The Sociological Analysis of *Ekiden*, Japan's Long-Distance Relay Road Race

Akira Ohira [*]

Abstract: *»Eine soziologische Analyse des* Ekiden, *Japans Langstrecken-Staffellauf«.* This paper aims to refer to the long-distance relay road race known as *ekiden,* which is a Japanese invention in the history of modern sports, from a wider sociological perspective. This unique sport, which has seldom been practiced in countries other than Japan, has been widely enjoyed and supported by a large number of Japanese people regardless of sex as a competitive team sport among high-school, university, and even company teams. By looking back on the developing history of this sport, I would like to shed light on the process of state formation in modern Japan as well as on a close relationship between nationalism and morality, an incentive to form the spirit of the nation, by using Norbert Elias's figurational theory. As a conclusion, I would also like to refer to the possibility of other nations' finding an interest in *ekiden* not only as an international competitive sport but also as a peaceful collective sporting event for the masses in the future. For that purpose, two examples are briefly introduced here; one is the 2018 Adecco Brussels Ekiden and the other the Koko Guam Road Race.

Keywords: long-distance relay road races (*ekiden*), sociological and historical perspectives of *ekiden,* modern Japanese history and politics, Japanese religion and myth, figurational theory, *ekiden* as international competitive and peaceful collective sports.

1. Introduction: *Ekiden* as a Traditional Sporting Event in Japan

The first *ekiden* (Japan's "long-distance relay road race"/ "road relay"/ "marathon relay") was held on 27 April 1917 as part of the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the Meiji State. Two teams were organized to run 508 kilometers from Kyoto (the old capital of Japan) to Tokyo (the new capital of Japan's Meiji government) along the route of the old, main highway called *Tokaido.* One team represented the Kanto (Tokyo) region, and the other the Kansai (Kyoto/Osaka) region. *Ekiden* as a long-distance relay race was invented by the

---

[*] Akira Ohira, School of International Liberal Studies, Waseda University, 1-6-1 Shinjyukuku, Nishiwaseda, Tokyo 169-8050, Japan; sils@list.waseda.jp.

Japanese and the name was proposed by the Japanese poet Toki Zenmaro (1885-1980), who was then head of the Social Affairs Department of a Japanese newspaper called "*Yomiuri Shimbun.*" He was also an advocate of both the romanization of the Japanese script and Esperanto. The name "*ekiden*" itself was coined by Takeda Chiyosaburo[1] (1867-1932), Vice-president of the Greater Japan Physical Education Society; however it was taken from the system of posting stations that had been used for long-distance communication in China and Japan since ancient times.[2] This new race played an important role in symbolizing the unification of the old Japan and the new Japan, emphasizing the successful modernization of Japanese society through western civilization. Thanks to new road-building, the runners were able to run this route in an amazingly quick time. The Kanto team won in 41 hours and 44 minutes.

A large number of spectators gathered to watch the anchor runner Kanakuri Shiso (1891-1983). He later became Japan's first Olympic marathon runner and helped create the Hakone Ekiden, one of the most famous and long-lasting collegiate *ekiden* events in Japan. It is run by representatives of various universities from the Tokyo region and is held over two days at the beginning of the New Year, covering 217.1 kilometers. It has continued as part of Japan's New Year celebrations from 1920 to the present.

Kanakuri's motivation in proposing the race was to train long-distance runners in Japan and he suggested that such a collegiate race would be attractive.[3] The route from Tokyo to Hakone and back was finally chosen because it combined naturally beautiful landscapes with sites of historic importance; for example, from the Hakone area, one can see the snow-capped magnificent figure

---

[1] While studying at Tokyo University, Takeda Chiyosaburo came to respect F. W. Strange very highly. Strange was a Cambridge University graduate who came to Japan as a priest in 1875 and produced a theory of sport written for students from the perspective of amateurism. Takeda also published his own books related to the philosophy and science of sport with a special emphasis on the importance of young men's physical and mental training. For more detailed explanations of their relationship, see Abe 2002, 4-6.

[2] It is also interesting to compare this kind of "long-distance relay road race" or "marathon relay", called *ekiden*, with a long-distance mountain marathon called "*kaihogyo*" (a mountain pilgrimage) which has been practiced by Japanese Buddhist monks for the purpose of physical and mental training so that they can attain religious depth. Japanese *ekiden* runners also need a great deal of endurance, perseverance, and even dedication to lead their teams to victory, while these monks have to bear extraordinary hardship and practise asceticism in order to get to the heart of Zen Buddhism, namely to attain enlightenment. From a Japanese point of view, sport and religion might have something in common. For the ascetic practices of these marathon monks, see Stevens 1988, 57-152.

[3] Kanakuri Shiso took part in the 1912 Stockholm Olympiad as one of the Japanese marathon runners, but he had to give up running in the middle of the race because he was out of shape. Actually, he lost consciousness because of the extraordinarily high temperature. After returning to Japan, he and his athletic associates planned a trans-America *ekiden* event, but that was never realized. So, it was important for him to train excellent Japanese marathon runners for international events, and to put the Hakone Ekiden into practice.

of Mt Fuji, the symbol of Japan and its culture, and the Tokugawa government had set up a checkpoint there, watching and controlling passersby or travelers. The route therefore had political meaning in terms of connecting Tokyo to places considered to be of traditional importance to the Japanese state.

