

CONTRIBUTOR

Martin J. Meyer is a lecturer for school pedagogy and educational science at Vechta University, Germany. He is a founding member of the German Society of Sport Science's Committee for Martial Arts Studies and the Journal of Martial Arts Research (JOMAR). In 2017, he received a scholarship from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) for a research cooperation project at Kanazawa University, Japan. His main research interests are motives for martial arts participation, mundane phenomena such as hockey fights, night-time economy and prison rehabilitation programs, as well as basic research.

WRESTLING, WARSHIPS AND NATIONALISM IN JAPANESE-AMERICAN RELATIONS MARTIN J. MEYER

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ABSTRACT

The following article explains how the metaphors 'wrestling body' and 'warship' are combined, mutually reinforced and nationalistically instrumentalised in the context of sporting events. The first case study examines contentious Japanese public discussions of the possible promotion of American wrestlers to the highest rank in professional sumō. The following case explores the staging of an American actor dressed as a Japanese sumō wrestler for the purposes of patriotic dramatization in North American pro wrestling. Both incidents have metaphorical and temporal parallels which reached their respective symbolic climax in 1993.

INTRODUCTION

The 20th century, especially 1914 to 1989, is considered to be the ‘century of ideologies’ [Müller 2013]. The most influential of these is arguably nationalism, which had already been established in the preceding 150 years. At that time, the emergence of nation states and the imperialist acquisition of mostly overseas colonies was approaching its peak. Nationalist ideas affected all areas of social life, from science and culture to trade and the military. Often nationalism was combined with racist theories, the cruellest iteration of which was German National Socialism.

Nationalist propaganda prefers to reiterate heroic narratives, sometimes embedded in glorious war stories like El Cid, Vercingetorix, Lemminkäinen or Ilmarinen [Reicher 2013: 163]. In addition to purely physical heroic attributes, however, legendary weapons have always been part of the story. King Arthur’s sword Excalibur and Siegfried’s invisibility cloak from the Song of the Nibelungs illustrate the connection between body and technology in the sense of a nationalist metaphor of strength and spirit. With the advent of huge sport events in the early 20th century, martial artists were reinterpreted as national fighting heroes, such as Joe Louis, Max Schmeling or Carlos Gracie. Similarly, battleships such as the Bismarck, the Yamato or the Hood served as symbols representing national fantasies of technical superiority.

Though fierce nationalistic symbolism in sports and military declined considerably after 1989, it continued to exist – perhaps even to this day. This thesis will be examined on the basis of two particular events. They occurred shortly after the end of the Cold War in 1993. Both illustrate a nationalistically charged Japanese-American conflict expressed through the classic metaphors of wrestling and warships. The purpose of this article is to illustrate how these events were influenced by nationalistic – and sometimes racist – agendas and how wrestlers and warships were utilised to express nationalistic ideology. Reicher’s ‘nations sports and media nations’ is the main theoretical lens used to explore images of the wrestling body [2013].

WARSHIPS AND WRESTLERS AS SYMBOLS OF POWER DURING THE PERRY EXPEDITION

In order to protect colonies and to gain influence on the world stage, many young nation states in the 19th and 20th centuries shifted to building powerful navies based on the British model. In so doing they effectively replaced castles and palaces as beacons of military architecture with warships [Benesch & Zwigenberg 2019]. These

weapons were evolving at an unprecedented rate. Gunboats, which could also be used in shallow waters, were used for demonstrations of power along foreign coasts. ‘Gunboat diplomacy’ was not only the historical heritage Europe’s military vessels, but an important instrument of national prestige.

Commodore Matthew Perry relied upon gunboat diplomacy when he entered Tōkyō Bay in 1853 with his fleet of the four steamships, the Mississippi, Plymouth, Saratoga and Susquehanna. As an experienced captain, and the descendant of a naval family, he was intimately familiar with the symbolic power of modern warships. Perry had even lobbied for the construction of additional vessels. He is still revered in the US today as ‘The Father of the Steam Navy’.

However, President Fillmore’s mission was not only intended to open the door for Japanese trade. Perry was instructed to pursue more immediate and pragmatic goals as well. America’s Pacific whaling fleet ‘needed Japanese ports to replenish coal and provisions’ [Blumberg 2013: 18], Washington desired new naval bases for strategic control of the Pacific, and the developing trade routes with China had to be secured [Swisher 1947: 32]. Perry’s mission was also about the repatriation of stranded American seamen.

At the time of Perry’s arrival Japan had enjoyed a 250-year period of peace. This had been initiated by the military ruler *shōgun* Ieyasu Tokugawa¹ (徳川家康) following a hundred year civil war (‘Age of Warring States’). In order to prevent anti-government uprisings, the feudal lords (*daimyō* 大名) were tightly controlled and international relations were almost completely severed. Christianity was banned and mission-friendly foreign states were blocked. Trade with China continued via Okinawa. After the British ceased trading with Japan for commercial reasons in 1623 [Blumberg 2013: 42], only the Dutch were allowed to maintain a strictly supervised trade mission on the small, fan-shaped, artificial island of Deshima in the port of Nagasaki.

When Commodore Perry anchored at Tōkyō bay in 1853 and desired to meet the Emperor, neither side was unaware of the other’s presence. Through the *nanban* (southern barbarian 南蛮) trade, which included books, technical instruments and scientific equipment [40], the Japanese upper class enjoyed a good understanding of current developments in medicine, natural sciences, military technology and politics around the world. Conversely, in preparation for his mission, Perry had conferred with Japan experts and translators. He prepared for his task by reading *Manners and Customs of the Japanese* by the famous German doctor and researcher of Japan, Philip von Siebold [40]. Nevertheless, the Japanese people, including many in government, were petrified by the

1 In this article, Japanese names are written in the western order first name + surname.



Figure 1:
The Kurobune anchoring off Tōkyō. Source:
<https://jpsearch.go.jp>

arrival of the hulking and darkly painted steamships. The unchallenged presence of the *kurobune* (black ships, 黒船) shamed Japanese society by emphasizing its inability to respond to such a blatant intrusion.

The *kurobune* also scared the crews of Japanese transport ships so badly that Tōkyō was cut off from its most important food source [26]. While the shogunate desperately turned to the *daimyō* and asked for advice in this crisis (something that had never happened before), other high-ranking officials tried to redirect the fleet to Nagasaki and prevent Perry and his crew from going ashore. Perry responded with demonstrations of his military might. He had his warships patrol the coast and insisted on reconnaissance missions in military formation. Although he had arrived in Tōkyō bay on July 8th, he celebrated the already passed American Independence Day with salute shots from his 64-pound cannons, which put the Japanese on highest alert. When going ashore Perry was accompanied by two African-American men who acted as his personal guard [31]. These were the first black men seen by the Japanese apart from the African Yasuke, who had come to Japan in 1579 as part of a troop of Jesuit missionaries and ended up as a samurai under circumstances that are still poorly understood. All of these measures served to intimidate and offend the Japanese, not only on a strategic level, but also as a symbolic attack on their then current nationalistic ideology.

