

## Examining Kokugaku as a Pattern of Defining Identity in Global Comparison

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**Abstract :** Kokugaku of the Edo period can be seen as a key factor of defining cultural (and national) identity in the 18th and early 19th century based on Japanese cultural heritage. Kokugaku focused on Japanese classics, on exploring, studying and reviving (or even inventing) ancient Japanese language, literature, myths, history and also political ideology. 'Japanese culture' as such was distinguished from Chinese (and all other) cultures, 'Japanese identity' was thus defined. Meiji scholars used kokugaku conceptions of Japan to construct a modern national identity based on the premodern and culturalist conceptions of community. The Japanese cultural movement of the 18-19th centuries (kokugaku) of defining cultural and national identity before modernization can be compared not to the development of Western Europe (where national identity strongly attached to modern nation states) or other parts of Asia (where these emerged after the Western colonization), but rather with the 'national awakening' movements of the peoples of East Central Europe, a comparison which have not been dealt with in the secondary literature yet. The role of a common language, culture, history and myths in the process of defining cultural identity – following mainly Miroslav Hroch's comparative and interdisciplinary theory of national development – can be examined compared to the movements of defining identity of the peoples of East Central Europe (18th-19th c). In the shadow of a cultural and/or political 'monolith' (China for Japan and Germany for Central Europe), before modernity, ethnic groups or communities started to evolve their own identities with cultural movements focusing on their own language and culture, thus creating their cultural identity, and in the end, a new sense of community, the nation. Comparing actual texts ('narratives') of the kokugaku scholars and Central European writers of the nation building period (18th and early 19th centuries) can reveal the similarities of the discourses of deliberate searches for identity. Similar motives of argument can be identified in these narratives: 'language' as the primary bearer of collective identity, the role of language in culture, 'culture' as the main common attribute of the community; and similar aspirations to explore, search and develop native language, 'genuine' culture, 'original' traditions. This comparative research offering 'development patterns' for interpretation can help us understand processes that may be ambiguously considered 'backward' or even 'deleterious' (e.g. cultural nationalism) or just 'unique'. 'Cultural identity' played a very important role in the formation of national identity during modernization especially in the case of non-Western communities, who had to face the danger of losing their identities in the course of 'Westernization' accompanying modernization.

**Keywords :** cultural identity, Japanese modernization, kokugaku, national awakening

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