Looking back on the early development of *ekiden*, we can see that the organizers were also concerned with the politics of the new Japanese state. It is therefore reasonable to say that "*ekiden* running emphasizes a combination of individual physical effort with teamwork and dedication", and that "these are the kind of values that the leaders of Japan wanted young Japanese to learn and respect" (Manning 2008, 22). From these premises it is also possible to conclude that "early *ekiden* races were connected symbolically with the traditions that the new Japanese state was creating" (Manning 2008, 24).

As has often been the case with newly established nation states, such as Japan was, there are likely to be considerable difficulties in creating political and cultural unity. Since the new Meiji regime started under the name of westernization, it often faced a serious dilemma caused by its efforts to modernize Japan's feudalistic social system on the one hand, and the maintenance of Japan's traditional way of life and thinking on the other.

Progressive, forward-looking, liberal intellectuals, such as Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901), argued that a thorough westernization of Japan – or to use Fukuzawa's own phraseology, its "de-Asianization" – was vital for Japan's survival (or the survival unit in the Eliasian terms). Other literati and art historians, such as Narushima Ryuhoku (1837-1884) and Okakura Tenshin (1863-1913), thought westernization to be a deplorable, superficial, and even harmful phenomenon that would result in the devastation of traditional Japanese culture, philosophy, and religion.[4] For example, Okakura states that "it must be

---

[4] Fukuzawa Yukichi, by publishing several seminal books under the influence of such English philosophers as Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill, demonstrated candidly and straightforwardly his practical, utilitarian worldview against the time-honoured, Confucian ideology of the Tokugawa regime. His essay on de-Asianizing (or de-Asianization) should particularly be noted as he stated explicitly there that "Japan does not have time to wait for neighbouring countries to become educated and to develop Asia with them. Rather she should join the civilized countries of the West in their actions [...] and treat them [i.e., Asian countries] as the West would when she comes into contact with them" (Kato 1989, 84). Narushima Ryuhoku, on the other hand, was very negative in his attitude towards Fukuzawa's utilitarianism and found little meaning in the westernization of Japan. Through his journalistic activities, he showed rather a great deal of nostalgia for Japan's traditional cultural assets and values cultivated by townspeople in the Edo period. Okakura Tenshin can be regarded as Narushima's like in that he made a great effort to restore and rediscover the historical value of Japanese art derived from a great Asian culture, mainly from Buddhism, Confucianism, and even Japanese indigenous thought on art and literature. The antithetical discussions and views between the three Japanese intellectuals on the westernization of Japan and the restoration of Japan's lost culture remind us of the antithesis between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* in Germany suggested by Norbert Elias at the very beginning of *The Civiliz-*

from Asia herself, along the ancient roadways of the race, that the great voice shall be heard" (Okakura 1920, 227).

Thus, "the dichotomy between the two [points of view] became one of the unmistakable features of modern Japan" (Beasley 1985, 154). Beasley expresses this more concretely,

> To them [progressives], industrial civilization, which the West exemplified, was a stage of development to which all societies should aspire, including Japan […] And there were some [traditionalists] who found a subservience to Western values…distasteful not only because it was a denial of tradition, but also because it contradicted the very "Japaneseness" that the whole Meiji programme was supposed to defend. (Beasley 1985, 154)

Although this kind of dichotomous and antithetical attitude towards the condition of modern Japan was to continue up to the Second World War, giving rise to a dangerous combination of nationalism and militarism, the Meiji government laid the foundation for the modern nation state. Generally speaking, it provided its subjects with well-adjusted political, educational, and cultural measures without breaking the balance between western civilization and traditional culture.[5] The development of modern sports, including *ekiden* in Japan, can more or less be recognized through such historical processes.

Seen from Norbert Elias's sociological perspective, the emergence of new Japanese sports with newly oriented national values in morals and ethics can be explained by the state monopoly of physical violence and taxation (Elias 2000, xii-xiii). In short, the development of *ekiden* shows that the new government had successfully achieved its original purpose of political stability together with economic prosperity based on westernization (that is, civilization/parliamentization/pacification). Although both the Russo-Japanese War and the First World War overshadowed the future course of Japan as a nation state and its national integration, victories in both wars would encourage Japanese leaders to praise the moral excellence of the Japanese in general.

---

ing Process (Vol 1). This sociological model can be applied as a prototype to the analysis of the changing processes and aspects of Japan's modern sports.

[5] The civilizing process of the Meiji era should not be thought of as a unilinear development. For example, the new Meiji government, in its incipient stage, had to confront several uprisings and rebellions – albeit they were sporadic―led by ex-samurai factions who were not contented with the new regime, followed by a more radical, long-lasting political movement known as the "freedom and people's rights movement." Towards the end of the period it also became extremely reactionary in order to suppress communism and anarchism from having influence among Japanese citizens, culminating in the Great Treason Incident of 1910, when some supposedly innocent communists were executed under suspicion of attempting to assassinate the Japanese Emperor. However, the Meiji government was, on the whole, successful in laying the foundations for a relatively peaceful and stable nation state in comparison with other Asian countries which had been devastated under colonialism. For more detailed explanations of the Great Treason Incident, see Benesch 2014, 150 and McClain 2002, 376-77, respectively.

In addition, between the end of the Meiji era and the beginning of the Taisho era (1911-1926), the modern educational system initiated by Japan's education ministry began to become effective, enabling considerable numbers of Japanese children (6,335,261) to study at primary school, and even institutions for further and higher education began to develop. Middle school enrollments amounted to 219,203; high school and college enrollments 66,300; and university enrollments 7239. That was the situation in 1910 (Maison and Caiger 1997, 301).

