

Seaside Communities in Crisis: On the Construction of Collective Identity in a Japanese Whaling Town after the Moratorium

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ABSTRACT

After the whaling moratorium of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) came into force in 1986, Japanese whaling activities such as small-type coastal whaling, scientific whaling in the Antarctic, driving whaling or hand-harpooning continued on a reduced level. The zero-catch moratorium had an enormous impact on the whalers', the whalers families and the traditional whaling towns. Being located in very remote rural areas, seaside communities found themselves involved in crisis concerning their economic, cultural, spiritual, social and moral development. Results of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a contemporary whaling town in Japan show that whaling is still a part of the collective memory of the town: whalers and non-whalers construct their identities through the articulation of a strong attachment to the traditional whaling town and their ancestors. From the very beginning whaling was an economic activity, an industry, but it was so dominant ("whales are my life") that all inhabitants were also involved in whaling related activities (sharing, arts and crafts). Today, whaling activities on the sea and on the land are decreasing. Additionally, whale and whaling symbolization is increasing. Inhabitants of the community experienced pressure from anti-whaling campaigns by global environmental groups and animal welfare organizations. Due to these experiences a new community identity emerged involving whaling as a reflected articulation, a marker of a cultural boundary in relation to Euro-Americans, but also in relation to urban Japanese and other rural communities which are not whaling, securing the future of the town as whaling town.

Keywords: seaside community, whaling, moratorium, collective identity, resilience.

1. The end of international commercial whaling¹

What becomes of the residents of a whaling town when whaling, which has shaped their economic, social and cultural life over the course of centuries, is severely restricted? This was a question that was on my mind when a lucky coincidence created an opportunity to carry out interviews with residents (including current and former whalers) in the Japanese whaling town of Taiji. In the mid-1980s whaling entered a crisis phase when a majority vote in the *International Whaling Commission* (IWC) suspended whaling (Sowa 2013e). Since then international whaling has been a dying industry, which is currently practiced by only a few nations. In present-day Japan whaling is still carried out in the four coastal towns of Abashiri (Hokkaidō Prefecture), Ayukawa (Miyagi Prefecture), Taiji (Wakayama Prefecture) and Wadoura (Chiba Prefecture). In addition whaling is regarded by many as one of the most controversial practices in the world. To the present moment, this has sparked many fierce confrontations between opponents and supporters. Who can forget the well-documented Greenpeace campaigns that have been frequently depicted via photography and on film? For example, Greenpeace's first anti-whaling campaign in 1975, which led to an open confrontation between an industrialised Soviet whaling

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fleet and rubber-boat activists – a vivid resurrection of the struggle between David and Goliath (Aune, Praschma 1996; Böttger 2000: 38; Brown, May 1989; Hunter, Weyler 1978).

This shift can only be understood against the backdrop of how whales were historically looked upon. To explain this further, we will first look at the history of changes in the perception towards whales (Sowa 2013e; Sowa 2014) that have impacted on the regulation of commercial whaling and led to the declaration of a moratorium. This will be followed by a presentation of the methodological approach that I employed as part of my qualitative research project that is presented here. Using the whaling town of Taiji as an empirical example, the impact of the decline of international whaling will be traced. The results of the content analysis are surprising: Compared to the past, the importance of whaling as an everyday practice has decreased, the symbolisation of whaling, however, has grown in importance. This use of symbolisation – and this is my paper's key argument – was accompanied by the construction of a new collective identity by Taiji's residents.

2. Historical changes in perception

In 1982 the IWC voted to suspend commercial whaling by a moratorium that would come into effect from 1986 onwards. This decision was hailed as one of the greatest victories in the history of environmental protection (Ellis 1991). It reflected a change in the ways in which whaling was perceived by Western industrialised nations (Barthelmeß 1992; Kalland 1993; Sowa 2013e). In the old days, when coastal residents did not yet actively hunt but only made use of beached whales, early Western images of the whale were characterised by monstrous alienation and exaggeration. In prehistoric cosmographies and old maps, *whales* were depicted *as sea monsters* and dragons with features such as fiery eyes, murderous teeth and frightening back fins on scaly bodies (Barthelmeß 1992).

