6.1. Analyzing the Japanese discourse on subculture/ sabukaruchā

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Abstract
Japan has its own diverse history of spectacular youth subcultures, from youth biker gangs and music centered subcultures such as Punk to fashion subcultures like *gothic lolita*. The usage of the Japanese term *sabukaru*, though derived from subculture and usually translated this way, diverges from the Anglo-American understanding. *Sabukaru* tends to include aspects of general popular culture but also is a marketing category for more specialized media, overlapping with or even becoming a synonym for the much discussed field of otaku culture. Interestingly, *sabukaru*/ otaku culture has often presented itself as an underground culture, whilst staying tied to mass-cultural phenomena. This paper explores the usage of and the discourse on the term "subculture" in Japan, taking the existing discourse on otaku culture but also a broader understanding of youth and underground culture into account.
Keywords*:* Japanese subcultures, otaku, Japanese popular culture, popular music.

1. Introduction: What is subculture?

In Japanese everyday life, the word subculture, often shortened to *sabukaru*, seems ubiquitous. It appears as a category in most bookstores and libraries, who tag a wide variety of fictional and non-fictional literature — from occultism to pop-star biographies — as "subcultural". Even the online retailer Amazon presented for some time a category for products targeting "subculture and culture girls" (sabukaru・bunkakei gāru), offering everything from musical instruments to books on photography, railways or videogames and manga (Amazon 2014: Internet). Magazines such as the pop culture magazine Quick Japan (Ohta Shuppan), the fashion and lifestyle magazine Relax (Magazine House) or art and culture magazine Studio Voice (Infas Publication) have been categorized as "subcultural magazines" (Namba, 2006, p. 161) as well.

It is also worth noting, that within Japan's recent history, there has been a wide range of cultural phenomena that would fit the definition of "spectacular subcultures" closely: Starting as early as the 1950s, there have for instance been various incarnations of youth biker gangs, more recently, different forms of street fashion have come to represent Japanese creativity abroad (Mabuchi, 1989; Namba, 2007; Kawamura 2012). Much like their counterparts in the rest of the world, Punk or gothic bands in Japan understand themselves as members of "underground-" or "sub"-cultures distinctly "different" from the cultural mainstream. They have created their own independent ecosystems of bands, record labels, specialized magazines and record shops as well as fashion labels.

In 2015, the web magazine *Tokyo Girls Update* published a series of articles by the author and journalist Okajima Shinshi[2], boldly declaring him the "next subculture leader" — without much further explanation of this title. The first installment is a conversation between Okajima and fellow pop culture-journalists Nakamori Akio and Sayawaka (pen name). The introduction opens with the statement that, "recently in Japan, the term 'subculture' has begun to change from its generally accepted meaning into one that is somewhat special." It is interesting to note that *Tokyo Girls Update* usually covers news on Japanese pop idol groups, models and teen fashion trends for an

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English-language audience — not exactly what one would usually associate with subculture. What the article however does not do is define the meaning of subculture. It just mentions some broad examples — Shibuya-kei[3] as a music genre, the noise band Violent Onsen Geisha or rock music festivals (Okajima, 2015).

The assumption that, in Japan, subculture is defined differently can not only be found in journalism or fan-discussions, but also in academic discourse. Thomas LaMarre notes in a conversation with fellow Japanese Studies scholar Patrick W. Galbraith, that

> Generally speaking, in Japanese discussions the emphasis often falls on subculture as 'small', both in terms of the number of producers and consumers and in terms of its concerns (Galbraith, LaMarre 2010, p. 367).

Subculture, so LaMarre continues, in a Japanese context "could be seen as a harbinger of the end of the history and of the nation", as opposed to the western notion where the term describes "a set of practices entailing resistance to dominant modes of understanding the world and organizing social relations." (Galbraith & LaMarre 2010, p. 367). Anne McKnight similarly states that:

> The main difference is that, while Anglo-American thought sees subculture as defined by a non-normative or marginal position and likely approaches study through sociology and urban ethnography, subculture in Japan is defined as a community formed around the conventions of representations in one medium of information culture (manga, anime, heavy metal fans, and so on) (McKnight, 2010, p. 125).