Since the shogunate could not expel the Americans, despite a flurry of desperate diplomacy, it shifted to showing off muscular wrestling bodies. This was probably a reaction to the beforementioned black bodyguards of Perry. Remarkably, there exist old Japanese drawings which seem to depict the African Yasuke engaging in *sumō* matches.

This may actually have happened as Yasuke served as a retainer of *daimyō* Nobunaga Oda who was a strong supporter of *sumō*.

Sumō wrestlers, which were unknown in the US, were used as dock workers, in order to intimidate the American sailors and provoke them to duels [Kuhaulua 1973: 33-36]. Blumberg even refers to a real *sumō* tournament:

[T]he Americans were invited outside to see a very special present from the Emperor to the entire crew – 200 bales of rice, each weighing between 100 and 150 pounds. Seated near these bales, they watched a procession of about fifty huge *sumō* wrestlers [...]. The Americans had never seen men as fleshy and massive as these athletes, who had been fed special diets so that each weighed between 250 and 400 pounds. Lieutenant Preble was shocked because ‘they were entirely naked except that they wore a stout silken girdle about their loins concealing what modesty should not expose’. [...] [The *sumō* wrestlers] had been brought from Edo [Tōkyō] for the occasion. A wrestler named Koyanagi [owner of the highest *sumō* rank at the time],



Figure 2:
*Presumably Yasuke depicting detail of *sumō yūrakuzu byōbu*.*
Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yasuke#/media/](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yasuke#/media/File:Black_sumo_wrestler_in_17th_century.jpg)
File:Black_sumo_wrestler_in_17th_century.jpg

called 'the bully of the capital', was presented to Perry by the commissioners, who urged him to feel the sumō champion's bulging muscles and to 'punch him in the paunch'. He gripped Koyanagi's huge arm, then felt the neck, which, he noted, was creased like that of a prize ox. Officers also examined the wrestler, and when they uttered exclamations of disbelief, he answered with an appreciative grunt. At a given signal, each of these strong men seized two bales of rice and carried them above their heads with apparent ease. One held a sack with his teeth. Another repeatedly turned somersaults as he held on to his bales. The wrestlers brought the rice to the edge of the water. Later the sailors huffed and puffed, lifting the bales into their boats and unloading them. The Americans were then escorted to the rear of the Treaty House to watch sumō wrestling matches.

[Blumberg 2013: 82-85]

Perry understood immediately that the sumō show served as a demonstration of physical hegemony and intimidation. 'After this Perry ordered a detachment of marines to put on an exhibition drill that would contrast with the "brutal performance" of "monsters" whose "animal natures had been carefully developed"' [86]. Perry wrote in his diary that he felt disgusted by the 'overfed monsters' [Guttman & Thompson 2001: 68] who were attacking each other 'with brutal ferocity, [...] ready to exhibit the cruel instincts of a savage nature'. Contemporary Japanese woodcuts show sumō wrestlers easily whirling the detested foreigners around (mostly portrayed as Perry himself). It is historically debated whether there were official duels on Perry's ship between the mentioned wrestler Koyanagi with an American wrestler as well as a boxer. At least Koyanagi's victory over the boxer is supposed to have happened [Kasahara 2009].

SUMŌ, SHINTŌ AND NATIONALISM

As in many societies, the origins of the Japanese wrestling are believed to be ancient and tinged with religious significance. Sumō (相撲) not only appears in Japan's founding myths, but it remains a subject of modern folklore. Shrine sumō developed a cultic tradition of its own through harvest prayer celebrations [Pauly 2008: 123; Kuhaulua 1973: 25]. Sumō meets were organised as a means of divination and as funerary ceremonies to appease the deceased [Pauly 2008: 115]. Even today, the controversial Yasukuni shrine in Tōkyō honours fallen Japanese soldiers with sumō wrestling. In addition to these sophisticated cultural practices, less refined and more violent matches have existed up to the present day under the rubric of 'street sumō'.



Figure 3:
Woodblock depicting Perry whirled around by a sumōtori.
Source: https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Сонно_дзёй#/media/Файл:Победа_японского_силача.jpg

Figure 4:
Inside Tōkyō Ryōgoku Kokugikan
(両国国技館) building.
Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ryogoku_Kokugikan_Tsuriyane_05212006.jpg



Perry's landing jump-started Japan's modernisation, a process which would see many indigenous traditions branded as barbaric or outdated. More than other martial arts, sumō suffered because of this social and cultural transformation. Suddenly the nudity of the fighters was found to be appalling [Möller 1990: 59]. Sumō was called 'an uncivilised sport, the anachronistic remnant of feudal times' [Keller & Keller 1981: 17, my translation].

It was the Emperor Meiji who averted the decline of sumō in 1884 when he declared his support for tradition by personally attending a sumō tournament. This signalled its re-traditionalization, which was fuelled by surges in nationalism inspired by Japan's victories in wars against Russia and China [Kuhaulua 1973: 37]. With the completion of the Tōkyō Ryōgoku Kokugikan (両国国技館) building in 1909, which was designed especially for sumō tournaments, wrestling regained its high social status.

The global public was introduced to sumō through a demonstration tour of the USA and Europe in 1907-1908. A match attended by President Roosevelt even inspired a newspaper cartoon in which the visibly overburdened Roosevelt tries to lift the wrestler Hitachiyama (常陸山), on whose body current presidential problems such as "Congress", "Panama Canal", "Railroads", "Financial Depression",

"Trusts", "Fleet to the Pacific" and "Third Term" [104] were written. Here again we find the metaphorical connection between martial arts bodies and naval strength.

Whether in response to Koyanagi's victory or simply as a reference to his distant relative, for the signing of Japan's unconditional surrender on September 2, 1945 on the battleship USS Missouri, General Douglas MacArthur had the star-spangled banner of Perry's flagship flown in from a navy museum. It is unlikely that this affront was missed by the Japanese delegation. However, sumō was not among the martial arts that the occupying powers of Japan banned as they 'regarded it as something like popular amusement' [Höhle 2004: 39, my translation].

Although there is broad agreement that sumō and Shintō always have been connected – e.g. through the ritualised thanksgiving sumō, shrine sumō etc. – it is disputed whether the re-traditionalization from the Meiji period only *revived* it, or *developed* it for the first time in such generality as to qualify as an invented tradition [Hobsbawm & Ranger 1982]. For each tournament, the ring (*dohyō* 土俵) is built from scratch with clay in precisely defined rituals and subsequently consecrated with sake. One day before the tournament starts, the dohyō is inaugurated in a festive ceremony led by referees dressed as Shintō priests (*dohyōmatsuri* 土俵祭り) and reminiscent of Shintō rituals for

the consecration of building sites [Möller 1994: 19].² As a nod to sumō origins, a rain roof is erected above the dohyō inside the tournament hall. Since 1931, this roof has been based architecturally on the most important Shintō temple in Ise [75] and crowned with a national flag to underline its national heritage.³

These examples show that the connection between sumō and Shintō is exceptionally close. Although the symbiosis of martial arts and religion or spirituality is always a very complex one, the celebration of religious elements in a commercialized and also highly professional martial art is nevertheless fascinating. Similar to the case of muay thai, it suggests that religion acts as an adhesive between the sport as a traditional cultural element and the ethnic group performing it. The emphasis on ethnicity in Shintō, which in Japanese is usually described with the term *yamato-damashii* (*Yamato spirit* = *Japanese spirit* 大和魂), thus merges sumō and nationalism.

