and few workplaces exist. Many young people leave the island at age 18, but some return later to participate in bullfighting, which they have often dreamed of since their childhood, moved by the experience of watching adults who are passionate about the sport.

However, many local people have been, and maybe still are, ambivalent about bullfighting because it is usually accompanied by gambling. I have watched people place bets in a corner of the stadium during a bullfighting match, even though doing so is clearly illegal according to Japanese law. It is alleged that even schoolchildren are involved in gambling if they approach a bullfighting stadium; therefore, many local high schools ban their students from participating in events related to bullfighting. On the contrary, a private high school on Tokunoshima Is. recognized bullfighting as part of local traditional culture, and in 2004, established a club to raise a bull for fighting.

### **Trans-Peripheral network**

**A**s previously mentioned, areas where people continue to engage in bullfighting in Japan are located at so-called peripheries in the context of Japanese society. In general, social networks in such areas spread only to surrounding areas and some social centers, such as the capital or large cities with considerable political and economic power. Bullfighting helps them spread their social network in another direction—in a trans-peripheral direction that includes networks of people who share a com-

mon interest in bullfighting in the peripheral areas in Japan (KUWAHARA *et al.* 2007).

For example, when an enormous earthquake hit Niigata Prefecture in Oct. 2004, the damaged area included Yamakoshi Village (incorporated into Nagaoka City in April 2005), which was famous for its bullfighting. At that time, as every type of lifeline had been destroyed there, all of the villagers needed to flee the village via army helicopters, leaving their bulls behind. Because the degree of destruction was very severe, some refugees who owned bulls had to live outside the village longer, which meant that they were forced to surrender bulls they had lovingly raised.

However, as soon as the condition of the earthquake-stricken area was clear, some bull owners on Tokunoshima Is. asked bull owners in Yamakoshi to allow them to temporarily care for their bulls in Tokunoshima, because these owners had already established friendships with each other as a result of bullfighting meetings. As a consequence, a bull and a male trainer came to Tokunoshima. If we consider the fact that Yamakoshi is about 1,400 km away from Tokunoshima Is., there is no doubt that this was a huge task, even though there was only one bull!

Later they (in a bullfighting match, a man stands nearby to cheer and give the direction of attack to the bull) participated in a bullfighting match on Tokunoshima Is., although the style of bullfighting was quite different from that of Yamakoshi, which led them to master the Tokunoshima style. Even after returning to Yamakoshi, they sometimes fought in the Tokunoshima style as proof of their friendship; for example, in a bullfighting tournament held in September 2006 to commemorate the recovery from the earthquake, a bull and its owners and trainers from Tokunoshima Is. were featured.

The importance of bullfighting to the people on Tokunoshima Is. is evident from these facts.

### **References**

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 KUWAHARA, S., OZAKI T., and NISHIMURA A. 2007. Shima 1(2): 1-13.

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