

"BURI" OR "TORIKO", A TRADITIONAL JAPANESE METHOD OF CATCHING DRAGONFLIES

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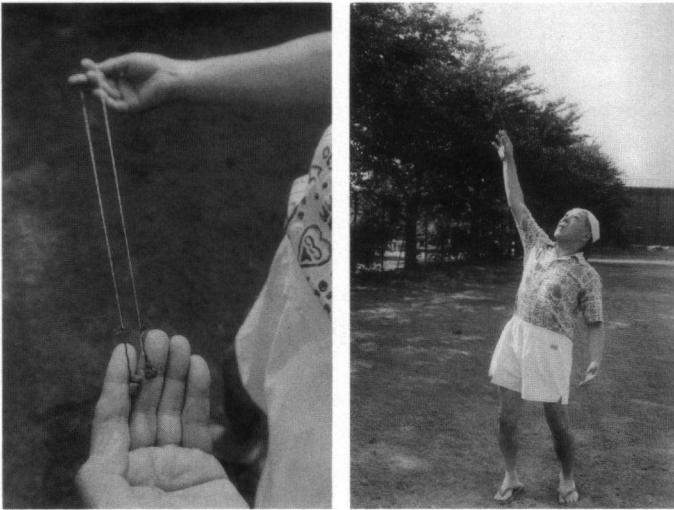
Received February 22, 1994 / Revised and Accepted May 5, 1994

A unique and quaint method is described. It has been widespread as a traditional boy game until about the 1960s, but it is now becoming rare and on the verge of extinction. — The method uses a silk thread, 60-80 cm long, with a weight tied at each end. Boys throw this tool up into the sky in front of large species, such as e.g. *Anotogaster sieboldii* or *Anax parthenope julius*. The dragonfly mistakes the weights for live bugs and swoops to catch them. At this moment it becomes entangled in the silk thread and it is forced by the weights to fall down to the ground. In this way, the dragonflies are captured alive and unhurt. The idea is similar to that of lure-fishing, and takes advantage of the predatory behaviour and habits of aeshnids and cordulegastriids.

INTRODUCTION

We call both the tool and the method "*buri*" or "*toriko*". *Buri* is a word which originated in Osaka, but it is now understood nationwide. It supposedly came from a Japanese phrase "*buran, buran*" that means "*swing, swing*". On the other hand, *toriko* is an expression used only in the Tokyo area. "*Toriko*" means "*captive*" or a "*prisoner of war*" in Japanese. The dragonflies are caught alive and unhurt by this method, like prisoners captured in war.

The method uses a silk thread, with a weight tied at each end (Fig. 1). This tool is thrown up into the sky in front of a dragonfly (Fig. 2). The dragonfly mistakes the weights for prey, swoops to catch them, whereby it gets entangled in the silk thread and falls alive and unhurt to the ground.



Figs 1-2. General aspect of *huri* or *toriko* (left), — and the techniques of throwing it into the sky (right). — [Originally published in *Yomiuri Shimibun*, 1987, issue of July 18].

ORIGIN AND HISTORY

Japan was closed and isolated for a few centuries, from the Middle Ages until the mid-19th century, so she developed unique traditions which are observed today. These traditions still remain in many fields, including philosophy, arts, literature, religion, language and the ways of thinking and living.

Japan has also been called the "island of dragonflies" for many years. Because the Japanese are an agricultural people, they have been good friends of dragonflies since prehistoric days. In fact, dragonflies have been so popular in the daily life of Japanese people for such a long period of time that our ancestors inevitably invented several methods of catching them. *Buri* or *toriko* is one example, and the origin of this method is traditionally imagined approximately as follows:

Once upon a time, a boy was watching many dragonflies flying in the evening, probably aeshnids in their crepuscular flight. He threw a small pebble at an aeshnid in the air. The boy was surprised when it followed the pebble, first flying up and then down near the ground. He figured out that the aeshnid thought the pebble was a delicious mosquito and chased it. So the boy tied two small pebbles to a string, or perhaps a girl's long hair, and threw them in front of the on-coming dragonflies. An aeshnid was entangled by the string and fell down to the ground. He succeeded in catching the dragonfly alive and unhurt. After the incident, this method spread gradually throughout the country, and it was developed and im-

proved technically and materially for many years by different regions. This is our guess.

The first documented record of *huri* is that published in 1831 by G. KODERA, where a picture shows a boy throwing a *huri* tool against a dragonfly in the sky. It is reproduced here in Figure 3. We can conclude, therefore, *huri* was widespread at least around 1800 already.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

Buri and *toriko* are essentially the same in idea and method (cf. Fig. 4), but the tool sometimes differs by regions.

