

TABOO AND IDENTITY
VIEWS FROM HOKKAIDO

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RÉSUMÉ

*LE LIEN ENTRE LES TABOUS ET L'APPARTENANCE. LE CAS
D'HOKKAIDÔ*

Les tabous sont solidement ancrés dans la conscience d'un groupe de personnes pour éviter de dire ou faire certaines choses. Les tabous n'étant par définition pas abordés, ils menacent en même temps d'exclusion du groupe toute personne qui les aurait enfreint ; formant un mécanisme de maintien et de pérennisation de l'identité du groupe et même de l'identité individuelle. Les tabous peuvent être perçus comme exerçant une forte pression sur certaines manières (souvent bien ancrées) de s'exprimer ou de se comporter, assurant des relations stables. D'un autre côté, c'est principalement par les violations des tabous que de telles relations peuvent subir un changement, amenant à des situations de changements ambiguës ou incertaines ; avantageuses pour certaines, désavantageuses pour d'autres.

Je m'intéresse aux mécanismes liés aux tabous et à leurs violations et je vais faire mon étude sur la base de documents provenant d'Hokkaidô, une partie moins connue du Japon. Dans l'un des groupes de documents je vais étudier l'image du concept du « professeur », un emblème social à propos duquel toute critique négative peut être considérée comme tabou ; autrement dit se retourner contre l'auteur de ces critiques. L'autre groupe de documents met en avant le rôle d'un type spécifique de « professeur », à savoir un conseiller appelant aux actions et aux changements à Yûbari, une ancienne mine de charbon à Hokkaidô qui a été au centre de l'attention pour sa mauvaise gestion et son ahurissant déficit révélé en 2006. Ce qui est intéressant est que cette conseillère (qui écrit en japonais) est russe et instruite, nous donnant un aperçu de la dynamique qu'on peut trouver à Hokkaidô.

Les tabous qui accompagnent le concept de *sensei* est compensé, dans les années 1950 et 1960, par de jeunes enseignants aux idées nouvelles, dans la nécessité de relations plus émotionnelles pour venir en aide aux familles pauvres.

A Yūbari on peut assister au conflit entre deux récits différents ; celui des gens de « l'intérieur », qui cherchent la stabilité et la continuité au travers des tabous et celui des gens de « l'extérieur », qui en brisant les tabous font confiance à la souplesse des relations individuelles.

INTRODUCTION

Though humans are born with a specific set of physical and mental traits, taken alone, these form only a marginal part of what we may call an adult person's identity. Identity is better understood as the result of continued adaptation of these traits to a concept of self that begins to emerge during the process of social learning and education. It is this concept of self that in the end determines form and content of how a person dares or dares not to, risks or risks not to, act and interact with others.

As they grow up, humans become aware that what they do or say is either sanctioned or legitimized by others, and by adapting to the resulting patterns of freedom and restraint their identity mirrors the rules of the social networks they belong to, by force or by choice. Thus, adaptation to fields of freedom and forces of restraint, and with it the emergence of specific patterns of taking and not taking risks, is a universal trait, linked to the wish and the need to survive both individually and as a member of a community, and to fears of being isolated, expelled, or repudiated.

In this paper, I will look at some aspects of identity on Japan's peripheral island of Hokkaido from the perspective of freedom and restraint and its link to the presence or absence of taboos. My paper reflects mainly two publications from which I sought to grasp subjective views mirroring the emotional relevance attached to keeping or breaking taboos. The first of the two publications, found at a local bookstore in Sapporo, deals with the formation of identity in relation to the powerful concept of *sensei* (teacher). The second one discusses problems of identity in relation to a bankrupt community. From these materials I wished to gain some insight, a) into how far taboos fixed and immobilized teacher-pupil relationships, and b) into internal immobility evidently related to taboos within a suffering community. At the same time, I kept an eye on dynamics working in the opposite direction, that is, dynamics of overcoming taboos, and of taboo breaking.

