

**The *Otaku* Culture in Brazil: The Brazilian *Manga*, the Impact in the Medias  
and the Cultural Miscegenation Processes**

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**Abstract**

The theme of this work is the Japanese *pop* culture, in particular the *otaku* culture in Brazil. The goal is to analyze the Brazilian *manga*, the cultural miscegenation process among Brazilian creators and the constitution of the *otaku* communities. In the translation of the *otaku* culture and its media products to Brazil, to the example of what has always happened in the process of Latin cultural constitution, there is a relevant feature of anthropophagy, which makes the Japanese –Brazilian examples quite singular.

Keywords: Japanese *pop* culture; *otaku*; Brazilian *manga*; cultural miscegenation

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## Introduction

The impact of the Japanese *pop* culture in the media can be easily recognized around the world. Cultural goods have been invading the West coming from Japan for the past decades, and in Brazil, it has not been different. Brazil has the biggest settlement of Japanese and their descendants in the world, process that started in 1908 with the arrival of the first Japanese to the state of Sao Paulo (Kawahara, 2007). According to Sakiko Hayakawa ambassador for culture of the Japanese Embassy in Brazil (*apud* Zuin, 2009), with the following generations the social and cultural interaction amongst the Japanese and Brazilian has consolidated, disseminated, popularized and significantly contributed in how the Brazilian consume the Japanese pop culture today. Some specific media products are the comic books and the cartoons, known as *manga* and *anime*, which created characteristic phenomena, such as a bigger circulation of knowledge about the Japanese society, its values, its esthetics etc.

For Azuma (2001), *otaku* are generally associated to people who isolate themselves from the world and prefer to stay at home playing on the computer, watching television and *anime*, reading *manga*, they are usually associated with magazine, keychains, miniature dolls aficionados amongst other objects.

At analyzing the transformations and the social problems in Japan, the researcher Mary Brinton (2011), from Harvard University, observes that there is a social concern about the way of life in change amongst the Japanese youth. For Saito (2010, p 104), “one of the significant characteristics of the *otaku* universe is connected to the obsessive consumerism of objects related to the *anime* and *manga* universe”.

Soares (2013) explains that today, even in Japan, the term *otaku* is not so pejorative, because the once young *otaku* have already turned into adults, and many have become owners of companies or famous professionals. Besides, nowadays the term is more used (mainly in the rest of the world), to denominate those who are lovers of *anime*, *manga*, videogames and the like. What make the *otaku* so interesting according to the reflections by Soares (2013) are the characteristics that have never changed since the term has appeared the preference to spend time by oneself indoors, without having much contact with the society.

But for Thomas Lamarre (2009), the *otaku* abdicated dependence on institutionalized means and consolidated their own media for consumption and relationships, reaching a planetary scale. It would be a kind of empowerment of consumers of cultural products communities, restoring control in and out of a situation of dependence, in which the media sets, for example, which must be transmitted and at what time. An *otaku* is therefore a kind of affective machine, a plural being, a machine yourself. Japan provides the progress of "otaku media" a technological and media environment.

The *otaku* phenomeno, according to Barral (2000), has gone beyond the borders of Japan reaching an international scale. In the West, the term *otaku* refers to all those who consume the media products which come from Japan.

## The *otaku* culture in Brazil

In Brazil, the term has been used by the appreciators of the Japanese *pop* culture, the *japop*, to be designated as fans.

The *otaku* culture in Brazil seems to result from a process of appropriation or incorporation of elements with origin in Japan creating configurations that could be defined as hybrid (Canclini, 2003).

The idea of hybrid cultures proposed by Canclini, in the beginning of the 90's, was to think of the Latin American modernity, characterized by the miscegenation of cultures, by the proliferation of strategies and by the pluralization of temporalities. According to the author, the Latin American countries are a result of the sedimentation, juxtaposition, and mutual crossing of local indigenous traditions, of the colonial Catholic Hispanicism and the modern communicative political educational actions (Canclini, 2003, p.73-74). In America, there is the predominance of a "cultural heterogeneity" (*ibid*, 2000, p.212, *apud* Gabrielli, 2013, p.85). There is not a concern about substituting the traditional and the old but rather to transform it into part of the same cultural mixture throughout the miscegenation.