At the same time a definition of subcultures as spectacular, rebellious or even delinquent youth cultures is still present. The image of the members of these subcultures as rebellious, eccentric outsiders is common enough to form them into stereotyped characters in films, television series, comics, etc. This paper explores the usage and definitions of subculture in Japan since its first appearance in the 1960s, taking both sides — subculture or *sabukaru* as a niche within the gradually diversifying Japanese media culture, as well as subculture as a rebellious underground culture — into account.

2. Subculture and *sabukaru*

Japanese sociologist Namba Kōji notes, that in postwar-Japan the youth subcultures, which often parallel their counterparts in other parts of the world (see also Narumi, 2010), have been usually called "tribes" (zoku)[4], while the term subculture was used to describe certain genres of media content and "subculture research" in many cases referred to media analysis (Namba 2006, 2007).

The term subculture appeared in the Japanese media for the first time in the late 1960s, and was originally used to describe US-American and Japanese contemporary art. A 1968 issue of the art magazine *Bijutsu techō* featured articles on "Camp, Hippie and Subculture", presenting American and Japanese artists as part of what the magazine called "a new image culture" (Kanesaka 1968, p. 81).

[3] The genre Shibuya-kei became popular in Japan during the 1990s. Its name derives from the Shibuya district in Tōkyō, which is known as center of fashion and youth culture and where the genre gained first popularity. It started as a revival of 1960s pop-music and soon gained the image of an extremely sophisticated taste culture, with both fans and musicians displaying an encyclopedic knowledge of music and pop-culture (Namba, 2007, pp. 297-308).

[4] The suffix "zoku" can be translated as tribe. It is usually used to describe (youth-)subcultures, e.g. the media referred for example to the hippies as hippī-zoku, the aforementioned youth biker gangs have been called kaminari-zoku (thunder-tribe) or later on bōsō-zoku (reckless driving/ runaway-tribe) (Mabuchi, 1989; Namba, 2005). The term does however not in all cases refer to a youth tribe or subculture. The wealthy inhabitants of the Roppongi Hills building complex in Tōkyō became for example known as "hiruzu-zoku" ([Roppongi-]Hills-tribe) in the popular press.

In 1975 a special issue of the philosophy magazine *Shisō no kagaku* on Japanese Subculture (nihon no sabukaruchā) appeared. In the closing remarks of the issue, the founder and editor of the magazine, Tsurumi Shunosuke, refers back to American sociological scholarship for a definition of the term. He describes different subcultures as single parts of a lager, collective culture, differentiated in terms of class, ethnicity and so forth. He suggests that, when translating the term subculture to Japanese, one should speak of "back-side culture" or "hidden culture" (ura bunka) rather than compartmentalized culture (bubun bunka) (Tsurumi, 1975).

A similar use — subculture as "back-side culture" — emerged in the late 1970s with the controversy surrounding Murakami Ryū's novel *Almost Transparent Blue (Kagirinaku tomei ni chikai buru)*, which won the prestigious Akutagawa Prize in 1977. The literary critic Etō Jun called the book "subcultural" with the intention of branding it as vulgar and far from the standards of high culture (McKnight, 2010, p. 126).

Apart from such isolated appearances, the term subculture was never used widely until the 1990s, neither in academic discussions nor in the popular media. The first monograph to feature the word sabukaruchā in its title was the 1993 work *Sabukaruchā Shinwa Kaitai (Deconstruction of the Subculture Myth)* by the sociologist Miyadai Shinji. While the study was meant to offer a post-war history of Japanese youth culture, it did not cover any of the youth cultures mentioned before, but focused rather on media aimed at a young audience, Shōjo (girls) culture, manga, popular music and the subject of sexuality (Miyadai, 1992 [2007]).