1. HOW FAR IS THE CONCEPT OF *SENSEI* LINKED TO TABOOS?

Like many of Japan's larger regional newspapers, the *Hokkaidō Shinbun* collects voices of the regional people on a variety of subjects. To make these public, it edits a series of books with the title *Kokoro ni shimiru ii hanashi* ("Good accounts that leave a deep impact"), of which vol.5 (Hokkaidō Shinbunsha 1998) contains 63 contributions to the theme *Watashi ga deatta ii sensei* ("Good teachers I had the fortune to meet").

As background knowledge about the image of *sensei* I brought with me, among other things, observations of parents and grandparents in the process of attaching values to the term *sensei*, and the definitions of *sensei* as found in the teacher's handbook for moral education published by the Japanese government in 1990 (*Chūgakkō Shidōsho Dōtoku-hen* 1990).

Repeatedly I have observed parents and grandparents admonishing their children and grandchildren in an emotionally very penetrating way, making full use of voice, eyes and posture, that a *sensei* is not just any person in charge of transmitting skills and information, but a precondition for an individual's very existence, i.e., that there can be no social and moral personal life without input from a *sensei*. In some cases I have even observed the concept of *sensei* being linked to that of *en* (a person's karma), i.e. a *sensei* is portrayed as having been specifically selected for a person by fate, whether one likes it or not.

In the teachers' handbook for moral education in public Japanese schools we find numerous expressions the children are taught to associate with *sensei* and which heavily appeal to emotion: *keiai* (love and respect), *sonkei* (esteem and respect), *sonchō* (respect and value), or the requirement always to show *kansha* (gratitude). The relationship between *sensei* and pupil is defined as complementary, the teacher being *jinsei no senpai* (a person with more experience in life) giving *shidō* (guidance), and the pupil being a person with a *kenkyō na kokoro* (a humble disposition) in the position of *ukeru* (receiving, accepting). Moreover, the individual pupil is required to understand that the world is full of *sensei*. Thus the concept of *sensei* is extended to cover all of society, far beyond persons whose profession it is to teach. Becoming a member of society, therefore, appears to imply the need to observe taboos that remove anyone called *sensei* from situationally determined patterns of exchange, with the aim of fixing and securing the bi-polar relationship of *shidō* (guidance) and *ukeru* (acceptance) on a level of principle.

Now what information on *sensei* can we gain from the book "Good teachers I had the fortune to meet"? The first point to make is that elder people frequently use the traditional term *onshi* ("master to

whom I am indebted”) when speaking of a teacher. However, a skillfully chosen formalized concept of the revered teacher is presented only by the oldest contributor (age 81) in the words *aogeba tôtosbi, waga shi no on* (“Raising my eyes I am aware how precious they are - my master’s favours, bestowed on me”) (p.198). Far more space than to showing reverence for the teacher is given to descriptions of concrete care, help and encouragement extended to the pupils, who in many cases were poor, often undernourished, and sometimes unable to attend school when they had to help at home¹. It becomes apparent that Hokkaido was less the place for the cult of taboos than for concrete and pragmatic solidarity.

At the other end of the age scale, a text by a 28-year old catches the eye², from which we gather that absolutely nothing is expected from a *sensei*, who is understood to be just routinely performing a job, no matter whether the pupils could follow or not (p. 82). However, against this drab background of disinterest for teachers the writer recalls the shock felt when one *sensei* suddenly exclaimed, *omae wa yareba dekiru* (“if you give it a try you’ll succeed”). This the pupil experiences as the discovery of “self” by the teacher, which in turn is recalled as having been the source of feeling great strength.

In between the texts of young and old contributors we can trace the historical changes that also brought about shifts in the relationship between pupil and teacher. In writing style, for one thing, we may note the disappearance of *keigo* (honorific language), which is by definition accompanied by an emotional effort to show reverence.

