

# The Japanese School Sports Day

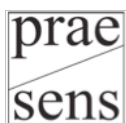
## The Socio-Cultural Role of a Ritualistic School Event in Contemporary Japan

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### Abstract

*This paper provides a thorough socio-cultural analysis of Sports Day in Japanese education. Basing myself on contemporary ritual research and Gerard Genette's notion of intertextuality, I describe the ritual 'Sports Day' as a 'cultural palimpsest', a form of practice where new meanings are constantly inscribed or rewritten without the former meanings being completely lost. This allows me to provide a detailed analysis of this school event by incorporating its ever-changing cultural dimensions. Since the introduction of the event into Japanese education in the early Meiji period, the most prominent discourses inscribed in Sports Day are elemental questions such as the relationship between the central national authorities and local practices or the problem of individualism and competitiveness in Japanese education. In an ethnographic account of a junior high school Sports Day which is based on my own fieldwork, I show how these discourses provide the framework in which Sports Day is still operated and experienced today.*

**Keywords:** School, education, sport, ritual, Japan



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Figure 1 Impressions from the Handa Junior High Sports Day



Sports Day and other annual school events (e.g., cultural festivals, field trips, and entrance/graduation ceremonies) can be seen as significant ceremonies and rituals which intersect with the Japanese life cycle. At a school, each of these events requires a considerable amount of preparation and effort. All in all, these non-academic activities claim a significant amount of time and dedication from the pupils and their families and therefore, in my opinion, should not be ignored or taken lightly when discussing Japanese education.

In elementary schools, Sports Day is usually called *undōkai* 運動会, whereas in junior high schools and high schools the term *taiikusai* 体育祭 is also frequently used. In everyday life, though, a conscious differentiation between the two terms (*undō* meaning ‘exercise’, ‘sports’, and *taiiku* ‘physical education’) is hardly ever necessary and the former is more commonly used. In this paper, therefore, I will primarily use the term *undōkai* with reference to the social practice of Sports Day in Japanese schools.

## Introduction

Sports Day is often regarded as one of the most important annual school events in Japan (see Iemoto 1981: 1-2; Makiyama 2006: 145). It has been practised in a similar fashion all over Japan since the introduction of the modern education system following the Meiji restoration (*Meiji ishin* 明治維新) in the latter half of the 19th century. It can thus be considered as a social practice with strong formalistic and ritualistic characteristics. During Sports Day, the students are divided into two or more teams that compete for points in a number of games, sport competitions and

performances. The event appears highly competitive, but it is also described as an opportunity to foster group socialisation and display the children's abilities in self-administration. Scholars of Japanese education acknowledge its importance (see Lewis 1995; Cave 2007), but have not yet offered a comprehensive account of the social and cultural meanings of this kind of event. This paper aims to fill this gap.

## Research aim and methods

The aim of this study is to give a comprehensive description of Sports Day as a ritualistic school event. It will focus on the question of what significance Sports Day holds in the context of Japanese education and what social functions and cultural meanings it offers to its participants. I believe that during Sports Day a wide array of discourses is displayed, which often seem to contradict each other (e.g., individuality and groupism, competition and harmony, nationalism and localism). I will trace the origins of these ambiguities and show how they establish a framework for the contingent experiences of the participating agents during the *undōkai*.

First, I will provide a theoretical framework that allows me to place my analysis of Sports Day in a broader theoretical discourse and to show how we can use concepts and ideas of ritual theory for a better understanding of such school events. On the basis of this theoretical framework, I will then approach the topic from a historical perspective and trace its origins and its continuities as well as its discontinuities since its introduction into Japanese education. Finally, I will discuss Sports Day in today's educational context, using the case study of a junior high school *undōkai* in contemporary Japan.

The description of Sports Day in pre-war Japan will be based on the book *Undōkai to Nihon kindai* 運動会と日本近代 [Sports Day and Japanese Modernity] edited by Yoshimi Shun'ya 吉見俊哉 (1999), as well as on other studies of modern Japanese education. For the discussion of post-war developments, I will use examples provided in the book *Undōkai, taiikusai* 運動会・体育祭 [Sports Days] edited by Iemoto Yoshirō (1981)<sup>1</sup> and juxtapose them with the official discourse of the Ministry of Education, as provided by the Ministry's official publications.

The case study is based on my own fieldwork which took place from August to October 2009 in the small town of Kokonoe (Kokonoe-machi 九重町), located in Ōita prefecture (Ōita-ken 大分県), in Kyūshū (九州). Thanks to an acquaintance, I was able to get access to a local elementary and junior high school as well as a high school in Fukuoka (Fukuoka-shi 福岡市). This made it possible for me to pursue my

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1 This book was published by Ayumi Shuppan あゆみ出版, a publishing house that specialised in books on democratic education. Its intention was to show how to create a 'successful' and 'democratic' *undōkai* by providing different examples. The publishing company was founded by teachers from a leftist union, who were fired during the 'red purge' in the 1950s. It went bankrupt in 2000.

fieldwork even with limited financial support. Aside from participant observation of the Sports Days in the schools, I was also able to obtain official materials as well as internal school documents.

In general, I used an open approach for my observations in order not to be blindsided by my own intentions. Opportunities for interviews often appeared spontaneously and these interviews usually took the form of what James Spradley describes as ethnographic interviews: a series of ‘friendly conversations’, during which the researcher slowly introduces new elements in order to allow the conversation partners to answer as informants for the research subject (see Flick 2005: 141).

## Theoretical framework

To describe non-academic school activities like Sports Day, the term ‘ritual’ is frequently used (e.g., Cave 2007: 176; Lewis 1995: 24), but it is also a term often used in everyday language to describe repeated traditional or formalised activities. Ritual theory in itself is an enormously vast and diverse field. For example, Jan Snoek (2006: 11) lists a set of characteristics of ritual which shows how difficult it is to work with the term. Rituals are culturally constructed; traditionally sanctioned; and tend to include behaviour, praxis, performance; they are marked off from the routine of everyday life; are framed; liminal; collective; public; creating/organising society/social groups; creating change/transition; repeated; standardised; sacred; transcendent, rigid; stereotyped; stable, repetitive, symbolic; meaningful; formal(ised); conventional; rule-governed; etc.

Furthermore, it is not possible, as Stanley Tambiah (1998: 227) argues, to make a clear-cut distinction between rituals and non-rituals. Dietrich Harth (2006: 16) even argues that ritual is indistinguishable from social action. It seems that ritual has become an all-embracing term:

Ritual has by now established a virtual monopoly – terminological, conceptual, and theoretical – for itself in the semantic field of terms denoting not only actions by means of which believers presume that they communicate with meta empirical realms and beings, but also in clusters designating secular modes of expressive behaviour... (Platvoet 2006: 161).

In the end, Snoek’s (2006: 14) advice is that researchers of rituals should create their own definitions, according to their research projects.

## Ritual theory

Even though contemporary ritual theory has long expanded out of the narrow view of religious ritual and myth of early ritual research, the fundamental question of the

relationship of context (myth) and practice/performance (ritual) is still paramount. This is not only true for religious rituals, but even more so for secular ones. As Tambiah (1998) argues, mythology may not only be seen literally, it may also refer to social and political discourses when discussing secular rituals.