Bastide, the sociologist (1959, p.65) who studies Brazilian culture, refers that all notions that he learned in European and American countries are not valid here. "The old is blended with the new. The historic periods are fused in one another [...]". According to Campos, "in Brazil; the primitive cultures are mixed in the everyday life or are a recollection still alive of a very recent past". (Campos, 1979, p.193, *apud*, Pinheiro, 2004).

One of the most important elements in the cultural interbreeding process is the one related to the emerging of new ideas or cultural spaces resulting by the introduction, in certain cultures, of elements foreign to it. It provokes the dialog in searching for the construction of new cultural formats, and consequently the outbreak of a "new cultural order", term used by Peter Burke (2003, p.17). This process occurs, according to the author (*ibid*, p.47), not by substitution, but by addition. Burke explains that this phenomenon takes place via "appropriation" because it chooses some items to appropriate while rejects others. He agrees with the idea that cultural translation is a mechanism of cultural encounters that generates new hybrids forms.

From this perspective, our objective has been to study the Japanese *pop* culture and its impact on the media, specially the *manga* and the *anime*, for we can observe that the *otaku* culture in Brazil presents a different interpretation from what means being an *otaku* in Japan. Koichi Mori, teacher and anthropologist, has made the following comment in a magazine, on the celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of the Japanese immigration to Brazil: "The Japanese culture relocated does not configure 'Japanese culture'. This happens because the *nikkei*<sup>1</sup> have created an ethnic culture with Japanese and Brazilian references" (*apud* Manfrinatto, 2008, p.7).

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<sup>1</sup> It is a denomination, in the Japanese language for the Japanese descendants born outside of Japan or for Japanese who live regularly abroad.

The Brazilian version of the *otaku* culture has appropriated and inverted its own Japanese logic of appropriation of western cultures. The Japanese culture is extremely syncretic, which has made possible that all elements considered interesting for the country to absorb, combined with characteristics from the Japanese culture and subsequently transformed in Japan's own characteristics, using the motto of the Meiji Restoration<sup>2</sup>: *Wakon yosai* – eastern spirit, western learning (Greiner, 2008, p. 2).

Just like in the past, Japan has sent delegations to China to learn about its culture, in the Meiji Era delegations were sent to European countries and to the United States to learn their techniques. Such delegations, after spending some time in those countries, returned to Japan (sometimes bringing western specialists along with them) and there they applied the knowledge they had once learned.

This can be observed even up to the present days, with the Japanese electronic products, their comic books, animations, and much of their culture being brought to the west as products exclusively “made in Japan” (Schuler, 2010).

The *pop*, according to Greiner (2003, p. 2), “is, by its own nature an example of miscegenation in all its products, ideas and phenomena of the media. But his formulations took place in the course of time of many decades, even when it comes to the more specific examples of *manga*”. The Japanese have known the *manga* since the XII century, but its success only happened when such cultural manifestation was contaminated by drawings, caricatures, newspapers strips, and western comic books (Gravett, 2006). On the other hand, Patricia Borges (2009), in her book: *Traços ideogramáticos na linguagem dos animês* (Traces of ideograms in the language of anime), show how the language of the *anime* and *manga* is full of ideas of Sergei Eisenstein, one of the most important Russian cinematographer, who used fragmented images in cinema to compose a single moment in action.

It is believed that in Brazil the *otaku* culture used the Japanese techniques but kept the Brazilian ‘mestizo’ spirit. This can be verified in the study performed by Soares (2013), about the *Cosplay* practice in Brazil. He observed in the *cosplayers* a feeling of belonging as they dress up with the costumes of their favorite *anime* or *manga* character and at the same time of acceptance, admiration as they are being photographed by the people who like the same characters as they do. According to the author, during the presentations,

the *cosplayer* in the costume ceases to be just a random person in the mist millions of people and he/she is actually seen by others. Not only seen: he/she gets the attention of all those people who may not know who and how he/she is, but they probably know the characteristics of that character and they will come close (Soares, 2013, p. 2).