It should be noted that under these circumstances, Japanese modern sports developed and diversified hand in hand with an increasing school-aged population, thus the relationship between sport and education became inseparable.[6] This would inevitably spur the struggle for status in sports championships and tournaments played among many Japanese high schools and universities as represented by the All-Japan High School Baseball Championship Tournament, which started in 1915, and by the traditional annual collegiate baseball game between Waseda and Keio universities, which was launched in 1903. The excessive enthusiasm and involvement shown by both players and spectators in these competitive sporting events remind us of an antecedent of the elimination competitions between well-known English public schools, Eton and Rugby (Dunning and Sheard 2005, 111). The Waseda/Keio baseball match was cancelled for 20 years from 1906 due to acts of violence between opposing supporters (Kiku 2004, 163), who could be seen as the precursors of modern hooligans, whose recurrent bad conduct (so-called spectator disorderliness) was already known in Britain even before the First World War (Waddington 2014, 28). The following quotation well describes one of the cheering scenes from the baseball games played in those days in Japan, showing how difficult it was for these wild and high-spirited students to restrain their emotions, leading to frequent outbreaks of violence.

> This fellow organized a cheering group, and jeered and hooted very much. The manner of their jeering – cheering was almost equivalent to jeering at that time – was such that it developed into a vehement exchange of foul words between both sides with no attention to the actual game taking place. So, the

---

[6] For example, both Fukuzawa Yukichi and Okuma Shigenobu, the founders of Keio and Waseda Universities, showed a great deal of interest in sport and emphasized its important role in education. The former encouraged students to train their bodies by enjoying sport in preparation for their future academic research from a practical viewpoint. He believed that education systems based on Confucianism leading to bureaucracy, elitism, and formalism should be replaced by more democratic, egalitarian ones. The latter helped build a sports venue called the "Seven-Virtue House" in 1895 in order to promote such amateur sports as *judo*, *kendo*, *sumo*, lawn tennis, and baseball. When the socialist Abe Iso, who returned to Japan in 1902 after studying in America, was nominated as Dean of the Department of Physical Education, a university baseball ground was prepared and sports became very popular among students at the same time. These trends are part of what Norbert Elias would call "the sportizing process" in Japanese universities.

spectators could not help but get excited. In the end the cheering groups of the two universities created a volatile atmosphere, as is found in the behaviour of football hooligans in Britain today. There would have been a great deal of bloodshed at the third Waseda-Keio intercollegiate baseball game if the game had continued. That was why the game was cancelled. Since that event, there were no baseball games played between the two universities for 20 years. (Okushima 1997, 222 [the present author's translation])

One may well say that the Japanese in general had not learned well enough to control their violent impulses and that those emotions were incompatible with a civilized life style; the level of their violence was relatively high. Having said that, the state had largely established a monopoly of the use of physical violence and taxation and had produced long-term psychogenetic and sociogenetic transformations in society so that most Japanese shared a unified sense of national identity. One of the consequences can be seen in the establishment of the Greater Japan Physical Education Association in 1911 with the aim of improving the Japanese males' physical abilities in order to compete in international sporting events like the Olympic Games as well as contributing to the development of world culture and peace. However, rising nationalism in those days influenced the general public's attitude towards sporting competition, as well as the attitudes of participants and organizers. In that sense, political incidents such as the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the 1919 independence movement in Korea also led Japanese leaders to reconfirm their commitment to what they believed to be the traditional Japanese morals embodied in teamwork and obedience to authority, which served to reinforce their national identity and power.

Interestingly, Nitobe Inazo (1862-1933), who had once been an exponent of Japanese westernization, now began to reevaluate and revitalize the old moral codes of the Japanese *samurai* through his 1899 book, *Bushido: The Soul of Japan,* going as far as to say that "Bushido as an independent code of ethics may vanish, but its power will not perish from the earth […] its light and its glory will long survive their ruins" (Nitobe 2001, 192). What he meant here was to indirectly support Japan's political dominance in Asia and its colonialism in those days (McClain 2002, 343-4). And more ironically, it was also to reinforce the contents of Fukuzawa's essay on de-Asianizing.

With this historical background in mind, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the invention of *ekiden* by Japanese leaders as a relay race that could serve as a symbol of national identity and moral pride overlapped with the advancement of Japan's unique civilizing process concomitant with the effective development of a centralized state. And it is also worth noting that this civilizing process accompanied by internal pacification was not always compatible with external pacification. The echoes of imperial wars still lingered and gave rise to fear and anxiety among the Japanese. It goes to show that intra-state relations, as Elias notes, can become peaceful at the same time as inter-state relations collapse into violence. Elias wrote:

The level of physical security within more advanced industrial nation-states, though it may appear low enough to those who live in them, is, in all likelihood, normally higher than in less developed state societies, while the insecurity in inter-state relations has hardly decreased. Violent inter-state conflicts at the present stage of social development are still as unmanageable for those involved in them as they always were. Standards of civilized behavior, accordingly, are relatively low and the internalization of social taboos against physical violence, the conscience formation, is in that respect transient and comparatively unsteady. (Elias and Dunning 1986, 133)