In order to describe the ‘myth’ of the ritual, recent research generally uses a semiotic conception of culture. In this regard, a direct link between the social world of everyday life and the cultural web of meanings is created through the ritual. Clifford Geertz argues that it is important to distinguish between these two dimensions when discussing rituals, since they themselves contain a cultural-symbolic side and a social-practical side. He especially criticises the focus on the functionalist approach of earlier ritual research. Following this point of view, researchers tend to emphasise the structural and constitutive elements of rituals as well as their harmonising and integrative function, but fail to acknowledge the history and dynamics that exist within the ritual and its social context. Thus the disruptive and disintegrating and also psychologically confusing effects that occur when social organisations do not match with cultural patterns are left out. The main problem in their conception, according to Geertz, is that the cultural and the social side of ritual are often not considered equally important (Geertz 1987: 96-98).

Christine Bell (1997: 251) even sees ritual as a ‘particularly effective means of mediating tradition and change’. In her book *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (1997), Bell shows in which ways rituals can change (with) social contexts. First, the (conscious) creation of a new ritual is a dynamic process, and while the ritual script might be created and provided by a central authority, the participating actors provide new (legitimising) meaning by themselves, linking the ritual to their own needs (Bell 1997: 227). The second mode of change concerns the alteration of meanings in apparently unchanging ritual practices through changing contexts. For example, a ritual like the Olympics might be seen by the participating parties from a general viewpoint of ‘global unity’, but this view is shaped by the socio-political context of their time, and occurring disruptions are ‘certainly more reflective of the way in that modern nations experience the tension between global ideals and realities than a fully ritualized ceremony could express’ (Bell 1997: 232).

## Ritual practice and socialisation

In his famous ethnography of Balinese cockfights, Geertz shows how ritual can mediate between the cultural and the social dimension of a society. These cockfights are a Balinese interpretation of their social world—‘a story they tell themselves about themselves’, as Geertz (1973: 448) puts it. Individuals can perform and portray themselves in specific roles and demonstrate idealised functions or specific characteristics valued by society through their performance. Building on the ideas of

Erving Goffman, Susan Birrell argues that this is not an act of deceit; people do not claim values for themselves they do not possess. It is rather a reaffirmation of the meanings people see in the ritual they perform (Birrell 1981: 360-61).

Christoph Wulf (2006: 399) argues that ritual action itself is the socialising, community-building aspect of the ritual, and personal interpretations of the (sometimes ambiguous symbols) of the ritual are secondary. Therefore it is easy to see why ritual can be an effective tool of socialisation in schools. Schools are not only expected to teach children academic skills and knowledge, but are further expected to be institutions that ‘shape children into adults with the character qualities that society demands’ (Cave 2007: 1). Through ritual they are able to ‘construct the social realm and generate communities in which children have their place’<sup>2</sup> (Wulf 2008: 72).

Ritual practices need the knowledge of how to perform a ritual. This practical ritual knowledge is mainly learned in a mimetic process (Wulf 2006: 395) and this, according to Victor Turner (2002: 199), can also be used for cultural socialisation. He argues that the best way to learn the rules of a different culture is by acting and performing. The actor learns by performing and performs that which has been learned at the same time. Gwen Neville shares this view concerning the socialisation of children. A child

is like the fieldworker learning the new culture, absorbing bits and pieces, putting together sequences that make sense, figuring out what a scrap of behaviour means,...Through trial and error, the child gradually assembles enough pieces of the puzzle to form a picture of what things mean and how to be a member of a family... (Neville 1984: 158).

In short, the repetitive aspect of ritual plays an important role when it comes to transferring knowledge through a ritual. In mimetic processes children create practical knowledge. They generate ‘mental imprints’ which they can access later on and adapt to new situations. In other words, rituals create the ‘social memory’ of communities (Wulf 2008: 72).

## **Sports Day as a ‘cultural palimpsest’**

In a sense, school rituals can also be considered as cultural performances. Following Milton Singer, a community formulates its self-consciousness in cultural performances and performs it in front of members and outsiders to the community (quoted in Fischer-Lichte 2002: 289). Wolfram Manzenreiter further discusses this idea in relation to nation and the sporting body. He argues that

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2 Translations into English from German or Japanese have been made by the author if not otherwise stated.

sport serves in at least two different ways as a stage for performing the nation. On the one hand, the practice of structured body movements according to intersubjective rules is always a kind of cultural work that is in this context grounded within the territorial boundary of a national culture. ...Performative cultural events, such as rituals, festivals, or its more mundane variants, such as parades or sports contests, thus vividly express a society's ideas and conceptions of itself (Manzenreiter 2004: 781).

Thus, Sports Day can be viewed as a cultural performance within the framework of Japanese schooling. In order to formulate an analytical framework that is able to describe Sports Day as such a complex and dynamic web of social practices and cultural meanings, I suggest using the metaphoric idea of the palimpsest. In its literal meaning, a palimpsest refers to a parchment of which the top layer was scraped off in order to allow new writing on the surface. Fragments of the original texts are still visible underneath the new text. The idea became popular in literature theory through Gérard Genette's use of the term for his exploration of 'hypertextuality' and the relationship between 'hypotexts' (original texts) and 'hypertexts' (texts that are based on 'hypotexts') (Winkgens 2008: 554).

The modes of ritual change I have discussed above lead to a number of continuations and discontinuities in the practice as well as the symbolic meaning of the ritual. These (dis-)continuities can be traced historically and also have to be seen in the larger socio-cultural discourse concerning schools and education. Because school events like Sports Day have a strong communal aspect to them, they bring together different members of the community (at the very least the teachers, parents and children). Thus, different generations are participating in the same ritual. Each of the actors has his or her own experiences and views about the ritual, and together they perform the ritual based on their own understanding of its cultural meanings and social functions. This makes it possible that, much like a literary palimpsest, older meanings may not be completely overwritten or forgotten or that newer ones can be incorporated without losing (experienced or imagined) coherency.

## The history of Sports Day

The history of Sports Day in Japan can be traced back to the introduction of the modern (Western) school system in Meiji era (*Meiji jidai* 明治時代, 1868–1912) Japan. In a sense, the history of Sports Day is also the history of modern education in Japan. In the following section, I will discuss developments from the establishment of the first *undōkai*, showing how this specific cultural palimpsest came into existence and how its contents were constantly re-examined, contested and rewritten within the broader context of Japanese education.

I will divide my discussion into two main parts—the pre-war Sports Day and the post-war Sports Day. This division reflects the two modes of ritual change I have

described above, of which the former is primarily concerned with the creation of the ritual and the latter with the impact of changing social contexts on the central discourses of the ritual.

## Pre-war education and Sports Day

Following the Meiji restoration, the traditional schooling system was abolished by the newly created government and a new education system based on Western models was established in its place. The foundation of this new system was laid out by the Education Law (Gakusei 学制) in 1872 (Okano and Tsuchiya 1999: 15). In this education policy, elementary school was the first compulsory stage of education and its primary goal was to educate children as functional citizens of a modern state in order to help the country on its way to modernisation and industrialisation (Lincicome 1995: 23).