Commercial whaling was established in the 19th century. It led to the notion of *whales as a resource* for the needs of industrial European societies (Barthelmeß 1992; Ellis 1991). The terrifying narratives and myths about sea monsters became “demystified” in the light of increased control over whales. With this increase in knowledge, the fear of the whale as a sea monster died away. Whales were now perceived as real creatures that, thanks to scientific and technical rational thinking, were easily dominated and thus became an easier prey.

Improved technology and more efficient methods of whaling led to an inevitable exploitation of the sea and whale populations. Restrictions for the whaling industry came on very slowly. It was only in 1946, during the International Whaling Conference in Washington, that the *International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling* (International Whaling Commission 1946) created the foundation for an international organisation that would advocate the conservation of whale populations for the orderly development of the whaling industry (Ellis 1991). Three years later, the IWC was founded by “a club of whalers” (Kock 2002: 9) as a commission (concerning the IWC history, see Gambell 1977): A regulatory authority with the main tasks of setting a maximum quota for large whales that could be caught as well as a restriction of time during which hunting was allowed. From 1949 to the late 1960s, it was mainly economic aspects that influenced the decision-making of the Commission (Freeman 1990: 107). Subsequently the scale of industrial whaling grew during this time: The agreed quota system failed to take actual existing whale stocks into account, instead it used an overall quota of whale catches, that was set in a “blue-whale-unit”. This unit defined the volume of the oil yield and was to be “converted” into other types of whales: The oil yield of one blue whale therefore corresponded to that of two fin whales, two and a half humpback whales or six sei whales. Since there were no individual (divided by nationality) quotas and the fishing season was still restricted,

strong competition for the largest part of the overall quota ensued. The “Whaling Olympics” (Andresen 1989: 103; Barthelmeß 1992: 38; Gambell 1993: 99) had begun: To make the most efficient use of the short hunting season, bigger and faster whaler ships were used; in addition they became part of an increasingly larger fleet. While whalers hunted, a large mother-ship processed whale parts at sea. Gradually the industrial whaling business became less profitable as fleets were driven further into ever more remote regions in order to catch large whales. This then led to the notion that whales had to be viewed *as a finite resource* and therefore restrictions on whaling needed to be put in place.

With the advent of the ecological discourse, a short era of scientific management of whale populations occurred within the IWC in the 1970s (Freeman 1990: 107). It was believed that whale populations, aided by natural science, could be adequately modelled and coded in order to allow concise conclusions about their habitat, age, average life expectancy, natural mortality or reproductive rates. Pálsson introduced the metaphor of the “aquarium” to describe a clearly defined natural area that was subjected to complete planning and control by people (Pálsson 2006). Accordingly, the sea is regarded as a huge fish tank, species can be “managed” by using scientific methods and because of that no over-exploitation of a resource will ever occur. Pálsson goes on to explain that a management system of this kind could only emerge from a fundamental split of subject and object, which is a constituent element of Western natural history (ibid.). The scientificity of the regulation of whaling meant that *whales* were perceived *as mere “objects in the aquarium”*.

