

Traditional Games Making a Comeback



"Oh, this is hard!" "Look, I did it!"

©Sato Hiroaki

Children's cries of delight echo through the gymnasium of an elementary school. During the periods set aside for integrated study at this school, elderly neighbors are invited to interact with students through traditional games, such as *kendama* (cup and ball), *koma* (tops), and *otedama* (beanbag juggling). Many kindergartens and nursery schools, as well as elementary schools have recently been holding such activities. Changes that have recently taken place in children's environments led to the active integration of such games in schools.

Children's Environments

What Japanese children do for fun has changed dramatically in the past 20 years. When Nintendo first started selling *famikon* in 1983, it became an instant hit. Subsequently, portable digital games have gone on the market one after the other, and by now even computer and cell phone use has spread among young children.

According to a study conducted by Benesse Educational Research and Development Center,* elementary school students play video games after school for an average of one hour. While over 20 percent of elementary school students play video games hardly at all, another 20 percent play for two or more hours. If we were to include other digital games, the figure would be even higher. Over 60 percent play in their own home or in a friend's home. Video and digital games are not the only things that have influenced the change in where children play, from outdoors to indoors. The number of places where children can safely play has decreased, it is said, as a result of urban development and crimes perpetrated against children. Furthermore, we see a decrease in cross-generational communication and the undermining of the local community due to an increase in nuclear families.

There is a heightened sense of crisis concerning children's environments. We often hear about the decline in children's athletic agility and strength because of little time spent actively playing outside as well as the deterioration of children's communication skills from spending so much time playing alone.

Merits of Traditional Games

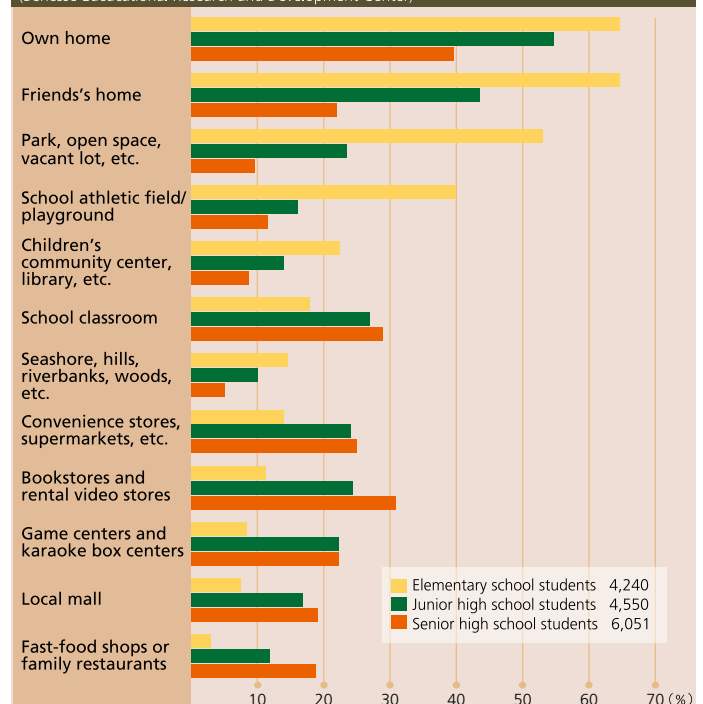
Many traditional games require physical activity. These games help develop children's physical agility and strength, foster perseverance and concentration, and develop balance without them even knowing it. For example, *kendama* appears to require the use of just the fingertips, but in fact, one must bend and stretch the knees, and maintain balance using the entire body. Learning to wrap the throwing cord around a *koma* top and tossing it correctly, or getting a small top to spin on the palm of your hand demands hours of practice.

In addition, traditional games can be enjoyed across generations, allowing people of different ages to interact. Elderly neighbors can be invited to join in, thereby fostering a sense of local community. One of the main aims in adopting traditional games in the schools is to create opportunities for children to interact with different kinds of people.