The foundation for the political system as well as the moral principles of the Japanese nation was completed with the Imperial Rescript on Education (Kyōiku ni kansuru chokugo 教育ニ関スル勅語) in 1890 and remained unchanged until the end of World War II. Over time, the Ministry of Education increased its control over schools even more by producing its own textbooks which focussed on moral education, language and history, because ‘anything in the school curriculum that contradicted the Rescript on Education was challenged by the state’ (Okano and Tsuchiya 1999: 18-19).

As a result, the Meiji nation-state as a disciplining and regulating power often tried to remove and repress ‘traditional’ customs and ceremonies of the Japanese people in order to regulate the people’s life. But even though the regulative power of the state could be experienced in nearly every corner of life, daily as well as non-daily, the state was not able to repress popular festivities (*matsuri* 祭り). Instead, the repressive strategies led to new formations or re-creations of folk habits within the context of the newly created national rites (Yoshimi 1999: 8). This process can be observed regarding the establishment of school rites in Meiji Japan, which played an important role in socialising the Japanese within a modern timeframe after the introduction of the Western calendar to Japan. During the first decades of the Meiji era, traditional popular holidays were still practised in schools (or outside of school without the children), whilst on newly established national holidays such as the Emperor’s birthday, children still attended school (Takahashi 1999: 115-22). In the beginning, these new holidays were often considered as something peculiar to schools and not of importance for general public life. But popular life began to be more co-ordinated with the modern framework of time towards the end of the Meiji era (Yoshimi n.d.: 13), and Sports Day—being one of the new school rites—developed into the form that is still practiced today.



### *National school rite and local festival*

This process also encompasses one of the basic ambiguities inscribed into the cultural palimpsest of Sports Day: the relationship between the nation- state and local communities. It took a long time for Sports Day to be institutionalised as a school ritual in Meiji Japan. The first Sports Days were held at the Naval Academy, the Tōkyō Imperial University and other elite schools as amateur sports championships in the 1870s and were modelled after athletic meetings in Great Britain. About a decade passed before similar events began to be practiced in elementary and middle schools (Yoshimi 1999: 11-12).

The early elementary school Sports Days showed the same militaristic tendencies as the elite schools' activities, such as *heishiki taisō* 兵式体操 (military-style exercising), flag-taking games and tugs-of-war. But while individual competition was the main focus of the *undōkai* at elite schools, the elementary and middle school Sports Days provided individual and group competition, as well as a tendency to incorporate the local population, since it was also regarded as a local *matsuri*. Actively promoted by the Meiji government, Sports Day spread to elementary and middle schools all over Japan in the second half of the 1880s (Yoshimi 1999: 11-12). The nationalistic aspects were clearly visible in the case of Okinawa, then the newly annexed province furthest away from the central government. Compared to mainland Japan, much more emphasis was placed on the role of Sports Day as a national event, and the reading of imperial edicts as well as the singing of the national anthem (Kimigayo 君が代) were prominent features of the event (Yoshimi 1999: 13-14). In contrast, Sports Day in other areas of Japan, especially during the late Meiji and early Taishō eras (*Taishō jidai* 大正時代, 1912–1926), began to focus more on performative aspects such as dance and, as a result, it came to resemble local *matsuri* even more (Hirata 1999: 111-12).

As militarism gained more and more influence during the late Taishō and early Shōwa eras (*Shōwa jidai* 昭和時代, 1926-1989), moral education (in the form of indoctrination) became more important, and during the 1930s, several education reforms were undertaken in order to strengthen the war efforts. The authorised school books became more and more nationalistic, and militaristic education material became used more frequently (Hirata 1999: 113-14). By 1941, military drills were compulsory in all Japanese schools, from primary schools to universities (Okano and Tsuchiya 1999: 24-25; Manzenreiter 2007). Sports Day itself started slowly to adapt to these new developments. Hirata Munefumi (1999: 114-119) compares *undōkai* held in 1930 and in 1936, and makes the observation that the names of dances, songs and games strongly reflected the (militaristic) situation of the time. Furthermore, nationalistic symbols like the national flag or the national anthem were featured prominently during the entrance and closing ceremonies in all *undōkai*.

### *Individualism and competitiveness*

After the Meiji government achieved its goal of catching up with the leading Western nations, the government faced new challenges in the Taishō period. In order to further improve Japan's situation, several educational, political and cultural reforms were conducted. As a result, the education system became more open, and new public as well as private universities and high schools were established. In keeping with the general mood of the times, a liberal education movement began to form, highlighting the importance of catering to the individual needs, interests and feelings of children (Hirata 1999: 107).

These developments put another central discourse of Sports Day in the foreground and thus provided the second central ambiguity in the cultural palimpsest: the question of how individuality and competitiveness can be beneficial to children's development. As the contents of Sports Day gradually changed in the early 20th century, more and more individual sports competitions like wide or high jumps were incorporated. This led to a change in children's attitude towards the *undōkai*. The children perceived Sports Day as a possibility to display athletic excellence. In contrast, the characteristic of military training as seen in the early Sports Day became less important (Yoshimi 1999: 29-32).

While the *undōkai* was perceived more and more as an examination of children's athletic capacity, enhancing their competitive attitude was not officially considered the goal of Sports Day. An excessively competitive spirit among children was often an object of criticism, and a balance between co-operative and competitive aspects was sought. In order to achieve this balance, children were taught how to cheer and to show each other support. Furthermore, there would be no more individual results, but instead they would only win points for their team with each competition (Yoshimi 1999: 36-37). So, while sports competitions always establish a ranking divided into winners and losers, the resulting showcasing of individual excellence and inter-pupil competitiveness was against the government's ideology and therefore discouraged. This contrast between ideal and practice (like the relationship between central and local authority) was to become a central aspect of Sports Day up to the present.

### Post-war education and Sports Day

After the defeat of Japan in World War II, the education system had to overcome severe economic and structural difficulties. The restoration of destroyed school buildings progressed only slowly, and there was a constant lack of teachers. On top of that, the budget was cut by a factor of eight. The education system had therefore to rely on donations, voluntary work and the sales of village properties. Despite (or

because of) all these difficulties, the Japanese school system was reshaped fundamentally in the immediate post-war years. A single-track school system<sup>3</sup> was established and administration was drastically decentralised, with local education boards partly taking over the competencies of the Ministry of Education (Okano and Tsuchiya 1999: 32-34).

In 1947, the Fundamental Education Law (Kyōiku Kihonhō 教育基本法) was issued. It declared that ‘education shall aim at the full development of personality, striving for the rearing of the people, sound mind and body, as builders of a peaceful state and society’ and that ‘equal opportunity in education, student aid system, nine years of compulsory education, co-education, public nature of school education and the respect for teacher status’ should be among the main principles of Japanese education (Ministry of Education 1957: 14). In the same year, the Ministry of Education also issued the first course of study (*gakushū shidō yōryō* 学習指導要領), which provided a set of standards for the contents that were expected to be covered in Japanese schools. While the 1947 course of study acknowledged the need for a framework that would govern the education process, it strongly emphasised that teachers should be allowed to take local disparities and the individual characters of the children into account (Ministry of Education 1947). In short, it outlined an educational ideology that was based on democratic, egalitarian as well as independent principles of self-administration.