Keigo can be said to be a kind of taboo that works to remove someone spoken to, or spoken about, out of the range of immediate — and in form negotiable — person-to-person contact. In other words, *keigo* is a mechanism making someone largely untouchable, in order to fix the relationship with that person outside the scope of individual judgment. Elder writers, who mostly still use *keigo* when referring to a teacher, accordingly emphasize the role of teachers implanting unquestioned values of right and wrong or admonishing the pupils to think from the perspective of the overall social fabric. In

1. “The business my father started never got off the ground. We had a large rice chest, into which the contents of a whole big bag of rice could be filled, yet we always saw through to the bottom. On days without any income we had no rice for supper.” (age 52) (p.24).

“When I was 6, in the spring of 1955, our primary school was opened. It stood in peaty soil in the midst of a region that still remained to be developed, and there was neither electricity nor gas nor any water supply.” (age 49) (p.73).

2. It must be kept in mind that the book was published in 1998 and the age indicated here and in the following of the persons interviewed is that at the time of the survey.

this respect teachers indeed are acknowledged as out-of-reach representatives of society, tabooed in order to maintain the continuity of its basic values.

“(After I’d been inadvertently hit by my class mate’s batter the teacher criticized me) for merely thinking, ‘I am myself to blame, and that’s it’. He said I did not consider the feelings of my class mate, who was terribly worried about having injured me.” (age 61) (p.13).

Though not directly tabooed, but certainly removed from a person’s own world, teachers appear in many of the recollections as the very source that has given shape and content to one’s own, present “self”. This appears fairly in line with personal observations — particularly in the 1970s — of parents passing on the image of the *sensei* as someone embodying the precondition for an individual’s development into a mature member of society. A frequently found wording that describes this relationship to a teacher is, “Thanks to him/her, I am”, or “Thanks to him/her, I am as I am now.”

“‘It’s not your fault. It’s just that you have only one parent.’ I did not get the job at the top-class department store at which I had applied. However, the teacher gave me the name of a company — I had never heard of it — and encouraged me to try there. I was accepted. At that time I felt I had been taught two important things. One was the experience of someone’s kindness, saying to me, ‘It’s not your fault’ and giving me back the self-confidence I had lost. The other thing was to understand reality as it is — I had only one parent, my mother — and I had to pursue my way in life on the basis of facts.” (age 62) (p.141).

“Being strict, being kind, being frank, being optimistic... I feel that thanks to having met this teacher I am what I am now.” (age 30) (p.173).

To quite an alarming degree, however, elder contributors also recall how teachers who had returned from the army terrorized pupils and used many forms of violence including beating. In hindsight these army returnees (who, it should be noted, are mostly referred to as *kyôshi* — “master of instruction” - and not as *sensei*) are not shown any kind of respect by the older generation who experienced them.

“I was always frightened of teachers. I got peritonitis. I stayed away from school. Today that would be called *tôkô kyôhi* (“refusal to attend school”).” (age 61) (p.36).

As the writers become younger we may note an increased sense of dependency upon the *sensei*, who is seen as an important source of love and care. Fond images of a *sensei* who has accepted a pupil’s character and abilities is, however, something very different to formal reverence, where formality functions as a taboo to secure distance and

with it the freezing of a relational status quo. Many a *sensei* in fact seems to have derived his/her power precisely through not conforming to any sort of image of a tabooed being. In a sense, we may conclude that the authority of numerous teachers recalled is derived from their capacity as taboo breakers, and that teachers did indeed often understand their job in this way.

“The teacher understood and accepted the changes to my emotions during puberty in a very natural way. The teacher enjoyed laughing.” (age 24) (p.137).

“My teacher was no longer young, but, typical for an English language teacher, had a tremendous sense for being fashionable.” (age 34) (p.129).

Having the power to break old norms and legitimize new ones comes across in the writings of persons between their 30s and upper 60s as one of the key features of many teachers. In contrast to what much present-day neo-conservative dogma tells us about the role of teacher, he or she frequently appears in the recollections from Hokkaido as the bearer of new ideas and especially also of a new understanding of the teacher-pupil relationship.