Professional sumō is divided into several divisional leagues, the highest of which being the *makuuchi* division (*inside the curtain* 幕内). The standard rank in the *makuuchi* is the *maegashira* (前頭). 34 out of 42 wrestlers belong in this category.⁴ Above *maegashira* there are three main ranks (*san yaku* 三役). These are *komusubi* (小結), *sekiwake* (関脇) and *ōzeki* (大関). *Ōzeki* translates as ‘big barrier’ which alludes to the insurmountability of these wrestlers.

2 Women may neither participate in the construction nor enter the finished ring. This strict rule also applies to functionaries. Thus the governor of Ōsaka (2000-2008), Fusae Ōta (太田 房江), despite her repeated complaints, was prohibited to enter the dohyō for the traditional opening speeches. Also, an incident on April 4, 2018, caused turmoil when the mayor of Mazuru collapsed during a speech in the dohyō and two female first responders came to his aid. They were asked several times by the gyōji referees to leave the ring while performing a life-saving cardiac massage.

3 Another element of Shintō purity ritual is the throwing of salt by both sumōtori before the fight to cleanse the ring and oneself [Möller 1994: 21]. Also, the stamping up to ward off evil spirits (*shiko*) belongs to this same cultural complex, which goes back to the ancient Shintō myth about the foundation of Japan. The opening of the empty hands demonstrates that one is unarmed, but it is also a religious gesture. In a broader sense, the symbolic richness of the power water (*chikara mizu* 力水) and power paper (*chikara kami* 力紙), with which sumōtori clean themselves immediately before the fight, can also be added [Pauly 2008: 131]. The threefold hand sword movement with which sumōtori receive their reward after the end of the fight is interpreted as a gratitude to three protective Shintō deities [Möller 1994: 97].

4 These and the following numbers are default values. Discrepancies in the overall strength of the *makuuchi* as well as in the individual ranks are common.



Figure 5:
A sumōtori throwing salt before entering the dohyō.
Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Salt_\(15715088222\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Salt_(15715088222).jpg)



Figure 6:
Yokozuna Kakuryū performing dohyō-iri.
Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yokozuna_dohyō-iri_at_Aki_basho,_Sept._28,_2014_\(cropped\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yokozuna_dohyō-iri_at_Aki_basho,_Sept._28,_2014_(cropped).jpg)

Depending on tournament performances, sumō wrestlers move up and down these ranks. Each *sumōtori* belongs to a sumō stable (*heya* 部屋) where the training takes place. Six big sumō tournaments (*honbasho* 本場所) take place annually, three of which are staged in Tōkyō and one each in Ōsaka, Nagoya and Fukuoka. Starting around the year 1800, dignified *ōzeki* were allowed to perform a ritualised dance in front of the *shōgun* [Kuhaulua 1973: 54].⁵ Doing this, the *ōzeki* wore a thick white ritual rope (*tsuna* 綱) around the hip (*yoko* 横). This rope gave the wrestler the epithet '*yokozuna*' (横綱). It was not until the 1890s that this epithet was mentioned on the calligraphic tournament schedule (*banzuke* 番付). Since 1903 the *yokozuna* has been an independent rank, which is now ranked above the *ōzeki*.

Still, *yokozuna* have the authority to perform specific Shintō rituals. This Shintō reference is evident in the lavishly folded paper strips (*shide* 紙垂) that denote sacred or nomenclature areas and objects in Shintō. Similar *shide* are attached to the *yokozuna* rope [54].

'Even though the *yokozuna* is not a god in the narrow sense, it is possible that it is seen as the embodiment of divine power. As a '*kami* vessel', he becomes the object of religious worship. [...] Shintō does not distinguish between a divinity and its manifestation' [Möller 1990: 68-69, my translation]. *Yokozuna* are therefore vessels for divine beings (*kami* 神). As such, a candidate for *yokozuna* promotion must not only have an impressive record of victories, but must also show dignity and integrity. In reality, however, these guidelines are so general that appointments have repeatedly led to public debates. Less than half of all *ōzeki* reach the rank of *yokozuna* [von der Groeben & Mennemeier 2000: 61].

Due to the 'divinity' of their rank, *yokozuna*, in contrast to all other ranks, cannot be degraded [62]. They are expected to resign if their tournament performance no longer suits their outstanding rank. Sumō history is full of *yokozuna* who got into trouble due to inconsistent fight performances (e.g. Maedayama, Chiyonoyama, Futahaguro [detailed in Guttman & Thompson 2001: 182-185]).

In 1958, the Yokozuna Deliberation Council (*yokozuna-shingi-iinkai* 横綱審議委員会) passed an appointment law which declared that 'candidates for *yokozuna* shall be of outstanding character and ability' and that they 'shall have two consecutive tournament championships at the rank of *ōzeki*' [183]. Concerning tournament wins, an exception clause was created that also allowed *yokozuna* promotion for equivalent performances, if the committee unanimously agrees. Due to this exemption, several mediocre *ōzeki* were promoted.

5 This *dohyō-iri* (土俵入り) is still performed today before the *makuuchi* fights.

The nationalistic intimacy between Japan, Shintō and sumō prevented a broad globalisation of the sport like in the cases of *jūdō* (柔道), *jūjutsu* (柔術), *karatedō* (空手道) and *aikidō* (合気道). Reicher [2013] distinguishes here between a national sport (*Nationalsport*) and a nations sport (*Nationensport*). A national sport has an identity-forming effect and references epic heroes or heroic stories in romantic nationalism (*romantischer Nationalismus*). Romantic nationalism extensively employs national iconography [163]. In contrast, a nation's sport is 'a type of sporting competition whose competition rules are internationally oriented and are usually determined by large and transnational sports associations. Sporting competitions are staged as country or nationwide competitions here. The character of the international competition is the result of a competition order in which teams and athletes are assigned to nations' [17].⁶

Nations sports such as the Olympic Games, for example, are also a 'political communication medium', since 'international sports competitions (embody) a ritualised and symbolic test of strength between countries. Such events provide an opportunity to present the nation to the outside world and are acts of affirmation of state sovereignty' [19].⁷ A typical characteristic of a nations sport is its professionalisation through the accumulation of economic resources, which enables international competitions and broad media coverage [56]. According to this definition, *jūdō* has developed from a Japanese ethnic national sport into a modern nations sport [75]. By 1920 the first European *jūdō* competitions were taking place and at its first Olympic appearance in 1964, the most prestigious *jūdō* gold medal was won by a non-Japanese athlete, the Dutchman Anton Geesink.

