



© 2021 Department of Japanese Studies  
Vol.1, No.1, January 2022  
Inaugural Issue, pp. 181-189  
ISSN:2789-3014  
<http://doi.org/10.55156/jjsem.dec2109>

## ***BOSozoku*- Violent Speed Tribes in Japan**

Ahmad Shadaan\*

**Abstract**– This article explores one of the post-war Japanese subcultures known as Bosozoku, who were biker gangs and groups defying state, police, rules and regulations through speed, noise, violence and symbols during the 1970s and 1980s. Bosozoku was a youth subculture that emerged due to discontentment against the post-war establishment in Japan with capitalism and westernisation from the deprived youth who eulogised native Japanese culture and the emperor’s authority. This article briefly explores specific characteristics of the Bosozoku subculture like symbols, attire, styles and tools used to attract the authorities and people. Furthermore, how Bosozoku subculture has inspired pop culture in Japan by looking at the popular anime movie *Akira*. Also, looking into this subculture’s sociological and historical aspect by examining Japanese society and *Akira* and drawing parallels between them. This article examines the Bosozoku subculture and its delinquent behaviour, which directly challenged Japan’s established order and dominant culture and behaviour.

**Keywords** *Bosozoku* · Violent speed tribes in Japan · Movie- *Akira* · Youth subculture · Pop culture ·

### **1. *Bosozoku*: A social issue**

Post-war, Japan went through massive transformations, mainly focusing on economic endeavours, i.e., full-fledged Capitalism can be seen in Japan in this period. The economic transformation led to several societal and cultural phenomena, many good and many bad. Many subcultural phenomena emerged in the 1950s because of the kind of economic system taking place in this period. If we see from a Marxist perspective, these economic systems decide how society operates or rebalances itself, and slowly, a pattern starts to develop like class structure and the roles played by the people from different classes, cultures and

---

\* PhD Researcher, Department of East Asian Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Delhi, India. E-mail: [ahmadshadaan@yahoo.in](mailto:ahmadshadaan@yahoo.in)

subcultures belonging to different classes takes shapes. Although Japan managed to soar high as far as the economy, development, and achieving high-income level and standard of living are concerned, there emerged several social issues that have taken a toll on Japanese civil society. These social issues mostly emerge among the depressed sections of the society or those who do not belong to the dominant section (reap maximum benefits from the system) of the society. One of such social issues which emerged in post-war Japan was **Bosozoku**- the violent speed tribe subculture.

Bosozoku are Biker Gangs consisting of youths, primarily males, gained momentum and mushroomed in Japanese urban areas during the 1970s and 1980s. Following World War II, a burgeoning community of motorcycle fanatics — comprised of returning soldiers looking for a spark of adrenaline and disgruntled youth influenced by foreign films like *Rebel Without a Cause* - emerged in Japan. Though first known as the ‘kaminari zoku’ or ‘thunder tribe,’ the term ‘Bosozoku’ (roughly translates to “violent speed tribe”) was coined in the 1970s when riots broke out, and biker culture became more criminal (George, n. d.). This Japanese subculture revolves around speed, thrills, extreme customisation of bikes and cars. This subculture showcases the deviant elements present in Japanese society contrary to the general picture of Japan. The famous picture of Japan around the world is about politeness, discipline, workaholic people, hospitable people, always smiling, and well-defined societal norms which the Japanese people conform seemed there is no deviant or opposing elements or ideas in the Japanese society. However, the Bosozoku subculture has defied and did not conform to societal norms and showed the world that there are deviant and opposing elements in Japan. How they defied Japan’s dominant culture and elements, which also threatened the dominant aspect of society. Members mostly belonged to the low-income group and lower rungs of society, i.e. deprived section of the society; therefore, they challenged the state and dominant elements of the society by accepting their position in the society and showcasing their deviant and opposing characteristics through different means, and one of the means was forming bike gangs and showing the people and state that they are different by making noise, showing of motorbike skills, customised bikes which are different from ordinary vehicles or which people use daily, and dressing sense (tokkofuku-special attack suit) different hairstyle, which is not seen among the ordinary people or those who conform to societal norms.

