

**HISTORICAL NARRATIVE IN JAPANESE LOCAL IDENTITY**

**G.S. Lapshakov**, *Graduate Student*  
**HSE University – Saint Petersburg**  
 (Russia, Saint Petersburg)

DOI:10.24412/2500-1000-2021-5-1-137-140

**Abstract.** *Research on historical narratives is highly relevant in the general context of Memory Studies development. This article examines the relationship between historical narrative and local community identity using a narrative from the Japanese community of Yuwa Memeki in Akita Prefecture, Tohoku region. This is a remarkable example of how a special collective memory can be preserved in a local community, creating a unique local identity and perception of history that is different from the traditional national one. The article describes how the historical reality is reflected in the narrative about the folklore character Yashaki, which is significant for this community, and what this may say about the peculiarities of the local identity.*

**Keywords:** *Narrative, collective identity, history of Japan, Japanese folklore, collective memory.*

Historical narratives are essential elements of any collective identity. Although groups of people with specific identities can include very different numbers of people (from nation to village), they always have one thing in common. They always have a specific worldview, shared ideas about the origin and history that unite them. It includes ideas about significant figures, events, places, symbols, etc. These ideas do not have to correspond with actual historical reality strictly; they may be mythological. Primarily, they must explain to the community members its origin and place in the world. This is also a source of their group solidarity. Narratives are the primary forms of such ideas. It can be narratives about the legendary creation and development of a community, about its heroes and enemies, about its victories and defeats, about iconic places and events. It is essential to understand that the whole history of the area cannot become a narrative. As a creation of mass consciousness, narratives describe the most critical, fundamental phenomena for people.

However, such a subjective approach to interpreting these factors implies that the same events can become the basis for entirely different narratives. For example, two communities may claim the same event or person and deny each other's claims. Or two communities may have fundamentally different assessments of the exact historical figures. Great

heroes in one community can become great villains in another if the history of the two communities struggles with each other. Moreover, these identities can coexist within one larger community. There may be such identities that claim to be the basis of the worldview of the same group of people. In this case, the victory of one identity necessarily implies the defeat of the other because of the intransigence of their positions. It reflects different views of the past, present, and future coexisting in society, reflecting the split in these views. This is the clearest example of the constructiveness of identity as a phenomenon. This does not mean that identity is some kind of wholly made up phenomenon. Undoubtedly, identities objectively exist. However, they live in people's minds, based on their ideas and worldview, symbols and narratives that are important to them. Identity cannot exist without people and their belief in it. This means that identity is very flexible on the one hand and stereotyped on the other.

From this point of view, local narratives can be a fruitful source of information when placed in the context of higher-level identities. Comparing historical narratives with actual historical events can provide valuable information for understanding the local community's specifics and uniqueness.

This article examines a narrative from the small Japanese community of Yuwa Memeki in Akita Prefecture (Tohoku region). It is lo-

cated in the north of the island of Honshu, not far from Akita, the administrative center of this region. It is a mountainous area near the coast of the Sea of Japan, in which the banks of small rivers are inhabited. The most prominent mountain in the vicinity is Takao, which plays the role of a sacred site. Traditionally, people were engaged in rice cultivation in flooded fields in the mountain valleys and hunting in the surrounding mountains. This region is located relatively far from Central Japan (Kansai region), in which the Japanese state was formed. For many centuries, this region was the territory of the Emishi tribes, who led a hunting lifestyle. During the 7th-10th centuries, the Japanese conquered these territories, which gradually assimilated the local population [1]. Therefore, local identity is of particular research interest since the history and people of this region were outside the context of early Japanese history.

The root narrative of the Memeki community reflects the events of the conquest of these territories by Japan. This narrative tells about the origin of critical local places and the emergence of Japanese people at the same time. It combines mythological thinking and the real history of this territory.

According to this narrative, the demon Yashaki was in the area of Mount Takao. There he met the beautiful woman Yoneko. He managed to become her husband, and they lived as a family for a long time. They had a son, named Otakimaru. Father devoted a lot of time training the son; they are doing a lot with sumo. However, their quiet life ended when Japanese general Sakanoue no Tamuramaro arrived in these lands. He defeated father and son, but Yoneko sacrificed herself to let them escape [2].

The legend tells a critical historical event for these places: their transformation from the land of the Emishi into a part of the Japanese state. The story explains the features of local geography, linking them to the described events (Mount Takao). Finally, the legend explains the traditions of the community through the events described (sumo). Therefore, the tale explains local objects and practices that are clear only to the natives. This forms an emotional bond with the local community and local area. In her book Under-

standing Japanese Society [3], American anthropologist Joy Hendry writes that remembering shared history and associated rituals and celebrations contributes to community heritage and pride. Identity is stable in a person's mind; if he is proud of it, he appreciates it. Therefore, the importance of such rituals in traditional communities can hardly be overestimated. Besides the story, Yashaka's story tells about other things that are important to the Memeki community. In this relatively short story, we can explain the reason for worshiping Mount Takao and, in general, the emphasis on the nature of this region (Yashaki considered these lands beautiful and comfortable for his life). This story explains the importance of the local sumo tradition.