Many local governments run programs to provide children with safe places to play, and traditional games often make an appearance in these programs. Local communities also hold traditional game events. However, this means that traditional games are no longer played on a daily basis. They were originally passed down from parents to children and grandchildren, but today, with growing numbers of nuclear families and society overflowing with toys, traditional games are not easy to pass

Where Japanese children play after school

(Benesse Educational Research and Development Center)



* *Dai-ikkai Kodomo seikatsu jittai kihon chosa hokokusho* [Report of the 1st Basic Survey on Conditions of Children's Daily Lives], 2005.

down. Nevertheless, more than a few children have become fascinated by the special appeal of traditional games, which offer pleasures digital games lack.

Traditional Games Common Around the World

Since *kendama*, *koma*, *otedama*, *takeuma* (stilts), *tako-age* (kite-flying), *ayatori* (cat's cradle) are often introduced as traditional Japanese games, many children think that they are unique to Japan. However, similar toys and games can be found all around

the world. Some may have been invented in one place and spread to other areas, while others may have coincidentally been invented in different places. It is no surprise that similar children's toys made from readily available materials are seen around the world, though the materials may differ from place to place. Traditional toys that are almost the same, but are somehow different: it can be interesting to compare the various toys of the world. Here we introduce traditional toys that are widely popular in Japan.

Kendama

Cup and Ball

Playing with *kendama* (lit., "sword and ball") begins by swinging the ball onto the small, medium, or large "plate (cup)," or making the ball, where it has a hole on one side, fall on the tip of a shaft at one end, called the "sword" (*ken*). The first challenge is to get the ball to land on the large plate, then on the medium and small plates. The next trick is to make the ball fall on the shaft. This covers the basic moves of the game. After that, everything involves combining the different moves. Many people create original moves, and there are said to be over 1,000 tricks in all.

The roots of *kendama* are said to be found in the French *bilboquet* (see right side in left box below), a game played in Europe during the nineteenth century. In France, it was played by aristocrats, while in England, it was a game for girls.

Kendama is said to have reached Japan from China via Nagasaki during the Edo period (1603-1867). At the time, it was comprised of a straight stick and a ball. *Kendama* as we know it today, with three plates and a sword tip, was invented in Hiroshima during the Taisho period (1912-1926). It was an instant hit among children, and was commonly played until the early Showa period (1926-1989).

To promote the spread of *kendama* as a sport, the NPO Japan Kendama Association founded in 1975 created a standard *kendama* for competition (*kendama* with approval stickers are used at competitions), and a rulebook. Today, competitions and grade (*kyu*, *dan*) certification meets take place around the

けんだま

country. Skill is ranked in ten *kyu* (rising from 10 to 1) and six *dan* (rising from 1 to 6).

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology is also focusing on games as a way to improve children's physical strength. Since *kendama* is recognized as a game that requires balance and helps exercise the entire body, including the back and knees, "caravans" comprised of people well-versed in *kendama* are set to tour elementary schools starting in the 2007 school year.

Japan Kendama Association <http://www.kendamakyokai.com/>



The All-Japan Young People's Kendama Championship Tournament takes place every summer. An elementary school boy and girl who advance through a regional block play in the tournament with their counterparts from other regions. There are ten regional blocks in the country.

©TJF

Kendama Around the World



Japanese Kendama



There are many types of *koma*—those spun with the fingers (*hinerigoma*), with the palms of the hands (*temomigoma*), by pulling a cord (*itohikigoma*), by throwing the top using a cord wrapped around it (*nagegoma*), and others. The kind often introduced as a traditional toy is the “throw top” (*nagegoma*). Some are made of wood, and some of cast metal (*beigoma*).

Beigoma are steel tops that have no stem. They are spun by throwing with a string about sixty centimeters long wound around the base. One game is played by spreading a sheet over the bottom of a barrel and pressing it down in the middle to create a playing surface, on which two players spin their respective tops until one flicks the other off the surface. It is difficult to wind the string tightly since the top has no stem, and spinning the *beigoma* requires considerable skill.

It is said that *koma* came to Japan from China, but the details are unknown. *Koma* were already popular among the common people in the Kamakura period (1192-1333), but it was during the Edo period that they flourished. The best known were the *beigoma* made by filling whelk shells with sand or lead and then sealed with wax. This was the beginning of the *beigoma*.

The production of *beigoma* we now know, made by pouring steel into moulds, started in the late Meiji to mid-Taisho periods. *Beigoma* etched with the names of professional baseball players and sumo wrestlers were very popular among children in the *shitamachi* (“low city”) area of Tokyo from the 1920s to the early 1930s. Since steel was collected during World War II for the war effort, *beigoma* during that time were made of china or glass instead.