It is quite possible that in Hokkaido, particularly in the '50s and '60s, this specific role of the teacher as taboo breaker was largely due to the fact that in the post-war years many young teachers with new ideas were sent out, or returned home, from Tokyo into the periphery of agricultural Hokkaido, where they met with pupils from families struggling to make an existence. Here, these young teachers quickly took a practical view of reality and the need to open up new horizons, and the recollections of them recount in a lively way the introduction of new concepts of class room activity such as discussion, criticism, fair play, the observation of rights, informal clothing, acknowledgment of personal expression, or the use of “real, living English.”

“That teacher came to the formal ceremony in a light grey turtleneck pullover. ... In my childish way I thought to myself, ‘What’s that! He doesn’t look like a teacher!’” (age 56) (p.103).

“The classes of teacher Wakita were typical for a young, spirited and vigorous person, and they were marked by his experiences as a student in Tokyo and by the many books he had read. His English was much more fluent than anyone else’s, and I marveled at the fact of being able to hear real English pronunciation. When teacher Wakita walked around the classroom the scent of perfume wafted through the air. That I chose the path of English teacher myself is largely thanks to the education by a teacher who was a ‘real human being’.” (age 67) (p.202/203).

“He took concepts such as ‘democracy’ or ‘discussion’ very seriously, and repeatedly asked, ‘What do you think? What are your ideas?’ Even after becoming somebody carrying responsibility at school he would say, ‘My opinion was wrong,’ and it was wonderful to have a teacher in front of you who criticized himself.” (age 65) (p.64/65).

“I longed for a teacher I could trust, a cheerful teacher, a teacher who thought about things on our level, a teacher who entered our hearts directly, who worried with us, who laughed, a teacher who was near to us. And there a new head master was appointed, who was (just such a teacher).” (age 65) (p.113/114).

Hokkaido, before the age of the airplane and the Seikan Tunnel, probably left more space for the development of young people (and young teachers) outside the stressful, competitive and ritualized framework of more career oriented Tokyo, and accordingly more scope for teachers anxious to break taboos. On the other hand, however, in surroundings with few stimuli, the voices of pupils signaling that they felt “lost” do not confer upon the teacher authority but rather make him or her the target of sympathy and pleasure for taking them seriously as individuals.

“Usually, teachers are said to be ‘masters of instruction’, ‘persons who are ahead of you in life’, ‘persons to consult’, ‘persons who give assistance’, and sometimes ‘persons practicing a sacred profession’. However, all this does not describe teacher K. He was a person with a most natural character.” (age 66) (p.70).

The 63 texts remembering teachers in Hokkaido show that the *sensei* is indeed the object of special reverence, yet not so much reverence on the basis of status or a traditional, formal understanding of authority than on the basis of genuine, not ritualized, thankfulness. The term by far most frequently used to describe teachers recalled is *yasashii* (gentle, kind, tender). *Yasashii* could be interpreted as a pupil’s mere subjective projection, but the expression undoubtedly speaks of the wish to belong to a protected context in which affection beyond all taboos was sought.

2. YŪBARI — DID TABOOS CONTRIBUTE TO THE RUIN OF A COMMUNITY?

How and whether taboos are observed or broken in a social context with few stimuli and narrow horizons is the implicit question I sought to figure out in another publication on Hokkaido. This publication focuses not on agricultural communities but on a (former) industrial area, specifically, on what once used to be one of

Hokkaido's great coal-mining communities: Yûbari. Yûbari, which in the late '60s boasted a population of around 116'000, was in 2007 left with merely 12'270 inhabitants. The township of Yûbari went bankrupt in 2007 and has now come under control from the Hokkaido government³.

In December 2007 the Russian-born author Natalia Roschina (now a citizen of New Zealand, but living in Japan since 1995) published a book in Japanese with the title *Yûbari e no tegami* ("Letters to Yûbari"). In it Roschina produces a long series of stimulating ideas about how to revive the beautifully located Yûbari. At the same time she deplores the lack of action on the part of Yûbari's inhabitants, who seem to have tabooed anything that would promise a brighter future.