Although sumō is a highly professional sport with extremely sophisticated media coverage in Japan, it has never transitioned to a nations sport [54]. This is not only due to the fact that sumō is not practised as a professional sport outside Japan, but also to the visibly different staging in foreign amateur sumō. Outside Japan, sumō dispenses with almost all Shintō symbols, rituals and ceremonies. The

6 "Nationensport" meint eine Art des sportlichen Wettbewerbs, dessen Wettkampfordnung international ausgerichtet ist und meist von großen und länderübergreifenden Sportverbänden festgelegt wird. Sportliche Wettbewerbe werden hier als Länder- oder Nationenwettkämpfe inszeniert. Der Charakter des Länderkampfes ist das Resultat einer Wettkampfordnung, bei der Mannschaften und Sportler Nationen zugeordnet werden. My translation.

7 'Internationale Sportwettkämpfe (verkörpern) ein ritualisiertes und symbolisches Kräfteressen zwischen Ländern. Solche Anlässe bieten Gelegenheit zur Präsentation der Nation nach außen und sind Akte der Bestätigung staatlicher Souveränität.' My translation.

referees wear boxing referee clothes instead of Shintō style clothes. There are weight classes and sometimes the competition is held on sports mats rather than in a traditional clay ring. Reicher [54] deduces from these differences that sumō actually has remained a national sport, as it is 'associated with a form of 'ethnic dignity'. Sumō is considered by many Japanese to be an exclusively Japanese practice'.⁸

KUROBUNE ENTERING THE YOKOZUNA RANKS

As a result, very few foreigners appeared in sumō's top divisions until the 1970s and most of these were Koreans and an American of Japanese origin [Kuhaulua 1973: 112]. All of them were visually indistinguishable from indigenous Japanese competitors. The large Japanese expatriate community in Hawaii maintained several amateur sumō clubs. Thus the Hawaiian Jesse Kuhaulua, born in 1944 in Maui, came into contact with sumō and was successfully trained by Isamu Ogasawara [Kuhaulua 1973: 41]. Kuhaulua did not have the common frame of Japanese sumō wrestlers with their pycnic physiognomy and relatively short extremities, as well as a low center of gravity which harmonises perfectly with sumō technique. Kuhaulua was tall, his legs were long and his weapons were power and mass. He entered the *makuuchi* under the ring name Takamiyama (高見山) as the first wrestler with visible non-Asian heritage.

When Takamiyama was on the verge to win the Nagoya tournament in 1972, a bitter discussion broke out in the Japanese public. Some felt reminded of the humiliation of the 1964 Olympic Games. Sumō's social function as a nationalistic, and partly racist, ideology was at stake. The newspapers ran headlines like 'National Sport in Danger! Stop Jesse!' [169].

Interestingly, the Japanese media nicknamed Takamiyama *kurobune* [Guttmann & Thompson 2001: 186], referencing the humiliation by Commodore Perry a century ago. Apparently, a wrestling body could be equated with a warship and both were regarded as menaces to Japanese national pride. The reference to the *kurobune* also implies a warrior-military nuance, in addition to the equally inappropriate polemics of invasion. There were public discussions as to whether to play the American national anthem if Takamiyama was victorious, as well as arguments that foreign wrestlers damaged sumō's reputation more generally.

Takamiyama was the first foreigner to win a *honbasho* tournament. The American ambassador, Robert Ingersoll, read out a congratulatory telegram from President Nixon in the ring. This event, in particular, was perceived as an affront to the Japanese sumō tradition. 'With later foreign winners [...] attention was paid to congratulations only being translated into Japanese' [von der Groeben & Mennemeier 2000: 28, my translation]. Takamiyama's dominance in the tournament (thirteen victories against two defeats) caused bitterness in the sumō community. A contemporary newspaper commentary decried: 'This is no joke. Can we call this our national sport? Despite his weak points, there were only two Japanese wrestlers who could manage to beat Takamiyama. I guess we can't brag much about our national sport anymore' [169].

It is noteworthy that Takamiyama's advocates referred in particular to his 'Japanese qualities', which would have enabled him to win the tournament in the first place. The president of the sumō association called this a result of many years of training in Japan among Japanese trainers. Shoichi Kamikaze, one of the leading sumō commentators, declared similarly: 'The notion that the national sport of sumō cannot be lost to a foreigner is an odd one. Takamiyama came to Japan nine years ago and put out more than twice as hard as other wrestlers. He's not a foreigner. He's a sumō wrestler of Japan' [169]. Here we see a transformation from ethnonationalism to cultural nationalism, which is typical for nations sports. However, Takamiyama ultimately failed to live up to the *Kurobune* nickname. After his initial victory he never succeeded in another tournament.

Takamiyama's achievements did inspire other Americans to take an interest in sumō. A total of 27 athletes, including 21 Hawaiians, competed in professional sumō in the next few years [von der Groeben & Mennemeier 2000: 33]. Saleva'a Fuauli Atisano'e, who entered the *makuuchi* as Konishiki (小錦) in 1984 and won his first tournament in 1989 – 17 years after Takamiyama, was particularly noteworthy. Two years earlier Konishiki had been become the first foreign *ōzeki*. He defended this rank for six and a half years, earning enduring respect from the Japanese public.

Konishiki's tournament victory in Fukuoka caused immense turmoil in Japan. Unlike Takamiyama, Konishiki held the rank of *ōzeki* and was thus almost eligible for *yokozuna* promotion. According to Shintō beliefs he would thereby become an 'object of religious worship' [Möller 1990: 69, my translation], a kind of Japanese saint. To make matters worse, Konishiki refused to accept Japanese citizenship, which could have defused the nationalistic discussion. Tensions peaked as Konishiki won a second tournament in Fukuoka two years later. According to the previously mentioned exception rule, he had achieved the mandatory accomplishments for promotion. However, the Yokozuna Deliberation Council hesitated to award the title without providing any explanation.

8 [...] Sumō mit einer Form von 'ethnischer Würde' verbunden ist. Sumō ist aus der Sicht vieler Japaner eine exklusiv japanische Praxis'. My translation.

Konishiki failed to win the following January tournament, but finished with an impressive score of 12-3. He then won the Ōsaka tournament in March. Clearly there was no reason to deny him the yokozuna title. But after the autumn tournament a harsh anti-Konishiki sentiment had emerged. The famous former *yokozuna* Taihō declared that the defeat of the Japanese top wrestlers was a disgrace [von der Groeben & Mennemeier 2000: 36]. Konishiki was threatened, insulted [Möller 1990: 69] and denounced literally as the ‘second *Kurobune*’. Once again, the Japanese media used nationalistic, militaristic rhetoric.