Since the beginning of the Meiji era (1868), faced with many difficult situations, the Japanese government had been relatively successful in keeping a high degree of political stability and unity as a nation-state in its internal policies in terms of civilization, parliamentarization, and pacification, but at the same time many conflicts, contradictions, and disharmonies remained unresolved in its foreign policies. Wars against foreign enemies often threatened the lives of the people of Japan, thus giving its male members the so-called habitus of warriors. That is perhaps one of the reasons why the warlike personality structure of Japanese males – in other words, the soul of the *samurai* (*bushido*) – has remained as a dominant spirit in Japanese sport.[7] In the same context, it is important to refer to a more radical and sacrificial form of *bushido* called *hagakure*[8] (the *samurai*'s philosophy of self-immolation), preaching that "A warrior will never be shamed if he thus demonstrates his resolve to die in battle at all times, single-mindedly fulfilling his duties and forging his martial spirit as if already deceased" (Yamamoto 2017, 78).

2. Intercollegiate *Ekiden* Races and the Making of the Japanese Habitus

There are three important intercollegiate *ekiden* races in Japan: the first is the Hakone Ekiden, a second the Izumo Ekiden, and the third the Ise Ekiden. Why are these three *ekiden* races so important and are there any noteworthy interre-

---

[7] For the interpretations in Japan of *bushido* from the early Meiji era up to the early Showa era including the postwar period, see Benesch 2014, 159-77. The rise and fall of *bushido* as the basic spirit of the male members of Japanese society is systematically analyzed and examined based on well-documented sources in combination with various relevant historical events. In this context, the section "Sports and Bushido" is highly instructive (Benesch 2014, 164-7).

[8] In reference to *hagakure* or *hagakure bushido*, which is said to have led Japanese soldiers to commit suicidal acts (such as the *kamikaze tokkotai* suicide pilots) during the Second World War, see Sánchez 2019, 164-5. The relations between Japanese martial arts, *bushido*, and Japan's militarization are explained more consistently or systematically here from the standpoint of figurational sociology. He also refers to the same term in a different essay on Japanese martial arts, see Sánchez 2017, 63.

lations between them? What are common sociological features, if any? First of all, some more information about these races may be helpful here.

The Hakone Ekiden features 20 teams each consisting of ten male students from various universities from the Tokyo (Kanto) region. This race is run from central Tokyo along Tokyo Bay, past Yokohama to Hakone and back. It is held over two days at the New Year, covering 217.1 kilometers. Runners in the race compete to set individual records as well as to support their teams. The race is considered to display many aspects of Japanese culture and spirit, including individual perseverance, identity within a group, and the importance within the Japanese hierarchy of allegiance to a major university.

The Izumo Ekiden in Izumo City, in the Shimane Prefecture of western Japan marks the beginning of the collegiate *ekiden* season and is for male university athletes. Teams come from all over Japan. The race is six stages covering 45.1 kilometers. The 20th annual race was held on 13 October 2008. Since 1998, a select team of Ivy League alumni runners from the United States has competed and found the competition quite stiff. The Ivy League representatives have finished in the last half of the field each time. In the 10 October 2011 race, the Ivy League Team finished 8th out of 21 teams.

The Ise Ekiden takes place on the first Sunday of November. The male runners compete in the 8-stage, 106.8 kilometer National Collegiate Ekiden Championship in Aichi and Mie prefectures. This race is the second of the season's big three, the first being the Izumo Ekiden and the last the Hakone Ekiden. Here, 27 teams battle for the national title. The race starts in front of Atsuta Shrine in Nagoya City and then proceeds out of the city, along the coast and 106.8 kilometers later to Ise Grand Shrine in Ise, Mie Prefecture.[9]

All these three *ekiden* races were basically male-oriented and only Japanese nationals can participate in them, except for the above stated Ivy League runners. So it might be correct to say, as explained in Section One, that the Japanese political leaders and educators of the Meiji era wanted Japanese young athletes to embody the uniquely Japanese values and morals represented by Japanese State Shintoism through these long-distance relay road races that demanded of them teamwork, collaboration, patience, diligence, and perseverance.[10] The reason for this is that all these *ekiden* races have been closely con-

---

[9] As described on Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ekiden>.

[10] The uniquely Japanese spirituality or morality derived from traditional martial arts originated in Japan such as *judo, kendo*, and *karate* was to represent the basic ideology of the Dainippon Butokukai (The Greater Japan Martial Virtue Association), founded in 1895. It is therefore not unreasonable to think that early *ekiden* runners may have shared some of the Japanese spirit and values encouraged by this association and its representatives. For detailed explanations of the founding, growth, and dissolution of this association, see Gainty 2013, 35-77. There are several insightful and in-depth references to the relations between martial arts, bushido, militarism, and imperialism in modern Japan focusing on this sports organization. The assumption that organizational pressure on individual sportsmen and

nected with Japanese shrines and the traditional myths and rites originated in them. The following quotations, therefore, seems quite suitable and adequate in this context:

> The venues for these three major Ekiden, Izumo, Ise, and Hakone (heading to Mt. Fuji), are all historically important places in Japan, Running the roads of such places is like running through the world of Japanese mythology related to the Izumo-Taisha Shrine or Ise-Jingu Shrine.

