

Connecting Tokyo 2020 with people and places: a case of the Nanairo Ekiden as sport heritage

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ABSTRACT

The Olympic Games is more than a mega sport festival and the myriad connections created through the interaction of sport, athletes, education, the public and community through Olympism is one of the great global expressions of education through sport. The linkages between the mega-event, society and sport are reflected in the tangible and intangible aspects of the event. These connections are created through participation, material culture and the intangible aspects of Olympism imbued in its expression. This paper considers material culture and the values education associated with it through an inclusive sporting

event, the Nanairo Ekiden, an academic legacy project of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games. It considers the intangible heritage created through the event and disseminated and maintained through the memories, wishes and hopes of the participants, written on ribbon tanzaku. It also considers the ascription of value to tangible and intangible heritage via actors during the implementation of the ekiden.

Keywords

Nanairo Ekiden, Tanzaku, Ribbons, Memory, Tokyo 2020

Introduction

The Olympic Games are described by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) (2023) as the 'world's only truly global, multi-sport, celebratory athletics competition'. However, the Games are much more than a mega-sport festival; they represent a local and global multicultural environment connected through media and shared experiences (Haggis and Vasilache 2019). Linked by shared values, heritage and knowledge creation (Dell'Aquila 2020), the Olympic Games represent in a global form the intricate connections between sport and society. The linkages between the mega-event, society and sport are reflected in the tangible and intangible aspects of the event (Cassini 2022), whereby connections are made and maintained in local, national and international communities through the processes of participation, connection, reflection and memory. The memories associated with sporting events in

the community are created through participation and via the material culture associated with the event (Stell and Pocock 2019), connecting people with the event long after it has finished. Exposure to the material culture creates and maintains the intangible heritage of the event and reinforces the connections in community and personal memory. Therefore, objects and places obtain and retain significance due to the values ascribed to them and through their association with people (Alivizatou 2007).

Objects, and the values associated with them, are an important component in the development of intangible heritage. The ascription of values is determined by people as agents, including collectives such as organisations and other groups (Andersson and Johannesson 2018). Andersson and Johannesson further suggest that 'an agent can be the one for whom a value is ascribed to a value object' and that 'an agent can be the one who

makes the value ascription[;] that is, the value ascription is performed by that agent' (2018, 29). These processes of value ascription are represented in two aspects of an inclusive sporting event, the Nanairo Ekiden, which was developed as a legacy project of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games (2020 Tokyo Games) and which uses IOC values education as a catalyst for engagement.

Olympism, the main philosophy of the IOC, reflects the idea that learning takes place through the balanced development of the body and mind, and that values education in sport promotes these concepts (IOC 2024). This harks back to the Ancient games, where sport and education played an important role in the holistic development of mind and body and where the *palestras* (wrestling schools) and *gymnasia* (gymnasiums) were positioned close to temples, marketplaces and other social spaces (International Olympic Academy 2019). The IOC promotes Olympic values education, whereby the use of sports and Olympism facilitates values-based learning and provides a framework to develop social attributes based on sport activity in the social and experiential setting of events such as the Nanairo Ekiden (IOC 2024). Values are taught via the educational initiatives and attached to the objects used to reinforce these values. In this way, the educational and cultural programmes associated with the Games allow people to connect with the Games and experience them second-hand, but at the same time create intangible heritage of the event despite being separated in time and space. Through participation in these programmes, people become connected to the Olympic Games in an intimate way. Their participation in the activity is finite; however, the intangible heritage associated with their participation remains.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO's) Intangible Heritage Convention (2003) defines 'intangible cultural heritage' as 'the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage'. Due to the finite nature of event participation, the individual and group awareness of the creation of intangible heritage may be lacking. Despite this, preserving the many and unique intangible heritages associated with the Olympic and Paralympic Games is an important initiative for unifying, and building cooperation and capacity between, people and communities within

the global Olympic family (Hannewijk et al. 2020). In order to do so, recognition and awareness of the nature of the intangible heritage associated with sporting events needs to be disseminated both with the community and within the organisations and groups implementing activities such as values education. Sport heritage is a relatively new paradigm and still has some way to go before gaining the same recognition as other branches of heritage (Reilly 2015). The author, for example, experienced the disinterest of other faculty while trying to create a small programme archive at a previous university. The majority of the faculty considered sport an active field that was not associated with heritage. For this reason, it is important to continuously connect and maintain the links between sport and heritage (both tangible and intangible) to define these connections more clearly as part of the social fabric of sport.