Since the 1980s until today the Commission has been trying to work out a comprehensive management procedure that can account for the populations of whales. Ideally, a system should enable a more sustainable use of large whales, yet no valid scientific data on migration and populations measures of whales is available. Due to this deficient data, consensus among experts is rare. This lack of expertise that has lingered in politics and policy has left much room for speculation and interpretation. Scientific arguments – which at that time could not be backed up by evidence – were replaced with political and ideological arguments. Due to a majority of pro-whaling opponents in the IWC, a moratorium was passed in 1982, which was to come into effect in 1986 and was supposed to ensure the conservation of the animals for five years (Birnie 1983). The moratorium was not lifted at the meeting of the IWC in 1990, as uncertainty remained whether populations of whales had actually recovered. This change in policy can be interpreted as an expression of the zeitgeist in Euro-American societies and is closely linked to the historical accounts and how the perception towards whales has changed over the course of time. Public opinion discovered affection for whales and dolphins. Whales no longer appeared threatening, but rather as endangered creatures. Whales even became – in particular because of frequent media coverage – cultural symbols and icons for environmental protection (Einarsson 1993; Freeman, Kreuter 1994; Kalland 1994; Lyng 1990; Oreskov, Sejersen 1993; Peterson 1993; Ris 1993), or as pointed out by the Norwegian anthropologist Kalland, totems of the Euro-American environmental movement (Kalland 1993). As a totem, it denotes the (super) whale because the whale is our ‘counterpart’ in the sea, the ‘man in the sea’ so to speak, and is on a par with (if not superior to) humanity. The protection of this totem has turned into a sacred duty for many. Kalland notes with some smugness that nowadays people can not only protect whales, but also meet and even touch them, for example when tourists travel out to sea to watch whales (ibid.). As a consequence of this altered perception of whales – *whales as a symbol of environmental protection* – the moratorium stayed in place. This heralded a new phase in whaling policy: from now on whales would be entitled to live (D’Amato, Chopra 1991).

3. Methodological approach

A lucky coincidence not only allowed me to visit the Japanese whaling town of Taiji three times but also resulted in a series of interviews. As part of my PhD, I examined the impact of environmental discourse in a post-colonial society using Greenland as an example (Sowa 2013b; Sowa 2013c; Sowa 2014), I added Japan as another – expanded, non-European – perspective. This inclusion of Japan led, amongst others, to the finding that the categories of the *world polity* (Meyer 1987) are responsible for the fact that Greenland whalers continue to catch whales in a legitimate manner whereas Japanese whalers are denied their deep-rooted cultural practice of whaling (Sowa 2013a). In addition to an empirical stay in Greenland, I also planned a research and interview phase in Japan, where I travelled to in 2002.

My first visit in the Japanese capital Tokyo from the 23rd of July to the 1st of August 2002 was aimed at gaining an overview of the political dimensions of the international conflict over whaling. I met representatives of the *Japan Fishery Agency*, the *Japan Whaling Association*, the *Institute of Cetacean Research* as well as the two environmental groups *Greenpeace* and *WWF*. In addition, I talked to the founder of the extensive bilingual *Whaling Library*, which is represented on the Internet. From the 1st of August to the 22nd September 2002, with support from Prof. Dr. Ren Azuma at the Mie University in Tsu (the partner university of the university where I was working on my PhD) I researched the scientific literature on whaling conflicts.

The whaling town of Taiji was relatively easy to reach from Tsu. I planned two stays in Taiji, which is situated in the Wakayama Prefecture. My supervisor Prof. Azuma from the Mie University travelled with me to the summer whaling festival that took place from the 14th to the 17th of August 2002. At the same time, the Bon Festival was celebrated (a three-day celebration to commemorate the dead). During the ceremony I met a former student of Prof. Azuma – the anthropologist Sakurai, who worked at that time at the Kendall Institute of the New Bedford Whaling Museum, U.S. Since he expressed interest to support my research, I returned to Taiji, hopeful to carry out interviews between the 20th of August and the 9th of September 2002. Sakurai had been researching whaling in Taiji for the last decade and his PhD had examined whaling in Alaska. He was the ideal expert and like-minded partner for me.

