

Tokyo 2020 official mascots and their contribution to the promotion of Japan's culture and legacy

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Abstract

This article focuses on the Tokyo 2020 official mascots, Miraitowa (Olympic mascot) and Someity (Paralympic mascot) and their contribution to the promotion of Japan's culture and legacy. After presenting the cultural importance of mascots in Japan, the article proposes an onomastic study of the names Miraitowa and Someity, which meanings carry values as well as cultural elements. The article then describes the mascots' selection process, which is based on a participatory approach and reflects the host country's desire to strengthen schoolchildren's sense of belonging to the Olympic movement. The article concludes by highlighting the mascots' personification and their role as soft power tools.

Keywords

Mascots, Legacy, Culture, Values, Onomastics, Linguistics.

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Introduction

By definition, a mascot is “a person, animal or thing that people believe will bring them good luck, or that represents an organization or event” (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 2007). The word was popularized by Edmond Audran, a French composer in the 1880’s operetta *La Mascotte*, about a woman who has the power to bring good luck around here as long as she remains a virgin. It comes from the provincial French and can refer to a sorcerer’s charm or a good luck piece (The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology, 2008).

Quickly, mascots gained a lot of popularity, and with time, they became brand representatives or sports teams’ symbols. Originally, real animals were used to play this role and still today, the habit can persist. For instance, Yale University’s mascot is still a bulldog named Handsome Dan: “A bulldog has represented Yale as mascot since at least 1890, and Handsome Dan is widely regarded as the first live animal collegiate mascot.” (Yale News, 2021). In the Olympic history, the first unofficial mascot was a real black Scottish terrier named Smoky which was seen walking around the Los Angeles 1932 Olympic Village (Time, 2012). Although he was wearing a coat with the word mascot written on it, Smoky was never recognized an official mascot; however, he represented a mascot’s debut in the Olympic universe. In 1968, Shuss’s character, a little creature on skis was created by Aline Lafargue for the Winter Games of Grenoble 1968 (International Olympic Committee, n.d) and in 1972, for the Games of Munich, a colorful dachshund named Waldi and designed by Elena Winschermann, became the “first official Olympic mascot in

the history of the Olympic Summer Games” (International Olympic Committee, n.d). The International Olympic Committee describes the Olympic mascots as “the ambassadors of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. They embody the spirit of the Olympics and play a vital role in welcoming athletes and visitors to the Games.” (International Olympic Committee, n.d).

Method

The year 2021 being the year of the Tokyo 2020 Games (postponed due to covid), we decided to focus our work on the official Olympic and Paralympic mascots, Miraitowa and Someity.

In this article, we will undertake a study from a linguistic and onomastic point of view in order to explain what the act of nomination of a mascot can say about its host country. By definition, onomastics is the study of the origins of words and proper names. In our case, we focused on the study of the two proper names Miraitowa and Someity. Our aim is to analyse how, in a country like Japan, where mascots are omnipresent, Miraitowa and Someity contribute to the promotion of Japan’s legacy. In other words, the purpose of this article is to draw attention to the mascots’ creation process and to the names they are given in regard to the Japanese culture. We mainly focused on the digital resources provided by the official websites of the International Olympic Committee’s official website as well as the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, such as news articles for example. To build and further our analysis, we used a theoretical framework consisting of linguistic and onomastic articles written by specialists in these fields.

A cultural phenomenon

The Japanese term for mascots, *yurukyara*, is a contraction of *yurui* mascot character. The adjective *yurui* means “loose”, but in this application it has a number of connotations including “gentle” or “weak”, generally describing amateur mascots (Birkett 2012). Typically, mascots are part of the *kawaii* culture, a Japanese cultural trend which has spread to the whole world. The term *kawaii* refers to an aesthetic that can be quickly defined as the culture of cuteness.

In Japan, mascots are omnipresent and hold an importance role in the Japanese society, they fulfill a societal role. They became particularly important after the economic bubble collapsed in the 1990s (Horiuchi 2009). Following this economic crash, Japan’s national government decided to put more responsibility on the prefectures and cities (Birkett, 2012). The economic crash also meant that there was a mass migration out of the countryside and into the cities, meaning that small cities had shrinking populations, from aging, emigration and the economic depression (Birkett, 2012). In an attempt to promote cities, mascots became very popular. Usually, they speak the local dialect and are often based off of a city’s historical legend or city’s industries (Occhi, 2012).