This paper outlines some of the participatory practices connected with the Nanairo Ekiden, an inclusive sporting event associated with an academic legacy project of the 2020 Tokyo Games. It considers the objects used by the participants as a means of engaging the community with the event and connecting them to sport values, Japanese culture and the creation of intangible heritage. It seeks to show, through the analysis of activities and objects, the connections made between event editions and the ensuing creation of a global intangible heritage network, the existence of which is as valid as its tangible counterpart.

Background and rationale

The focus of this paper is the implementation of an academic and sport legacy project called the Nanairo Ekiden, as well as its material culture and the intangible heritage derived from it. The Nanairo Ekiden is considered a legacy project of Japan's Tsukuba International Academy for Sport Studies (TIAS), as it was conceived and implemented by TIAS faculty and was intended to remain after the 2020 Tokyo Games. For the IOC, the core idea of legacy projects is to promote the spread of Olympic values and ideals throughout the world (IOC 2012). The legacy aspect is already present, as the event has been held multiple times in Tsukuba, Kenya and Uruguay, and once in the United Kingdom. Uruguay is currently the only location in which the Nanairo Ekiden is being actively implemented. *Nanairo* means 'seven colours' in Japanese, and *ekiden* is a traditional Japanese long-distance road relay race where participants pass a *tasuki* (sash) from

one runner to the next. In the Nanairo Ekiden, each of the colours represents an Olympic or Paralympic value – friendship (red), excellence (yellow), respect (green), courage (purple), inspiration (white), determination (blue) or equality (black) – and the runners participate while keeping these values in mind. In the same way that the *tasuki* is passed from one runner to the next, the aim of the event is to use the team relay component and the associated education activities (*eki*) to pass on the spirit of the Olympics and Paralympics to the next generation.

This work on the intangible heritage of the Nanairo Ekiden is informed by the author's experience as faculty (2016–2021) of the TIAS at the University of Tsukuba (UT), an academic legacy project of the 2020 Tokyo Games and a partner in the Sport for Tomorrow Consortium (SFT). SFT was an international contribution-through-sport initiative of the Japanese government to the 2020 Tokyo Games (SFT n.d.). It is part of the TIAS archive project, the aim of which was to collect items associated with the projects, linkages and activities of TIAS and to create a tangible record that reflected the academic, historic, research and sporting aspects of the legacy programme. In the process of cataloguing the archive, it was noticed that the collection included many coloured ribbons from the 'Tree of Nanairo' which had been present at various Nanairo Ekiden since its inception in 2016. The act of writing in pen on the ribbons and attaching them to the Tree of Nanairo created an art object but also represents the intangible heritage of the ekiden. It has been suggested that intangible legacy captures the essence of Olympism through its manifestation in the Olympic Games (Girginov and Preuss 2021). Therefore, the ekiden objects contribute to this discourse through their associations with the sport, legacy and educational nature of the event conducted as part of the legacy of the 2020 Tokyo Games. These cultural objects have been referred to as having 'shared significance embodied in form' (Griswold 1987a, 4), because the intangible heritage manifested during their creation assigns value to them. This assigned value within the context of a sport event is also a *public value* because implementing organisations such as TIAS shape and create the public perception of value due to their co-creation of people's experiences at the event (Meynhardt 2015). During the Nanairo Ekiden, this is reflected via the aspects of values education and encouraging participants to ascribe value to the colour and sport value that they ran for and in the ribbons on which they wrote their comments, hopes or dreams. The presence of the Tree

of Nanairo and its ribbons in the TIAS archive represents the memories that remain with the communities and people because of their participation. The collection of objects facilitates questioning of the relationship between objects and action, and of the reasons for specific choices in projects or activities and the intangible aspects of these connections. The objects are imbued with meaning through their association with communities, athletes, people and organisations and represent the intangible network of the Nanairo Ekiden.