After the publication of *Sabukaruchā Shinwa Kaitai* the number of both academic and popular publications on the topic has been rising steadily. In the same time the abbreviated version *sabukaru* came into use (Miyazawa, 2014, pp. 95-105). In 2005, the pop culture and philosophy magazine *Yuriika* dedicated a much-discussed special issue to an alleged conflict between otaku[5] and *sabukaru* or subculture. But even in this context, it is difficult to find a definition of the two phenomena in focus. In the foreword, the author and editor Barbora tries to define both via the different modes of consumption they supposedly entail: While otaku-like consumption is deeply interested in the collection of extremely detailed information on a certain object, *sabukaru* rather creates its own worlds of consumption outside of mainstream culture. Finally, Barbora however remarks that it is extremely difficult to precisely define *sabukaru* today simply because of the fact that a clearly delimited mainstream hardly exists anymore. Instead, Japanese popular culture seems to be diversifying constantly. Thus, he argues that, if you meet someone with certain specialized interests now, you simply accept this person as different from you, without sorting him into another subcultural group as a result of this (Barbora, 2005, pp. 10-11).

In another essay in the same magazine issue, the journalist Taguchi Kazuhiro describes his journey from otaku to *sabukaru*. He traces his development from anime-fandom and an otaku lifestyle to the realm of *sabukaru* as a teenager, describing how he "graduated" from the former to the latter after he had been introduced to the music of Yellow Magic Orchestra, RC Succession and especially of punk band The Stalin. After moving from his hometown to Tōkyō, he starts to visit concerts and broadens his interests beyond music into underground film and art. With a few likeminded friends he finally starts a fanzine, which ultimately allows him to stay connected to *sabukaru* during his career as a writer and journalist (Taguchi, 2005). *Sabukaru* in this context seems to be more than an interest in specialized forms of popular culture, even if Taguchi does not seem to understand himself as a member of a clearly defined subculture.

There is a continued interest in the topic, especially on a more popular level. There has been a number of on- and offline publications, interviews often nostalgic in their tone, retelling their author's youth and their first encounters with — or decent into — *sabukaru*. Even Japan's public broadcaster NHK produced a series titled *Japans's subculture (Nihon no sabukaruchā)*, which has just recently been extended to a third season (Miyazawa, 2014).

[5] For a definition of the term see chapter 3.

3. Otaku and subculture

In a discussion of the term subculture in Japan, it is also crucial to take the aforementioned otaku or otaku-culture into consideration, as the terms otaku and subculture/ *sabukaru* are closely intertwined. LaMarre, in the interview quoted above, refers to otaku as the "prime instance of subculture" in Japan (Galbraith & LaMarre 2010, p. 367). In the introduction to his well-known book *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, originally published in 2001, Azuma Hiroki uses both terms — otaku and subculture as a certain form of media content — almost synonymously:

> I suppose that everyone has heard of 'otaku'. Simply put, it is a general term referring to those who indulge in form of subculture strongly linked to anime, video games, computers, science fiction, special-effects films, anime figurines, and so on. In this book, I identify this form of subculture as 'otaku culture' (Azuma, 2009, p. 3).

The term otaku came to be used in the late 1980s to describe young people completely absorbed in the world of their hobbies[6]. While the opinions on the topics are diverse, it can be said, that the otaku is still at least loosely connected to the media or genres of popular culture mentioned by Azuma. The term has also been used to describe these media or types of media content themselves as otaku-like. As the examples in the previous chapter have shown, the term is also closely connected to certain forms of consumption.

The discussions on otaku have been diverse since the first appearance of the term in the early 1980s. A wide range of participants from insiders and self-proclaimed otaku to the mass media and academic researchers from a wide range of disciplines have commented on the subject. It is thus difficult, as Galbraith, Kam and Kamm emphasize, to create a coherent history out of the discourse around otaku, let alone to speak of a single otaku identity. The academic discourse has often uncritically reproduced consumers of certain media (manga, anime, video games or pop-idols) as otaku — creating an otaku identity by taking the existence of an otaku culture with a certain defined history for granted[7] (Galbraith *et al.*, 2015, pp. 7-10).