In Roschina's book (p.151, 200), Murakami Tomohiko, the doctor who in 2007 formed a medical corporation called "Yûbari Kibô no Mori" (Yûbari Forest of Hope) so that the bankrupt hospital⁴ could continue to provide rudimentary services, makes one thing unmistakably clear: Change can only be brought about by *yosomono*, *wakamono*, *bakamono* (outsiders, youngsters, fools).

Incidentally, the involvement of Russian speaking *yosomono* like Natalia Roschina with Hokkaido is worthy of note. In Japan, contact with Russians has to a degree been tabooed as they were considered unreliable, uncooperative (with regard to the Northern Territories), and even uncultivated. The latter is particularly true where Russians are seen buying up supplies of cheap goods in Japanese stores. In present-day Hokkaido we may encounter groups of Russians involved in business activities, and in several Hokkaido towns street and other signs are in Japanese and Russian. In this sense it is interesting to observe the involvement of Natalia Roschina with a Japanese community, and the Japanese reactions to a category of *gaijin* ("foreigner") still being stigmatized.

The outsider Roschina takes a very critical view of the developments in Yûbari, but is anxious to make her ideas as widely known as possible in the face of the potentials she sees in the region. In her book she addresses the various actors in the Yûbari drama in the form of letters, and draws up an action plan for change. She points to the run-down shops and establishments (p.49, 56), to unprofessional service (p.22-26, 194), to the lack of study and ambition (p.50), to the unstructured forms of child rearing (p.40), to remaining mentally

3. A detailed description of Yûbari and the problems it is facing is given by Flüchter (2008). Japanese materials outlining the most recent developments there are Hokkaidô Shinbun Shuzaihan (2009), Yomiuri Shinbun Hokkaidô Shisha Yûbari Shikyoku (2008), Hobo Takehiko et al. (2007).

4. The hospital of Yûbari was originally the Hospital of the Yûbari Coal Mines, and from 1982 the General Hospital of Yûbari Township.

fixed upon the one-time success of growing melons (p.44, 136), to the disinterest in enterprises that might be lured to the region (p.114), and quite particularly to the continued and damaging support of the local administration, the very source of inefficiency and therefore the last place she thinks worthy of still receiving voluntary contributions of money and personal efforts (p.42).

Roschina does not tire of criticizing the constant use of expressions like *isogashii* (“busy”) (p.44, 146f) or *yojū ga nai* (“no time and energy to spare”) to evade concrete action, and she also touches upon the fatal fact that residents of Hokkaido seem to take no interest in Yūbari and would not spend their money there (p.144f). This, to her, is all the more deplorable since one of the reasons for Yūbari’s financial collapse are the huge investments carried out to create a truly attractive tourist resort. Yūbari can indeed boast a charmingly arranged and fascinating museum of coal mining, a lovely flower garden with a pond and a pretty restaurant, a railway museum, a stuffed animal museum, a robot museum, the “Melon Castle” up in the hills; it became famous for its film festivals and associated posters visible throughout the town, and it has reasonably good skiing facilities together with associated monstrous buildings such as the Mount Racey Hotel.

So what taboos could be at work to make it necessary for Dr.Murakami to call for *yosomono*, *wakamono*, *bakamono* — people like Roschina — to overcome the misery?

First, we need to point to the taboo that protects people’s views of themselves as embedded in the flow of history, that is, in past experiences in one’s own and one’s ancestor’s lives⁵. Outsiders look at what can be seen, whereas insiders reinforce their views by sharing a narrative. We can sense Roschina’s frustration at being unable to fathom this common narrative rooted in the past, and can derive from her frustration some important general insights into problems of communication between insiders and outsiders.

Shared narratives will as a rule seek to protect themselves from outside infringement. However, Roschina herself can be considered an example for someone with few shared narratives, having had to battle with an abundance of crises and emerge with an identity built up largely on her own. In contrast to identities strongly dependent on networks of interaction, she neither shares nor protects a common narrative (p.92f, 106, 136, 142, 145) and feels comfortable in a state of *baribari fuantei* (being full of energy in [a world of] instability) (p.183).