Nanairo Ekiden

The traditional Japanese sport of *ekiden* has its origins in the messenger systems of the past when a runner ran between stages or stations (e.g. on the route between Kyoto and Tokyo) bearing letters or messages. The runners were instilled with a sense of responsibility and dedication to their task – traits which Havens (2015) has suggested match the group-orientated nature of Japanese society and which Ohira (2020) believes were necessary for nation-building. This traditional system has a strong history within Japan and, for this reason, the Nanairo Ekiden uses it to pass on the spirit of Olympism to the next generation. The teams comprise males, females, young and old, and people with disabilities. Team members usually have not met prior to the race. Teams must devise inclusive ways of working and 'running' together, as social inclusion is an essential aspect of the Nanairo Ekiden. It provides an opportunity for a diverse group of people to gather, have fun, and reinforce through their participation the Olympic and Paralympic values. [Figure 1](#) shows the activities of the different Nanairo Ekiden.

There are two main components in the Nanairo Ekiden: the team race and the educational *eki* (stations). Often the team race is run first and the teams then rotate around the various educational stations. Other participants not running in the relay can try the educational activities at any time. The educational stations overseen by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), sports organisations and community groups have addressed a variety of topics: reproductive health, sports values, English, traditional games, menstruation, non-violence projects, right to play, disability, adapted sports, Olympic history, and Japanese culture (origami, hashi-okashi, daruma), to name a few. One activity, the writing of *tanzaku* by participants, although not initially meant to do so, provides the material culture and associated intangible cultural heritage of

Tangible and Intangible Legacy



Rio de Janeiro, Brazil



Tree of Nanairo



Tsukuba 2016



Tsukuba 2017



Machakos, Kenya

Figure 1
Activities and locations of the Nanairo Ekiden
Source: de Soysa, 2017.

the Nanairo Ekiden. In Japanese culture, *tanzaku* is the process of cutting paper or wood into thin strips on which one writes short messages, poems, prayers, hopes and dreams. These strips are then attached to shrines, gates, public spaces, lanterns and other structures. The most famous use of *tanzaku* is during the *Tanabata* (star) festival in July, but the same activity is often used to espouse different philosophies, reinforce other traditions, or represent 'the ephemeral' in recovery and renewal activities (Ishida 2012). In the Nanairo Ekiden, participants were asked to write their sporting and personal aims on one of the seven coloured ribbons and attach it to the Tree of Nanairo. They could choose any colour they felt an affinity with: the colour they ran for/liked, or the Olympic or Paralympic value colour that resonated with them. The Tree of Nanairo was carried from one Nanairo Ekiden to the next, linking the participants and the events via the

presence of the tree and intangibly through the messages it carried. This is one representation of the sport heritage of the Nanairo Ekiden.

The Nanairo Ekiden as sport heritage

Considering the ethos of the Nanairo Ekiden and its relationship to sport, education and communities, it is plausible to describe the participants as a heritage community. The Faro Convention states: '[A] heritage community consists of people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish, within the framework of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations' (Council of Europe 2005, 2). The *ekiden* initiative represents the continuation of long-held connections with the Olympic movement, sport and education in Japan. Jigoro Kano, the first principal of the Tokyo Higher Normal School (1872)

(a predecessor of UT), was the founder of Judo and the first Asian member of the IOC. One of his pupils, Shiso Kanakuri (a marathon runner), represented Japan at the 1912 Stockholm Olympic Games and founded the Hakone