### *Continuing practice, changing meaning*

Even though it was decided to abandon all school rituals related to the pre-war nationalistic policy after World War II, Sports Day was not affected and many schools continued to practice it. This may be the result of its ambiguous significance that allowed it to be perceived as a sports event or local *matsuri* rather than a nationalistic display. Nagase Kenji (1981: 23) states that post-war *undōkai* were often performed as a local variation of the National Sports Festival of Japan (Nihon Kokumin Taiiku Taikai 日本国民体育大会), organised by the physical education (PE) department and therefore bypassing their former militaristic connotation by focusing on their function as a showcase of the children’s physical development.

At some schools, Sports Day was also used in order to display the new principles of Japanese post-war education. For example, Ichimiya Waichirō (1981: 99-102) describes a junior high school *undōkai* which shows how principles like democracy and peace were incorporated into the *undōkai*. One new highlight of its Sports Day was a marching exercise called ‘peace march’ (*heiwa kōshin* 平和行進). The whole

3 The new system features six years of primary education (elementary school *shōgakkō* 小学校), three years of lower secondary education (junior high school *chūgakkō* 中学校) and three years of higher secondary education (high school *kōtō gakkō* 高等学校).

student body would form the three *katakana* characters of the word *heiwa* へイワ (peace) during the school's *undōkai*. On the one hand, this practice can be understood as a reaction to the new political reality in the 1950s, when a strengthened conservatism could be felt within the education administration. At Ichimiya's school, young leftist teachers (who occupied a majority of the available teaching positions at that time) were eager to act against these conservative developments. On the other hand, the *heiwa kōshin* is also an interesting example of how the symbolic meaning of a physical activity (in this case a *taisō* 体操 (gymnastics) exercise) can change drastically, while the basic practice or activity remains the same. In its form the parade strongly resembles pre-war (militaristic-style) marching exercises (*heishiki taisō*), only this time reinterpreted for a new socio-political context and the new educational discourse of 'peace and democracy'.

### *New guiding principles*

Ichimiya's example also depicts Sports Day as an important and unique opportunity for students to show their abilities in self-administration following democratic principles. The students formed executive committees (*jikkō iinkai* 実行委員会) for the *undōkai* by electing one member from each class. These committees played a central role regarding organisation and administration of Sports Day and the teachers gave them a high amount of freedom but also responsibility in order to promote creativity and improve their administrative and organisational skills (Ichimiya 1981: 106).

Practice time replaced normal lessons and the training was to be handled by the students themselves. Even though the training did not go well at times (something that was quite worrisome for the responsible teachers), the teachers tried to let the students handle these difficult situations themselves as often as possible. It was thought that only when the students found their own ways to handle their mistakes and failures would they be able to develop 'real independency' (Ichimiya 1981: 106-107).

Thus, according to Ichimiya (1981: 105), 'the Sports Day holds an important position among the "many occasions and places" of education.'<sup>4</sup> These 'many occasions and places' are a direct reference to the second article of the Kyōiku Kihonhō, which states that 'education has to be realised on all occasions and all places'<sup>5</sup> (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology n.d.: 2). This view on student involvement and a self-administrative approach furthermore clearly reflects the concepts of *shidō* 指導 (guidance) as formulated in the 1947 course of study:

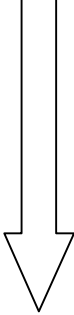
4 Undōkai wa, [...] arayuru kikai no arayuru basho no hitotsu to shite ichi o shimeru.

運動会は、[...] あらゆる機会のあらゆる場所のひとつとして位置を占める。

5 Kyōiku no mokuteki wa, arayuru kikai, arayuru basho ni oite jitsugen sarenakereba naranai.

教育の目的は、あらゆる機会、あらゆる場所において実現されなければならない。

Table 1 The guidance process according to the 1947 course of study  
(Ministry of Education 1947)

	<p>The aims of learning should be the aims that the children consider as their own. Only in this way will they try to <u>achieve them with eagerness and enthusiasm</u>.</p> <p>The children have to create their own plans on how to realise these goals. The experience of creating these plans is the foundation for learning.</p> <p>The children have to realise their plans themselves. Planning and realisation of the plans are intellectual activities that should be encouraged.</p> <p>Through trying-out and experiments, children gain 'real knowledge, viewpoints and abilities' and thus the learning process is complete. If they do not gain enough insight, they have to start over again.</p>
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### *The community-based and anti-nationalistic Sports Day*

In the 1950s, as already mentioned above, voices within the Ministry of Education expressed criticism of the immediate post-war education system: too much emphasis was put on pupil initiative, which tended to make a great difference in individual scholastic knowledge; the curriculum lacked consistency between elementary schools and junior high schools; and the subject of moral education was missing (Ministry of Education 1957: 22-23). Soon, the government tried once again to increase its influence over education and to restrict teachers' freedom and monitor their performance. More emphasis was put on the standardisation of textbooks, which led to nationwide, often violent protests by teachers' unions. But in the end the Ministry of Education regained control over textbooks, reintroduced moral education and finally issued a new course of study in 1955, which was more prescriptive in nature and also legally binding, in contrast to the 1947 version (Okano and Tsuchiya 1999: 36-38).

Within this context of increasingly centralised control by the Ministry of Education, Nagase describes how Sports Day was actively applied in an elementary school in order to respond to these developments by using its ambiguous connotations regarding its nationalistic and communal role. At first, the *undōkai* at his elementary school was organised by the PE department and extensively used national symbols like the Kimigayo and the Hinomaru 日の丸. Furthermore, the running competitions were created in such a way that fast children could achieve good results, while slower ones would be left behind. According to Nagase, these aspects were against the fundamental principles of Japanese education (Nagase 1981: 18-20). He argued that

the *undōkai* began to resemble a PE exercise too much. ...From the beginning, not only the competitive meetings but also more general recreational elements for the local area were part of the historicity of Sports Day. Especially in urban areas like the town of the Hanaguri Elementary School, with its rapid urbanisation, a lively *undōkai* is of great importance<sup>6</sup> (Nagase 1981: 25).

As a result, not only were the children placed at the centre of the preparations by the creation of an organisational framework in the form of the *jikkō iinkai*, but the importance of the incorporation of the community was also stressed.

This example is interesting on two accounts. First, because of the urban environment of Nagase's elementary school, no 'traditional' village community was in existence. Nagase, conscious of the ambivalent role of the *undōkai* in this regard, therefore emphasised its community-building elements. His aim was the promotion of a new sense of community among its members with the school at its centre. Second, the *undōkai* was actively used to counter growing nationalistic tendencies by replacing national symbols like the Hinomaru and the Kimigayo with different ones like the school flag or an original *undōkai* song.

## Case study: Sports Day in a contemporary junior high school

In order to show what role Sports Day plays in the contemporary educational context in Japan, I will provide an analysis of a Sports Day performed at Handa Junior High (飯田中学校) based on my own fieldwork. While the Handa Junior High *undōkai* will be the focus of this section, I will also refer to observations and materials from other schools I visited during my research.