The Brazilian *otaku* like to participate in the meetings of Japanese *pop* culture – the *anime* meetings - where it is normal to note the presence of *cosplayers*. The visual ranges from *anime*, *manga* and *tokusatsu* characters up to heroes from electronic games.

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<sup>2</sup> The Meiji Era (1868 – 1912) – Period in which there was the opening of the Japanese ports for the Western world.

In many of these events of the Japanese culture, dancing has been growing to be very popular among the young *otaku*. The *Matsuri* dance is diffusing itself more and more among the young Brazilian *otaku* who dance to the sound of Japanese slow or rhythmic music, using mostly the movement of their arms, as argues Nagado.

The Brazilian public are composed by many young people and couples (boyfriend and girlfriend), what would be a contradiction to what happens in Japan. Much more enthusiastic, loose and noisier than their Asian counterparts, the Brazilian fans jostle for an autograph of their favorite interpreters. They jump around listening to anime songs as if they were in a rock concert and promote a party in a particularly Brazilian style, which is certainly very distant from the lonely and isolated fanaticism present in many of the Japanese *otaku*. (Nagado, 2005: 56).

That way, it is believed that this new culture, formed by the encounter between the Brazilian culture and elements of the Japanese culture, may allow the emerging of new values and attitudes, which are singular in Brazil, unique from the miscegenation of cultures.

### **The Brazilian *manga***

*Manga* is a Japanese word that is used to represent comic book story in general. It is formed by two ideograms: *man* (漫) – which means ‘humor or something that is not serious’, and *ga* (画) – which means ‘image or drawing’. Together they mean “irresponsible drawings”. Although they are a cultural manifestation that has been contaminated, the *manga* is a comic story used by the Japanese in their language, as a fruit of their culture. Brazil already makes its own *manga*, however, how can it be considered Brazilian *manga*, once the very own word does not even come from our own language?

The *manga* reading arrived in Brazil with the eastern immigrants and their descendants since 1908. Back then the magazines were imported and distributed by specialized distributors located in Liberdade in São Paulo, which then sent them to the country side of the state and to Paraná where the Japanese colonies were located.

Only in 1964, begins the works of the artist Minami Keizi. He was the first artist to produce comic books stories and to outstand keeping the Japanese cultural style in his productions. Japanese descendant born in Brazil, he develops works for the *Pan Juvenil* publishing house and for the newspaper *Diario Popular*, where he creates the character *Tupãzinho, o Guri Atômico* (Tupãzinho, the Atomic Kid), inspired in a character the *Astro Boy* by Osamu Tezuka (Nagado *et al.*, 2011 p.20). *Tupãzinho*, a Brazilian indigene, drawn in the *manga* style accompanied by narratives from the orient influencing the national piece of work, is the first character in the Brazilian *manga*.

The greatest publication by Minami Keizi was the *Álbum Encantado* (Enchanted Album) (1966) which presented illustrated tales in the *manga* style (Nagado *et al.*, 2011 p. 20-21). From then on many other artists started to develop their work in *manga* style and one of them was Claudio Seto, who became famous, being considered the greatest producer of Brazilian *manga* during almost two decades, with his stories *O Samurai* (The Samurai). Other titles by Seto and published by the *Edrel* publishing house during this period are: *Ninja, o Samurai Mágico* (Ninja: the Wizard Samurai), and *O ídolo juvenil* (The Juvenile Idol). Seto is considered, along with

Minami Keizi, the precursor of the *manga* in Brazil, being an inspiration for national authors.

However, with the end of the activities of the *Edrel* publishing house in the 70's, the *manga* has practically disappeared from the newsstands in Brazil. Nevertheless, in the end of the 1980's and beginning of the 1990's, there was a new interest for Brazilian *manga* with the publication of the first *manga* edited in Brazil, the *Lobo Solitário - Lone Wolf* – (Kozure Okami), by the *Cedibra* publishing house, in 1988. Following it came *Akira*, which also became *anime*, directed by Ketsushiro Otomo and published by *Globo* publishing house.