Ekiden – the most prestigious inter-university long-distance relay race in Japan. UT is a forerunner of Olympic and Paralympic education and includes many Olympians and Paralympians among its faculty, alumni and student

Table 1
Nanairo Ekiden participants

| Date | Name | Place | Sponsor | Supporters | Participants | Description of Participants |
|-----------|------------------------------|------------------------------|---|---|--------------|--|
| 24/2/2016 | 1st Nanairo Ekiden | University of Tsukuba, Japan | University of Tsukuba | Pe de Vento club, Petropolis, Brazil | 512 | Top Brazilian runners; people with disability (wheelchair runners, blind runners and hearing-impaired runners); elementary school students |
| 7/2/2016 | International Nanairo Ekiden | Machakos, Kenya | Sport for Tomorrow University of Tsukuba | Light of Hope; Elimisha Dad a Race; 7 NGOs; Japan International Cooperation Agency, Nissin Foods | 1269 | 8 primary schools; 2 junior high schools; 3 special needs schools; a university; 9 organisations for people with disability |
| 31/8/2016 | International Nanairo Ekiden | Rio de Janeiro, Brazil | World Athletics University of Tsukuba | Correr Bem International; Consulate General of Japan; SAN-EI Corporation; Non-Violence Project; Estacio Taquara University | 413 | 8 junior high schools; a university, 2 organisations for people with disability; and 1 athletic club |
| 31/8/2017 | International Nanairo Ekiden | Nairobi, Kenya | World Athletics University of Tsukuba | World Junior Athletics Championship; Kids Athletics; Kenyatta University, SAN-EI Corporation | 1500+ | People with disability from Machakos; elementary, junior high and high school students; Deaf Dance Troupe; top athletes; World Athletics officials; Kenyatta University faculty and students |
| 2/9/2017 | 2nd Nanairo Ekiden | Tsukuba, Japan | University of Tsukuba | Ibaraki Prefecture; Tsukuba City Japan Sports Promotion Centre; Peter Pan Bakery | 1000+ | People with disability; elementary, junior high school and high school students; members of the public |
| 7/10/2018 | International Nanairo Ekiden | Montevideo, Uruguay | University of Tsukuba Red Internacional Basquetbol Educativo Juan Salvador Gaviota P.S. | Embassy of Japan; Para-sport Organisations; Int'l Aikido Federation; Int'l Judo Federation; Uruguay Down Syndrome Association | 400+ | Members of the public (toddlers to seniors over 80 years of age); Para athletes |
| 12/2/2019 | International Nanairo Ekiden | Doha, Qatar | University of Tsukuba World Athletics | Qatar Olympic Committee; Kids Athletics; Qatar Anti-Doping Agency; Japan Anti-Doping Agency | 490 | Special needs schools; national team athletes; local and international school students |
| 17/3/2019 | 3rd Nanairo Ekiden | Tsukuba, Japan | University of Tsukuba | Sekisho; Kasumi; Under Armour; Celespo; Kirinoha; local business | 1500+ | People with disability; elementary, junior high and high school students; members of the public; top athletes; student athletes |
| 3/8/2020 | International Nanairo Ekiden | Stirling, Scotland | University of Tsukuba University of Stirling Sport Management Students | Embassy of Japan; Forth Valley Disability Sport; Bridge of Allan Highland Games; Cricket Scotland; Stirling Fund | ~200 | Members of the public; University of Stirling students |

body. It was due to these historical connections that the *ekiden* concept was chosen as the basis for the Nanairo Ekiden and for the transmission of Olympic and Paralympic education to the public. Table 1 shows the participants in the various Nanairo Ekiden and the relationship to their communities.

