

## Tokashiki Tug-of-War

### The Pull of Tradition

Tugs-of-war are held all around Okinawa as part of village festivals in summer and autumn, and Tokashiki is no exception. The Naha tug-of-war is recognized by Guinness World Records as the world's largest.

The Tokashiki tug-of-war is held on the 25th day of the sixth month of the old lunar calendar (July or August in the modern calendar). The opposing teams come from the eastern and the western parts of the village. According to legend, if the west wins, the next year will see a bumper rice harvest; if the east wins, there will be a bumper catch of fish. Until recently, there was genuine rivalry between the two parts of the village, as the *honke* (main households) of the first families to settle the island lived in the west, while the *bunke* (branch households) lived in the east. As a result, the competition could get quite fierce.

The rope for the tug-of-war is 40 to 45 centimeters in diameter—far larger than a normal rope. It consists of two halves, each 45 meters in length. There is a female rope (*mezuna*) for the western team and a male rope (*ozuna*) for the eastern team. Each rope ends in a loop; the male loop is forced through the female loop and fastened with a thick wooden pin (*kanuchibo*). There are around 70 to 80 people on each team. Since the rope itself is too thick to grasp, smaller ropes are attached for the contestants to pull on.

The rope is made of three or four lengths of interlaced rice straw wrapped with conventional rope. In the past, most villagers grew their own rice, and offered the rice straw to the shrine in hopes that it would be used for the sacred rope. These days, fewer villagers grow rice, which makes securing the necessary amount of straw more challenging than in the old days. Special efforts are being made to ensure a supply so that the tradition can continue. The rice is harvested about a month before the tug-of-war, and the straw is dried before being woven into lengths.

On the morning of the tug-of-war, the *hatagashira*—decorations for the flagpoles of each half of the village—are taken from the shrine. The east has a trident-like decoration and the

west has one that resembles a scimitar. Before the actual tug-of-war starts, two smaller groups from either end of the village perform a mock battle with the flagpoles.

The tug-of-war takes place in front of the village office, which straddles the boundary between the east and west ends of the village. A line is drawn on the road; whichever side manages to pull the other about 3 meters across it is judged the winner.

Visitors are sometimes assigned to the teams to make equal numbers. Lucky tourists may get the chance to participate in an ancient Okinawan tradition.