Handa Junior High is one of four public junior high schools in Kokonoe, a small town located in Oita prefecture, Kyūshū. The town largely consists of farms and rural tourist spots like hot springs and nature parks and has a population of just a little over 10,000 people. It has six public elementary schools but no private schools and no high schools. After graduating from junior high school, most students attend high schools in bigger cities like Fukuoka or Oita (大分市), or at least plan to do so. All the schools in Kokonoe suffer from a declining number of students. This is especially the case for the elementary schools, and there is an ongoing fear about closure of some of the local schools.

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6 ...Undōkai ga taiiku gakushū no happyō no ba ni narisugite iru. ...Undōkai wa tanjō irai, kyōgitaikaiteki na keishiki o mochinagaramo, chiiki no sōgōteki rekuriēshon to shite ichizukerare, hatten shite kita rekishisei o motte iru. Toku ni Hanaguri shōgakkō no yō ni toshika genshō ga kyūsoku ni susunde iru tokoro de wa, kono chiiki ni ikiru undōkai to iu kanten wo taisetsu ni shiyō.

...運動会が体育学習の発表の場になりすぎている。...運動会は誕生以来、競技大会的な形式をもちながらも、地域の総合的レクリエーションとして位置づけられ、発展してきた歴史性をもっている。特に花栗小学校のように都市化現象が急速にすすんでいるところでは、この地域に生きる運動会という観点を大切にしよう。

Some developments that frame the contemporary Japanese educational discourse should briefly be summarised in order to sketch the background, against which my analysis of the Sports Day is set. During the 1980s, the foundation was laid to reinvent the Japanese school system once more, because despite all its achievements, Japanese education was facing new problems. School violence, bullying, non-attendance, classroom disruption and the pressure caused by the notorious university entrance examinations came under the spotlight and were hyped by the media (Tsuneyoshi 2004: 368). This led to a series of education reforms which resulted in what Tsuneyoshi Ryoko calls ‘low-pressure education’. The Ministry of Education now emphasised education according to individual character and abilities, reflecting the belief that not enough room for individuality and creativity was offered by the Japanese education system. In the end, more emphasis was placed on ‘one’s ability’ than ‘equality’.

Besides these reforms, the Fundamental Law of Education was also revised in 2006. One of the major changes was the inclusion of patriotism as an aim of education. The law states that education should ‘nurture a tendency to love one’s country and value its culture and tradition’ (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology 2006: 3) and the terms ‘home’ (*kyōdo* 郷土) and ‘community spirit’ (*kōkyō no seishin* 公共の精神) were included on several occasions. These developments were met with suspicion, although Japanese teachers seem to be quite capable of distinguishing between moral education and political indoctrination. As Christopher Hood pointed out, the classroom hours dedicated to moral education were usually used by the teachers to teach fundamental ethical values, like the importance of friendship and the value of life, instead of specific political ideologies (Hood 2001: 81-82).

## Organising Sports Day

While Sports Day itself is held on a Sunday during September each year at Handa Junior High School, the preparations start several months earlier. In June 2009, the teacher responsible for that year’s Sports Day—a third-year homeroom teacher—created the guidelines for the implementation of the Handa Junior High Sports Day (*Handachū jisshi yōryō* 飯田中実施要領). These guidelines provided a basic outline of the aims, the organisation and the timeframe up to the event. It offered information on the allocation of rights and duties as well as on several other aspects regarding the planning process and defined the relationship between the teachers and the students (especially the *jikkō iinkai*). After it was sanctioned by the teacher conference, the more detailed aspects of the planning and administration of the Sports Day were carried out in co-operation with the students. During the whole process, the teachers were expected to give the students an appropriate amount of guidance.

For example, in order to create the final programme for the Sports Day, the teachers provided a basic outline for the programme with several blank spots for the *jikkō iinkai* members to fill out. These parts were decided during the committee meetings in July. The leader of the *jikkō iinkai* described these meetings to me as rather short and easy. He remarked that they decided to ‘do it basically like the year before’ and argued that as the previous year’s Sport Day was considered a success by everyone they felt they had to prove that they were able to achieve the same.

The *taiikusai jikkō iinkai* 体育祭実行委員会 (Sports Day executive committee) as well as other important organisational units like the *ōendan* 応援団 (cheering group) were established in June after the guidelines for the *undōkai* were approved by the teacher conference. The executive committee was formed by a representative of each class (in this case the committee included six members), who were previously elected by their classmates in a homeroom session. The committee itself also voted for a president, a position usually filled by a third-year student.

The organisational structure of Sports Day can be seen as a dual arrangement of teacher positions and student positions. The general planning and organisation were headed by the teachers’ planning committee, which consisted of the supervisor of the student body, the head of the PE department and the student *taiikusai jikkō iinkai*. The next step down the organisational ladder consisted of an extended *jikkō iinkai* and basically the whole teaching staff. Each teacher was responsible for a specific activity (e.g., the three-legged race competition, dance, etc.) and had to work with the team leaders during the training periods. Finally, there was an executive board which was responsible for the administrative and executive elements of Sports Day, such as commentating or updating the scoreboard. These tasks were undertaken voluntarily by students with support by their homeroom teachers.

Table 2 Organisational structure of the *undōkai* in Handa Junior High

	<i>Position</i>	<i>Members</i>		<i>Position</i>	<i>Members</i>
<b>Teacher positions</b>	Planning committee	Student assembly supervisor; PE dept.	<b>Student positions</b>	Sports Day executive committee	Group from the student body
	Teacher conference	All teaching staff		Extended executive committee	<i>Jikkō iinkai</i> leader/vice; <i>ōendan</i> leader/vice
	School year assembly	Homeroom teachers		Executive Board	Executive positions (students)

Some Western anthropologists who have been conducting research on the Japanese school system describe Sports Day as run by children with little involvement from adults (Benjamin 1997; Conduit and Conduit 1996). I would argue that this is not



entirely the case, at least not in the schools I visited. There, teachers play a vital role during the planning and organisation of the event. It basically follows a pattern that Gerald LeTendre argues is characteristic for Japanese junior high schools: teachers act as ‘senior members’, who are more experienced in the patterns and dynamics of society than the ‘junior members’ (LeTendre 1994: 278). The mirrored structure allows each student to have a specific ‘senior member’ they can refer to and learn from. In this sense, teacher involvement in the planning and organisational aspects of Sports Day is not only important but also crucial for the socialisation process. This parallel organisational structure helps the students to learn ‘techniques for self-management (i.e. peer management) by direct experience with and connection to the self-governance of the school’ (LeTendre 1994: 273).

## Learning Sports Day

As discussed earlier, learning in ritual happens by repetition of bodily practices and mimicry. In that respect it can be seen as similar to the traditional learning of classical Japanese arts and crafts, where the learning process focuses on ‘copying, ...mimicry and suffering together, learning through performative experience and action’ (Köpping 2006: 146). During such rehearsal practice, solidarity is created. Constant training and shared hardship several weeks prior to Sports Day helped the children achieve a goal (for example the human pyramid) through hard practice. They learned the ‘importance of interdependence and cooperation in the most physical form’ (Cave 2007: 176).