5. Von Engelhardt (2006: 1) defines “strangers” as “people without history”, i.e. people whose narratives are unknown to us, emphasizing the importance of narratives for establishing both a person’s own sense of identity, as well as the identity outsiders attribute to a person.

The inhabitants of Yūbari, on the other hand, subjectively see themselves as far too busy — busy, we may say, maintaining the narrative that holds them together — to find time or energy to react to Roschina's ideas (p.101).

“Farmers in Yūbari (say): ‘We do not have time to study. We are fully occupied with our work.’” (p.44)

“Many persons who run businesses keep on exclaiming, ‘We have no time!’” (p.58)

“People in Yūbari make the excuse, ‘we have no time or energy to spare’ and never leave the town (to learn anything)” (p.146)

In Roschina's eyes, in places like Yūbari mechanisms of taboo function to fend off unwelcome narratives and also shut out dangers of innovation that may arise from activities of gifted people. Accordingly, it is left to the Roschina to make that very typical outsider's comment: “Much hidden talent is lying idle” (p.71).

Taboos, by protecting narratives, also protect the symbols of identity through which a community finds cohesion and at times solace. In view of Roschina's admirable efforts we cannot but conclude that she might first need to come to terms with the vitally important mechanisms protecting Yūbari identity by means of shared symbols and narratives of lost self-confidence, such as the lack of *o-share* (smart appearance) in combination with — as Roschina points out — remarkably *yasashii* (gentle) forms of communication (p.38, 78, 118, 152).

Narratives protect the sense of identity of those who share them by drawing on and exploiting the past — the history — that has brought them into being. History, in this sense, includes the shaping of emotions, the establishment of fears, the production of mechanisms for survival, in short: core elements within a society that its members feel need to be regulated, protected and upheld by taboos. So what might history tell us about the impact of specific taboos in Yūbari?

In a survey, Roschina searched for opinions about where Hokkaido's economic problems come from. In the answers we find, of course, mention of an isolated world view fixed on the limited possibilities of the island, and paralyzing fears of the future. But there are also opinions of the following kind: *izonshin ga tsuyoi* (“a character heavily dependent on others”), and *kan-shudō no ishiki ga nezuoī, shinbō shite ireba, sonouchi dareka ga nantoka shite kureru* (“a deeply ingrained feeling that government officials will lead, and that if you wait a bit you'll find in the end somebody does something for you”) (p.194-195). How do these points fit into a larger picture of Yūbari's history?

As mentioned, Yūbari is a town that had well over 100'000 inhabitants in the 1960s, occupied mainly in the coal mining industry. However, looking at the structure of its former population, Yūbari cannot really be seen as a community of self-determined citizens. In effect, Yūbari had belonged to the Mitsui Zaibatsu and, after the war, to the Hokkaidō Tankō Kisen (Hokkaido Colliery & Steamship Co.), a company within the Mitsui Group. Then, in the 1970s, the mines rapidly closed and large parts of the population left the region. Those young people who remained developed a no-future perspective, while we must assume that the presence of gangsters influenced the pattern of people's taboos and habits of shirking an individual stance⁶. 1981 left 93 dead in a mining disaster. In the same year Yūbari, suffering from rapid depopulation and therefore unable to generate enough tax money, was in the red (Kaneko and Takahashi 2008: 7f).

To overcome the situation, the town of Yūbari, aided by the government, began taking over facilities that were causing deficits, at the same time securing large sums of money to transform the region into a resort and tourist center. As from 1983, the museums and other important tourist establishments opened up to the public, quickly turning Yūbari into a widely hailed model for *machi-okoshi* ("revival of [stagnant] communities"). However, it is clear today that the restructuring of Yūbari exploited the taboos of the citizens whose fear of further unemployment and depopulation blocked all objective arguments appealing to economic common-sense⁷.