Tab. 1. Interviews in Taiji

| | Date | Sex | Occupation/Activities/Functions |
|----|-------------|------------|---|
| 1 | 22.08.2002 | Male | local government official, tourism division |
| 2 | 22.08.2002 | Female | whalers wife, whaling products distributor |
| 3 | 23.08.2002 | Male | retired whaler, gunner |
| 4 | 24.08.2002 | Male | retired local government official, writer |
| 5 | 28.08.2002 | Male | active whaler, sailor, dolphin trainer |
| 6 | 29.08.2002 | Male | retired whaler, sailor |
| 7 | 31.08.2002 | Female | dolphin trainer |
| 8 | 31.08.2002 | Female | doctoral student of veterinary medicine |
| | | Male | fishery association |
| 9 | 03.09.2002 | Male | retired whaler, gunner |
| 10 | 07.09.2002 | Male | teacher, writer |

Initially we had difficulties finding interviewees. No whalers wanted to speak to an European visitor. Also, stakeholders in local and other associations were suspicious because of experiences with anti-whaling and animal rights activists and refused to speak to me. The fact that I was staying with a local host family eventually worked to my advantage. We used members of my host family to build trust and help us with approaching interviewees. During this time we were able to have many (mostly) informal conversations with former and active whalers or people who were otherwise involved in whaling. We recorded ten interviews with eleven interviewees (*Table 1*). The duration of the interviews varied from one hour up to seven hours (of which more than three hours were recorded).

In addition, we researched material in the local library, collected relevant data and printed information (statistical data) from the City Council, the Fisheries Association, the Taiji Whale Museum (visitor statistics as well as personal accounts) and financial data from a woman who sold products made from whale. I also carried out a number of participative observations: for example, I was present at a whale slaughter, in auctions of whale meat and at numerous invitations to eat whale meat or fish. A third brief visit finally took place between the 20th to the 23rd of July 2014. My aim was to catch up on recent developments that may have emerged from the movie 'The Cove', and subsequent international protests against the hunt for dolphins.

As method of analysis a content-analytic interpretation was chosen. Due to financial restrictions of the research project it was not possible to transcribe the interviews and translate it to English or German. Therefore only selected statements from the simultaneous translation are analysed and interpreted (Przyborski, Wohlrab-Sahr 2009; Rosenthal 2011). The results of the empirical research in Taiji will be presented in the following two sections.

4. The whaling community Taiji and the impact of the moratorium

Since the moratorium, which is still in effect, whaling continues in Japan albeit on a much reduced scale. In addition to the so-called "scientific whaling", which corresponds to highly industrialized whaling in the Antarctic and the west Pacific, there is also hunting for dolphins and porpoises (drive fishery), whaling using portable hand-held harpoons launched from fishing boats, random catches by using fishing nets and small-type coastal whaling (Komatsu, Misaki 2004). To set Japanese coastal whaling apart from the existing categories of *commercial* and *aboriginal subsistence whaling* (reserved for indigenous groups)(Donovan 1982; Gambell 1993; Gambell 1997), a third category may be required. This new category could neither be classed as purely commercial nor purely subsistence as whaling in Taiji carries a social, cultural and economic importance. This argument has also found support from cultural study experts: "[T]his form of small-scale whaling constitutes a justifiable, separate and distinctive operational category of whaling. Adopting such a separate categorization would help avoid some of the semantic and definitional problems that continue to confuse the issue, and would allow subsequent discussion to focus upon the important socio-economic and associated human-centred problems that constitute the most pressing management issues requiring just and appropriate attention at the present time" (Akimichi et al. 1988: 84). Thereafter there were many attempts by the Japanese government and the Japanese Whaling Associations to legalise the *Small-Type Coastal Whaling* within the IWC-categories (Japan Small-Type Whaling Association 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002; The Beneficiaries of the Riches of the Sea and Japan Small-Type Whaling Association 1993; The Government of Japan 1997).