So it is hardly surprising that the two weeks leading up to Sports Day were quite demanding for everybody involved. About half of the school day was used for Sports Day practice in one form or another, and during this period the children usually wore their gym outfits all day long.

Table 3 Handa Junior High schedule during Sports Day preparations

Unit:	1	2	3	4	5	6	
1 Grade:	Cl.	Tr.	Cl.	Cl.	Boys/ Girls tr.	Group tr.	Jikkōiin/ ōendan meeting
2 Grade:	Cl.	Cl.	Tr.	Cl.			
3 Grade:	Cl.	Cl.	Cl.	Tr.			
1 Grade:	Cl.	General rehearsal			Group training		Jikkōiin/ ōendan meeting
2 Grade:	Cl.						
3 Grade:	Cl.						
1 Grade:	Cl.	Cl.	Cl.	Tr.	Boys/ Girls tr.	Group tr.	Jikkōiin/ ōendan meeting
2 Grade:	Cl.	Tr.	Cl.	Cl.			
3 Grade:	Cl.	Cl.	Tr.	Cl.			

Tr.=Training; Cl.=Regular classroom lesson

The training sessions were usually headed by the children themselves. This took a lot of co-ordination effort, since each team was further divided into different sub-groups. Training could involve a specific level, boys and girls separated or specific groups for different competitions. Students thus did not belong only to one specific group at the time but to many groups and may have held different positions within these groups. Many children also held an administrative position (e.g., being on the broadcasting team or being responsible for the scoreboard), so as well as being able to work in a group, the ability to switch between the groups was of great importance. For example, each member of the *jikkō iinkai* also belonged to the red or white team, but during the team training sessions they were also expected to judge the performance of all teams.

The division into various groups as well as the simultaneous membership in various groups (sometimes divided by grade, sometimes by gender) demands a high command of social skills from the pupils. The ability to ‘switch’ between social roles and group contexts is an important aspect of childhood socialisation in Japan. According to Lois Peak (1989: 36-37), this form of cultural behaviour is one product of Japanese socialisation. It can be seen as a continuation of the distinction between home and the outside world, reflecting the traditional Japanese conceptualisation of *uchi* (内 inside) and *soto* (外 outside) in human relations. The school, therefore, is responsible for the children’s socialisation in the *soto* realm with its highly formalised group-oriented organisation, which is considered different from the social environment at home.

A Handa Junior High teacher argued that Sports Day also had a very practical socialisation aim. It should help to improve the general behaviour of the children and help them to cope better with their daily self-management, e.g., to be on time and not to forget things. This improvement should also be carried over to academic classes. In this sense, the *undōkai* can also be seen as part of a more general lifestyle guidance (*seikatsu shidō* 生活指導). Such guidance is an integral part of the Japanese ideal of whole-person education and encompasses classroom management or disciplinary activities to achieve the goals of healthy social, emotional and physical development, optimal academic performance and early detection and prevention of discipline problems (see Fukuzawa 1996). This is regarded as especially important for junior high schools, where a strong reliance on lecturing style can alienate students who have problems succeeding in such classroom settings.

## Performing Sports Day

Sports Day at Handa Junior High was held on the second Sunday in September. On this occasion, all the accomplishment and hard work of the children were presented to their families and friends. The official timetable stated that the event was to begin at nine o'clock in the morning, with a one-hour lunch break at twelve o'clock, and finish at three o'clock in the afternoon. The fact that they were able to stick to the timetable, even though many games required quite complex setups, shows how well the event was organised and how professional everybody was in completing her or his tasks.

Table 4 Schedule of the Handa Junior High Sports Day

Morning			Afternoon		
	Opening ceremony	School	<i>ōen</i>	<i>ōen</i> competition	School
<i>taisō</i>	Stretching	School	Group	Game	Boys
<i>ōen</i>	<i>ōen</i> performance	School	Group	Race	2 Grade
<i>ōen</i>	<i>ōen</i> competition	School	Group	Game (with parents)	3 Grade
Single	Race	1 Grade	Group	Game	Girls
Group	Game (with parents)	2 Grade	Dance	School dance	School
Single	Race	3 Grade	<i>ōen</i>	<i>ōen</i> competition	School
Group	Game	Boys	Relay	Race	School
Group	Game	Girls	Dance	Dance	PTA
Group	Game (with parents)	1 Grade	Group	Eye of the typhoon	School
Group	Race (with parents)	3 Grade	Dance	Folk dance	School
Group	Race	PTA <sup>7</sup>		Closing ceremony	School
Group	Tug-of-war	School			
Group	Tug-of-war	PTA			
	PTA greeting				
Relay	Whole-school relay	School			

In the following section, I will discuss the two dominant discourses of the cultural palimpsest of Sports Day that I presented in the historical discussion and show how they are present in the Handa Junior High Sports Day.

### *Nation and community*

During the opening ceremony of Sports Day, I could not help but notice the absence of the national flag and anthem. To be more precise, the Hinomaru was there, but only as part of the sports ground decoration (which also featured the national flags from almost every country of the world), rather than being displayed in a prominent position. This is interesting because Ministry of Education regulations require the

<sup>7</sup> Parent-Teacher Association.

use of Hinomaru and Kimigayo at all official school ceremonies, and general statistics indicate that the national symbols are used practically everywhere (Hood 2001: 71-72). Christopher Hood states that these statistics do not say much about how these symbols are used during the events. For example, the Kimigayo might be played only briefly without words, or the Hinomaru might be hidden out of sight due to local opposition (Hood 2001: 75). There are even cases where the Hinomaru was only raised in the principal's office (Hood 2001: 193). At the Handa Junior High *undōkai*, the national flag was there, clearly visible to everyone, but at the same time it was hidden or absorbed by dozens of other flags.

In contrast, at the Chikushichūō High School 筑紫中央高校 in Fukuoka, the very first point in the opening ceremony (as well as the last one in the closing ceremony) was dedicated to the national flag. There were three flagpoles at different heights next to the school's sports ground. The Hinomaru was raised on the central and tallest pole, on the second tallest the prefectural flag, and at the lowest the school flag. The Chikushichūō High School is a school that prides itself on its long history and emphasis on traditions (Chikushichūō Kōtōgaku 2010: 1), so it may be reasonable to think that this conservative attitude is also reflected in the display of the national flag during its Sports Day.