As funds and subsidies flowed in, oversized and ill-conceived projects arising from the dreams of local politicians were realized. Taboos protecting the common narrative took the shape of giving land developing companies a free hand and letting badly understood financial operations just happen, but in the end they resulted in criminal forms of obscuring the figures of the community's budget (Kaneko and Takahashi 2008: 23-27). Moreover, one of the most obviously visible taboos of a population that had been more or less used to control by the Mitsui Group was that of questioning the power and authority of the mayor. Thus the mayor, described as *oyabun-hada no gōketsu* ("a kind of fatherly gang leader"), managed to keep on being reelected and securing funds for 24 years from 1979 until his death in 2003 (Kaneko and Takahashi 2008: 13).

It was not until 2002 that subsidies began to be cut, and it took even longer for the illegal forms of book keeping to surface. Natalia Roschina is thus observing a community of people heavily reliant on their administration (*gyōsei*), supporting and defending by taboos whatever might disturb a system that apparently secured their lives

6. This can be gathered from the details of the 1984 Yūbari insurance murder case (*Yūbari hokenkin satsujin jiken*; cf. <www.alpha-net.ne.jp>).

7. Details are given in Kaneko and Takahashi 2008: 5 ff.

by protecting their common narrative. Roschina is quick to describe the functioning of such protective taboos that so often exploit the concept of *wa* ("harmony") to silence an individual who, for instance, honestly rejects refunds for expenses that in fact had never been incurred (p.24, 169).

Roschina also puts her finger on the taboo of acknowledging one's own potentials, which in turn creates an identity comfortably fixed on depending on others. According to Roschina, neither the people of Yūbari, nor of Hokkaido in general, appear to take an interest in their own fate and potential (p.144f). Repeatedly, she observes how public relations activities are only considered after they have been successful in Tokyo, and how products that could be made in Hokkaido are unnecessarily acquired from outside firms (p.69f, 78).

Roschina can well call for *yosomono* and *bakamono* (outsiders and fools), but what about the *wakamono* (youngsters), indispensable for breaking existing taboos as they fight for their own generational identity? As the population ages, the young generation focuses on where it senses a chance to create a generational force for itself, that is, to some extent on Sapporo, but mainly and above all on Tokyo. Will Yūbari then be left to hang on amidst taboos protecting patterns of dependency on an island that itself taboos belief in its own potential?

Towards the end of her book Roschina cites reactions of newspaper reporters to her efforts at breaking taboos and calling for action to get Yūbari back on its feet (p.202f). To me, the reactions of the reporters read as a good example for how taboo breakers are sanctioned. The weapon used is first an attack on qualities of Roschina's character. The questions posed are hardly concerned with facts but seem like a test to expose Roschina as a person with moral deficits; the reporter says, "Your book appears pretty arrogant!" He then goes on to accuse Roschina for not having been more deeply involved with the everyday lives of the people she wants to encourage, a point that is almost impossible for an outsider to refute. After that she is confronted with the criticism that her advice is simplistic in the face of the complicated nature of Yūbari's problems, and that telling people what they could or should do is injuring their pride. Then she is accused of being rich (which in fact she is not) and therefore in a position of looking down upon the less well-to-do inhabitants of Yūbari.

At the end of the interview I get the impression that the reporter turns to cynicism, communicating the whole arsenal of resentment against a taboo breaker. The final question is formulated in an ambiguous way, and, coming as it does after much direct attack, it appears as the ultimate form of sanctioning someone by means of praise. Reacting to the reporter's exclamation, "You are really a professional journalist!" Roschina answers, *o-seji, arigatō* ("Thank you for flattering me"), which hints that she may have understood the comment

as cynical, as I do. But then she goes on to explain that her position is not that of a journalist but of someone who cares about running a business and is worried about the squandering of public assets. Upon which the reporter snorts, "I now understand more than before."

In this short interview I believe we can catch a glimpse of some of the most powerful mechanisms used to sanction taboo breakers, that is, stripping them of their honour, first with regard to their moral, and then to their professional qualities.