Photograph 1 and 2. Whale ship and small shrine in Taiji



In addition, experts have been in favour of granting the Japanese a mutually shared whaling culture: “Whaling culture implies a shared knowledge which emphasizes the relation between human beings, whales and the environment (which includes spiritual as well as bio-physical elements)” (Akimichi et al. 1988: 28). The Japanese whaling culture is a culture of respect, which is characterised by spiritual and religious ideas: “The whales are also gifts from nature, which itself is believed to be infused by Shintō deities (*kami*). Thus, whaling activities become intimately bound up with religious beliefs and, as gifts from the deities, whales have to be fully utilized, for to do otherwise would be an insult to both deities and whales. To repay the whales for sacrificing their lives, whalers have furthermore to take care of their souls, or else these whale souls can turn into ‘hungry ghosts’ (*gaki*) which might cause illness, accidents or other misfortune” (Kalland, Moeran 1992: 152). Many Shinto and Buddhist rituals and ceremonies demonstrate this (Akimichi et al. 1988). In August the annual Bon Festival takes place in Taiji; during this time Zen monks of the *Junshinji* temple and the *Tōmyōji* temple commemorate the souls of whales. On the 29th of April further rituals are held across Taiji. In 1978, outside the town, a large statue of a whale (*Kandori-Zaki*) was built on an ancient look-out, which is used for Buddhist ceremonies by many visiting whalers and their families. In addition, there are many Shinto rituals that are practised at the Shinto shrine or on a whaler ship (*Photograph 1*), where often a small shrine (altar) is built for that purpose (*Photograph 2*). Yet none of these arguments were politically strong enough to take hold in the IWC’s policy framework.

For the residents of Taiji the moratorium meant a threat to the world they knew because the whaling industry had always shaped their life and brought wealth and prosperity. Taiji is one of the few coastal communities in Japan, which has a tradition of whaling that goes back centuries (Sowa 2013d). In the “town that lives with whales” (Kalland, Moeran 1992), whales have been hunted for over 800 years. Taiji is considered the birthplace of traditional, large-scale whaling in Japan. Whaling in Taiji has been documented since 1606, when the technique of whaling with portable harpoons was introduced. Whaling always has been as a communal, group activity; large humpback and right whales were hunted in so-called *kujira gumi* (whaling teams) (Komatsu, Misaki 2003). In 1675 the method of whaling using nets was invented in Taiji. Several boats drove slowly travelling whales into a vast net that had been floated in the open sea, when a whale was caught, it was harpooned by whalers from different boats (Kalland and Moeran 1992). From the very beginning whaling in Taiji was a collaborative activity, often involving the entire community. In 1878, a gloomy story imprinted on the collective memory of this whaling town: Back then the whalers broke the taboo of never killing a mother whale with her calf, consequently – according to legend – strong winds and the tide drove the whalers out to sea, where at least 111 men lost their lives (Akimichi et al. 1988; Beatty, Takahashi [no date];

Kalland, Moeran 1992; Komatsu, Misaki 2003; Nicol 1979). With the introduction of the Norwegian method in 1899 whaling practices became industrialised.

This change in tradition allowed this remote and underdeveloped town and its people to gain prosperity. In the heyday of the Japanese whaling industry in the 1960s, 30% of the urban revenue came from whaling and the whaling processing industry; at the beginning of the new millennium, this value decreased to about 3% (Segi 2003). The moratorium therefore had an enormous impact not only on the town, but also on the whalers themselves and their families. In 1975 there were still 167 whalers; by 1990 the number had decreased to 35 and to just 9 in 2003 (ibid.). Because of their specialised profession many whalers ended up unemployed and subsequently their households battled financial hardship. In addition to the economical crisis, the population today is declining: In 2010 only 3,251 residents lived in the town, in 1978 the total head count was over 4,800 (Statistics Bureau Japan 2010).

Fig. 1. Location of Taiji



To this day the location of the town remains peripheral. Taiji, far from the Japanese central cities, is situated on the southeast side of Kii Peninsula in Wakayama Prefecture that is located on the main island of Honshū (*Fig. 1*). The whaling town is located about 250 kilometres from Nagoya and Osaka. Far away from the Shinkansen high-speed rail, it takes a whole day on a slow-train to get there. The city of Nachikatsuura with about 17,000 inhabitants is the nearest bigger city (Statistics Bureau Japan 2010). The area is characterised by steep, green mountains and a narrow coastal strip to the Pacific. The town's harbour is surrounded by a beautiful natural landscape (*Photograph 3 and 4*).