After the Yokozuna Deliberation Council initial evasions, it tried to use all possible excuses to block Konishiki’s appointment. First, it was declared that the losses against *maegashira* Akinoshima and *komusubi* Tochinowaka were unworthy of a *yokozuna*. Moreover, Konishiki was criticised for relying too much on mass and strength, and less on ‘real’ wrestling technique (of course this also applied to countless other highly ranked sumō wrestlers – including several yokozuna). Secondly, the council published an article which called the *yokozuna* promotion for any non-Japanese athlete into question because they would lack (Japanese) dignity (*hinkaku* 品格) [Guttmann & Thompson 2001: 186]. This was clearly a nationalist and racist argument. By stating ‘sumō is first a ritual, then a drama and only third a sport’ [Reicher 2013: 53]⁹ the council put the basic idea of modern sport and equal treatment behind national-cultural symbolism. Third, the high number active *yokozuna* in 1991 (four) and the comparatively generous *yokozuna* promotions in previous years were suspicious. Guttmann and Thompson [2001: 186] suspect that this was done with the intention of not generating ‘free’ *yokozuna* ranks that Konishiki could occupy. On the other hand, the number of active *ōzeki* was also unusually high and some *ōzeki* were promoted to yokozuna to outbalance this.

Although all four *yokozuna* of the period (Chiyonofuji, Ōnokuni, Hokutoumi, Asahifuji) resigned between 1991 and 1992, Konishiki was still not promoted. In 1986, Futahaguro had been promoted to *yokozuna* even lacking a single tournament championship. The fact that Konishiki did not receive this honour despite three tournament victories (two of them in close succession) and overall impressive performances (since 1989) left no doubt as to the deep-rooted nationalistic ideology in high-ranking sumō. Finally, the council deleted the exemption clause from the two-consecutive tournament victory rule to dismiss Konishiki’s claims to the *yokozuna* title once and for all.

But during the Konishiki crisis another Hawaiian from Takamiyama’s

stable had moved up to the sanyaku ranks. Chad(wick) Rowan entered the *makuuchi* in 1990 as Akebono (*dawn* 曙). After Konishiki had won the tournament in March 1992 and the dispute concerning his promotion had escalated, Akebono eventually won the following tournament in May as *sekiwake*. When he succeeded in the November tournament in 1992 and the following January tournament in 1993, the Yokozuna Deliberation Council had no other choice than to promote Akebono to *yokozuna*.

At that time, Akebono was not only the first foreign *yokozuna* ever but also the only one of his rank. The Japanese public reacted less hostile than expected. On the one hand, fatigue prevailed after the heated Konishiki debate. On the other, a liberal, anti-nationalistic position increasingly gained support in the Japanese public. It may also have been conducive that Akebono behaved in a Japanese-desirable manner inside and outside the ring [Reicher 2013: 53]. He showed few emotions and seemed rather distant and shy. In terms of character, he presented a significant contrast to the militaristic, xenophobic *Kurobune* metaphor.

With the Samoan wrestler Musashimaru (武蔵丸), who became *yokozuna* in 1999 after debuting in the *makuuchi* in 1991, the Japanese public finally made their peace with foreign yokozuna, and the vicious comparisons with foreign warships vanished. The undeniable resemblance of Musashimaru to Takamori Saigō (西郷隆盛), a Japanese national hero of the Meiji restoration [Kuehnert 2003]¹⁰, and his disarmingly charismatic friendliness played a huge part in this.

Eventually, the sumō association decreed that each stable must not accept more than one foreigner at a time to maintain its national sport character, although this requirement is in fact exceeded by double citizenships. Nevertheless, the four *yokozuna* following Musashimaru all had Mongolian roots. Out of these four, the still active Hakuō (白鵬) excels with a stellar record of 44 tournament victories (as of October 2020), amazing technical skill¹¹ and (almost)¹² flawless behaviour.

10 In The Last Samurai Takamori Saigō is played by Ken Watanabe.

11 In contrast to extreme heavyweights such as Takamiyama, Konishiki, Akebono and Musashimaru, Hakuō is rather average 160 kg.

12 In 2008, Hakuō got into an incident after a defeat against Asashōryū, because the latter carried out an illegal push after the end of the fight. Three seconds of threatening staring in the ring led to both of them being warned by the sumō association.

9 ‘Sumō ist zunächst ein Ritual, danach ein Drama und erst drittens ein Sport’. My translation.

NATIONALISM IN PRO WRESTLING

The majority of Americans knew nothing about sumō until the middle of the 20th century. In his biography, Takamiyama, the American sumō pioneer, reports:

A customs official in California once took a look at my size, topknot, and kimono and decided that I must be some kooky pro wrestler. And he wasn't the only one. A lot of people came up and asked me if I had ever fought guys like Dick the Bruiser or Destroyer Freddie Blassie, and I would have to explain patiently that sumō is a bit different.
[Kuhaulua 1973: 167]

The most obvious difference is that in pro wrestling generally the so-called Kayfabe code is applied. Kayfabe insists that the ring characters (called 'gimmicks'), storylines and emotions are acted out as well as that fighting sequences and techniques are choreographed. In this way, Kayfabe separates a show from 'real' competition. It demands to pretend the 'realness' of the actions and forbids breaking the fourth wall. And it implies that the actors continue to play their gimmicks outside the ring, thus blurring the line between reality and roleplay.¹³

Lust is right when he concludes: 'Less a martial art, which it imitates in its expression, pro wrestling is rather similar to dance' [Lust 2010: 418, my translation]. In pro wrestling, the goal is not a mere victory but 'the aesthetic quality and show-suitability of the performance' [417]. The performance as the centre of pro wrestling is embedded in an unprecedented theatricality. It provides the narrative background of the 'fight dance theatre'; it is meaningful for the act of fighting; and it provides the formula for the symbolic conduct of conflicts in the ring. Not only the American monopolist in the pro wrestling business, the WWE ('World Wrestling Entertainment', formerly WWF), defines itself as a 'sports entertainment' company (which it also does for legal reasons). Even the viewers themselves do not regard pro wrestling as a 'real' competitive sport [Woo & Kim 2003: 362].

The televised spectacular Monday Night Wars between the WWE and the WCW in the 1990s demonstrated that dramatic theatricality might

be superior to ring performance.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, the results of a study by Indiana University indicated that in a two-hour pro wrestling event, only an average of 36 minutes is filled with actual performance [Oppliger 2004: 19; Woo & Kim 2003: 363]. In the perspective of wrestlers and fans, there is no need to discuss whether pro wrestling is a 'magic show' [Vince McMahon in Lust 2010: 422], 'folk theater' [Archer & Svinth in Green 2001: 743] or a 'soap opera with a referee' [Chris Mortensen in Oppliger 2004: 1]. Some people interpret the Kayfabe code like a kind of method acting: 'No one would call a production of Shakespeare fake' [145].