The discussions on otaku as a subculture are equally diverse. Thiam Huat Kam points out the limitations of speaking about otaku as a subculture, or even as a set of similar subcultures. The topic, so Kam continues, is too complex and the groups and phenomena involved too incoherent to be classified as a subculture. Rather, he suggests, one should understand otaku as a process of labeling (Kam, 2013, pp. 41-44)

Similarly the anime producer, author and self-proclaimed "otaking" Okada Toshio refers to *otaku* as an originally diverse group, that was through external labeling forced to forge into a collective identity (Kam, 2013, p- 155). In his 1996 book *Otaku-gaku nyūmon [Introduction to otaku studies]* he differentiated Japanese otaku clearly form imported, western subculture. Okada presented otaku as a uniquely Japanese form of popular culture, tracing it back to the country's historical Edo-period and its craftsmen- and connoisseur-culture to establish its claim as the only "truly Japanese" subculture. He also suggests that the often ambiguous distinction between children and adults in Japan on the one hand is an important factor for the development of otaku-culture as children and adults are allowed to appreciate the same content. On the other hand in

[6] The author and journalist Nakamori Akio, who was mentioned before as one of the participants in the discussion on Tokyo Girls Update, is usually cited as its originator, mentioning the term in a column for the comic magazine *Manga Burikko* in 1983 to describe the visitors of Tōkyō's biggest market for amateur-manga and fanzines. Nakamori's writing on the group was decisively negative in tone — in his eyes, its members seemed little more than anti-social loser types. Furthermore, their interests appeared extremely narrow: they seemed fixated almost exclusively on a specific genre of (amateur-)manga.

[7] The cultural critic and magazine editor Ōtsuka Eiji, who has been a prominent participant in the discourse on otaku since the 1980s, emphasizes that he himself and other students created the first writings on otaku — and otaku-related media — using an academic language in part for entertainment and in response to the ongoing public discussion. Ōtsuka thus harshly criticizes later academic writing on the topic as legitimization of a discourse, which originated in a kind of insider-joke, going so far as to call academic writing about otaku, which further stabilizes these images of otaku, meaningless or even harmful. (Galbraith *et al.*, 2015, pp. 2-39; Ōtsuka, 2015, p. xv).

this view it becomes less clear, against what a subculture could rebel without a clearly delimitated parent culture and thus subculture in his view is little more than an empty, superficial imitation of western fashion (Okada, 1996, pp. 214-231).

Patrick Galbraith and Thomas LaMarre suggest referring to otaku in terms of a fan culture, rather than subculture. Other scholars however speak of the importance of "subcultural cred[ibility]" (Ito, 2012, pp. xvii), clearly presenting otaku as a subculture:

> Even as otaku culture is recuperated by elites and the mainstream, and as the terms 'anime' and 'manga' have become part of a common international lexicon, otaku culture and practice have retained their subcultural credibility. In Japan, much of manga and anime is associated with mainstream consumption; otaku must therefore differentiate themselves from *ippanjin* (regular people) through a proliferating set of niche genres, alternative readings, and derivative works (Ito, 2012, p. xvii).

What renders otaku relevant for the discussion of subculture in Japan, apart from the ongoing academic discourse on the topic, is also their relative continuous media presence. Otaku appeared in various roles and with various sometimes contradictory images, often presented as symptomatic for the problems of Japan's youth as a whole. On the other hand they appeared as representatives for the global interest in Japanese popular culture. They have also frequently been juxtaposed to other subcultures, as for example Taguchi's essay on otaku and *sabukaru* shows.

4. Subculture and pop-idols

While it is thus not easy to define otaku as subculture, it is also almost impossible to talk about subculture in Japan without mentioning otaku. As for example the *Yuriika* special issue shows, otaku is in many cases the initial point for discussions on the topic. In some cases these images of a more traditional subculture form have also been juxtaposed to otaku — or more broadly — the Japanese notion of subculture described above.