After World War II, from 1945 to the early 1960s, *beigoma* was the most common game among children. There were many factories manufacturing *beigoma*, but today, there is only one left in Kawaguchi, Saitama prefecture. Still, there are many *beigoma* fans, and every week, competitions, both large and small, take place in parks and various other locations.

Japan Spin a Top Association ☞ <http://www.komav7.com/jsta/jsta.htm>
 Japan Spinning Top Musuem ☞ <http://www.wa.commufa.jp/~koma/>
 Nihon Komamawashi Fukyu Kyokai (Japan Spinning Top Promotion Association) ☞ <http://www.bekkoame.ne.jp/ha/asobi/osaso.html>
 Nihon Beigoma Kyokai (Japan Beigoma Association) ☞ <http://www.wa.commufa.jp/~koma/mawashi/index.html>



Beigoma imprinted with names of people or places.

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Children and adults of all ages enjoyed *beigoma* in a festival in the old *shitamachi* area of Tokyo.

©TJF



©Koma no Sato

In 2006 the 7th All-Japan Top-spinning Contest was sponsored by the Japan Spin a Top Association.

Acrobatic Tops

Kyokugoma きょくごま

In addition to children’s toy tops, there are beautifully shaped and colored tops used for acrobatic displays. Performers delight audiences with various tricks, such as making a spinning top slide along the blade of a sword or move along a slender cord, and balancing a spinning top on the edge of an open fan (see photo below; Mimasu Monya’s performance). These feats, which require years to master, are often performed at celebratory occasions such as New Year’s.



©TJF

Japanese Tops



Hinerigoma

Temomigoma

Itohikigoma

Nagegoma

©Koma no Sato

Otedama

Beanbags

おてだま

Otedama are fabric bags filled with red *azuki* beans, kernels of rice, or plastic pellet which one plays with juggling, throwing and catching several simultaneously while singing a traditional ditty. The names of the game, pellets used to fill the bags, shape of the bags, and the ways they are played with vary from region to region.

The origins of *otedama* are said to go back to a game played by nomads living near the Black Sea around 1200 B.C. which spread all over the world via the Silk Road. In Japan, it has been passed down from mothers to their daughters from about 1,200 years ago, but since around 1970, it has not been so commonly played. Nowadays, *otedama* are still sold, but they seem to be more for decoration than for play.

Nihon no Otedama no Kai (Japan Otedama no Kai)

☞ <http://www.shikoku.ne.jp/otedama/>

Takeuma

Stilts

たけうま

Takeuma are stilts made by fixing crosspieces near the bottom of bamboo poles one to two meters long. One stands on the crosspieces and walks while holding onto the poles at the top. The origin of the word *takeuma* (lit., "bamboo horse") comes from an ancient Chinese game in which people rode bamboo contrivances made to use like horses. It is said that *takeuma* as we know them today became widespread from the Edo period onwards.

Today, *takeuma* made from plastic are the norm. Playing with *takeuma* is said to be useful in fostering balance, and it is a common fixture of play equipment, along with unicycles, at elementary schools and children's recreation centers. There are some elementary schools that invite grandparents, parents, and children to make their own *takeuma*; students help one another in making their stilts in class, and hold competitions in which footraces and relay races are all done on stilts.



5th National Takeuma Contest sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce of the city of Muko, Kyoto prefecture, in January 2007. A *takeuma* workshop for parents with their children was also held.

©Muko City Society of Commerce and Industry

Juggling Toys from Around the World

Australia



Made of plastic with bird seed filling

U.S.A



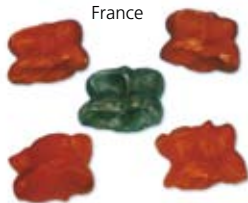
Jacks and ball

Puerto Rico



Knitted from wool yarn

France



Made from ankle bones of sheep

Japanese Otedama



Photos and captions from *Otedama*, 1997 Published by BUNKEIDO Co.,Ltd. ©NIHON-NO-OTEDAMA-NO-KAI & Denchirou OHNISHI

Modern Versions of Traditional Toys

Some traditional toys have been revamped by toy manufacturers to appeal to children of today. For example, there is Beyblade, which is a spinning top modeled on the *beigoma*, as well as DIGI-KEN (*dejiken*), a digitalized version of *kendama*, with flashing lights and sounds.