As in folk theatre, wrestling gimmicks are pre-figured. In their staging – mostly based on stereotypes (e.g. 'The Undertaker') – as well as in their morality. Heels are bad and (baby) faces are good. Rarely does a wrestler change his gimmick. Much more common are heel turns or face turns, when a wrestler changes sides. In the 1940s, Gorgeous George was the first wrestler to consistently develop his ring personality to get as much crowd reaction as possible (in his case as a heel). In this way he even influenced the young Muhammad Ali. Gimmicks and the audience are therefore recursive [Kutzelmann 2013: 43–45]. They influence each other so much that the actual wrestling brawl sometimes falls behind. The interaction of the ring persona with each other, and especially with the audience, is much more important. Like Gorgeous George, wrestlers always try to generate as much hate (as a heel) or admiration (as a face) as possible. This crowd reaction is called 'heat'. Costumes, ring entrances (hymns, gestures and pyrotechnics), ring managers, catch phrases, signature moves and narration (interviews and storylines) ultimately serve gimmick modelling [67].

Naturally the decisive factor of a gimmick is the athlete's body. Especially in the 1980s the 'hardbody' dominated.¹⁵ The hardbody is presented as a muscle-bound larger-than-life version of American 'white trash'. Cinematically accompanied by Schwarzenegger, Stallone, van Damme and Willis [152]; Hulk Hogan, Ric Flair and the Ultimate Warrior dominated the wrestling ring. For the main audience of pro wrestling shows at that time, these heroes embodied messianic saviours of white, masculine hegemony from the repeated assaults of financial capitalism, the counter-culture movement, war trauma, women and minority rights movements and emergent globalisation. The hardbody has always had reactionary and nationalistic elements and resonances with the white supremacy agenda.

13 The pro wrestling story is peppered with curiosities arising from this rule. For example, the (actual) brothers Owen and Bret Hart were only allowed to meet secretly during their scripted feud. Even their parents were included in the storyline and acted out their grief in the audience.

14 With a brilliant storyline, the WCW was briefly dominating the wrestling business: a group of former WWF stars were marketed as 'infiltration commandos' in the service of the WWF, trying to destroy the WCW as an inside job.

15 The term was coined by historian Susan Jeffords [Kutzelmann 2013: 89].

From a global perspective pro wrestling is clearly a nations sport since, despite the kayfabe code, there is a highly professional effort to deliver the best show possible and to ignite enthusiasm in the audience. Because fights are taped several times, the kayfabe code allows that the course of a fight can be tailored to different international markets. In American television, the American wrestler is allowed to win, in Japanese television the Japanese wrestler wins. Exceptions are pro wrestling leagues that are strongly limited to the domestic market, such as the Mexican Lucha Libre, which are ethnically rather secluded and distinguish themselves from comparable leagues. While the Japanese audience is mainly interested in technical brilliance, a thrilling show is the most important factor for WWE fans. Flags, anthems and national stereotypes surround the upright redneck wrestler in his perpetual fight against the evil, the foreign and the progressive. Nationalism is the anchor point, the ethics and at the same time the driving force of the wrestling hero which legitimises his existence. 'Always somewhere the 'nation' is somehow in danger, always competing with others, always triumphs and always defeats emerge' [Reicher 2013: 149].¹⁶

The tradition of racist and nationalist heel gimmicks as antagonists of the upright hardbody is therefore as old as pro wrestling itself – worldwide. Strikingly, especially in this gimmick category, neither name, home country nor accent usually coincide with the real person behind the mask. Regarding the WWE, the German Nazi character Baron von Raschke was actually Jim Raschke who originated from Nebraska. The Iron Sheik was a native of Iran who, with the outbreak of the first Gulf War, wrestled as Colonel Mustafa from Iraq [Oppliger 2004: 12]. Killer Kowalski (Edward Spulnik) had Polish roots but was of Canadian descent. Harold Sakata (actually Toshiyuki Sakata, 坂田 敏行), who transformed his role as Oddjob in 'Goldfinger' into his gimmick, originated from Hawaii [Beekman 2006: 91].

As a rule, the nationalist heel marches to the ring waving a foreign flag, while he loudly insults the home country of the audience. Since pro wrestling leagues rent their wrestlers from all over the world, it is common for American hardbody faces to rotate abroad to nationalistic heels and vice versa. Japanese pro wrestling even thwarted the American hardbody ideal by 'simply reversing its specific logic to express the superiority of the supposedly weaker body of Asian men' [Kutzelmann 2013: 106, my translation].

16 'Immer ist irgendwo die 'Nation' irgendwie in Gefahr, immer befindet sie sich im Wettstreit mit anderen, immer tauchen Triumphe, immer Niederlagen auf.' My translation.

YOKOZUNA AND THE CHALLENGE ON THE USS INTREPID

By the early 90s, the stardom of Hulk Hogan in the WWE declined. The chiselled Lex Luger was designated as the successor to the beefy, tanned Hogan whose gimmick was a face version of Gorgeous George. At that time Luger embodied the heel gimmick 'The Narcissist' who always admired himself in a large mirror (again a reference to Gorgeous George).

In order to orchestrate the handover of Hogan's crown to Luger, the WWE needed a super villain, a 'monster heel'. They found him in Rodney Anoa'i, descendant of a traditional Samoan pro wrestling dynasty, born in San Francisco. The WWE discarded his gimmick 'Kokinka Maximus' shortly after his engagement in 1992 and created a new one. The 230 kilograms Anoa'i slipped into the gimmick of a sumō wrestler, dressed with *kimono* and *mawashi*,¹⁷ traditional hair plait, bamboo flute entrance music and a ring manager named Mr. Fuji. His gimmick name was 'Yokozuna'.

Mr. Fuji who was played by the Japanese-American Harry Fujiwara wore wooden sandals and a *kimono*. He distorted the Shintō-inspired sumō practice of throwing salt into the ring by throwing it into the eyes of Yokozuna's opponents when the referee was distracted.

However, anti-American nationalist gimmicks had declined in the early 1990s in the WWE. Notable exceptions were the Finnish gimmick 'Ludvig Borga' (sporting high boots to conceal his Nazi tattoos) and the Canadian gimmick 'The Mountie'. In comparison, Yokozuna was even more typecast. The Second World War ended half a century earlier and the Japanese-American relationship was peaceful. Since there was no real discord, the WWE was able to build up an extreme hatred on the part of the audience against the Japanese without risking that it would spill over outside the wrestling ring.

