

## The meaning of “mukokuseki” in Harajuku subcultures research

Klaudia Krystyna Adamowicz

Jagiellonian University, Ph.D.Cand.

My research is concentrated on Japanese popular culture with a special emphasis on Japanese fashion and music subcultures from Harajuku. The presentation's aim was to define a term *mukokuseki* and explain its meaning in the characteristics of Japanese subcultures. I referred to the general definition of the term as well as to the wide range of its occurrence showing different spaces of the phenomenon. Then I presented two ways of understanding *mukokuseki* what was followed by defining new term *takokuseki* which develops the understanding of previously mentioned *mukokuseki*. By analyzing these concepts I described Japanese alternative culture from the perspective of transculturality, which seems to be deeply inscribed in the Japanese culture. Referring to the two possible ways of writing the word *takokuseki* I characterized Harajuku subcultures from the perspective of multiplicity of existing themes, as well as the possibility of transcultural flows of fantasies and desires. Presented terms provide a starting point for my further Harajuku subcultures' research, but also can be useful in Japanese study in general as well as in the developing transcultural discourse.

The word *mukokuseki* is written as 無国籍 where 無 expresses negation, 国 country and 籍 membership what together means the lack of membership or statelessness. The most basic use of the term is a legal context where *mukokuseki* means the lack of belonging to any specific country<sup>1</sup>. The first time when the term was applied to the cultural phenomena was in the Koichi Iwabuchi's book "Recentring globalization: popular culture and Japanese transnationalism". Even though I present it here in reference to Japanese culture it can be used to describe postmodern culture in general.

Iwabuchi used the term to describe the phenomenon of Japanese cultural and electronic products which popularity is the effect of their cultural vagueness and the lack of clear country belonging. According to Iwabuchi the final products are culturally odourless. The smell of Japanese culture is hidden. Even if it is known that the products' origin lies in Japan,

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1 *Statelessness*: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Statelessness#cite\\_note-2](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Statelessness#cite_note-2), accessed on 28.01.2015.

the fact does not constitute the essence of their popularity. Iwabuchi gives Sony walkman as an example. Even the name walkman became so popular that it is used to products which were not produced by Sony<sup>2</sup>. Other products also use English name hidening the japaneseness of their origin (for examples Panasonic, Olympus, Casio, Bridgestone etc.)<sup>3</sup>.

The explanation above was the hardest approach to the problem, but *mukokuseki* can be also applied to different cultural phenomena like animation, games, fashion, music or even to the characteristics of individuals. Both micro and macro level is engaged, analougusly to Wolfgang Welsch's theory of transculturality which appears on both levels<sup>4</sup>.

Susan Napier wrote a lot about anime's *mukokuseki* in the book "Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke: experiencing contemporary Japanese animetion". In anime characters' race is very often indefinite. They do not look Japanese, but neither they look European: unnatural proportions, colorful hair, unnaturally big eyes etc. Some people tend to refer big eyes to Disney or colorful hair to kabuki, but it seems that such characteristics is only the way of showing characters' emotions and rather their freedom of cultural limits than any special cultural or racial belonging<sup>5</sup>. Additionally universal and trascultural themes are very often used (for example apocalipse, escapism or the fight in the defense of the world)<sup>6</sup>.

Even thought the concrete place or time is often given, it does not lead to any specific consequences. Europe or european historical era are treated as some kind of ideal concept which does not have its equivalent in the real world or in the history. A good exaple can be "The Rose of Versailles", which is situated in XVIII century's France and the characters include some historical names like Marie Antoinette, Madame du Barry or Louis XVI, which are mixed in the story with fictional ones (Oscar Francois de Jarjays – commander of the royal guard). All story rather than presenting the historical truth turns into the romantic fairy tale which does not refer to Japan, but is also far from presenting the real Europe from this time. Similar characteristics can be found in different Takarazuka

2 K. Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*, Durham 2002, pp. 33 ff.

3 B. Zi, *What's Japan got to do with it? - mukokuseki, ronin, kabuki: Circle of blood*: <http://whatismanga.wordpress.com/2013/03/25/8c-whats-japan-got-to-do-with-it-mukokuseki-ronin-and-kabuki-circle-of-blood/>, accessed on 28.01.2015.

4 W. Welsch, *Tożsamość w epoce globalizacji – perspektywa transkulturowa*, (in:) *Estetyka transkulturowa*, ed. K. Wilkoszewska, Cracow 2004, pp. 34-35.

5 B. Ruh, *Adapting anime: Transnational media between Japan and the United States*: [https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/2022/15920/Ruh\\_indiana\\_0093A\\_11591.pdf?sequence=1](https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/2022/15920/Ruh_indiana_0093A_11591.pdf?sequence=1), s. 12 ff, accessed on 28.01.2015.

6 B. Greenstein, *Mukokuseki - "Stateless" Aspects of Anime*: <http://www.brainia.com/essays/Mukokuseki-Stateless-Aspects-Of-Anime/21953.html>, accessed on 28.01.2015.

performances.