The first thing we can notice in this story is that it goes beyond the traditional view of Japanese society on the events of the conquest of northern Honshu. It was a long historical process that took place from the 7th to the 10th century. In Japanese sources of that era, we can see a negative attitude towards the native tribes of the Emishi. Japanese authorities call the Emishi barbarians. From this perspective, Yashaki's story shows the difference in the collective memory of the Memeki community and Japan as a whole. The Japanese state in this story is represented by general Sakanoue no Tamuramaro, an authentic historical character of that time. But in this story, he is shown negatively. This does not mean that there is some struggle between good and evil in Yashaki's story. The first thing we learn about Yashaki is his demonic nature. However, in this story, the listener empathizes with him and his family. His wife, an entirely positive character, dies with dignity, and the general kills her. Now in the Memeki community, places associated with the life of Yashaki and his family are revered.

Also, Yashaki's story makes the foundations for the inhabitants of Memeki to their surrounding nature, highlighting essential objects in it. This topic is considered by the authors studying the landscape of Satoyama, born due to adaptations to such conditions: Takeuchi Kazuhiko with co-authors [4]. Their team of authors draws attention to how the traditional community organically coexists with the surrounding landscape. Filling inter-

action with nature with irrational meanings, the community achieves objectively prosperous and harmonious coexistence with it. Such coexistence was fundamentally crucial for traditional communities, which could not oppose nature and were utterly dependent on it. Traditional local societies existed in close connection with the nature around them. Over time, this formed complex rules for interacting with her: rituals, taboos, customs, etc. The narrative was the primary way of transmitting information between generations for traditional communities, most of whom could not write. Therefore, vital knowledge about the interaction with the outside world was shared through narratives. Toyoda Mitsuyo writes about this in more detail [5]. This is another feature of the Yashaki narrative. This feature shows the fact that this narrative is indeed traditional.

Let's summarize. The Yashaki narrative includes very significant traits of the local identity of the Memeki community. In it, we see the prehistory of the emergence of the community, the description of the environment, and the definition of sacred places, as well as a certain opposition to the "other" – the central government, which is something external and distant for the inhabitants of this territory. There is no hostility in this confrontation. But this narrative points out to the community members their unique place in the world, their uniqueness in comparison with other communities, and their central authority due to the unique historical heritage of the community. The awe bears this out for the places connected in one way or another with Yashaki and his family. Thus, the Yashaki narrative is a scientifically valuable example of a historical narrative in the identity of a local community.

#### **References**

1. History of Japan. Vol.1. From ancient times to 1868. / Edited by A.E. Zhukov. Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences. 1998. 659 p.
2. Kogoma T. The Power of Narrative and Memeki Community. Student Journal of International Liberal Arts. Akita International University. Volume 6. 2020. P. 32-39. URL: [https://web.aiu.ac.jp/wp/wp-content/themes/aiu/doc/press/StudenJournal\\_vol06.pdf](https://web.aiu.ac.jp/wp/wp-content/themes/aiu/doc/press/StudenJournal_vol06.pdf)
3. Hendry J. Understanding Japanese Society, 4th Edition. New York: Routledge. 2013.
4. Takeuchi K., Ichikawa K. and Elmqvist T. Satoyama landscape as a social-ecological system: historical changes and future perspective. Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability, 19. 2016. P. 30-39
5. Toyoda M. Recollecting Local Narratives on the Land Ethic In Japanese Environmental Philosophy. Oxford University Press. 2017. URL: <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190456320.001.0001/acprof-9780190456320-chapter-11>

**ИСТОРИЧЕСКИЙ НАРРАТИВ В ЯПОНСКОЙ ЛОКАЛЬНОЙ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ**

**Г.С. Лапшаков**, магистрант  
НИУ ВШЭ – Санкт-Петербург  
(Россия, г. Санкт-Петербург)

***Аннотация.** Актуальность исследований исторических нарративов обусловлена их находением в общем контексте развития исследований коллективной памяти. В этой статье исследуется взаимосвязь между историческим нарративом и идентичностью местного сообщества. В качестве примера используется нарратив японского сообщества Юва Мемеки в префектуре Акита, регион Тохоку. Это примечательный пример того, как в местном сообществе может сохраняться особая коллективная память, создавая уникальную местную идентичность и восприятие истории, отличное от традиционно принятого в стране. В статье рассказывается, как историческая реальность отражается в нарративе о Яшаки, значимом для данной общины фольклорном персонаже, и что это может сказать об особенностях местной идентичности.*

***Ключевые слова:** Нарратив, коллективная идентичность, история Японии, японский фольклор, коллективная память.*