THREAD AND/OR STRING. — In the early days, boys used girl's hair and horse's tail or mane hair, and later might have used cotton strings, but finally silk threads became the favourite choice, because the silk industry was so prosperous in modern Japan. Silk thread is the best material, since it is pliable as well as strong enough to entangle dragonflies flying in the air.

MATERIALS FOR WEIGHTS — Boys used small pebbles at first, then improved to air-gun bullets or ball bearings. Sometimes fishing weights, leaden printing types (about a centimetre-long piece was cut in half), pigment-tube caps and cut-off nail heads were used in various districts. Pieces of coral in the southern islands and beans in farmlands were also used. Many types of materials were used as long as they were relatively heavy and easily obtainable in the local area.



Fig. 3. Reproduction of the drawing from KODERA (1831), the earliest known evidence on the *huri* play.

TYPES

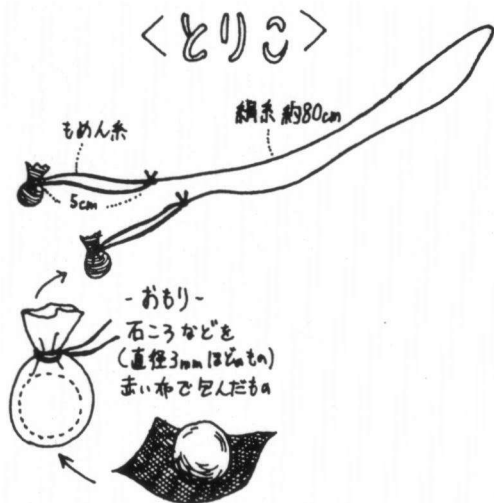


Fig. 4. The elements of *toriko*. — [Originally published in *Coppice*, July 1992, p. 7].

TOKYO TORIKO. — In Tokyo, two air-gun bullets or ball bearings, 4-6 mm diameter, are used wrapped in a piece of red cloth and tied to a cotton thread. A small loop is made with the cotton thread. A 60-80 cm silk thread is attached at each end to the loop of the cotton thread, attached to one of the weights — and the tool is completed. (See below). Instead of 60-80 cm, the length of the silk thread could be (1) as long as one fathom or arm's length; — or (2) as short as 30 cm. The length is determined by individual players who decide which one is the best by experience.

OSAKA BURI. — Small pebbles or ball bearings are wrapped in stencil paper, oiled paper, candy wrapping paper or brown sulphate paper, where the ends of the silk thread are pushed in. The paper is then folded and twisted hard enough, so that the silk thread will not slip off. The length of the silk thread is also determined by each player's performance.

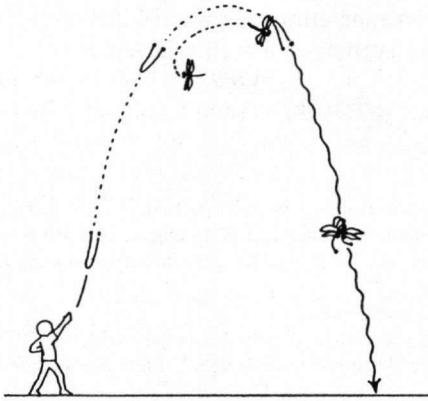
OTHER VARIATIONS. — In some regions, rubber bands are connected to fishing weights and the bands are tied to the silk thread. In other areas, small pebbles are directly cross-tied to cotton threads. The rubber band type might be best for throwing the highest.

There are many types and variations of *buri* and *toriko* used by dragonfly catchers all over Japan. The specific details are quite subtle and rather difficult to describe. However, they can be classified into three types, viz. (1) city and urban areas, — (2) districts near and around fishing ports, — and (3) general farmland districts. These three types are observed throughout the country.

HOW TO PLAY *BURI* OR *TORIKO*

Illustrations and pictures are much better than written descriptions. Figures 5 and 6 show a side view of how to catch an aeshnid by *buri* or *toriko*.

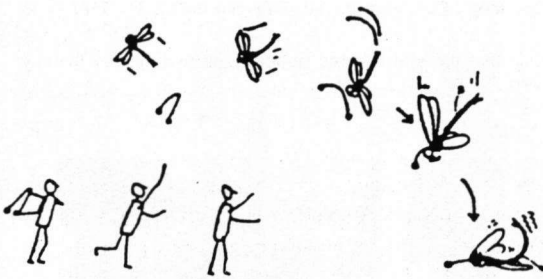
(a) Throw the tool a few meters in front of the on-coming aeshnid, and about a meter above it.