In former times heels were regularly chased by audiences after leaving the wrestling event [Hart 2009]. It is therefore not surprising that African-American heels were not employed in the WWE until the 1980s due to concerns that they might be lynched [Oppliger 2004: 13]. In contrast, Yokozuna was granted a particularly disgraceful victory over face wrestler Jim Duggan with his naïve-patriotic comical gimmick the 'American Patriot'.¹⁸ Duggan, who had been blinded by Mr. Fuji's

17 To appease the American audience, he pulled on leggings.

18 Jim Duggan's trademark was his raw longwood which he brought to the ring as well as his frenetic 'U-S-A!' chants.

salt, was subjected to Yokozuna's dreaded finishing move, the 'Banzai Drop', no fewer than four times! This technique was a backward jump from the first ring rope onto the chest of the lying opponent, leaving Yokozuna sitting on the victim. Americans soldiers in the Second World War described the assaults and kamikaze attacks of Japanese infantry as 'Banzai Charges'. Once again we find a military metaphor projected upon the wrestling body. To further increase the public's rage, Yokozuna draped an American flag on the helpless Duggan before the fourth 'Banzai Drop' and then remained sitting on the flag (and the buried hero).

In the following months, the WWE built Yokozuna up to be an almost invincible monster heel [Hart 2009]. Due to his sheer weight, he could neither be thrown nor slammed. Yokozuna defeated his opponents not by using his skill and technique, but by his massiveness and strength. Interestingly, as we have seen, at the same time in Japan Konishiki was accused of owing his success to mere mass and strength. In both cases, it is therefore the huge, massive and primitive foreign body that is portrayed as the antagonist to the cunning, skilful national hero. Here we find symbolism from the biblical story of David, when the slender David defeats the mammoth Goliath with a deft stone shot. Parallels can also be drawn to stereotypical medieval romanticism, in which brave knights fight monstrous dragons.

The WWE staged the handover of Hogan's reign to Luger as an outstanding event. On July 4, 1993, United States Independence Day, Yokozuna celebrated his triumph over Hulk Hogan and the end of the (so-called) Hulk Mania. At this event called 'Yokozuna vs. the US', Yokozuna (of course kayfabe) publicly claimed that Americans were too weak to slam him [Luger 2013].

This insult was intensified not only by the symbolic date of the national holiday, but also by the location – the USS Intrepid. This aircraft carrier of the Essex class (CV-11) is a museum ship stationed in New York. During the Pacific War, the USS Intrepid was feared by the Japanese as much as Perry's kurobune fleet a hundred years before. The carrier was involved in the sinking of the two most renowned battleships of the Japanese fleet. The sister ships Yamato (大和) and Musashi (武蔵) were not only the largest battleships of all time, they were commissioned as admiral flagships and represented the Japanese soul like no other combat unit.

Yamato is the name of a historical province that encompassed the core of traditional Japan. Moreover, in the Japanese language Yamato is commonly equated with the nation itself, e.g. in the phrase *yamato-damashii* mentioned above. To this day, the Yamato is a symbol of Japanese fighting spirit and strength, but also of the honour of 'dignified defeat' [Morris 2020],¹⁹ regularly revived in various national romantic narratives [Takekawa 2013].

Musashi is the name of another former Japanese core province, and also the name of the famous samurai Musashi Miyamoto (宮本武蔵, 1584-1645), who is both worshipped as the embodiment of the Japanese fighting spirit and adored as a sword saint. During the Pacific War, recurring Japanese reports that the Intrepid had been sunk after heavy hits turned out to be wrong. Indeed, she suffered more hits than any other American carrier in the Pacific War. Because of her unnatural resilience, the Intrepid was eventually feared in Japan as a ghost ship.

Thus in the 1993 July 4th event, the symbolic significance of the massive, invincible enemy intruder is once again intertwined with the warship metaphor. In Japanese drawings that depict Perry's fleet, the contrast between the small graceful wooden boats with colourful, splendidly dressed Japanese sailors, and the bulky, stinking and seemingly unmanned, bestial black ships is marvellous rendered. Likewise, Yokozuna welcomed his opponents on the most impressive ship of the fleet – an aircraft carrier. A colourful, noisy crowd of American patriots, athletes, wrestlers and journalists was awaiting him. In his role as a Japanese athlete, Yokozuna, like Koyanagi, challenged the American nation to a wrestling match on an American flagship. In both cases the chosen location is the representative gateway to the world: the vibrating cultural capital (New York/ Tōkyō) and not the noble administrative capital (Washington D.C./ Kyōto). The accumulation of symbolism, capital town, warship and wrestling reinforces their pictorial meaning.

The symbolic superimposition of this spectacle might seem bizarre. An American compatriot is disguised as a sumō wrestler of Japanese descent who is given the ring name of the most decorated, as well as the socially and religiously most revered, Japanese athletes. He then challenges the American nation to a (staged) match on Independence Day on the flight deck of a US warship which managed to destroy the symbolic soul of the Japanese nation in the likeness of the legendary battleship Yamato.

Yokozuna, boasting that nobody had ever lifted him off his feet, began the exhibition with twenty of the biggest, strongest athletes on the planet – NFL players, NBA players, wrestlers, powerlifters, and bodybuilders – all taking turns at trying to slam the mammoth man down, with no success. Yokozuna laughed at their feeble attempts. 'Is this the best America has?' he scoffed, much to the chagrin of the crowd on hand to celebrate the nation's birthday, 'Americans are so weak! Isn't there anybody in America who has what it takes?' [Luger 2013]

After no one succeeded in lifting Yokozuna, seemingly defeating the USA on its most patriotic holiday, a helicopter landed on deck. On his way to the ring, Lex Luger freed himself from his heel gimmick by

19 'Würdevolle Niederlage'. My translation.

repulsing his heel manager. He faced Yokozuna as a stereotypic patriotic hero (tanned, free upper body, western boots, plain blue jeans). After an exchange of words and a few blows, the miracle happened. Yokozuna staggered towards Luger, who succeeded in lifting him horizontally and slamming him on the ground. With thundering cheers, the audience celebrated the victory of the brave national hardbody hero over the insurmountable 'Asian'.

This nationalistic event can be compared to hockey's 'Miracle on Ice' in 1980 or the 'Match of the Century' in chess in 1972. In the following weeks Lex Luger travelled with his new gimmick, 'The All-American', in a red, white, and blue tour bus ('Lex Express') to promote a title fight against Yokozuna. For this fight, which took place in August 1993, Luger sported trousers embroidered with Stars and Stripes and colour-matching gear. In November 1993, Luger and his team of 'All-Americans' vanquished Yokozuna's 'Foreign Fanatics' (featuring the mentioned Ludvig Borga and the Canadian duo 'The Quebecers'). Through these three symbolic victories against foreign evil, America's national integrity had been restored. In all three events, nationalist iconography was reinforced by flags, national heroism and anthems.

CONCLUSION

Reicher [2013: 212] argues that 'hard' nationalism in sport has declined significantly in the 21st century. Using European football as an example, he explains that migration from other EU states, former colonies and non-European countries in general has contributed to the development of 'romantic nationalism' into 'empty nationalism'.²⁰

In contrast to 'romantic nationalism', the 'empty nationalism' of 'national sport' is not based on an ethnically or regionally defined particularist culture. Rather, it is universalistic and refers to sport as a component of a generally accepted world culture. The content and form of this 'nationalism' is not particularly different in large parts of the world. [304].²¹

20 'Leerer Nationalismus'. My translation.