> Ekiden is not just an internal fight for everyone who runs, but also a team sport requiring every member to pass the "tasuki" sash to the next runner and to fight to the last, even in severe circumstances. Seeing each member run wholeheartedly for the team, doing no harm to others, strikes the right chord to capture the hearts of the Japanese people.[11]

The three intercollegiate *ekiden* races share the most fundamental spirit of Japanese sports such as *kendo* (Japanese fencing), *judo*, and *aikido* (a Japanese martial art of self-defense). The values they embody can be said to be derived from what Nitobe called *bushido*. The development of *ekiden* and its appeal can also be explained along the same cultural lines. In addition, judging from the fact that *ekiden* has been associated with Japanese mythology, it is understandable that the Hakone Ekiden has played an important role for Japanese leaders in establishing Japan's national identity by connecting the race "with ideas of morality and nationhood associated with a romanticized history that have been promoted by the state as being essentially and uniquely Japanese" (Manning 2009, 46). It is also significant to note the next quotation in this context:

> The history of the development of modern sport in Japan in general and the Hakone Ekiden in particular are lenses through which we can observe and document empirically how the civilization process expounded by Norbert Elias has operated in Japan. We have seen how the development of the necessary organizational capabilities depended on specific figurations of relationships between individuals. We have also seen how the values of elite groups are diffused, in this case through the education system, as the chains of interdependence between individuals lengthen in the process of state formation. (Manning 2009, 46)

Having said that, the Hakone Ekiden represents the history of the development of modern sport in Japan, it was not always supported or encouraged by the Japanese military government during the Second World War for the reason that *ekiden* races would prevent military training by tying up important highways

---

women as moral constraints may demand them to conform to the ideological framework of sports associations can be understood in the sentence stating that "personal achievement is pursued in North America and parts of Europe, whereas collectivism (characterized by a stronger coercion to fit into social groups) is more obvious in countries such as Japan and China" (Gestel 2018, 47).

[11] <https://www.kokugakuin.ac.jp/en/article/46655>.

for long hours. During the Second World War, it was necessary for the military government to use most highways to transport military supplies. Besides, it was alleged in those days that *ekiden* would be harmful to athletes because running on gravel roads would cause injuries. In fact, many Japanese roads were not paved, and runners did not wear such high-quality shoes as their present-day counterparts do. It is also noteworthy that the Hakone Ekiden was cancelled from 1941 to 1946 because of the war with the exception of the 1943 provisional *ekiden* event, whose main purpose was to whip up war sentiment. The starting point was Yasukuni Shrine, where the war dead are now enshrined, and the finish was Hakone Shrine. As a matter of fact, a lot of young university runners had to endure great hardship during war time.

3. Some Changing Aspects of *Ekiden* in the Globalizing Process

Despite the religious and moral connotations mentioned in the quotations from the website (https://www.kokugakuin.ac.jp/en/article/46655) above, the Japanese *ekiden* has actually been exposed to globalizing processes in recent years. As was mentioned in the case of the Izumo Ekiden, a team of American runners has been invited recently, and some university teams are eager to recruit athletes from African countries to run in the Hakone Ekiden. Women's *ekiden* races have gained in popularity, though their number is still smaller than men's races. In the Eliasian terms, the power balance between the sexes has favorably tilted towards women in Japan in accordance with the global feminist movement in recent years (See, for example, Elias 1998a, 206).

In addition, the Men's All Japan Interprefectural Ekiden Championship held in January in Hiroshima and the Women's All Japan Interprefectural Ekiden Championship held in January in Kyoto, are noteworthy because both of them reflect the process of Japan's unique political and cultural development since the establishment of the Meiji government with each prefecture assigned as a local administrative unit. It is also important to refer to two international *ekiden* races: one is the Chiba International Ekiden (there are two separate teams; one for men, one for women) and the other the Yokohama Women's Ekiden (foreign teams are frequent winners).

These circumstances show that Japanese *ekiden* races have been developing into more internationally based forms and enjoyed by wide-ranging social strata, both men and women together, young and old. Now *ekiden* is not a uniquely Japanese, exclusive sporting event any more. It has changed, it is changing, and it will change through the civilizing process (that is, ever-widening, lengthening, and diversifying chains of human interdependency). This is basically, as Elias frequently says, an unintended and unplanned, or, in

other words, non-teleological developing process although it has been moving in the direction of functional democratization more and more.

Here it is worth referring to other *ekiden* teams running these long-distance relay races in Japan in order to show that the application of Elias's concepts of "diminishing contrasts, increasing varities" to the sportization of modern Japan – for example, a diversification of *ekiden* among Japanese citizens as a whole – is useful, effective, and fruitful (Elias 2000, 382-97). Let us take a brief look at other *ekiden* races run by corporate teams, junior high and senior high school teams, and varieties of women's teams across Japan.

As corporate *ekiden* championships, the following are representative: the All-Japan Women's Corporate Ekiden Championship; the All-Japan Men's Corporate Team Ekiden Championship, which is held on New Year's Day and referred to as New Year Ekiden; the Asahi Ekiden, which is held in Fukuoka Prefecture; the Women Kita-Kyusyu (the northern part of Kyusyu area) Ekiden, which is also held in January; and the Minami-Kyusyu (the southern part of Kyusyu area) Ekiden, which is held in February in Miyazaki Prefecture. These corporate teams also show how *ekiden* races have been widely supported and enjoyed both by men and women, helping to create a very important tradition of sport culture in Japan through long-term, ever widening and lengthening chains of human interdependence.