An interesting phenomenon in this context are pop-idols, who have seen their first boom in the 1980s but continue to play a central part in the Japanese media landscape due to the ongoing success of groups like Perfume, AKB48 or Momoiro Clover Z[8] (Galbraith & Karlin, 2012). Idol-groups are not sold based on their musical quality or the image of a glamorous super-star lifestyle. Rather, the fans are encouraged to follow the journey of a "typical girl next door", who makes her way into the world of music and entertainment almost solely by hard work and based on her unique character. Looks behind the scenes form a central part of the idol's presentation, so that the producers and managers of the groups are in many cases as well known as the performers (Aoyagi, 2005; Ōta, 2011).

While these groups are omnipresent in the music charts and on television, they are at the same time considered part of otaku culture — or *sabukaru*. Aoyagi Hiroshi describes idol otaku as fans who follow their favorite groups with a considerable investment of time and money:

> As for idol otaku, extensive consumption encompasses acts such as the elaborate collection of idol goods, frequent attendance at idol concerts as well as fan conventions, and taking part in voluntary support groups. Devoted idol otaku publish their own newsletter and magazines as ways of exposing their knowledge about, and their dedication to, their idols (Aoyagi, 2005, p. 205).

[8] While in this paper I talk solely about all-female idol groups, male idol groups equally successful and present in Japanese media. The maybe most prominent talent agency in Japan, Johnny & Associates, has continued to produce successful boy groups since the 1960s, with groups such as SMAP or Arashi belonging to the best-selling artists of all time in Japan. These groups have however seldom been discussed in context of *otaku* culture, although they have their own particular fan culture, whose usually female fans also refer to themselves at times as *jannīzu-wota [Johnny's-otaku]*. For discussions of male idol groups and their fans see Darling-Wolf (2004), Nagaike (2012).

Idol-fans — or otaku — bring glowsticks to the concerts and perform choreographies called *wota-gei* (*otaku-dance*). They also present themselves as "connoisseurs" as Aoyagi Hiroshi puts it, setting themselves apart from casual fans, often favoring lesser known performers over those, who enjoy mainstream success (Aoyagi, 2005, p. 215; Xie, 2014, pp. 78-79). AKB48 are named after Akihabara, a district of Tōkyō that has become well known as a center otaku culture and "youth performing 'otaku-ness' for the cameras" (Galbraith, 2010, p. 212). It has also been marketed as a shopping destination to Japanese and international tourists interested in otaku and media that are usually connected to otaku. What fuels the image of groups like AKB48 as an otaku-group even more is a marketing strategy that caters mainly to super-fans who are willing to buy hundreds of copies of a CD or DVD to receive bonuses such as meet and greets with their favorite members or posters. Furthermore, CD purchases may allow them to vote on minor decisions regarding the group's future direction, for example on which of its members should stand in the limelight in the next music video.

An interesting recent spin on the pop-idol concept are groups like BiS (Short for Brand-new Idol Society). On the one hand, these self-proclaimed Anti-Idols present themselves as part of Idol and thus *otaku* culture[9]. On the other, they also make use of a more "traditional" image of subculture. Their band-logo quotes the famous Ramones one, and their T-Shirts bear the slogan "Cash from Idols" a clear reference to the Sex Pistols' well-known "Cash from Chaos". These kinds of allusions do not end with the group's merchandise or their visual image. The group's first, independently released music video became an internet sensation by filming the members running stark naked through a forest. The group's manager, Watanabe Junosuke, has been compared to Malcom McLaren in interviews. Watanabe claimed to have taken some inspiration for BiS from the Sex Pistols' marketing strategy while adding that his group was unfortunately not too likely to make it to the front pages of the tabloid papers like them (Munekata, 2016, pp. 155-156). Musically, the group moves freely between more traditional idol-pop and punk, often in collaboration with well-established artists. The latter provide not only new musical ideas, but also ensure that the group retains its image as an authentic underground band. Their arguably most debated work was an album produced in collaboration with the internationally renowned noise artists Hijokaidan. In addition creatives from entirely different genres such as DJ, producer and designer Nigo also expressed their admiration for the group.