Photograph 3 and 4. Taiji harbour

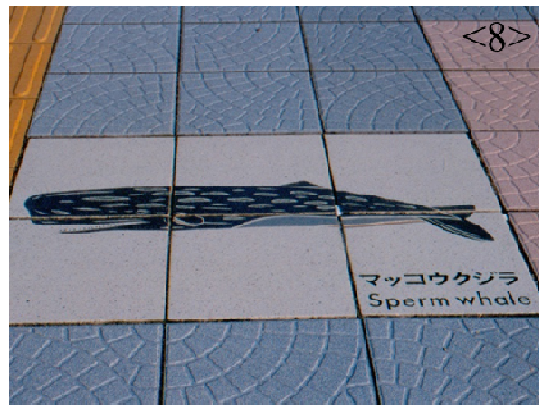


5. Construction of a new collective identity

My interviews showed that whale meat was consumed little and rarely (about every month to every other month), but that it was and still is held in high regard. Although whale meat can be bought in supermarkets, this was rejected by the interviewees. Whale meat is not something you buy but something you share. Non-whalers also rejected the commercially available whale meat and tend to wait until friends or neighbours give them some. We can see that on one hand, the moratorium results in cuts in whaling practices as well as a decrease in the amount of how much whale meat is consumed. However, on the other hand, there is an increase in the symbolisation of whaling through the establishment of ever-new symbols that commemorate whales in the town.

This phase of symbolising and iconising the whale began in the late 1980s. With the moratorium firmly in place, the town and its residents had to ask the question of whether they could survive as a whaling town (local government official, interview 1, Taiji, Japan). In 1988, the town received a government grant of 100 million yen (about 1 million USD). The Town Council used this as an opportunity for their residents to discuss how the money should be invested. Because Taiji is a traditional whaling town, it was decided that the investment should have something to do with whales. The Council then initiated an urban planning project that would embrace the spirit of Taiji as a whaling town.

Photographs 5–12. 'New' and 'old' whale symbols in Taiji



Thus between 1988 and 1997 the money was invested into a variety of new symbolic representations that had a relation to whales: Manhole covers around the city show humpback whales (*Photograph 5*). Driving from Nachikatsuura to Taiji by car, massive sculptures of whales – the Humpback Whale Arch – catch your eye (*Photograph 6*). The area surrounding the Whale Museum was turned into a great “Whale Park”, with a monument showing two tail fins: the Whale’s Tail Monument (*Photograph 7*). Close to the harbour, new sidewalks were constructed representing various whale species, for example, a sperm whale (*Photograph 8*) or Risso’s dolphins (*Photograph 9*). Arriving in Taiji by train, you will be greeted by a painting of a humpback whale mother with her offspring (*Photograph 10*).

In contrast to the older symbolic representations, the new symbols take on a different role. Previous older symbols include the whale museum (*Photograph 11*) that opened in 1969. This museum was improved during the years and has a collection of the Taiji history of whaling (Sakurai 2010; Sakurai 2011), pools where dolphins can be watched and an old catcher boat. Another symbol is the whale memorial that was built in 1979 (*Photograph 12*). This monument is dedicated to all the whalers that have given their lives so that people could have food. Once a year in April whalers and their families go there together to hold a Buddhist memorial service for the whalers. This means that the purpose of these old symbols was educational or religious: The museum was originally built to pass on knowledge to the next generation, whereas the whale memorial is for Buddhist ceremonies.