It is also important to note that, in addition to these corporate *ekiden* races, there have been more community-based *ekiden* events all over Japan recently. Some of them are held in towns and cities after the fashion of intercollegiate or corporate examples in which some elite runners are included too, and others are planned and organized by local and regional groups in order to create a friendly atmosphere both for runners and spectators, where some food and drinks may be served in some cases in consideration of children who are occasionally allowed to take part in running. Here, *ekiden* races for cultural exchange between Japanese citizens and foreigners should also be included. So, each stage and leg in the race can be loosely set in accordance with its situation and needs. There are around 20 of these community-based *ekiden* races in the Kanto (Tokyo) area alone. There may be more community-based, fun races of this kind to be seen in other prefectures in Japan.

In this case, some races are likely to disappear, and others will be newly organized in accordance with new human figurations in the future. This developing process can also be regarded as unintended and unplanned. The emergence of new styles in *ekiden* cannot be explained any longer on the basis of *bushido*.

In connection with some changing aspects of human behaviour or attitude in the civilizing process, what Elias observes in his essay titled "Technization and Civilization" is noteworthy in that he emphasizes the fact that the development of technology in industrialized societies has something to do with how people can effectively learn to control their sentiments and emotions by possessing automobiles which will lead them to road accidents and deaths more frequently

than before, or than in less industrialized societies. He goes on to say, by making use of the statistics of the World Health Organization, that the number of persons killed in car accidents and road deaths will decline as our society becomes more industrialized and more technologically develops. On this hypothesis, he also shows his view that "as Japan advanced to a highly developed industrial country, the Japanese acquired greater stability and evenness of self-regulation, which is indispensable to a highly technical society" (Elias 1998, 221). His statement here is highly important because it more or less has led to the transformation of the personality structure (what Elias calls "*habitus*") and mentality of the Japanese, which is indispensable to the development of modern sport in Japan, especially to such sports as *ekiden* races. As can be seen in the Hakone Ekiden, the race itself has been so competitive that every athlete is required to concentrate on their physical and mental training depending on using more scientific methods and theories. Even a few second's delay will cause his team to lose a race, which means modern *ekiden* races are not so idyllic as before due to a changing concept of time characteristic of modern highly industrialized societies as Elias also suggests in *Time: An Essay*. It is not an ordinary wristwatch or stopwatch but a highly computerized, digital watch that is needed as a time-keeping apparatus for track and field events.

What Elias suggests next is also noteworthy in terms of a radical change in the habitus of modern Japanese sportsmen and sportswomen. With reference to the remark by the writer Laurence van der Post about the Japanese national character (van der Post called it semi-medieval because, he thought, Japan had been a proud, courtly, feudal nation of warriors that looked upon itself, on its unconquered islands, as the centre of the world, continuing to say that this nation was now avenging itself by its rapid rise to economic and technological superiority [Elias 1998b, 198]). Elias comments that:

> The traditional warrior code of the Japanese made being captured alive appear an unforgivable humiliation. It thus bred an extreme form of self-control, a fanaticism that did not allow any adjustment to changing circumstances. It resulted in a boundless contempt for the Allied Forces who had let themselves be captured when resistance was hopeless. The counterpart to the extremely high degree of self-control shown by the Japanese in certain respects was, for instance, extreme capacity for acting out sadistic pleasures on their prisoners. It is possible that only the Japanese Emperor was in a position to bring about a break with this code by laying down the Japanese arms after the first American atom bombs had been dropped. From then onwards, there has been a gradual change in the personality structure of the Japanese. It is among the peculiarities of such civilizing changes in personality structure, and changes especially in the social standards of self-regulation, that they follow other social changes, perhaps economic and technological ones, usually only after a lapse of time. (Elias 1998b, 222-3)

It has been widely recognized that Japanese soldiers ill-treated and humiliated Allied prisoners of war the during the Second World War, as they regarded

surrendering and being captured without fighting to the end as shame and cowardice. Probably on the basis of this generalized information about their fighting spirit, Ruth Benedict distinguished Japanese society and Western society by categorizing the former as a shame-based culture, the latter as a sin-based culture respectively. For example, in relation to the character of Japanese soldiers, she states that "The shame of surrender was burned deeply into the consciousness of the Japanese. They accepted as a matter of course a behaviour which was alien to our conventions of warfare. And ours was just alien to them" (Benedict 2003, 40). This dichotomous judgement in understanding different cultures has been rather criticized by many historians, anthropologists, and sociologists – for example, Eiko Ikegami says that "This was quite possibly the fundamental methodological flaw" (Ikegami 1995, 373) – but, seen from a different angle, her book might be somewhat useful for policy makers dealing with multicultural issues in their politically unstable communities or countries. Nevertheless, thinking of the cultural characteristics and traits of different social groups or strata as innate, predetermined, or changeless will lead us to a dangerous assumption in present international relations.

What Elias indicates in the above quotation is therefore crucial in understanding how the habitus of the Japanese has changed since the end of the war, and how they have become able to find more meaningful life in their economic activities instead of clinging to their conventional moral codes derived from those of the warriors. In short, according to Elias, the inseparable relation between civilization (psychological restraint binding individuals' behaviour and conduct from inside as the "superego") and technization (social restraint forcing individuals to conform to the whole human figuration from outside) has organically combined, thus giving the Japanese an impetus to change their habitus to suit new social and economic figurations. The change in the habitus of the whole nation triggered by this process of civilization and technization is also applicable to the development of modern sports in Japan. In other words, the habitus of Japanese sportsmen and women have changed so that they may accept a modern form of sport not as a "real battle," but as a "mimic or mock battle" or transfer it to a more enjoyable type of excitement through deroutinization, that is, through a "controlled decontrolling of emotional controls" (Mennell 1998, 158) without inflicting serious physical injury to the opponent. According to Elias, this kind of change in habitus has occurred through a long-term civilizing process of human society, above all through what he calls "the courtization of the warriors" in the West. In the Japanese context, what Ikegami calls "the taming of the "*samurai*" or "*bushido*," which was highly idealized and romanticized by Nitobe, may indicate the same civilizing process in Japan.