The group's image could easily be pushed aside as no more than a marketing gimmick designed to set them apart in an overcrowded and gradually shrinking music market. I believe that there is however more to the phenomenon than this. BiS' combination of bubblegum pop and sub- or underground culture is remarkable in that it both gathers a relatively large audience interested in idol pop groups and has won over other fans who had not been interested in this kind of music and music marketing before.

BiS appeared in Idol magazines as well as in music magazines focusing on punk, and took part on both idol festivals and alternative music events. On the one hand, they gave concerts in small live venues, such as the Shinjuku Loft, a club which is closely associated with punk and underground music in Japan. On the other hand, the group's last concert before they temporarily broke up was held in Yokohama Arena, one of the largest concert venues in metropolitan Tōkyō.

[9] A similar term "underground idols" (chika aidoru) has also frequently been used. Apart from groups like BiS, who combine pop and more extreme music genres, "underground idol" is used to describe idol-groups or artists, who are not backed by a large talent agency or record company. Underground idols are often self-produced or work with smaller independent labels. In many cases these groups depend on a handful of loyal fans to survive as an artist (Galbraith, 2016). Interestingly, AKB48 also uses a similar image of a few passionate followers, who carried the group from the beginning of their career to the point of being one of Japan's most successful music groups as a central part in their self-presentation (Xie, 2014).

5. Conclusion — *Sabukaru* and underground culture

In 2012, the musician and author Ōtsuki Kenji published a book under the title *Sabukaru de kuu (Getting by on Subculture)*. It is a humorous collection of suggestions on how to survive without a day job, only by doing the things you really like to do. The cover blurb recommends the book to "all idiots who are incapable of a normal life" and to everyone who cannot get up early, is neither attractive nor good at studying, or cannot even imagine wearing a necktie in summer but who nonetheless wants to spend a happy life (Ōtsuki, 2012). Everything one needs to achieve this are, as the blurb continues, 15000 yen, passion and self-study. Later in his book he continues to stress the difference between *sabukaru* and subculture. For him, *sabukaru* has not much to do with Beatnik-culture, Timothy Leary, Counter-culture or Hippies — the examples he uses to illustrate the difference between the two terms. *Sabukaru*, so Ōtsuki, is lighter, less serious than subculture and hard to define. In the book, he illustrates *sabukaru* by pointing to his own career, which involves everything from musical activities to writing books or occasionally appearing in magazines or on television — in other words everything except huge ambitions and a "normal" lifestyle.

If we look back on the underground-but-pop-idols from the beginning of this paper, we find some similarities to Ōtsuki's definition of *sabukaru*. Idols are no glamourous pop-stars — neither do idols, such as BiS, try to be fully accepted as underground musicians. Their self-presentation appears rather as a collage of influences, quotations and parodies, making it a game for the audience to spot every reference. The group appeals to idol-otaku — much of their media presence is not too different from other idol groups — while at the same time their fans can nevertheless understand and present themselves as fans of Punk or other underground-music.

Ricky Wilson, the manager of the "Japan's first occult-infused idol unit" (Kracker, 2014) Necronomidol also mentions another aspect of the fandom surrounding such in-between groups in an interview with the English-language newspaper *The Japan Times*. He stresses the close connection of the fans as supporter of the group.

> At a metal show you never wear the T-shirt of the band (you're seeing); it's shallow. But at underground idol events you would want to show support for the unit. Strength in numbers; it's your gang colors (Kracker 2014).

These examples illustrate the borders between *sabukaru* — connected to the consumption of certain media and specific genres of popular culture — and more traditional subculture, as characterized by a sense of nonconformity and non-normativity, the "most common narrative about subcultures" according to Ken Gelder (Gelder, 2007).

To sum up what I have tried to show: Japanese underground idol groups — among other creatives — skillfully make use of the differences and overlap between these two concepts existent in Japanese cultural discourse today.

This renders the ongoing discussion on Japanese subculture, both on a popular and an academic level, an interesting field for further studies; even more so as different (youth) subcultures continue to play a vital role in Japanese popular culture today. The dynamic interplay between the notions of subculture and *sabukaru* that I have explored in this paper may well present a fruitful approach for such future research.

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