The teacher responsible for the Handa Junior High *undōkai* stated that he considered Sports Day as something personal, created from their own experiences and local traditions, instead of being a school event demanded by the official curriculum. He argued that

[t]he foundation on which the Sports Day is built is based on our [the teachers'] own experiences or from what we learn from other teachers. It is nothing we have learned from a textbook. We experience it, we remember it and adapt it. The academic education is defined by the Ministry of Education, but not specific events like the *taikūsai* or the Culture Festival.<sup>8</sup>

A sense of community was considered very important at the Handa Junior High Sports Day. Even the audience was divided into local areas (neighbourhoods) rather than the two student teams. Each neighbourhood even acted as its own team during the PTA competitions. The PTA competitions, therefore, were not about the school, the children or their teams but about the neighbourhoods. In other words, the PTA tug-of-war, for example, can be seen as a demonstration of co-operation between the neighbourhoods in a friendly contest. This way of including the PTA stresses the

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8 *Taikūsai o tsukuru kijun wa, kyōin de atta keiken no naka ya, hoka no sensei kara mananda. Kyōkasho de manabu wake de wa nai. Taikan shite, oboe, kaetari shite itteiru. Jugyō wa Monbukagakushō kara iwarete iru ga, taikūsai, bunkasai nado no gyōji wa toku ni Monbukagakushō kara iwarete inai.*

体育祭を作る基準は、教員であった経験の中や、ほかの先生から学んだ。教科書で学ぶわけではない。体感して、覚え、変えたりしている。授業は文部科学省から言われているが、体育祭、文化祭などの行事は特に文部科学省から言われていない。

communal (*matsuri*-like) aspect of Sports Day. Much as in Nagase's school, the ambiguity towards nationalism/localism inscribed in the cultural palimpsest of the *undōkai* allowed the teachers and parents to view Sports Day not just as a part of school socialisation, but also as a part of their own local way of life.

### *Groups and individuality*

Most activities at the *undōkai* were considered group activities. These could either be competitions or performances. Most of the games like *kibasen* 騎馬戦 (mock cavalry battle) or tug-of-war have been performed since the Taishō- or early Shōwa-era Sports Days. But one of the most important elements of the historical *undōkai* was missing: (*heishiki*) *taisō* exercises were almost completely absent from the Handa Junior High *undōkai*.

In today's Sports Days, cheering (*ōen* 応援) performances seem to have taken the place of *taisō* exercises. This view is also echoed by a Handa Junior High teacher, who stated that the most prominent difference between the *undōkai* of today and his own school days was the stronger emphasis on *ōen* activities in recent Sports Days. Like *taisō*, they are also group exercises during which the children are expected to display their spirit. But *ōen* does also give individual students the chance to shine by being part of (or even better by leading) the cheering teams. At Handa Junior High, the members of the *ōendan* were clearly the stars of Sports Day. In their black uniforms, they stood out from the other team members in their PE outfits and the quantity of the parents' video equipment increased continually whenever they performed their elaborate cheering routines. But in the case of Handa Junior High, *ōen* competitions had another important function. They were used to 'equalise' the final results. If one team seemed to fall behind in the sports and group competitions, the team of judges (which consisted of teachers, *jikkō iinkai* members and PTA representatives) would provide them with more points for their *ōen* performance.

In contrast to these exciting and expressive group activities, the individual competitions were rather unspectacular. In running competitions, members of each team competed individually against each other. But even within them, the children expressed their dedication to their team instead of showing off their individual excellence. The runners were never called by their names, just by their team colours. There was also no progressive narrative, with the winners going on to the next round. Instead, the children scored points for their team—even the ones placed last. One parent told me that during his school time, that was not the case and only the first two or three placed were rewarded, but this was changed in order that even children who are not fast runners can experience the feeling of helping the team.

Despite all the emphasis on egalitarianism and groups over individualism, children can be quite sensitive about their own accomplishments as well as failures. The pupils of Handa Elementary School (飯田小学校) and Handa Junior High I talked to were often not pleased with their performances, especially in the running competitions, regardless of their team's performance. Moreover, literature like *Undōkai de ichiban ni naru hōhō* 運動会で1番になる方法 (How to Become the Best at Sports Day) by Fukashiro Senshi (2004), a book that describes a training method that should enable children to achieve first place in the running competitions, indicates a different perspective.

In addition, several individual students are in the spotlight at the *undōkai* regardless of their athletic abilities. These students are the team leaders, the *jikkō iinkai* members, the *ōendan* members, etc. They show leadership skills, act as model students and often show ambition. Hood argues that one has to be careful when discussing individuality in Japan, since there is a differentiation between two conceptions of individualism in Japanese education. For one thing,

(Japanese) 'individualism' (*kosei*) does not lead to selfishness, immaturity and a reduction in social responsibility, which have often been associated with (Western) 'individualism' (*kojin shugi*).... It is the qualities of 'independence, self-control, endurance, a sense of responsibility, a feeling of togetherness, consideration for others, and a sense of gratitude' that most parents wish to have instilled in their children ... (Hood 2001: 126).

This 'positive' conception of individuality (*kosei* 個性) was strongly promoted at the Handa Junior High Sports Day. As mentioned before, at the end of running competitions everybody got points for their team. At the same time the event allowed children to express 'positive individualisation', not by showing their individual strength, but by assuming central (administrative) roles within the group life (*shūdan seikatsu* 集団生活) of the school.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to create a theoretical model that enables a description of *undōkai* that incorporates the functional elements of socialisation as well as its cultural meanings. Research on such school rituals often focuses on the functional aspects, but in my opinion, these may exclude the cultural meaning such rituals possess for the participating agents and, by doing so, are not fully capable of explaining the ambiguity of the ritual's meanings for the personal affection of people towards it.

Using a semiotic conception of culture, we can see the *undōkai* as a cultural symbol or a system of symbols. And as Geertz (1987: 53) suggests, such a symbol

may be ‘a model *for* something’ as well as ‘a model *of* something’.<sup>9</sup> This distinction allows us to differentiate between two modes of Sports Day. On the one hand, the *undōkai* provides a model of cultural behavioural patterns that are considered appropriate for the children to learn and thus plays a major part in school socialisation in accordance with acknowledged principles of Japanese education. On the other hand, it is also a performance of the guiding principles and discourses of Japanese education, re-evaluated and performed by the central agents in this social field. Therefore, the *undōkai* can also be seen at the same time as an *interpretation of* or a *model for* Japanese culture.

## Sports Day as a model for Japanese society and culture

Sports Day is part of the official Japanese curriculum as a special activity (*tokubetsu katsudō* 特別活動) (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology 2008a: 23-24; 2008b: 106-107). These special activities, together with moral education and club activities (*bukatsu* 部活), constitute the means of childhood socialisation through student guidance (*shidō*). The concrete aims are next to the nurturing of a healthy body, the socialisation into group life (*shūdan seikatsu*), the improvement in children’s self-management and the strengthening of the ties between the school and the local community. In this sense, it is still based on the principles laid out in the 1947 course of study. A homeroom teacher of Handa Junior High argued that Sports Day is especially important, because

it is a lesson for the heart, something spiritual. ...Today, when children come together to play, they only play video games alone or against each other. During the *taiikusai* they can learn how interesting and how hard it is to achieve a goal together as a large group. There are many children who graduate without this experience. ...Therefore, the *taiikusai* is necessary.<sup>10</sup>

But despite all the emphasis on groups and egalitarian principles, students can also manage to instrumentalise Sports Day for their personal ambitions. For example, one of the members of the Handa Junior High *jikkō iinkai* aimed to get into an academic high school in Oita, despite his rather average school performance. He hoped that his homeroom teacher would actively provide support on the basis of his (leading) role in Sports Day. This not only reflects a consciousness on the part of students

9 My emphasis.

10 *Taiikusai wa kokoro no jugyō, seishinteki na mono. ...ima no kodomo wa, nanjin ka de asonde ite mo 1 tai 1 ya hitori de no terebigēmu nado. Taiikusai wa, takusan no hitokazu de hitotsu no mono o tsukuru omoshirosa, taihensha o shireru. Sore o shiranaimama sotsugyō suru kodomo mo ooi. ... taiikusai wa hitsuyō. 体育祭は心の授業、精神的なもの。…今の子供は、何人かで遊んでいても1対1や一人でのテレビゲームなど。体育祭は、たくさんの人数でひとつのものを作る面白さ、大変さを知れる。それを知らないまま卒業する子も多い。…体育祭は必要。*

towards the new reality of the notorious entrance exams, where alternative ways to fact-based exams (such as personal recommendations by teachers) are now possible (see Tsuneyoshi 2004), but also shows how individual actors can use the ambiguities about the display of individualism incorporated in Sports Day for their own advantage and thus learn strategies to compete in their social environment.