What they all have in common is the ease with which one is able to acquire the skills to enjoy them, compared to traditional toys. With Beyblade, one attaches the top to a special device that anyone can spin. Another characteristic is that many of these games are tie-ins with *manga*, video games, and anime. Beyblade, which went on the market in 1999, became popular after characters in *manga* played with it and its anime version was aired on television. Its popularity rose to the extent that national competitions were held, and in the first half of the fiscal year 2001, over 15 million were sold.

The popularity of such modern versions of traditional toys is fleeting, and both Beyblade and DIGI-KEN are no longer on the market. However, the popularity of Beyblade led to renewed interest in *beigoma*, and an increase in *beigoma* playing population. These modern versions of traditional toys, which provided people a shortcut to enjoyment, in fact led to a renewed interest in traditional toys that offer the pleasure to be gained when you take time to polish your skill.



DIGI-KEN

This photo is from *Kendama*, 2003 Published by BUNKEIDO Co., Ltd. ©NPO Japan Kendama Association, Teruki MARUISHI, Ichiro SUZUKI & Yuji CHIBA, ©1998 TOMY



Beyblade

©HUDSON SOFT/
TAKARA, Beyblade Project,
TV Tokyo



New Encounters Through *Kendama*

Hello, my name is Tario. “Dama-ken,” the club I belong to, teaches *kendama* (cup-and-ball) to local children and performs at events. We also travel to Mongolia once a year for a *kendama* exchange program. This past year, I was the club representative.

Tario

21 year-old, third-year university student
Hiroshima, Japan

I didn’t start *kendama* until I entered university. Until then, I’d never even touched one. When I was in elementary school, I was a video game freak. I sometimes played outdoors, too, but as the number of parks dwindled, so did the time I spent playing outside.

A friend I made in college was good at *kendama*, and before I knew it, I had become a member of Dama-ken. I also belonged to the tennis club during my first year in university, but I quit when I realized how much more I enjoyed the activities of Dama-ken.

A Real Sense of Usefulness to People

At Dama-ken, we get requests from local elementary schools and children’s centers as well as senior citizens’ groups, nursing homes, and groups organizing international exchange events to teach or give performances with *kendama*. We take part in such activities about 100 times a year. Wherever we go, people seem to enjoy our activities. When children master a move they hadn’t been able to do, their eyes sparkle with excitement. When I see something like that, I feel that I’m doing something that is useful.

I met a lot of people when I visited Mongolia during spring break at the end of my first year. The experience helped me gain an even stronger sense that I am doing something worthwhile with Dama-ken. Every spring since 2002, our club collects 300 *kendama* from people we know to take to Mongolia, where we take part in a cultural exchange. In fact, *kendama* is well-known in Mongolia, and there is even a *kendama* association there. There are groups other than Dama-ken in Japan that conduct *kendama* exchange programs in Mongolia.

I have been to Mongolia twice, once last year and once two

years ago, but I don’t know the Mongolian language. But when I go there with *kendama* in hand, people come up to me and ask, “Hey, you know how to play? Show me,” and we begin interacting right away. Last March, I stayed in Ulan Bator¹ for about two weeks, and Khovd² for about a week. While we were based in those two cities, we visited mostly elementary and middle schools in nearby towns. We had over 2,000 visitors at our *kendama* lessons and rallies, which we held in more than 20 locations. We visit some of the same places every year, so we see a lot of familiar faces. Children we hadn’t seen in a year come up to us, and with barely a greeting, say, “Look, look, can you do this trick?” I am no match for some of the better kids. But that, too, is part of the fun.

Whenever I go to Mongolia, I know without a doubt that I want to go again. The other members of Dama-ken say the same thing. But it’s not that we want to go sightseeing. We don’t need to, because we’ll have our *kendama*. There are people we want to see, kids we want to play with. That’s why we want to go.