## 2. **Bosozoku: the key traits**

The appearance of the Bosozoku is unique and different, and they symbolise their opposition against state and dominant societal norms and class differentiation. The appearance, symbols and meanings used by these groups or gangs are the

resistance shown to the dominant order. The recognised uniform of Bosozoku is the *tokkofuku*, a modified working clothes version of WWII kamikaze pilot uniforms embroidered with the specific Bosozoku group name on the back, nationalist phrases, kanji, imperial flags, personalised slogans which often ridicule Police and state, and stitched on nationalist symbols like the Rising Sun flag. These kanjis and signs are symbols showing their allegiance to the emperor and authentic Japanese culture or 'Japanese spirit' (Yamato Daishi), and therefore they believe that the true Japanese spirit or uniqueness of Japan is lost post-world war (Callahan, 2014). Other aspects of Bosozoku styles include greaseresque hairstyles, *dokajan* (jumpers worn by construction workers), *sentofuku* (overalls originating from right-wing organisations), *jimbei* (summer clothes), flu masks (to prevent recognition by the police), group flags, lighters, and matchbox. Bosozoku often sports accessories like wraparound headbands (*hachimaki*) bearing battle slogans (i.e., 'police be damned' or 'bring it on.'). round sunglasses, surgical masks, dangling earrings. Bosozoku tends to avoid wearing any protective gear when driving as it adds an extra thrill to the ride (Davis, n. d.). These are some of the essential appearances of the Bosozoku, and it shows how they look entirely different from the common perception about Japanese people and their appearance. The idea behind this subculture is to show that alternate Japan exists, and they are most deprived, neglected, denied opportunities and frustrated from their conditions and the state themselves. They showed rebellious characteristics against the dominant order.

Another thing which Isolde Standish talks about the Bosozoku is their style and gaining attention (*Medatsu koto*) of media and people. 'Fiske had argued that the pleasure 'style' affords its ability to empower the creator then he gives an example, how Madonna through style, turns herself into a spectacle' (Martinez, 2001). In doing so, the creator or performer completely controls the show and denies the onlooker any part to play, i.e., the onlooker is just a spectator. *Medatsu koto* (being seen) is another aspect of Bosozoku pleasures in which they derive the attention of media and people through this style by creating the spectacle.

### 3. *Bosozoku*: Analysis in literature

Ikuya Sato's book 'Kamikaze biker: Parody and anomy in affluent Japan (1991)' depicts the Bosozoku phenomenon, which achieved prominence in the 1980s and Sato during this time many other articles analysing and explaining the phenomenon (Sato, 1991). Sato's in-depth analysis of biker gangs in Japan showcases the contradictory picture of Japan, which is believed to be coherent and harmonious. The research is primarily based on first-person eyewitness interviews and accounts of the members of the Biker gangs and onlookers or spectators of the Bosozoku ridings. Based on personal accounts, Sato mainly focuses on the

behavioural pattern, appearance, what they feel, and why people join the gangs or enjoy the rides. Also, feelings and the opinion of the spectators regarding the Bosozoku subculture and their activities disrupt the regular proceedings of the day and disturb the ordinary people. Sato also vividly explains the activities and actions performed by the members on the street, which includes customisation of bikes, speed thrills, organising and planning of rides, meeting point and ending points, deciding the routes and action plan, techniques and stunts used in riding, hairstyles, clothing, evading the police, and the consequences and the effects of the activities performed. According to Takeyuki Tsuda's review of the book, 'the anthropological study of the Sato, the Bosozoku is analysed from a symbolic, interpretive perspective as the cultural text of 'play' and 'fun' that the deviant youth actively construct and define in their attempt to impose meaning in their life' (Tsuda, 1993). In order to achieve meaning in their lives, these youths are involved in 'delinquent' behaviour but are not as severe as American biker gangs who are indulged in serious crime. Though Bosozoku is considered as the entry point for the Yakuza (organised crime network of Japan) system and involvement in the petty crimes, they are most aggressive in behaviour only, and actions performed by them are, however 'playful' in nature to satisfy their angst and frustration against the typical Japanese setup according to Sato.