## The Sports Day as a model of Japanese society and culture

Nitta Yoshiko and Senjū Machiko (1995: 61-62) argue that while Sports Day started as a translation of English athletic meetings, with its combination of competitive elements, playfulness and demonstrative elements, it developed into an ‘independent Japanese form’. Many of my informants reflected this view and tended to describe the *undōkai* as a display of ‘Japanese culture’ (*Nihon no bunka* 日本の文化).

Discussing the dangerous aspects of some games performed at Sports Day (e.g. *kibasen*), the father of a third-year student had the following reasoning:

We all experienced Sports Day every year since we were young. Therefore it became a national event. That is why I don't think too much about [the danger involved]. It is a festival and therefore accidents often happen.... The bull fights in Spain are also dangerous, but they don't stop them. Sports Day is such a tradition too.<sup>11</sup>

Thus Sports Day may be seen as a cultural performance. As outlined above, the *undōkai* was always part of a greater discourse on nationalism. With its heavy emphasis on militaristic *taisō* exercises and excessive use of nationalistic symbols, it was part of the process of mobilisation and militarisation of Japan's future soldiers. But its ritual nature and its ambiguous stance toward nationalism and localism also allowed the use of Sports Day as a challenge to the dominating educational discourse. Sports Day can be placed under the concepts of child-driven education but also of traditionalism and localism. While these examples are extremes, they show how Sports Day can be seen as a representation of, as well as a conscious reaction (on a symbolic level) against, the socio-political context of the time.

Sports Day is arguably just a small wheel in the machine of Japanese school socialisation, but thanks to its active bodily and performative aspects it is surely an impressive praxis to witness. It has not only survived countless educational reforms but has also managed to maintain a basic formal integrity since the Taishō era. Over

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11 Chiisai toki kara mainen mite iru shi, aru node, taiikusai wa kokuminteki gyōji ni natte iru. Soko made shimpai shite inai. Omatsuri da kara jissai ni jiko ga yoku aru .... Spein no tōgyū nado mo abunai ga, chūshi ni natte inai no to onaji yō ni, taiikusai mo dentōteki na mono.

小さい時から毎年見ているし、あるので、体育祭は国民的行事になっている。そこまで心配していない。お祭りだから実際に事故がよくある [...]。スペインの闘牛なども危ないが、中止になっていないのと同じように、体育祭も伝統的なもの。



time, a lot of different (sometimes even contradictory) meanings have been inscribed into the ‘cultural palimpsest’ of Sports Day. This palimpsest still preserves many of these meanings in the discourse of the *undōkai*. Needless to say, I do not regard this paper as a complete record of all the meanings present in the ‘cultural palimpsest’ of the *undōkai*, but I hope it offers a foundation and point of departure for future research, to add new layers and distinctions and thus provide a better understanding of a cultural praxis that is much more than what ‘[s]ome commentators view...as an odd quirk, or even a shortcoming, of Japanese education’ (Lewis 1995: 61).

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## GLOSSARY

Ayumi Shuppan	あゆみ出版	Japanese publishing house that focussed on books on democratic education. Founded by leftist teachers in the 1950s, it went bankrupt in 2000
<i>bukatsu</i>	部活	(school) club activities
<i>chūgakkō</i>	中学校	junior high school
Fukuoka-shi	福岡市	Fukuoka, capital of Fukuoka prefecture
Gakusei	学制	Education Law (1872)
<i>gakushū shidō</i>	学習指導要領	course of study (standardised curriculum for Japanese schools)
<i>yōryō</i>		guidelines for the implementation of Handa Junior High Sports Day (document created by the teaching staff)
<i>Handachū jisshi</i>	飯田中実施要領	military-style training or exercise
<i>yōryō</i>		peace
<i>heishiki taisō</i>	兵式体操	peace march: a Sports Day exercise in a Japanese junior high school (described in Ichimiya 1981).
<i>heiwa</i>	平和	national flag of Japan
<i>heiwa kōshin</i>	平和行進	executive committee
Hinomaru	日の丸	mock cavalry battle; traditional group game played at Sports Days.
<i>jikkō iinkai</i>	実行委員会	national anthem of Japan
<i>kibasen</i>	騎馬戦	Kokonoe, town in prefecture
Kimigayo	君が代	community spirit
Kokonoe-machi	九重町	individuality
<i>kōkyō no seishin</i>	公共の精神	high school
<i>kosei</i>	個性	home
<i>kōtō gakkō</i>	高等学校	Fundamental Education Law (1947)
<i>kyōdo</i>	郷土	Imperial Rescript on Education (1890)
Kyōiku Kinhonhō	教育基本法	Kyūshū, one of the four main islands of Japan.
Kyōiku ni Kansuru Chokugo	教育ニ関スル勅語	festival, festivity
Kyūshū	九州	Meiji Restoration (1868). Term for a chain of events that led to the restoration of the imperial rule of Emperor Meiji and the creation of Japan as a modern nation state
<i>matsuri</i>	祭り	National Sports Festival of Japan
<i>Meiji ishin</i>	明治維新	
Nihon Kokumin Taiiku Taikai	日本国民体育大会	
<i>Nihon no bunka</i>	日本の文化	Japanese culture
<i>ōen</i>	応援	cheering, support
<i>ōendan</i>	応援団	cheering group, cheering squad
Oita-ken	大分県	Oita, prefecture in Kyūshū
Oita-shi	大分市	Oita, capital of Oita prefecture
<i>seikatsu shidō</i>	生活指導	lifestyle guidance
<i>shidō</i>	指導	guidance

<i>shōgakkō</i>	小学校	elementary school
<i>Shōwa jidai</i>	昭和時代	Shōwa era; historical period lasting from December 25, 1926 to January 7, 1989 (=reign of Emperor Shōwa)
<i>shūdan seikatsu</i>	集団生活	group life
<i>taiikusai</i>	体育祭	Sports Day (term often used in junior high schools and high schools)
<i>taiikusai jikkō iinkai</i>	体育祭実行委員会	Sports Day executive committee
<i>Taishō jidai</i>	大正時代	Taishō era; historical period lasting from July 30, 1912 to December 25, 1926 (=reign of Emperor Taishō)
<i>taisō</i>	体操	gymnastics, exercise
<i>tokubetsu katsudō</i>	特別活動	special activity
<i>uchi/soto</i>	内/ 外	inside/outside; traditional differencing principle in Japanese social relations
<i>undōkai</i>	運動会	Sports Day (general term)