From 1990 on, with the end of the monopoly of the *Abril* publishing house as a distributor of comic books sold in the country and with the growing acceptance of the Japanese cultural products, the quality of the stories in *manga* style produced once as experimentation generated the first pieces of work to be commercialized. In addition, with them, a new way of producing national art, a fact that increased in a progressive way the miscegenation contained in the Brazilian production of comic books. These changes caused impact in not only the format itself, but also consumerism and commerce of the content published in Brazil and the insured the presence of *manga* in all newsstands and bookstores in the country from then on.

In 2001, the *Conrad* publishing house published the series *Dragon Ball* and *Cavaleiros do Zodíaco (Seinto Seiya)*, which had already been a success on the Brazilian television. After that, the *JBC* press published the following *manga*: *Samurai X*, *Sakura Card Captors*, *Guerreiras mágicas de Rayearth (Rayearth)* and *Video Girl Ai*. Still outstand: *One Piece*, *Vagabound*, *Inuyasha*, *Love Hina*, *Dark Angel* and many others. They have followed the Brazilian editorial patterns for comic books in smaller sizes, like digest size, possibly to diminish the cost of the national *manga*. They have in the most 100 pages, but many of them follow the original format which requires the reading to be done from right to left, as well as the leaf through also to be done in the same manner, as done by the Japanese.

According to Borges<sup>3</sup>, “from the comic book series influenced by the *manga* tracing in Brazil, we have the extreme popularity of the *Holy Avenger*, created in 1998 as an RPG adventure”. Right after that it gave origin to a comic book in *manga* style very known due to the success that it has achieved, managing to being published for the longest period of time in the country. Created by Marcelo Cassaro and illustrated by Erica Awano, *Holy Avenger* has reached 42 editions published monthly along the period of a little more than three years; he has also created several special editions related to its universe. Although it is completely in *manga* style, *Holy Avenger* brings a juvenile thematic focused on the reality of the Brazilian youth. It makes direct references to teens most common questions, their behavior and way of talking, places created to symbolize elements that are common to living in Brazil and ever more elements to bring a uniformity to the language, predominating the Brazilian sound even in the onomatopoeias (Figure 1A and B). Another series of great popularity was

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<sup>3</sup> The influence of *manga* in comic publications in Brazil. (2014). Patricia Maria Borges: PhD in Communication and Semiotics from the Catholic University of Sao Paulo.

the *Combo Rangers*, created by Fabio Yabu, in the late 1990's and published by the *JBC* and *Panini* publishing houses. In this series, a group of heroes armed with love and courage fight for a better world (Figure 1C).

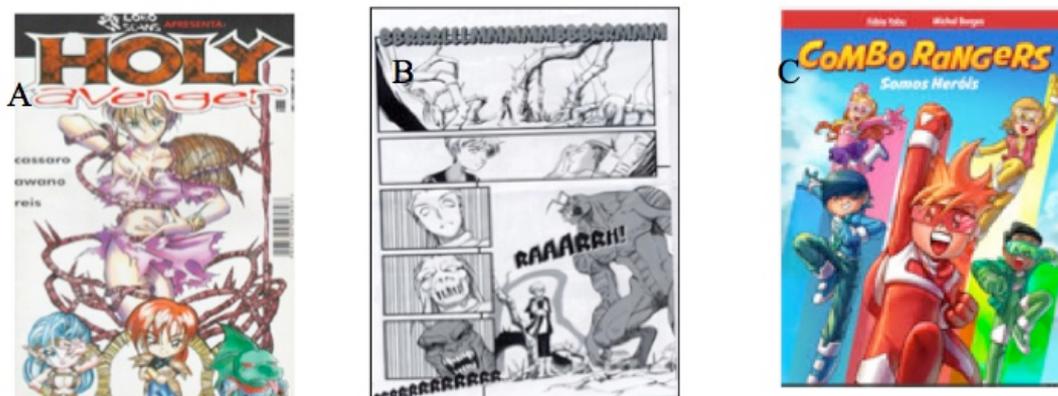


Figure 1- Brazilian manga *Holy Avenger* (A); example of onomatopoeias in *Holy Avenger* (B) *Combo Rangers* (C).

The adaptation of the *manga* style in the publishing of comic books in Brazil, as far as it can be demonstrated, has pushed the editorial market forward in the country and it has contributed to the growth of the sales and the strengthening of independent productions. Brazil has created its own digest size of *manga*, which has endured for several years (Noro, 2015).