These anthropomorphized characters typically represent companies, cities or prefectures. The Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department even has its own mascot, *Peopo* a portmanteau word combining the nouns *people* and *police* (*Pipo-kun* in Japanese), whose goal is to help build trust between the Police Department and Japan’s citizens (The Tokyo Times, 2011). Furthermore, contests are hosted each year, the most famous one

being the *Yuru-Chara Grand Prix* in which a lot of mascots participate to become the most popular in the country. Usually there are about 1,500 participants in this competition and the mascot is elected by a public vote (Yuru-Chara Official Website, n.d).

The mascots’ names and their meanings

Studying the genesis of the names *Miraitowa* and *Someity* will allow us to highlight the idea that the link between the mascots’ and Japan’s culture and legacy is noticeable through their names.

Before going any further, it is necessary to note that the mascots’ nomination act doesn’t always depend on the organizing committee: for the 2016 Rio Olympic and Paralympic Games, the public was given the opportunity to vote for the mascots’ names. Three choices were presented: *Oba* and *Eba*, *Tiba Tuque* and *Esquindimn* and *Vinicius* and *Tom* and a total of 323,327 votes were registered. Eventually, the third proposal won the competition, with 44 per cent of the valid votes (International Olympic Committee, n.d). The public’s choice was motivated by its desire to pay tribute to *Vinicius de Moraes*, the famous Brazilian poet and lyricist, and to the musician *Antonio Carlos*, known as *Tom Jobim*, two pioneers of the *bossa nova* musical genre born in the late 1950s in Brazil. Therefore, the choice of the names of the Rio mascots can be considered as a collective act of nomination.

For Tokyo 2020, the nomination act was not based on a vote: the mascots were named by a panel of the Games organizing committee. However, this does not prevent the names *Miraitowa* and *Someity* from having a strong impact on a national and international

audience. From an onomastic point of view, the mascots' names are extremely interesting and revealing of Japan's goals for the Tokyo 2020 Games. Miraitowa and Someity are both anthroponyms (human trait) and ergonyms (inanimate trait) (D. Maurel and M. Tran, 2005).

The name Someity is a neologism. On the one hand, the name comes from a hypocoristic derivative of the common name someiyoshino, referring to a certain type of cherry blossom, which are directly linked to Japan's culture and identity. The word someiyoshino is reduced to its two first syllables and is then given the suffix "-ty". Pronouncing Someity's name sounds like saying "so mighty", a clever play of words (homophony) revealing Someity's powers and capacities: "Someity can show enormous mental and physical strength, representing Paralympic athletes who overcome obstacles and redefine the boundaries of possibility." (International Olympic Committee, n.d). Therefore, the name Someity has an axiological dimension, it carries and conveys the positive values of determination, equality, inspiration and courage advocated by the Paralympic movement. In other words, Someity's physical strength and determination to face challenges and obstacles is included in its name, originates in its name.

The name Miraitowa, which is also a neologism, is built on the juxtaposition of the Japanese common nouns mirai, which means future, and towa, which refers to the idea of eternity. It should be noted here that this neologism, formed from two common nouns, becomes a proper name. While culture is emphasized by the name Someity ; it is the notion of legacy that is highlighted by the name Miraitowa. Indeed, the notion of legacy is inherent in the