Mongolia’s Special Appeal

I also find the country of Mongolia very appealing. They have completely different landscapes, cultures, and traditions from Japan. The first time I went there, I was amazed by everything. Once you leave the center of the city, it’s all open natural landscape. In Japan, people are punctual and efficiency is of the utmost priority, but Mongolians are not so tied down by time, which I find liberating. Whenever I return from Mongolia, my friends tell me that I’ve changed. It’s probably the laid-back atmosphere of Mongolia. It costs us about 160,000 to 170,000 yen



Presenting *kendama* to friends in Mongolia.

©Dama-ken



Teaching Mongolian children to play with *kendama*.

©Dama-ken



The *kendama* booth at a Japanese university festival. Foreign students trying their hand for the first time.

©Dama-ken



At an elementary school nearby. We are sometimes asked to teach *kendama* as part of regular classroom study.

©Dama-ken

to go, so we all work hard at our part-time jobs to pay for the trip. But because we want to see everyone in Mongolia, we think little of how much work it takes to get there.

In Mongolia, many people help us out. This year, the members of Dama-ken stayed in Ulan Bator at the home of a famous player of the *matouqin*, a two-string, horse-headed fiddle-like instrument. Also, every time we go, university students studying Japanese take care of us, driving us around and interpreting for us. When I first went to Mongolia, neither I nor the other members of Dama-ken were aware of the significance of our activities. But I got to thinking after Zorigo, one of the college students who always helps us out, said, "You guys are doing good, which is why I'm helping out. I want you to know that." I became convinced that having people who will help and support us means that we must live up to their expectations, that we can't take part half-heartedly. We have to be responsible and aware of what we are doing.

New Discoveries about Myself

Until I became a member of Dama-ken, I wasn't very good with children. Children can be hyper and when they interact with someone older than themselves they get even more excited. But I realized that it didn't bother me so much when I have my *kendama* with me. It makes it easy to work with kids. I discovered that I really enjoy playing with them.

Also, I wasn't too good under pressure and didn't have much confidence in myself, but because we've had many occasions to perform in front of people and also because I was the club representative this past year, I've gotten a bit stronger than before. In the beginning, if I made a mistake, I'd panic and mess up even more. With experience, I have stopped panicking even if I slip up. I'm also able to adapt to each particular situation by paying attention to children's expressions and behavior, inserting breaks when necessary or encouraging concentration by showing tricks. That, in turn, has given me more self-confidence.

The Appeal of *Kendama*

When I tell my friends from high school that I'm in a *kendama* club, most of them are a bit appalled. At first, I was embarrassed to be playing with *kendama* as a university student, but I don't have any qualms anymore. If my friends say anything, I just tell them, "You should try it, too!"

The great thing about *kendama* is that anybody can do it. Age

and strength don't matter, and whether you're athletic or not doesn't, either. It's not like faster runners have an edge when it comes to *kendama*. Anyone can do it. There are people who are better at it than others, but it's a very equal-opportunity game. The more you practice, the better you become. I was a beginner when I joined Dama-ken, but now I have third *dan* rank (see Japanese Culture Now). Sometimes during practice, I suddenly become able to do tricks that I found impossible before. At times like that, I'm just simply happy. Whether you're successful or not is clear-cut with *kendama*, so it's easy to see your achievements. That's another great thing about *kendama*.

I wish kids would play with *kendama* instead of video games. Only a limited number of people can play a video game at one time, so it's not as much fun, and it doesn't have much room for improvisation or interaction with others. With *kendama*, on the other hand, you can play on your own and with other people by showing your moves or competing against each other, so it's not so narrow.

Dama-ken's goal is to spread *kendama* even further in our local communities. Because it's a game that you have to keep practicing in order to improve, we started the Dama-ken Dojo this year. Twice a month, we rent a room at the community center and hold lessons. Right now, we have about 15 or 16 students. My hope is that the popularity of *kendama*, a game that can be enjoyed by young and old, will continue to grow.

- 1 Ulan Bator: The capital of Mongolia, located approximately 1,300 meters above sea level, and has a population of approximately one million.
- 2 Khovd: Located 1,425 km west of Ulan Bator; a three-hour plane ride or two nights and three days by car. Temperatures reach a high of 38 degrees Celsius and a low of -43 degrees Celsius. Population of 90,000 people. Approximately 1.32 million livestock.