So far we have not enough evidence to prove that the change in the habitus of the Japanese, which is supposed to prop up the spiritual formation of modern Japanese athletes as a whole, has something to do with any of traditional religious beliefs, ethical precepts, or moral principles. The next quotation may

imply how difficult it is to explain the changing aspect or phase of modern sports in Japan from any singular dimension like religion.

> All in all, religion in Japan offers a confused and indistinct picture. Shinto shrines, and Buddhist temples are found everywhere. The lives of most Japanese are intertwined with religious observances – shrine festivals, "god shelves" and Buddhist altars in the homes, and Shinto or Christian marriages, Buddhist funerals, and other religious rites of passage. But the majority of Japanese – some 70 to 80 percent – even though carried on the rolls of one or more religious body, do not consider themselves believers in any religion…Clearly religion in contemporary Japan is not central to society and culture. (Reischauer 1998, 215)

Apart from the intriguing questions of what religion most of the Japanese believe in and whether the Japanese are really a non-religious nation, this quotation itself may give us another clue to look at the developing process of modern sports in Japan from other aspects than religion and morality, that is, from more multifarious, or more multi-level angles. Seen from the perspective of Norbert Elias's figurational theory, the globalizing process through which most of modern Japanese sports including *ekiden* races have gradually changed plays an important role in that we can approach this issue from a macro-sociological viewpoint, simultaneously leading us to collect more reliable data on individual cases necessary to prove this from a micro-sociological viewpoint. This will be discussed more concretely in the next section by giving a few more examples of *ekiden* races that have been held in foreign countries in recent years.

4.　　Conclusion: *Ekiden* in the Globalizing Process

It should be noted that several *ekiden* events have recently been held in some foreign countries, sometimes on such a large scale as annual events, attracting thousands of participants. Such events as the Honolulu Raibow Ekiden in Hawaii, the Guam KoKo Road Race in Guam, the Acerta Brussels Ekiden in Belgium, the Rotorua Ekiden in New Zealand, the Anglesea Ekiden in Australia, The Longest Day Ekiden Relay Race in Canada, and The Mizuno Ekiden in Singapore are the most representative.

All these *ekiden* races – some of which seem to be supported by Japanese sports organizations, or firms producing and selling sports goods – may show how Japanese style marathon-like events have been developing into a more globally enjoyable leisure-time activity beyond Japan's past historical context where more moral and ethical requirements and restraints may have restricted the individual orientation of each runner so that they could perform very well only for their own team's victory, thus sharing a sense of identity with their team mates and peers, by extension, a sense of national identity as well. For all that, interestingly enough, some Japanese traditional concept of *ekiden* still remains in one of the above-stated foreign races (the 2018 Adecco Brussels

Ekiden) in terms of the weightiness of *tasuki* (the sash, that is, the symbol of each *ekiden* team in Japan)[12] as follows:

> The registrations end on 17 September, 2018. Every team has to consist of 6 runners. The whole teams have to cover the distance of a marathon, that is, 42,195km. The relays are done with a <u>Tasuki</u>, a ribbon carried around the trunk, a wink to the Japanese origins of the event. The race is open to companies, associations, sports clubs, and children. The regulation is available on the website of the Ekiden run. (brussels-ekiden)[13]

In Eliasian terms, this developing aspect of *ekiden* leading to a more peaceful, less competitive, and rather egalitarian form in sport is basically unintended and unplanned in the civilizing (or sportizing) process; in other words, this developing process – along with an informalizing process – has unknowingly given birth to a more ideal form of sport in which we can keep our health both physically and mentally by avoiding serious injuries which athletes are likely to suffer in excessively hard training and competitive involvement, or by forming friendly relationships with other participants. For example, the Koko Guam Road Race has recently been more related to an ecological movement, especially in order to protect wild life, that is, to protect a flightless bird called "koko" endemic to Guam.[14]

Generally speaking, many professional or even amateur sports will be exceedingly competitive and victory-oriented if athletes seek too much economic success for themselves or, honour, glory, and prestige for their own schools, corporations, or even their own countries. This kind of tendency may force athletes to use dangerous chemical substances and drugs like steroids more and more, as some athletes from the former Soviet Union and its East European satellite states were actually under pressure to use them in the Olympic Games, particularly in the 1970s and 80s (Waddington and Smith, 89-92). Such *ekiden*

---

[12] At the qualifying event of the Japan Women's Corporate Ekiden Championship held on 26 October, 2018, an *ekiden* runner named Rei Iida continued to run the second leg although she was seriously injured. Actually, she was found to have a fractured leg, but she did not give up running, deciding to crawl the final 200 meters to her goal with her leg stained with blood. Some people, according to the mass media, praised her brave and patient deed for the reason that she never forgot "the weightiness of the sash [*tasuki*]." If she had given up running, the whole team would have been disqualified from the race. Others said that she should have stopped running in order to protect her own physical safety. It was also alleged that not only the *ekiden* organizers but also her coaches were to blame. But actually, in their opinion, in the case of a qualifying race like this, they were not allowed to give any suggestions or advice directly to the runner. Thus, this is one of the typical cases in which we can ask an important question of how we should solve such a serious problem in relation to sports culture in a given country. In recent years, the authoritative and somewhat feudalistic structure underlying sports organizations or clubs in Japan has been increasingly faced with various criticisms from various sides, particularly concerning "power harassment."

