

Rok-Fighting, a brief account—George Webster

The full name of the original Japanese 'rok' kite is the Shirone, also Sanjo, Rokkaku (emphasis on the 'ku') of Nigata province. Fighting with kites in Shirone goes back several hundred years—there are at least two versions of its origin. One is the 'designed to get ill feeling by young people off the streets and into the sky', the other features a land owner who had problems with the solidity of the embankment walls of a newly built 70m wide canal and realised that hundreds of sandaled feet running up and down the canal banks would compact the surface nicely. Common to both stories is the rivalry between the villages on each side of the water. The original description of the event by a Westerner is Tal Streeter's in chapters 1 and 2 of 'The Art of the Japanese Kite'. He points out that the main fighting at the time he describes—early 1970's—was between teams fighting across the canal. He mentions that at one time the roks cross spars were diagonal, not at right angles, and that the rok as we know it is about 100 years old.

All Japanese kites were made of washi paper and most used bamboo spars which were frequently stuck to the cover. So portability was an unusual asset. Rokks were portable—simply remove the vertical spar and roll up the kite. Hence a true rok has the vertical spare behind the horizontal.

Visits to Japan in the late 1970's spread knowledge amongst Western kite fliers of how big kites were fought there including very large Edo type (called o-dako also) at Shirone. Rok fighting really came to the 'west' following an article by Valerie Govig in the Spring 1983 Kitelines which launched 'Bevan Brown's Rokkaku Kite Team Challenge'. As originally envisaged this seems to have Age of Aquarius angle in 'no systematic competition'. But Brown's proposal set out the basic idea of a largish kite flown by a team of at least 2. The article included plans, sometimes called the 456 model where 4 was the distance between the horizontals, 5 the width and 6 the overall height. Bridles were shown as 6 or 7 point—in the latter case the 7th was the midpoint of the spine. While 4 points are the norm today (6 points were seen as allowing lighter spars), looking at the photo in Tal's book it does seem that Japanese roks were fought with 5 bridles, 4 were relatively weak and the 5th was the flying line going directly to the intersection of the spine and the top spar. Other Japanese kites (eg those flown at Hamamatsu) had deliberately weakened bridles

at the corners to encourage attacking the bridles as a winning tactic. Of all Japanese kites fought rokkakus were the easiest to make, which is why they were chosen in the west.

The plans emphasised the importance of taut leading edges. One nice touch, in Kitelines about construction methods, "Those of you who have been trying to grow bamboo will have an opportunity to use it here". What on earth was going on over there?

The 'challenge' was taken up in the USA and in 1985 there were famous 'all American' rok battles involving an all female team—the Mama-Sans—against teams in Chicago and victories by them against the Rainbow Warriors at Scheveningen (then the leading European festival) and Cervia. The kites used appeared to be about 8ft high.

I was involved with Tony (T.C.) Cartwright in what I think was the first English rok fight at the York festival in 1986. TC made the kite with a diagonal blue/brown design using two pieces of bamboo carpet core for the spine sleeved by an extension tube from a vacuum cleaner. I can't remember the result but do recall as I leant on the rails of the race course that 'I was too old to do this sort of thing'.

The development which most influenced British rok fighting was an article by Martin Lester in the July 1986 Kiteflier which led to the rules still being broadly followed today. Martin originally proposed two competitions—one an international one which never got going. In the October 1986 Kiteflier Jon and Gill not only backed his proposals but agreed to be judges. The format was to take the best results from at least 2 rounds from 4 venues to count towards an annual trophy. Each round comprised of 3 fights to be held immediately one after the other. The first of many English kite plans was provided using the 5/4 ratio and emphasising the importance of bowing with a taut leading edge. This gave the belly on each side which provided stability—in the case of TC's York rok the use of balloon fabric led to the edges nearly touching behind the spine producing a kite more suited to the lurking game than the aggressive approach which won TC the World Championship title at a later Dieppe.

A problem both here and in the USA was the line to be used—UK rules specifically banned manja, kevlar, wire, etc. But I remember a fliers meeting before the 86 (?) Sunderland, when Adam

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Sutherland was in charge of these matters, that he issued his own made heavyweight manja which he insisted we would have to use. He was told 'no' ! I still have mine, it resembles pink coated clothes line. It is only hearsay but I was told that a well known Brighton flier had developed a metal core with gun-cotton wound round it which he was proposing to use when on fire above the crowd at Portsmouth. More seriously there were allegations of lines being doctored in competition in various ways and pseudo-learned discussions on the advantages of frequently knotted line versus smooth.

The second problem of rok fighting which was difficult to eradicate even with good judges was 'passivity' or hiding in the early stages.

The Lester/Bloom rules clearly stated that the ream roks should be 2m high and that there should also be a class of individual roks 1—1.5m high competing in a parallel competition. Metric measurement was not so common in those days and many a rok were made 6ft high (this being a common dowel length). At a Brighton festival 2m was insisted on, so fliers attached light-weight spine extensions to the 2 yard kites which soon fell off in flight.