For example, Sato describes the 'driving techniques used by the bikers to show their fellows, passers-by, curiosity seekers. Techniques used are 'yonshasen kama' (zig-zagging across four-lane), 'hanabi' (fireworks, or making sparks by striking the asphalt pavement with the kickstand of the bike), 'raidaa chenji' (rider change, changing the rider's position while driving the bike)' (Sato, 1991, 14). In this way, Sato vividly describes the subculture's physical characteristics and then gives them symbolic and ritualistic meaning.

In the first chapter itself, Sato discusses the reason behind the people joining the Bosozoku groups and recognises two reasons. The first reason he recognised those given by scholars and psychologists is that the frustration, inferior status, and lack of success led them to become one of Bosozoku and use it for personal satisfaction and driving attention and show their dissatisfaction and rage against the state and society. However, Sato recognises the second reason as more plausible based on research and literature review of Bosozoku. In this view, Bosozoku activities are seen as 'asobi' (play). Two words 'speed' and 'thrills' are seen as most important in this approach as most of the answers in the interview corresponds to these two words. The people in the Bosozoku groups show delinquent behaviour in a playful manner, which means playing and creating minor chaos for the state and society as they ignore these individuals. The intrinsic enjoyment that this driving gives to individuals is the real reason for the expansion of Bosozoku. Sato talks about the concept of 'flow' (given by Mihaly



Csikszentmihalyi), which he explored during the personal interviews, which means 'the holistic sensation that the people feel when they act with total involvement' (Sato, 1991:18). He then recognises several characteristics of experience in Boso driving related to personal experience and enjoyment of the driving. Sato's work describes and explains the Boso-zoku phenomenon, which is very contemporary and limited in scope, and it does not look deeper into the phenomenon based on sociological and psychological perspectives. In other words, what motivates these youths in such a deviant and socially rebellious manner.

Another work that is an excellent addition to the study of Boso-zoku and, most importantly, its popularisation worldwide is the Japanese animated movie and Manga series 'Akira (1988)' directed by Katsuhiro Otomo became a massive hit around the world. The movie is set in a dystopian Japan where civil wars, rebellions, public outbreaks are common, and it consists of dysfunctional and highly stratified societies. Otomo's main issue is the 'lost youth' resulting from World War III, where the atom bomb destroyed Tokyo city. Otomo creates a parallel post-war Japan where the Japanese world is in complete chaos and is different from the real Japan of that time. However, one link between Japan is the 'lost youth'. He also recreates the Boso-zoku subculture, in which these lost youths are involved. The lead characters Kaneda and Tetsuo are friends and members of the Boso-zoku gang, and basically, it is a story of their friendship and rivalry with other issues of saving Japan from upcoming catastrophe in which these both play the most critical role.

Otomo very nicely showed darker and more chaotic Japan as an alternate future of post-war Japan in Akira. The movie demolishes the view of Japan as a homogenous society based on economic and social development, and it showed there was the existence of parallel Japan which is opposed to mainstream Japanese society. It was aimed at youths, more clearly deprived and neglected youths as an audience, but it became a sensation worldwide. The movie concentrates on the more deprived section of Japanese and how they are divorced from mainstream Japanese society and Japan's more vulnerable and darker side. The connection between the movie and real Japan is the Boso-zoku subculture which showed Japanese vulnerability and negativity.

Another scholar named Isolde Standish brings up the criticism of Ikuya Sato's study about the Boso-zoku subculture. He says that 'Sato fails to adequately explain the social and historical causes behind the manifestation of this particular form of delinquent behaviour' (Martinez, 2001:57). Standish stresses post-war polarisation based on occupational status and recognised several factors for developing youth subcultures in the post-war period. Some of the factors are post-war changes in the Japanese education and work systems, meritocracy and

achievement-oriented social status, the gradual decline of extended family, and the proliferation of mass media. 'Bosozoku subculture, seen as an outward manifestation of a new generational consciousness, poses a direct challenge to the traditional 'work ethic' and achievement-oriented ideology of the previous generation' (Martinez, 2001: 58). Standish also argues that the 'polarity of occupational status in society can be divided along the lines of blue-collar/low-status workers, and the salaryman/white-collar/high-status workers. The polarity of occupation is determined by education. It is reflected in the emergence of distinct youth cultures divided along these lines' (Martinez, 2001:59) By looking at this backdrop, the emergence of Bosozoku can be explained in Cohen's (1955) view that 'working-class youths who under-achieve at school and who cannot conform to 'respectable' society. Often resort to deviant behaviour as a solution to their problems' (Martinez, 2001:59-60). The discontent of the Bosozoku youths with mainstream society led to the adoption of standards that are the antithesis to the dominant standards.