Going from the more mainstream culture to the alternative one, which is the main point of my current research, there is also a lot of examples available. Japanese fashion and music is characterised by similar approach to Europe treated as an ideal concept – the Europe that has never existed.

All visual kei can be inscribed into this phenomenon. Visual kei is the music style, not music genre: bands' music can be very different, but all musicians take a special care of image and visual effect which are as important as the music. The style took inspiration from glam rock, goth rock, and also since beginning until now uses different west motifs. Instead of it it does not become the copy of western styles. Musicians, analougously to anime characters, instead of looking western can be considered as lacking any special nationality and as a result they are free from cultural limit.

Fashion including subcultural fashion from Harajuku can be inscribed into the same way<sup>7</sup>. Lolita Fashion is the style which used to be strongly connected with visual kei. It is said to arise from so called Nagomu galls who were fans of bands from Nagomu records. Then it became more and more independent. Lolita has many substyles, but generally the inspiration taken from the West is very visible. Dresses' shape is inspired by victorian dolls or victorian children's dresses. The influence of western subcultures like punk or goths can also be found. European motifs and stories are used in dress prints or in photo shoots. In spite of it Lolita Fashion analogusly to visual kei did not become the copy of European style, but stays inbetween or lacks any special belonging.

We can perceive the similar phenomenon on the micro level on which individuals build their own image, identity and sense of belonging. Cultural elements are freely chosen and transformed independently of their cultural origin. The array of available cultures is only the starting point to more wide and rich search. Sometimes we can meet with the opinion that Japanese who dye their hair blond, decide on plastic surgeries or wear colorful contact lenses want to look european. The similar mechanism works the other way round for European people wearing Japanese fashion. In spite of it we can come to the conclusion that the aim is to rather look stateless. The selection is based accordingly to aestethetic criteria and has nothing in common with national belonging<sup>8</sup>.

Minori and Anastasiya Shpagina can work as examples. Minori is the most famous representative of the style called *shironuri*, which is characterized by painting the face in white, what has its origin in Japanese theater, but also in geisha's practices. In spite of it Minori joins the white

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7 L. Miller, *Fashion innovation, not emulation, The Chicago Shimpo*, Chicago 2004, pp. 21.

8 L. Miller, *Youth fashion and changing beautification practice*, (in:) *Japan's changing generations. Are young people creating a new society?*, ed. G. Mathews i B. White, Oxford 2003, pp. 84.

make-up with the motifs of European fairy tales and vintage fashion. The final effect can not be clearly identified as Western or Japanese – it belongs to *mukokuseki* area, to fantasy world. Anastasiya Shpagina is mostly linked with anime aesthetics, but at the same time the Ukrainian joins it with European motifs, like fairy stories, flower fairy, creating *mukokuseki* image as a result. They both could be easily categorized as Japanese inspired by West, and European inspired by Japan, but in fact it seems that we have encountered more complicated situation where different cultural elements are exchanged through transcultural networks.

Iwabuchi presents two ways of understanding *mukokuseki*. The first one is the lack of belonging to any country, what is the result of erasing cultural and ethnic features. According to him it can be seen in Japanese technologies or kawaii characters, which in spite of being Japanese do not say anything about Japan itself and its culture<sup>9</sup>. This term is connected with globalization – which can be identified with uniformization and lead to the birth of one, shared culture and at the same time to the death of cultures' diversity.

The second way of understanding *mukokuseki* is hybridization: the diversity is not erased, in spite of it it is only multiplied through the wide array of available cultural motifs. The term is connected with transculturality, which according to Welsch is based on the rule of new diversity which does not happen between different cultures, but different cultural networks. Transculturality can be perceived as the new way of cultural exchange which leads to the birth of new meanings and values<sup>10</sup>.

Iwabuchi points both statelessness and hybridisation as the two meanings of *mukokuseki*, but still seems that the element suggests "the lack" and can meet with criticism. *Mukokuseki* strongly refers to the globalization which is contradictory with new diversity. It is also worth to mention that cultural products which outwardly does not represent Japanese culture in fact are immediately associated with Japan: anime, manga, fashion, music, all kawaii culture. Considering modern Japanese culture as not Japanese is very prejudicial – it has a strong connection with traditional one, share its values and uses its motifs.

Because of it I would like to introduce the new term: *takokuseki* which seems to better express the values of transculturality. It can be written as 多国籍 or 他国籍.

多国籍 expresses the content that was presented above. *Koku* means country and *seki* membership, *ta* points multiplicity. In spite of *mukokuseki*, *takokuseki* emphasises diversity what corresponds with the theory of transculturality. Elements are not chaotically mixed, but rather

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9 K. Iwabuchi, *ibid.*, pp. 71 ff.

10 W. Welsch, *Transkulturowość. Nowa koncepcja kultury*, (in:) *Filozoficzne konteksty rozumienia transwersalnego. Wokół koncepcji Wolfganga Welscha*, ed. R. Kubicki, Poznań 1998, pp. 204 ff.

connected through different networks – local specificity is preserved. *Takokuseki* can be applied to examples described above: visual kei, lolita fashion or *shironuri*. They lack concrete belonging, but at the same time are based on the idea of new diversity, which is born between cultural networks.