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- (b) The timing of the throw is most important: not too early, not too late!
- (c) Always watch your tool, even though the dragonfly is not entangled. You will probably lose the tool if you follow only the escaping dragonfly with your eyes!

SPECIES THAT CAN BE CAUGHT BY *BURI* OR *TORIKO*



“とりこ”によるヤンマ生捕りの仕組み

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Aeshnidae: *Aeschnophlebia anisoptera*, *A. longistigma*, *Anaciaeschna martini*, *Anax n. nigrofasciatus*, *A. parthenope julius*, *Boyeria maclachlani*, *Planaeschna milnei*, *Polycanthagina melanictera*.

Cordulegastri-
dae: *Anotogaster sieboldii*.

These are all large species. Unfortunately, smaller species, such as *Orthemtrum albistylum speciosum*

Figs 5-6. The idea and the catching principle of *buri* or *toriko*: (5) from FUJIMOTO, 1993; – (6) from HAYASHI, 1974.

and *Sympetrum frequens*, are not caught by this method, because they do not fly high enough to enable use of the *buri* and also they do not attack mosquitoes and tiny insects in the same way that the *Anotogaster* and aeshnids do.

DISCUSSION

The *buri* or *toriko* was a favourite and fascinating game for boys in the summer from at least 160 years ago up to the 1960s. However, with the decreasing number of dragonflies in Japan due to environmental destruction, water pollution and concrete blocking of river banks and lake and pond shores, the sight of young boys using this traditional method is becoming extremely rare. It is now on the

verge of extinction. Therefore we are making efforts to preserve and protect this rather artistic and romantic method of catching dragonflies in Japan.

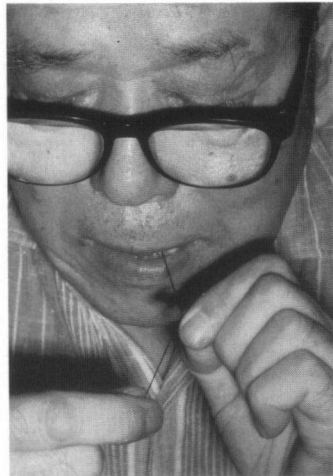
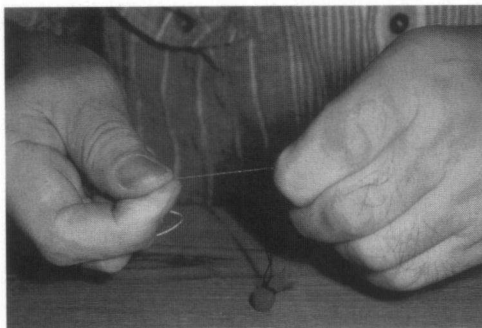
HOW TO MAKE A *TORIKO* TOOL

Figures 7-9

MATERIALS NEEDED. — A silk thread, 60-80 cm long, the finer the better; — air-gun bullets or ball bearings, 4-6 mm in diameter (other metallic materials, such as fishing weights and heads of nails are also possible, if they are reasonably heavy); — red cloth; — black cotton thread.

MANUFACTURING PROCESS (Figs 7-9):

- (1) Cut the red cloth into 2 approximately 1.5 cm sq. pieces.
- (2) Place an air-gun bullet in the center of the red cloth, and wrap it with the cloth (Fig. 7).
- (3) Bite and hold a length of black cotton thread and roll to tie it tightly a few times around the wrapped bullet (Fig. 8).
- (4) After tying the wrapped bullet as hard as possible without breaking the thread, cut the cotton thread and tie the two ends in a loop 5 cm long.
- (5) Repeat steps (2)-(4) with a second bullet.
- (6) Tie each end of the silk thread to the loop of a cotton-threaded air-gun bullet. The bullets act as weights (Fig. 9).
- (7) The red cloths should be trimmed, so that the tool is more smoothly thrown up into the sky, with less air-resistance.



Figs 7-9. The manufacturing of a *toriko*. — [For explanation see text; — all photographs by the publisher of *Coppice*, 1991-1992].

(8) The tool is complete, as shown in Figures 1 and 4.

N o t e. — The wrapping cloth is red, as in this way the weights are found more easily when they fall on the ground, either on the grass or in the water. Usually, the dragonfly natural prey is of course not red.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Dr BASTIAAN KIAUTA (SIO Central Office, Bilthoven), as this article was completed following his warm advice when I made a presentation and demonstration of this method in the framework of the Twelfth International Symposium of Odonatology, Osaka, Japan, 1-11 August, 1993.

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