These new ideas in the national *manga* provided Mauricio de Sousa studios with a partnership with the *Panini* publishing house the perfect scenario for the series *Turma da Mônica Jovem* (Monica's Gang Teen) released in 2008 (Figure 2).

*Turma da Mônica Jovem* presents some changes in relation to Japan's *manga*. The first is that they are of styles referents to the oriental *manga*, with a great presence of the *J-pop* culture, however, its reading is done like in western books and magazines, from left to the right.

Another distinguishing feature in the change made by Mauricio de Souza in the transition from the comic to *manga* is the physical difference of the characters. The gang, which before was represented by boys and girls of seven years old turns now becomes teenager and with new look. This new version brings the characters as teens, with changes not only in the physical aspect by also traditional characteristics of the characters. Different from the traditional version of the characters, which still continues to be produced and commercialized normally, in the new series in *manga* style one can perceive changes in the style and narrative in order to reach a more mature audience. The greater novelty is the thematic, that has been adopted, with reference to social matters, family issues, contemporaneous, pertinent to reality, showing the strength of the youngsters and some influence they may have on their parents. It also brings up romantic topics, arguments, jealousy and current news. Topics before banalized are now discussed in a subtle and irreverent manner.



Figure 2 – *Turma da Mônica Jovem 00 - Monica Gang's Teen 00* edition (A); Example of the passing of time (B) and of the presence of the onomatopoeia and of the big eyes (C).

In 2012, Mauricio published the *Tesouro Verde* (Green Treasure) (Figure 3), with the participation of distinguished characters from the famous *mangaka* Osamu Tezuka, such *Astro Boy*, *Safiri* and *Kimba* united with Mônica and her friends in an adventure in the Amazon forest against an organization of Amazon deforestation wood smugglers.



Figure 3- *Turma da Mônica Jovem 43- Tesouro Verde* (Monica Gang's Teen 43- Green Treasure).

In relation to the language, there are differences between the Brazilian *manga* and the Japanese *manga*. The languages in the Japanese *manga* involve a combination of techniques which use the approximation between how the words are written and the illustration, the presence scenario and elements of interaction, exaggerated feelings reactions, demonstrated through the characters' faces and by using graphic onomatopoeia. The Brazilian *manga* is more focused on the sequencing of the narrative rather than on the feelings transmitted. What gives the comic book its signature is the balloon, but what completes its expression and gives the real impact and great aesthetic in terms of sonority is the onomatopoeia. In the Brazilian *manga*, the onomatopoeia is less common. In the typesetting one can observe a large quantity of tables in most pages and an exaggeration of texts present in the lines of the characters. However, the two kinds of *manga* are very alike, because the characters have big eyes, long hair, elongated body and other modern techniques used in *manga*.

## Final Considerations

Although *manga* is a cultural product of extreme Japanese symbology, the insertion of Japanese colonies in the country has given to their descendants a very different vision, which incorporates not only questions originated from Japan but also from our Brazil.

In the spreading and insertion of the *manga* as a market product in Brazil, artists as Minami Keizi, Claudio Seto and Julio Shimamoto have opened a new product in different artistic style, which initial content was intended to the Japanese immigrants, but then, with the changes that happened during the Japanese commercial opening in the 80's and the invasion of the importation of the *anime*, *manga* and other products of the Japanese *pop* culture, they integrated themselves more and more to the Brazilian reality and allowed little by little that pieces of work and adaptations could evolve into comic books completely done nationally, whose topics converse with the teenage public of our country. Soon they started to use the Brazilian cultural traces in their pages, in their dialogs, in their allusions to reality known to the Brazilian, creating in fact, national comic books using the *manga* narrative techniques.

It all seems that art in comics books using *manga* style have come to stay, with a progressive increase of published material in the last twenty years. That can be accounted for not only for the work translated by imported pieces but as well as of national pieces, which little by little have been characterized with thematic of our own culture and subtle mixture of techniques already been used with propriety modifying the very own culture of comic books in Brazil, particular of the cultural miscegenation.

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