*Takokuseki* can be applied when researching all nowadays culture with special emphasis on popular one, but in fact the term *takokuseki* corresponds with all the space of postmodernity. It is also worth noticing that *takokuseki* or transculturality in general is especially adequate when considering Japanese culture. According to Welsch Japanese identity is transcultural as a matter of course. Japanese can easily adapt different elements, transform them and perceive them as the part of their own culture.

他国籍 is the second way of writing *takokuseki*. *Takoku* means different, foreign country and *sei* analogously mean belonging; together – belonging to the different country. Before I will come to explain what is hidden behind the term "different culture" I would like to refer to Arjun Appadurai's theory of scapes.

Scapes consists of five dimensions of global cultural flow. Those dimensions are as follow: ethnoscap (flow of people), mediascapes (information), technoscapes (technologies), finanscapes (money), ideoscapes (ideas)<sup>11</sup>. Napier has divided one more scape, which is called fantasyscope: the flow of fantasies. On fantasyscope the flow of desires, images and fascination takes place<sup>12</sup>.

Popcultural fantasyscope is the place of transcultural desires exchange and as an effect new sense of belonging is born. Rather than describing it as "culturally odourless" – using Iwabuchi's words – it should be called differently/variously odorous. Fantasyscope is based on multiplicity, as a result *takoku* (different world) is created – previously mentioned *takoku* is the world of fantasy.

In other words popculture should be treated as a world of fantasy where dreams are generated and realized. Manga, fashion, music – different ways are used leading to the same goal which essence does not lead in lacking nationality, but rather in creating world of its own by taking motifs from all available sources. As a result different boundaries become vague and lose its meaning. Fantasy is created – *takokuseki* is born.

What kind of place is nowadays Harajuku? Japanese popular culture with a special emphasis on Harajuku become like a toy box – using the world of hNaoto who is a designer and owner of several Harajuku brands<sup>13</sup>. People are freely juggling between styles, taking them from a

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11 A. Appadurai, *Nowoczesność bez granic. Kulturowe wymiary globalizacji*, tr. Z. Pucek, Cracow 2005, pp. 52 ff.

12 B. Ruh, *ibid.*, pp. 24.

13 P. Keet, *The Tokyo Look Book*, Tokyo 2007, pp. 74.

box like toys and enjoying the fullness of popular culture's multiplicity – *takokuseki* in its first meaning.

*Takokuseki* – toy box strategy – seems to be much easier to conduct in Japan than in Europe. In Japanese society status or class did not play an important role like in Europe so Japanese can treat European culture very easily and straightly visual. The relatively short presence of European culture in Japan also helps with this kind of treating. Joining second hands clothes with Louis Vuitton or popular music with opera seem natural. In Europa it is of course changing, but Japanese do not have problems with it since the beginning.

The other important case is that Europeans tend to look for meaning independently what kind of phenomena they approach. West researchers are stubbornly looking for the meaning and reasons of origin of Japanese street fashion; they indicate a rebellion against society in Harajuku's eccentric looks or see sexuality behind Lolita Fashion. In spite of it seems that when researching Japanese culture this way of thinking can lead us nowhere.

Shoichi Aoki – the editor of several fashion magazines including famous "Fruits" – says: "I get the feeling that people look for rebellion, violence, sexiness – the deeper meanings that often lie behind fashion in the West. But the youngsters in these magazines are simply having fun with clothes"<sup>14</sup>. There is no meaning or reason except having fun with fantasies, with taking different elements from the toy box and making the most of available *takokuseki*.

The term *mukokuseki* seems to stress the meaning of national identity and at the same time indicate the deeper meaning which should be hidden behind. However it seems that in popular culture *takoku* – fantasy world – comes first and boundaries are disappearing.

Summarizing:

- terms *mukokuseki* and *takokuseki* can be applied both on micro and macro level;
- *takokuseki* also refers to the sense of identity built through the multiplicity of available elements which are selected, transformed and take part in building a transcultural identity and new diversity;
- fantasy is the important category when researching Japanese popular culture, which meaning results in blurring the boundaries between different part of cultures;
- the presence of *takokuseki* – multiplicity – does not lead to chaos and contradictions, Japanese culture seems to be built on the value of multiplicity and Japanese identity stays fluent and allows outwardly contradictory element to co-exist;

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14 P. Keet, *The Tokyo Look Book*, Tokyo 2007, pp. 151.



- Welsch quoted Ryuusuke Hashi<sup>15</sup> who said that Japanese identity can be compared to the water: it does not have a one steady form – *mukokuseki* – but thanks to it it can easily adopt to different containers – *takokuseki* – but does not stop to be water;
- accuracy of the term *takokuseki* should lead to join it in the transcultural and also postmodern discourse.

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15 W. Welsch, *Tożsamość w epoce globalizacji...*, ibis., s. 43.