The UK competition ran for, I think, 10 years. My son and I formed a team which once won the annual award for 'Team Spirit'. This sounds laudably Japanese but was largely base on our performance at Sunderland. The kite was rather heavy, being made out of ripstop scraps from Poole sailmakers—but this had nothing to do

with our problem. Oliver was captain and I was the launcher and line-beater. At the cry of 'launch' the kite refused to rise. I checked that the bridles were not tangled and tossed it up again becoming aware of uncalled for abuse by my son who seemed to be screaming 'upside down'. I think this was the time when Andy King the commentator fell off his chair laughing.

Oliver (my rude, load mouthed son) competed in the singles with some success, inventing the tactic called the 'flue brush' which involves running quickly around all your competitors if they are close together and then pulling in your line. Keeping your line moving improves your chances of a cut and you can reduce the field quickly. He finally lost a tactical final to a young Peacock at Bristol. Ah the Peacocks! They were not only the best team but easily the most successful. But some allegations were such you wondered how they ever got the line to bend round the reel.

Team fighting became very popular—and has always been one of the most asked about items on a programme—and in the late 1980's I remember close to 50 kites lining up at Sunderland and Bristol.

Then it gradually died away and although there has been a slight mini-revival at Portsmouth, a field of 8 is good and sometimes the overseas fliers outnumber the Brits.

Why the fall off? In my view a major reason was simply that what was once new lost its novelty and there weren't enough new fliers to sustain it. Secondly the kites quickly became complicated pieces of time consuming art/craft work which the owner-flier was reluctant to put at risk. Beach festivals can obviously be a problem and perhaps it is the wide surrounds which encourage the Portsmouth field. Some fliers e.g Martin Croxton fly a kite with a simple oriental pattern on a plain background. Perhaps 'not so much to lose' - but he flew it for 10+ years. And who can forget the artwork of Doug's 'Hello Jim' series?

Smaller entries have meant that organisers now typically have an open (any size) sudden death (only 1 fight) competition which reduces the incentive. Originally many kites were made by their fliers—although Skybums roks were also common—and I suspect there are fewer makers now attending festivals.



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Rok fighting continues elsewhere—on Germany you can find standard issue 50m spools of line marked for rok fighting. Kites are no longer sponsored here—on Malaysia local companies have names and logos on 2 m ripstop roks—and Carolyn Swift did well to finish highest international flier in one competition.

Lastly, and it shows how far some of us have come from the lofty sentiments of the 1980's, there is something called Headland Rok Fighting which has been practiced since 2004 by those at the last festival of the year in the North East. It grew out of North East Kite Fliers having those cheap Chinese rainbow deltas with tails (why is another story) but there being too much wind and not enough space to fight roks at Hartlepool. Frustrated kite fliers soon get into trouble so a new event was developed quickly: Headland Rok Fighting by the Rainbow Warriors for the Websters Trophy. The award is not named after the writer but the empty can of Websters Bitter which is the trophy currently held by Kathleen Beattie.

The rules are set out below and are proclaimed before the fight since many contestants never read anything:

1. All roks shall be Chinese Rainbow Deltas of standard size.
2. The use of the original lines is encouraged.
3. Competitors are discouraged from trying to cut opponents bridles as there aren't any. Tipping should only be for the judge.
4. The last kite flying in the opinion of the commentator and sole judge is the winner.
5. Full body contact is barred.
6. Contestants may not personally touch an opponents kite in the air except by kicking it.
7. If kites are cut free near a cliff edge (or similar) then catchers are allowed to use their feet to help propel the kite to its doom.
8. At least one relaunch is required and others will be permitted at the discretion of the judge.
9. Contestants must be aware at all times of which kite is theirs.

A final thought—the public do like the idea of competition and being able to see a winner. We all know that a 'Sudden Death' can be fluked but, on the other hand some fights go on for 10 minutes so a proper 3 fight contest in 30 minutes plus and this is a long time for some festival programmes. While I never liked the ap-

proach sometimes taken at Bristol, which was to have them battling away in a corner (and it always is a corner) while getting on with the rest of the demo—do we feel that there is something to encourage—perhaps Indian fighting, or a display or Oriental kites between rok fights?

Coincidentally after we received this from George, Keith Griffiths from STACK got in touch to see if we were interested in having a national event once again as quite a few Stack members were keen—details are on the STACK page (29) . For this year the competition will be for individual flyers only - so there will be competitions at STACK events (to which non STACK flyers can enter and rounds at Weymouth, Blackheath, Portsmouth, with the final round at Margate, where the (original U.K Rokkaku challenge trophy) will be presented. If there is enough interest maybe STACK and ourselves will do teams next years. Entry for the competitions will be on the day.



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