In addition to the events listed in Table 1 the *ekiden* was extended to include soccer and has been held at least twice more in Uruguay (2019 and 2023). As the main stakeholder, the University of Tsukuba connected academic, sport, business and community groups via the various *ekiden* and sustained these connections and other traditions throughout the different editions. One tradition was the use of seven colours to represent values; another was to design the medals and trophy of the first Nanairo Ekiden based on the theme of creating an 'interconnected world'. Similarly, the creation of the Tree of Nanairo connected the events via the different trees and the coloured hope messages attached to them. Although the traditions of the event were 'invented', they represent its tangible and intangible aspects and its heritage. The connection between the nanairo colours representing the Olympic and Paralympic values and the event's intangible heritage is outlined the following section, as is the material culture of the Nanairo Ekiden.

Material culture of the Nanairo Ekiden

The objects comprising the Nanairo Collection in the TIAS archive were collected as part of the running of the individual editions of the event. Aside from the focus on the Tree of Nanairo and its ribbons, selection bias in the collection of objects from the implementation of the *ekiden* was limited to recovering objects that were available for collection after the event was finished. As mentioned elsewhere, disinterest on the part of some faculty/organisers may have limited the amount of material that could be collected. In some cases, the lack of event provenance led to the large 'miscellaneous' count of ribbons in Table 1.

The material culture of the Nanairo discussed in relation to intangible heritage in this paper is represented by three categories: (a) the trees of Nanairo; (b) ribbons attached to the trees; and (c) miscellaneous objects. Figure 2 shows some of the material culture of the event. All the objects are associated with the Olympic and Paralympic values and their identifying colours, as described above. For 'equality', the T-shirts were prepared and printed on black; however, the ribbons to be associated with the Tree of Nanairo were grey – so that the writing could be seen clearly.



Figure 2
Material culture of the Nanairo Ekiden. Top L-R: Tree of Nanairo (Uruguay); purple participant shirt from Doha 2019 associated with the value of 'courage'; Tree of Nanairo (U.K.). Bottom L-R: Original Tree of Nanairo; ribbons expressing future sport goals (U.K.); mini frisbees with inscribed values (Japan).

During the assessment of the Nanairo Collection in the archive, it was noticed that there were many unlabelled coloured ribbons that had been inscribed by participants. To determine the number and breakdown of the ribbons, a count was undertaken and the ribbons were categorised according to *ekiden* and colour. The results are shown in Table 2. Unfortunately, the 'Miscellaneous' category comprises the second-largest count, indicating that the provenance is not known for these ribbons. It is assumed that they are from overseas *ekiden* and that they were mixed up either in transit or during storage. The largest count is attributed to *ekiden* in Japan, the provenance of which is easiest to secure and maintain. Blue (determination) and red (friendship) were the largest colour and category values, with 130 and 129 ribbons, respectively. The 'Stirling' category had limited content. This is because very few participants in the event in Scotland chose to write on a ribbon, and the organisers wished to have some of the ribbons on display on their Tree of Nanairo.

A subjective assessment of the coloured ribbons and their counts can give an indication of participant preference in relation to colour and value. It is regrettable that on the day of the various *ekiden* a more objective assessment of selection patterns and beliefs was not confirmed via a survey of the participants. Lyras and Welty Peachey (2011) suggest that the lack of data to measure the outcomes of sport for development programmes (of which values education is included), particularly within community settings, is a failure of the field and one that needs to be addressed. This information could have complemented the discussion on the connection between the object, the intention and the event.

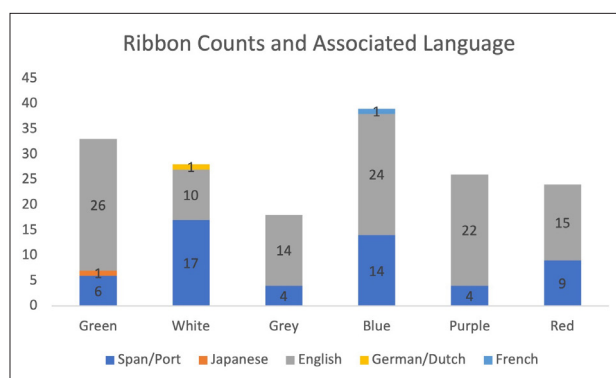


Figure 3
Ribbon counts, colours and associated language (miscellaneous)

In assessing the collection of ribbons and how their presence in the collection contributes to the intangible heritage of the event, a count was also undertaken of the 'Miscellaneous' ribbon category as a means of deriving data from them and ascribing value to this part of the collection.