Standish examines the Manga series 'Akira' and relates to the Bosozoku subculture. How director Otomo 'legitimises and mythologises the position of Bosozoku youth on the periphery of Japanese society, and so becomes a sharp critique of contemporary corporate Japanese society' (Martinez, 2001: 62). Standish explains that Akira is set in the futuristic present while deriving meaning from present social, political and economic conditions. The movie gets its meaning by adopting four historical signifiers that led to contemporary Japanese society's corruption and degeneration. The first historical signifier is pre-war Japan when right-wing military factions and Zaibatsu (prominent industrialists) controlled the country and drove Japan into the world war. The second historical signifier in the movie relates to the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the movie's opening scene where the atomic explosion destroys the city of Tokyo. The third historical signifier relates to the Tokyo Olympics (1964) and the fourth to the political unrest and student demonstrations against the revision of the US-Japan security treaty in the 1960s (Martinez, 2001). Kaneda and his Bosozoku friends exist in the movie with all the evils of the degenerated society, symbolising real Japan's post-war condition. Also, Kaneda and his friends are the product of this degenerated society. Otomo in Akira creates the imagery of the subdued voice and suppressed feeling of the depressed section of the Japanese people, which means how Japan looks like in the eyes of this depressing section. The depressed section which is shown in the movie is the Bosozoku group.

Standish also examines other technical and aesthetic aspects of the movie, but the main thing we are concerned with is its connection with the Bosozoku subculture and Japan's deviant aspect, which it clearly shows. The movie shows all the negative aspects of dominant cultures and setups like corruption among the elites,

revealing the dark side of scientific experimentation and technology and the gloomy and murkier picture of the city. Also, the qualities shown in the lead characters (Kaneda and colonel) of the movie corresponds to the deviant characteristics of what is expected and found in Japanese people. Both Kaneda and colonel are 'koha' types, which embody rugged masculinity especially aspired by the Bosozoku youths, whereas college students are considered 'nanpa' or soft types, which is in clear contrast to masculinity bravado, and chivalry (Martinez, 2001). The lead characters have purity of motives ('makoto') which means neither have been corrupted by the degenerative society. Standish sees the incorporation of Confucian ethics and drawing from the glorious Japanese past by this Bosozoku subculture depicted in the movie's lead characters. So, a different kind of nationalism is seen among the Bosozoku youths as they try to incorporate from Japanese ancient traditions and cultures to legitimise their position in Japanese mainstream society. The movie eulogises the deviant elements and characteristics, criticises the dominant elements of society, and puts it in a negative light. Akira became a worldwide phenomenon as a science fiction Manga series and movie. However, with time, it achieved cult status for its content and became essential for understanding the Bosozoku subculture and questioning the popular idea that Japan is a homogenous and classless society with overall development.

Another valuable work in understanding Japanese deviant behaviour where writer Karl Taro Greenfeld in his book 'Speed Tribes: Days and night with Japanese next generation' examines Japanese youths post bursting of the bubble. The book is a non-fiction work written in 1994 when Greenfeld worked as a journalist in Japan and interviewed Bosozoku drivers, Yakuza members, nightclub hostesses, ultra-right-wing nationalists. He wanted to look into where the new generation of Japan is heading, search for why the Japanese economic crackdown happened, and find its social impact. With this economic depression, the image of Japan as a classless and orderly country was broken. Therefore, Greenfeld tried to look into the underground realities for which he went to murkier alleys, lived with Yakuza gangsters and watched late-night proceedings on the Japanese streets. The book is written in individual and group stories based on interviews and eyewitnesses. The book has been used to study Japanese society in a more organised way and helps in a deeper understanding of Japanese society. Therefore, we see several scholars have reviewed and used this book to understand different Japanese subcultures. Greenfeld questions mainstream Japanese society through this book based on conformity, control, and order. He questioned everything about Japan, like the polite language and gesture, which in the case of Yakuza and Bosozoku is contradictory where these people use rough and vulgar forms of the Japanese language, and they are far from being polite. Greenfeld tried to everything antithesis about Japanese mainstream Global image.