[13] <https://www.brussels.be/brussels-ekiden>.

[14] <https://guamkokoroadrace.com>.

races, as have been enjoyed in a friendly atmosphere, will teach us at least that there will be no need to get involved in doping any more. In that sense, more attention should be paid to *ekiden* races for junior and senior high-school boys and girls which have also been held in Japan (for example, the All-Japan High School Ekiden Championships, the All-Japan Junior High Scholl Ekiden Championships, etc). Despite the fact that some of them have become more competitive in recent years like their intercollegiate counterparts, they may, seen from Elias's sociological perspective, provide people throughout the world with a great incentive to found new *ekiden* races which seem more enjoyable and health-oriented by means of ever-widening, changing human figurations.

References

Beasley, W. G. 1982. *The Modern History of Japan*, 3rd ed. Tokyo: Tuttle.

Benedict, Ruth. 2005. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Benesch, Oleg. 2014. *Inventing the Way of the Samurai: Nationalism, Internationalism, and Bushido*. Oxford: OUP.

Dunning, Eric. 1999. *Sport Matters*. London: Routledge.

Dunning, Eric and Kenneth Sheard. 2005. *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players* , 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Elias, Norbert and Eric Dunning. 1986. *Quest for Excitement. Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Elias, Norbert. 1998a. 'The Changing Balance of Power between the Sexes in Ancient Rome'. In *Norbert Elias: Civilization, Power and Knowledge*, eds. Stephen Mennell and Johan Goudsblom. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Elias, Norbert. 1998b. 'Technization and Civilization'. In *The Norbert Elias Reader*, eds. Johan Goudsblom and Stephen Mennell. Oxford: Blackwell.

Elias, Norbert. 2000. *The Civilizing Process*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Gainty, Denis 2013. *Martial Arts and the Body Politic in Meiji Japan*. London: Routledge.

Gestel, Joannes Van. 2018. *Norbert Elias and the Analysis of History and Sport*. London: Routledge.

Ikegami, Eiko. 1995. *The Taming of the Samurai*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Ikuo, Abe and J. A. Mangan. 2002. Sportsmanship – English Inspiration and Japanese Response: F. W. Strange and Chiyosaburo Takeda. *The International Journal of The History of Sport* 19(2-3): 99-128.

Kato, Shuichi, Don Sanderson. 1979. *A History of Japanese Literature*, vol 3. Tokyo: Kodansha International.

Kiku, Koichi. 2004. The Development of Sport in Japan: Martial Arts and Baseball. In *Sport Histories*, eds. Eric Dunning, Dominic Malcolm and Ivan Waddington. London: Routledge.

Manning, Julian, Ohira Akira and Ohki Tom. 2008. *Sports, History and Culture*. Tokyo: Yumi Press.

Manning, Julian. 2003. Ekiden and the Modernization of Japan. In *Norbert Elias and the 21st Century,* ed. Akira, Ohira. Tokyo: Seibuno Press.

Manning, Julian. 2009. Ekiden: Sport and the Civilizing Process at Work in Japan In. *Norbert Elias and Globalization*, ed. Akira, Ohira. Tokyo: DTP Publishing.

McClain, James L. 2002. *Japan: A Modern History*. New York: Norton.

Mennell, Stephen. 1992. *Norbert Elias: An Introduction*. Dublin: UCD.

Nitobe, Inazo. 1969. *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*. Boston: Tuttle.

Okakura, Kakuzo. 1920. *The Ideals of the East: With Special Reference to the Art of Japan*. New York: E.P. Dutton.

Okushima, Takayasu. 1997. *Shinshuno Seishin* [*The Spirit of Enterprise*]. Tokyo: Waseda University Press.

Reischauer, Edwin. 1988. *The Japanese Today*. Tokyo: Tuttle.

Sánchez-García, Raúl. 2017. Civilizing-Decivilizing and Formalizing-Informalizing Balances in Figurational Sociology: An Example from the Long Term Development of Japanese Martial Arts. In Norbert Elias and His Sociological Perspective, ed. Akira Ohira. Tokyo: DTP Publishing.

Sánchez-García, Raúl. 2019. *The Historical Sociology of Japanese Martial Arts*. London: Routledge

Stevens, John. 1988. *The Marathon Monks of Mount Hiei*. Boston: Shambhala.

Waddington, Ivan and Smith, Andy. 2009. *An Introduction to Drugs in Sport*. London: Routledge.

Waddington, Ivan. 2014. Sport, Violence and the Civilizing Process. In *Norbert Elias As Social Theorist*, ed. Akira, Ohira. Tokyo: DTP Publishing.

Yamamoto, Tsunetomo, A. Bennett, trans. 2014. *Hagakure: The Secret Wisdom of the Samurai*. Tokyo: Tuttle.

All articles published in HSR Special Issue 45 (2020) 1:
Emotion, Authority, and National Character.