name Miraitowa: the evocation of the future and eternity is matched by Tokyo 2020's desire to have a positive impact on the world and to leave a positive legacy after the Games are over. Furthermore, Miraitowa's personality is inspired by the Japanese proverb "learn from the past and develop new ideas" (International Olympic Committee, n.d). It seems relevant to draw a parallel between this Japanese proverb and the Tokyo Games of 1964 and the 2020 Games. Indeed, the Tokyo Games of 1964 took place after the Second World War and its devastating consequences, meaning that the 1964 Games were motivated by the idea of rebirth and by the will to transform Japan through the event. To illustrate this idea, we can quote the official International Olympic Committee's website: "Sport has the power to change the world and our future" and "The Tokyo 1964 Games completely transformed Japan" (International Olympic Committee, n.d). Tokyo 2020's ambitions are quite similar: "Some 56 years later, as Tokyo prepares to host an Olympic Games fit for a post-corona world, the themes of rebirth and resilience are once again on the cards. This time, Tokyo symbolizes the resilience of a world in the midst of a global pandemic." (International Olympic Committee, n.d). All these elements allow us to highlight the fact that the proverb advocates learning from the past, developing new ideas by innovating in order to create a better future. This duality between the past and the future is omnipresent. It can be perceived in the names Miraitowa and Someity; but it is also completed by the two mascots' designs and costumes where the Ichimatsu pattern refers directly to the Tokyo 2020 Games emblem, a tribute to both the respected tradition and modern innovation of Japanese culture. Furthermore, this duality

exists within the mascots' pair: their names both refer to tradition (the cherry blossom and Someity) and future (Miraitowa).

Someity and Miraitowa's identities are tied to the Japanese culture, their names are highly evocative (Siblot 1997) and bear values as well as cultural elements (Lecolle, Paveau & Reboul-Touré, 2009). The names of the mascots are rooted in the Japanese culture, they carry meaning and are cultural markers for a collective familiar with the Japanese culture and language. Indeed, a person who has no knowledge about these two elements will most likely don't notice the fact that one mascot is named after a cherry blossom tree, or that the second's name is based on two Japanese words. Therefore, we are faced with different possibilities. First, an audience familiar with the Japanese language and culture will be able to feel the names' different levels of meaning, making a direct connection between the names Miraitowa and Someity and their significance because they are linked to known elements of their reality, to their imagination and to their memory as a collective. Second, another type of audience, who has no knowledge about the Japanese culture, could miss the meaning of the names of the two mascots. This audience could also discover the hidden meanings behind these names and understand that the choice of the names Miraitowa and Someity is not anodyne but motivated by the organizing committee's intentions to promote the Japanese culture worldwide. In this second case, the International Olympic Committee and Tokyo 2020 websites make this type of information accessible to a curious audience or one that is keen to learn more which echoes the didactic aspect of Olympism.

The mascot selection process: a participatory approach

We studied the significance of the names of the two mascots, but in order to give a complete presentation of Miraitowa and Someity, we need to go back to their selection process.

Involving children: building a strong legacy

Before being named, the mascots were first thought of and created with the help of a national competition (announced on the 22nd of May 2017) which was held from the 1st to the 14th of August and where illustrators, professional designers and Japanese citizens were invited to submit their personal creations online. Using a competition to create mascots is not new in the history of Olympism, but the originality of the Tokyo 2020 Organizing Committee's approach lies in the fact that after a group of experts had pre-selected three pairs of mascots (Meaning six mascots out of a total of 2,042 entries), schoolchildren were asked to choose the official mascots of the Olympic and Paralympic Games by voting. Overall, children from 16,769 schools voted for their favorite mascot pair (Tokyo 2020, n.d).

The omnipresence of mascots in the Japanese culture makes the fact that children were chosen to select the mascots even more important. Involving children in the mascots' selection process is part of the host country's legacy action plan: the children who voted for the mascots of their choice are the adults of tomorrow, meaning that they will this carry the Tokyo 2020's legacy with them as they grow old. We can quote Yoshiko Ikoma, the Vice Chairperson of the mascots' selection process panel, who said:

“Given the importance of mascots in modern Japanese culture, we always knew that the public would respond overwhelmingly to the

selection of the Tokyo 2020 mascots. We believe this gives the public - and especially school children - a unique opportunity to participate in the mascot selection process.” Indeed, the mascots’ selection process was part of an education program called “Yoi Don!” (International Olympic Committee, n.d), which means “Get Set!”. The “Yoi, Don! School” is part of the Tokyo 2020 Education Programme aiming to “help children grow as they experience and learn the values of the Olympic and Paralympic Games and the power of sports”. Overall, 16,576 schools from 47 prefectures, 2,351 schools in 20 Ordinance-designated cities and 20 Japanese schools located outside of Japan have been authorized in the Tokyo 2020 Education Programme (Tokyo 2020, n.d).