21 'Im Gegensatz zum 'romantischen Nationalismus' basiert der 'leere Nationalismus' des 'Nationensports' weitgehend eben nicht auf einer ethnisch oder regional definierten partikularistischen Kultur. Er ist vielmehr universalistisch und bezieht sich auf Sport als Bestandteil einer allgemein akzeptierten Weltkultur. Inhalt und Form dieses 'Nationalismus' unterscheiden sich in weiten Teilen der Welt nicht besonders voneinander'. My translation.

This means that even though sumō continues to inherit the status of a national sport that has an identity-forming function for the Japanese nation, it has noticeably moved away from a nationalistic-racist ideology. Regarding the superiority of non-Japanese *yokozuna* in the 21st century in a 4:1 ratio, sumō probably had no other choice. It was also Akebono, who, in his function as a *yokozuna*, represented sumō as he exorcised evil spirits before the start of the Olympic Winter Games in Nagano in front of a worldwide audience [Guttmann & Thompson 2001: 209].

It seems, however, that the dignity of *yokozuna* wrestlers is drifting away from the prestige of the rank itself. After his retirement, Akebono was able to choose a career path that is rather unusual for a *kami*. Instead of becoming an official in the sumō organisation as others did, or taking over the management of his own stable, Akebono engaged in K-1 kickboxing. Of his many defeats, the one against Bob Sapp (2003) may be the most notable. Akebono suffered another impressive defeat in an MMA fight in Ōsaka in 2004 against Royce Gracie. Weighing 80 kilograms, Gracie was 140 kilograms lighter than his opponent.²²

In 1996 the pro wrestler Yokozuna, at that time weighing over 300 kilograms, performed a face turn. He stopped speaking in Japanese in interviews, and again took up his native English. Mr. Fuji exchanged his Japanese flag for an American one. The time of glaring nationalism, once typified by Yokozuna and Lex Luger, is over in the WWE.

Nevertheless, the company occasionally experimented with gimmicks which had a clear political-ethnic agenda. Among these was the post-9/11 persona 'Muhammad Hassan' (portrayed by the Italian American Marc J. Copani), who represented Americans of Arab descent and spoke out against prejudice in his heel gimmick and praised Allah during the ring entrance.²³

22 Finally, in April 2005, Akebono competed against the heavyweight wrestler 'Big Show' at the WWE event Wrestlemania 21. Completely kayfabe, the fight was surprisingly designed as a sumō match, including sumō dress and rules, a real *gyōji* in traditional garb and a pro wrestling arena converted to a sumō ring. Doing this, the WWE tried to get Japanese spectators excited about the American pro wrestling league. This was expressed in the fact that Akebono was allowed to win the – from a sumō perspective – quite long fight.

23 Hassan had a performance on July 4th, 2005 (again on Independence Day) in a remarkable match of his protégé Daivari against the Undertaker. After Daivari's defeat, Hassan 'conjured up' four henchmen for support, whose clothing was very reminiscent of real-world terrorists. Three days later, London was attacked by 'real' terrorists. Under public pressure, the WWE stopped the storyline and removed Hassan from the spotlight.

Some of today's most popular face wrestlers display patriotic rather than nationalistic traits, which they express through their reference to the US military and especially its veterans. This is an 'appreciation of one's own country without devaluing others' [Reicher 2013: 21].²⁴ These include John Cena, Kurt Angle and, to a certain extent, the Undertaker after his gimmick was altered to 'American Bad Ass'. In summary, the still occurring exploitation of nationalistic and racist emblems is so overexcited in the WWE that in modern times it strangely contributes to their trivialisation [Oppliger 2004: 118].

In both sports, pro wrestling and sumō, the significance of the monstrous wrestling body has decreased. The aforementioned Hakuho is not only non-Japanese and the most successful sumō wrestler of all time, but also of only average size and an athlete who amazes with his technical brilliance. He has never lived up to the stereotype of a terrifying foreign giant. In show wrestling too, technical sophistication now dominates over sheer gigantism. Because of this, women's wrestling has grown into a highly respected branch of the WWE. This obviously mirrors similar developments in the UFC. Nevertheless, the heritage of the hardbody ideology is still visible.

The focus on technical perfection, regardless of gender, stature and nationality, is a result of modern media representation which attributes a cultural-national character, or patriotic-national meaning, to specific sport events [Reicher 2013: 18], but in which the athletes or fighters themselves only represent different instances. An equation and ideologization of athlete and nation in sports (like Fischer vs. Spassky) and especially in martial arts (like Balboa vs. Drago) by the media is almost unthinkable today. The most important reason is the increasing ethnic mixing of many national teams. Actual political conflicts between nations are no longer fought between athletes but rather between officials and associations.

With the emergence of empty nationalism, the nationalist symbolism of warships has declined significantly. In the movie *Battleship* (2012), the international navies that are off Hawaii on the occasion of the biennial RIMPAC manoeuvre cooperate to ward off a threat from alien warships. Interestingly, the battle is mainly fought by American and Japanese ships and is won with the help of the reactivated battleship USS Missouri. Remarkably, at the beginning of the movie a rivalry between Americans and Japanese is staged in a baseball game and settled in sportive fair-play.

Aircraft carrier combat groups are still the dominant instrument in modern gunboat diplomacy. Not unlike Commodore Perry in his days, US aircraft carriers are sent out when conflicts intensify or

demonstrations of power are necessary. Japan, like all highly developed but militarily second-rate nations (such as Germany, the UK and France), derives its pride primarily from technological, scientific, cultural and, indeed, sporting achievements [19].

This article showed how wrestling bodies and warships are used as metaphors of nationalism and belligerence, how these two metaphors have been combined, and in which diplomatic, warlike, sporting, and theatrical conflicts they have been applied. From the perspective of martial arts studies, this article illustrates the complex macro-sociological utilisation of the wrestling body. It opens up space for further investigation that is located at the intersection of martial arts and ideological instrumentalization.

Unfortunately, many studies largely ignore the nationalistically motivated body image language, e.g. the National Socialist appropriation of *jiu-jitsu/ujutsu* by Möller [1996] and Coesfeld [2019] or the Zionist ideologization of *krav maga* by Bar-On Cohen [2010; 2011].²⁵ The current urgency of this issue is illustrated by the attempts of European right-wing extremists to implement their racist and nationalist agendas into mixed martial arts tournaments [Claus & Zajonc 2019]. The alleged superiority of the white male fighting body is thereby staged and celebrated in the most obvious possible way. This article warns against refilling the empty nationalism in sports as formulated by Reicher with transfigured martial arts warrior symbolism that can be misused as ideological groundwork for future nationalistic conflicts.

24 'Aufwertung des eigenen Landes, ohne andere abzuwerten'. My translation.

25 A notable exception is the work by Baratella [2019] on boxing.

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