Photographs 13–15. New whaling festival in Taiji



In addition, after the moratorium it was also decided to launch a new whaling festival that would take place during the “All Soul’s Festival” (obon) every year in August. Watched by residents, young men, dressed in aprons and seated in traditional whaling boats, chase a plastic whale, which they eventually bring into the harbour (*Photograph 13 and 14*). There was also the possibility to see old traditional whaling boats (*Photograph 15*). During these festivals there can be a revival of Japanese whaling songs (*kujira uta*) observed. These old and new songs foster the identity of present whaling communities (Greenland 2013).

However, the new symbols, with their focus on whales only, put the history of Taiji as a whaling town and its residents as whalers at the centre of attention. Their purpose is thus to install a sense of identity. Formation of identity is always closely tied in with the collective memory of a region, city or town and the bond to a community. In the case of Taiji the symbolisation of whales constitutes a maritime space that stands

for their centuries-old tradition of whaling. The residents develop a special sense of place, a bond that is associated with whaling culture and coastal community. Detached from the economic importance of whaling, this symbolisation of Taiji's local identity has led to the emergence of a distinct, cultural collective identity. On the one hand this appears to bring about a true sense of identity, on the other it puts down a barrier that keeps others out:

It's important to show your identity, Taiji identity [...]. We need to respect people from different cultures, even in Japan there are cultural differences between urban and rural people, different background [...]. It is also important to show your differences. When it comes to the whaling issue, it looks like that Euro-American people are pushing their standard, which is called the global standard, to different people who have different cultural background. Ironically, the United States have developed the idea of multiculturalism, and at the same time pushes their cultural standard to others. (Retired local government official, interview 4, Taiji, Japan)

Two aspects of the emergence of this new collective identity are particularly noteworthy: First, because the moratorium presented a threat to commonplace practices, it was the spark for the construction of a new collective identity. Anthony Cohen focused on the constructing of boundaries by proclaiming a collective identity of the community when he answered the question why communities respond assertively to encroachment upon their boundaries:

"They do so because their members feel themselves to be under so severe a threat from some extrinsic source that if they do not speak out now they may be silenced forever. Further, they do so because their members recognize their own voices within them, and because they feel the message of this vocal assemblage, though general, to be informed directly by their own experiences and mentalities. And they do so because their members find their identities as individuals through their occupancy of the community's social space: if outsiders trespass in that space, then its occupants' own sense of self is felt to be debased and defaced" (Cohen 1985: 109).

The expression of this new collective identity becomes a necessary agent to transform whaling from an everyday practice no one gives much thought to, into a special, conscious practice that is still carried out by choice. It is also important to understand that this comes at a time when the whaling industry is in crisis. In regards to the crisis and the limited influence they have on decisions of the IWC, interviewees paint a picture of a powerless, helpless situation: "He is afraid of anti-whaling people, because they are very good performing, Taiji peoples are not used to communicate with others, explaining their thinking, they are just fishermen not politicians [...]. He just want: People, please do not care about Taiji people, please just leave us alone" (fishery association, interview 8, Taiji, Japan). As a result their desire is to be left alone and in this way, they make themselves heard.

Second, the emphasis on being part of a whaling community leads to a contrast to others. The whaling symbols mark an important border for residents – they provide a contrast to other towns or cities, represent a boundary to urban Japanese, but also, and above all, are a distinction from Euro-American societies. Whales and whaling are – using Barth's words – idioms for resistance: „[M]uch of the activity of political innovators is concerned with the codification of idioms: the selection of signals for identity and the assertion of value for these cultural diacritica, and the suppression or denial of relevance for other differentiae“ (Barth 1998 [1969]: 35). Whaling becomes a mental reconstruction of a community that is under threat of being lost. Before the moratorium, whaling was an un-reflected, everyday practice. Nowadays it has become a conscious symbolic and relational expression.

In their individual narratives the interviewees refer to the whale and whaling in a similar way. They embrace the identification and emphasise their appreciation for whales. The – albeit rare – consumption of whale meat is enormously significant for them as it forms a connection to their ancestors.