The choice of this participatory approach reflects the host country’s desire to strengthen the schoolchildren’s sense of belonging to the Olympic movement. By giving them an active role, they elected two symbols of the Tokyo 2020’s Olympiad. Giving an important role to children and involving them makes it a unique and pedagogical experience, especially since they only had a vote per class and had to discuss together on occasion of classroom debates and other events. After these debates, they had to come to a final agreement as a group. From an educational point of view, the role they were given also gave them access to Olympism knowledge. To illustrate this idea, we can quote:

“We may assume also that due to the classroom debates and special events before the voting process, the level of personal attachment and interest towards the Tokyo 2020 Games among Japanese schoolchildren was greatly increased. On the other hand, their direct

involvement in the voting process, make kids become active supporters and ambassadors of the Olympic mascots within their families and closest social networks, spreading their enthusiasm and Olympic knowledge through interpersonal communication to other segments of population.” (Kolotouchkina, 2018).

We would like to draw attention to the fact that when the vote took place, the mascots had yet to be named. When the three pairs of mascots were first introduced, the audience was given a lot of information about their personality traits and special abilities, however, they were respectively referred to as “Candidate A”, “Candidate B” and “Candidate C”. It is for example the case in a video entitled “Tokyo 2020 mascot shortlist revealed” posted by the official Paralympic Games’s Youtube Channel (Paralympic Games’s Youtube Channel, 2017).

Finally, the official Olympic and Paralympic mascots were introduced to the world on the 22nd February 2018 in front of about 600 children, and a livestream made the event available internationally: the mascots of Ryo Taniguichi, a Japanese graphic designer, were the contest’s winner. It was only on the 22nd July 2018, that the mascots’ names were revealed at a launch event in Tokyo (CNN, 2018). We should note here that this date is considered as their birthday (Tokyo 2020, n.d), which is a sign of their personification.

A two-step act of baptism

These elements lead us to compare the process of the mascots’ revelation with the notion of act baptism (Kleiber, 1984), which can be defined as the event in which the mascots’ names are introduced. From a linguistics

point of view, the fact that the mascots are presented to the public before being given a name may seem paradoxical, as if the act of baptism was divided in two steps. Indeed, the official mascots' reveal process is a two-step process: first, the presentation of their physical appearance and various characteristics; then, the introduction of their names. It should be noted that both unveils take place in front of an audience, and are the subject of an event, thus becoming important steps in the Tokyo 2020 Games' history.

It is by naming the mascots that they come to life and enter the Olympic sphere since the act of nomination is performative. It is therefore through the revelation of the mascots' names that they pass from the status of virtual object to that of object of the world since the act of nomination "connects the signifier with a referent" (Lecolle, Paveau & Reboul-Touré, 2009). It is after being named that mascots can participate in the promotion of the Olympic and Paralympic movements, as if before receiving their names, they did not have an active role to play in the promotion of Olympic and Paralympic values or in the promotion of the Olympiad yet. Indeed, it is after their nomination that they can finally take part in events to promote the Tokyo 2020 Games. Therefore, the act of nomination is also a rite of passage (Alford 1988). After being nominated, the mascots take on the role of ambassador, symbol and spokesperson for the Games.

Personified soft power tools

Anthropomorphizing mascots is rooted in the very purpose of mascots and manifests itself mainly through the human characteristics that we attribute to them, whether it is in terms of their physical appearances or their behaviors.

In the case of Someity and Miraitowa, not only are the mascots anthropomorphized, but they are also personified. This form of individualization contributes to their success. Here we can highlight the fact that the mascots each have their own Instagram account (@miraitowa and @someity) featuring photos of them, mostly in their costume form. Their personification is especially noticeable because of the fact that the public is given a lot of information about the identity of the mascots. Although they were introduced to the world in 2018, the limits of their existence go beyond the Tokyo 2020 Games' promotion. For example, we learn that Miraitowa and Someity are childhood friends, which echoes the value of friendship promoted by Olympism. The personification of the mascots is also part of the gender issue, which is important. Indeed, it should be noted that the two mascots are bright blue and bright pink. These two colors refer to the color of the cherry blossom, and the color of the Tokyo 2020 logo, but are also the stereotypical colors respectively attributed to the female and male genders.