This action correlates with the view of Andersson and Johannesson (2018) that ascription of values is determined by both organisations and participants, who act as agents during this process. English and Spanish/Portuguese languages were found on the largest number of ribbons. It is possible to infer that the Spanish/Portuguese category represents material from the Nanairo Ekiden held in Brazil in 2016. The Spanish/Portuguese languages are combined in one category because the text and some of the ribbons have degraded and it is not possible to clearly read the language on some of the ribbons. Conversely, given the large number of ribbons with English writing, it is not possible to infer which *ekiden* these were derived from, as

Table 2
Ekiden counts and ribbon colours

| Ekiden/Colour | Purple | Green | Red | White | Blue | Yellow | Grey | Total |
|---------------------|--------|-------|-----|-------|------|--------|------|-------|
| Doha | 3 | | 2 | | | 1 | 15 | 21 |
| Brazil | 16 | 12 | 18 | 16 | 27 | 24 | 5 | 118 |
| Kenya | 13 | 20 | 34 | 31 | 11 | 32 | 26 | 167 |
| Japan | 41 | 39 | 50 | 35 | 52 | 35 | 31 | 283 |
| Stirling (Scotland) | | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | | 5 |
| Miscellaneous | 26 | 33 | 24 | 28 | 39 | 20 | 18 | 188 |
| Total | 99 | 105 | 129 | 111 | 130 | 113 | 95 | 782 |

English is an international language and the ribbons could be representative of any of the *ekiden* (including Brazil).


Intangible heritage of the event

Attendees at the Nanairo Ekiden were asked to write their sporting and personal aims on any of the seven coloured ribbons and attach it to the Tree of Nanairo (Figure 1, 2), which was then carried from one Nanairo Ekiden to the next, linking the participants and the events. Between 2016 and 2020, the Nanairo Ekiden was held in Japan (three times), Kenya (twice), Uruguay (twice), Brazil, Qatar and Scotland. Local organisers of the event often made their own Tree of Nanairo with unique local characteristics; for example, the Japanese 'tree' was created from recycled material, the Stirling 'tree' from metal, the Uruguay 'tree' from wood, the Kenyan 'tree' from Masaai beadwork. In this way, local traditions were connected with the event and thus were also disseminated worldwide as part of the intangible network. The tangible heritage of the event was built up through the collection of 'ribbons' and 'trees' represented by the different Trees of Nanairo. The series comprises the different 'trees' and the hundreds of message ribbons and the values, hopes and dreams attached to them. This creates a linkage between the past, present and future. Such a dispersed collection contributes to the discourse on objects, intangible heritage and legacy.

The material culture of the event is linked to the

memories that remain with the communities and individuals through their participation, as well as with those people who view the collection externally. The objects are imbued with meaning through these associations with communities, people and organisations. The act of writing on the ribbons and attaching messages to the Tree of Nanairo forms a 'social practice' or 'ritual' associated with the Nanairo Ekiden, defining its intangibility and connection to both the heritage of the event and the contribution and memories of the participants (Harrison and Rose 2010). A social paradigm that the 2020 Tokyo Games sought to develop was the bonds of friendship, or *Kizuna*, among competitors, the public, and the national and international community. In this way, the Trees of Nanairo and their ribbons created a tangible and intangible heritage legacy network that connects participants in Japan and overseas.

Conclusion and future work

This paper has briefly considered the relationship between the material culture of the Nanairo Ekiden and its associated intangible heritage and should be considered a work in progress. It is too early to give a definitive view on all aspects of the intangible heritage created by this event. Future work will consider the breakdown of colours in more detail and the messages on the ribbons using content analysis to determine further connections between the participants, material culture and the intangible heritage of the events. 

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