Whales are his life. His ancestors are whalers, so his family, he grew up with whales, he learnt many things by catching whales [...]. Whaling was his job for living. After retirement he still has many chances to talk about whaling industry, the whales, whalers. So, he always tells his kids, his children when he dies probably [laugh] he will say: "I wanna eat whale meat. So, please let me eat whale meat! (Retired whaler, interview 6, Taiji, Japan)

His father told him, you are made of whale meat. His ancestors, generation to generation, his family eat whale meat and whales, so his body is made of whale meat. And he was told by his father many times. His body is whales itself. (Retired local government official, interview 4, Taiji, Japan)

They express gratitude that their ancestors' whaling industry secured the town's prosperity. Taiji thus has grown into a unique place where contemporary symbolic practices bring the past to the present.

These channels of symbolisation that shape identity can be interpreted as resilient practices under critical conditions: social units

"adapting to change and critical conditions (...) by mobilisation of the person's or group's own resources or external resources of different kinds (...). Under given and changeable basic conditions, and with their own interpretations and attitudes, which also develop and are distinct from resources and skills, resilient social units develop their own strategies, practices and habits which may lead to changes in the social unit itself or in its environment. In any case, they give rise to a better, or maybe even stable or sustainable situation under critical or adverse conditions where, precisely because of these conditions, the opposite would have been expected and, empirically speaking, would have been the rule" (Promberger et al. 2014: 275-276; translation from German to English).

In this way members of the community can maintain their identity in a changing environment. This is also shown by the fact that the residents have fought off all attempts to merge Taiji with other cities. Equally, they reject the introduction of whale watching, which is offered by neighbouring communities. The distinction to others that whaling has brought about in Taiji must not be watered down. The creation of a town of whalers as an offer to build a strong collective identity has resulted in a symbolic revaluation of the practices related to whaling. Even though they happen less and less, the consumption and the sharing of whale meat as well as celebrating the whale at festivals and ceremonies, are all unique moments in the everyday life of the people of Taiji.

6. Concluding thoughts

The whaling industry has dominated the small town of Taiji for centuries. Because of the moratorium still in effect – the word actually implies only a temporary reprieve – whaling practices have been cut considerably. This crisis represented a turning point for the town of Taiji. Many whalers found themselves unemployed due to the lack of alternative economic pathways, or because of their specialised training they were unable to find adequate, well-paid employment opportunities. Simultaneously a rise in the use of symbolisation of whaling occurred. More whales and whaling symbols can be found in Taiji today than ever before. They are a key expression of a collective identity taking shape: "We remain the town of whalers, despite the decline in our whaling practices." Whaling is part of the town's collective memory, it is an idiom for resistance and lends itself to establish a new whaling community after the moratorium. Even in a new millennium, many Taiji residents can identify with the identity of a

whaling town. This identification process is closely related to the collective memory of a region, city or town and the bond to a community.

The documentary 'The Cove' (Roth, O'Barry 2010) which addresses and puts on the spot the hunt for dolphins in Taiji, can be regarded as an assault on this new collective identity. Every year in September groups of dolphins are driven into a bay and slaughtered. The meat is sold in supermarkets and a few dolphins may be sold to commercial aquariums. Since the documentary premiered, animal rights activists travel to Taiji to protest against this practice and to interfere with, or stop the hunt. Notably, the regional prefecture as well as the Japanese government have shown their support for Taiji, also regarding this outside interference as an attack on Japanese culture. In this respect, the campaigns of the anti-whaling and animal welfare organisations strengthen the town's collective identity.

However, symbolisation in the form of images may not be enough to maintain the town economically and socially. Continuous and actual whaling practices and the consumption of whale meat maintain a tangible relation to whales. When asked in interviews whether Taiji can survive as a whaling town – and the cultural collective identity of Taiji residents with it – interviewees expressed worry that in the future it may be harder to recruit young whalers. Without its *raison d'être*, even on a much reduced scale, it is doubtful that the community would survive as a whaling community through symbolism alone beyond the next generation.

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