The construction and development of Miraitowa and Someity's character is what makes them great mascots: "a strong story is crucial to their success" (Occhi 2012). Their backstories, personalities, playfulness and kawaii appearance allow the audience to feel affection for them and connect with them. Here, we can think of the fact that during the Games, spectators and athletes like to interact with the mascots and to take pictures with them. For Tokyo 2020, a mascot house was even opened to coincide with the launch of Miraitowa and Someity where merchandise is sold, and people can take pictures with them: "A ceremony was then held to mark the

opening of the “Mascot House” pop-up store in the lobby of the Hibiya Midtown building. I got a sneak preview of the mascot-related items for sale in the shop, including plush toys, ties, water bottles and key chains. Afterwards, Miraitowa and Someity were taken on a cruise on the Sumida River, greeting fans watching from the riverbank.

The two characters will appear at the “Mascot House” every Friday, Saturday and Sunday until the first week of September, so you can go and have your picture taken with them.” (Mondo Mascots, 2018).

The two characters’ development also contributes to their positive representation, a representation that serves a great and honorable purpose. Everything that revolves around the mascots, all the narratives that are made about them and the elements of identity that they are given have very specific functions. It is possible to compare Someity and Miraitowa to service-oriented mascots, created “to inspire belief and incite action” (Occhi, 2012). Indeed, we have seen that by embodying Japanese culture and heritage, mascots become ambassadors of the Games’ host country but also of the Olympic and Paralympic movements. Their appearance as kawaii and friendly looking characters is put at the service of something more important than their cute costumes. It is particularly representative because once the mascots are presented, they actively participate in the promotion of the Olympiad and Olympism. They help to spread the principles advocated by Olympism because they are used as soft power tools. Soft power is defined as the ability to influence events and people (Nye, 2005). Although Joseph Nye focused on countries, soft power can be found everywhere. The soft

power of mascots comes from their cuteness and their connection with the public. They are popular with children and adults alike. “Kawaii characters, in particular, need to be accessible and create familiarity with a wide range of people.” Their power lies in the fact that they are not only perceived as marketing tools, but are seen as friendly character (Birkett, 2012). Furthermore, their soft power is also perceptible in the fact that the mascots seem to become celebrities, to be elevated to the status of celebrities : for instance, they travel to take part in events. Indeed, we can think of the “Make the Beat!” project:

“In their first trip to Europe, Miraitowa and Someity will visit four previous Summer Olympic and Paralympic host cities – Barcelona (1992), Paris (1900, 1924, 2024), Athens (1896, 2004), and London (1908, 1948, 2012) – as well as the home of the International Olympic Committee, Lausanne, and home of the International Paralympic Committee, Bonn.” (Tokyo 2020).

At each stop, the mascots will participate in events to ‘Make the Beat!’, which is a unique cheering project that will engage fans all over the world via social media to make the Tokyo #2020beat, a melodic rhythm that spectators can dance or clap along to. This idea leads us to think of a distinction, or a duality to put it in other words, within the mascots themselves: cute creatures played by people wearing costumes who interact with an audience on the one hand; and ‘virtual’ characters that have a strong cultural reach and which carry with them the Japanese legacy. This duality highlights “the social impact and emotional powers mascots have as a form” (Allison, 2003): it thanks to these two elements that mascots are complete soft power tools.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to draw attention to the importance of the creation of the Olympic and Paralympic mascots, Miraitowa and Someity. In a country where mascots are a cultural phenomenon, these two creatures were given a very important role, whether on the national or international scene. On the one hand, these kawaii creatures are carriers of the Japanese culture and the legacy that Japan wants to leave behind once the Games are over; on the other hand, they are ambassadors of the Olympic and Paralympic movements since their characteristics, personalities and friendliness make them complete soft power tools. Their names are particularly representative of Tokyo 2020's desire to highlight the Japanese culture, but what remains most important is the fact that the participatory approach of the mascots allowed today's children, and tomorrow's adults to get familiar with the Olympic and Paralympic purposes and therefore, to become active actors of their movements with the great aim to build a better world, as it is advocated by the International Olympic Committee.

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