The call for *yosomono*, *wakamono*, *bakamono* may have little effect in the face of mechanisms protecting identities that have historically grown to be what they are, and continue to derive a sense of belonging on the basis of a common narrative. Through what mechanisms, then, could the link between identity and traditions of maintaining a narrative continuity be cut, which in so devastating a way made possible an administration built upon the taboo of exposing weakness in order to secure further loans? (Kaneko and Takahashi 2008: 17).

And who will lift taboos fostered by the people of Hokkaido that prevent reliance on their own potentials and divert their focus to the shining centres of Japanese culture and power? Who can lift the taboo of living in a place like Yūbari, when anyone with a higher degree of education will probably seek a career elsewhere? How can you call for action with a disillusioned and aging population whose taboos go to protect their wounds and keep away risk? One answer (p.152) may lie in the fact that indeed there are several places around Hokkaido (e.g. the Niseko region) where outsiders and fools may have succeeded — perhaps *yosomono* and *bakamono* are more easily lured to Hokkaido with its space for dreams than to other peripheral regions in Japan!

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I presented two views of Hokkaido, based mainly on two publications from which I hoped to learn about taboos and the mechanisms of blocking change and freezing narratives. At the same time I also hoped to learn about the dynamics of breaking taboos and changing the flow of narratives. I traced, in particular, perspectives on *yosomono* — on those who do not belong — and their impact on keeping or breaking taboos, focusing on schools mainly in agricultural areas, and on the former mining community of Yūbari.

Taboos testify to belonging, not necessarily to a common reality, but to a common narrative, which is adopted, protected and defended by a group in order to maintain its continuity and secure its impact and power in social encounters and networks. Taboos, which seek to fix specific concepts and relationships outside the scope of individual judgment, can be said to support the human need for long-term iden-

tification, and thus what is felt to be one's "identity". This is particularly so where they promise to maintain what has proved successful in the past. In spite of the human need to change and adapt, we cannot ignore the fact that survival is impossible without taboos and the will to protect cohesion. The question is how these opposing needs can be kept in balance.

In the case of teachers, I found that during important stages of post-war Hokkaido history the taboos surrounding the concept of *sensei* — which theoretically underlie the entire Japanese education system — were counterbalanced on the one hand by the sheer practical need to help poorer families, and on the other hand by young teachers bringing with them new and stimulating ideas. The texts I studied placed particular emphasis on the emotional attachment of the pupil to the teacher and the reliance on him or her to discover and develop one's potentials. These testaments of attachment appear to have often been far too intimate and personal for any formalized pattern of taboo to come into play.

Actually, this was not what I had expected in view particularly of present-day demands for observance of what are called "traditional" norms and taboos. Rather, being in many ways a breakdown of a taboo which seeks to remove the teacher-pupil relationship — and with it the process of passing down the basic values of society — out of the scope of individual argument and judgment, it throws an interesting light on mechanisms of forming the identities of school children for several decades in post-war Hokkaido.

In the case of Yūbari, with its history as an industrial community, a combination of depopulation and the absence of taboo breakers has contributed to barely concealed misery. All efforts had gone into maintaining taboos to secure dependency (on the mayor and his connections) and the flow of funds, in the end only resulting in bankruptcy. Taboos had certainly protected the complex common narrative about fear of the future and a desperate wish to attract nation-wide attention, even if this meant acting beyond all considerations of economic common-sense.

As a backdrop to this we discover paralyzing taboos in Hokkaido in general, where the population looks to the centre of Japanese power to define its identity and, probably, to secure a pattern of continued dependency. Specifically through the book of Natalia Roschina we are also given substantial insights into the dynamics of encounter between two diametrically opposed narratives, one that seeks the stability of a social network, and one that of necessity relies on individual flexibility. In view of the spread of air travel, however, places like Yūbari might, we may conclude, in the future enjoy ideas not from the reluctant population of Hokkaido itself, but from taboo-breaking

yosomono, *wakamono* and *bakamono* from elsewhere in Japan, but also nearby Korea and Russia.

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