However, the Bosozoku subculture declined rapidly with the dawn of the new century. According to Japan times, National Police Agency statistics show that Bosozoku members peaked at 42,510 in 1982 but steadily declined, hitting a record low of 6,771 in 2015 (Osaki, 2016). Bosozoku achieved its peak as a cultural phenomenon in 1980, but it steadily declined because of several reasons. The laws have become stricter where members are jailed for long terms, and their lives get spoiled very young. With improved surveillance and the help of cyberspace technology, the police can take stricter actions and keep watch on the bikers' activities. The laws on modifications of bikes and cars have also been becoming stricter. The state has dealt with the Bosozoku gangs with an iron fist and has almost ended the youth rage against mainstream Japanese society trying to control everything. With the decline of Bosozoku, new groups known as 'Kyushakai' (old bikers) have emerged to prominence, with their numbers increasing rapidly (Osaki, 2016). According to the NPA official, some of them are believed to be old Bosozoku members, and they insist that they follow traffic rules, but police are largely unconvinced, seeing them as "a secret nest" of Bosozoku. Kyushakai and Bosozoku are similar in modifying their bikes, such as cutting off mufflers for louder sounds and tilting their license plates to avoid identification. There is some continuity from the past, but there is an overall decline in the popularity of Bosozoku subcultures.

#### **4. *Bosozoku* subculture: Towards a conclusion**

As in Antonio Gramsci's 'Hegemony', the state always tries to suppress the voices or deviant behaviours and ideas that threaten the power or legitimacy of the state and dominant section of society. Therefore, to remain in power, the state has to suppress everything against its existence and always propagate, strengthening the legitimacy of those in power. However, it is challenging to suppress voices, ideas, and deviant behaviour. Japan, such a controlled society and country itself, has shown deviant behaviours such as the Bosozoku subculture, which threatened the existence of dominant ideas and culture of Japan and achieved worldwide popularity through popular culture like Manga and Anime and also through sufficient amount of literature and journalistic works and articles. Another reason cited for the decline of Bosozoku groups is that most teen members during 1980 have become middle-aged now trying to reintegrate into society to spend a normal life or form groups like Kyushakai. Also, Bosozoku members find it very difficult to reintegrate into the normal society as after one phase of life ends, a person wants an everyday life. The life of the members becomes tough. Either they indulge in criminal activities like joining Yakuza, or their life gets spoiled because of serving in prison and charges of criminal cases. Therefore, one needs to be very hardcore to involve in Bosozoku activities. However, the Bosozoku subculture has inspired teens for its distinct clothing styles and fashion and inspired Japan's popular culture to drive inspiration for its distinct style.

---

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank and express my gratitude to my supervisor Dr Ranjana Mukhopadhyaya for her continuous support and guidance and the HOD of the Department of East Asian Studies, Dr Ravni Thakur, for giving me the proper opportunities and providing adequate channels for moving forward. I am very grateful to the Department of Japanese studies, University of Dhaka and Journal of Japanese Studies: Exploring Multidisciplinarity for considering my article and my work and giving my work a unique opportunity for it to be recognised and also for publishing the article. I want to thank all the reviewers and the editor, Professor Abul Barkat, for their valuable time reviewing and providing specific inputs to improve the article. I would also like to thank my colleagues and friends for their support and encouragement. Without their help and support, the article and its recognition would not have been possible. I want to thank everyone for their support and guidance truly.

### References

- Sato, I. (1991). *Kamikaze biker: parody and anomy in affluent Japan*. The University of Chicago. Press. London and Chicago.
- Martinez, D.P. (2001). *The worlds of Japanese popular culture*. Cambridge university press. Cambridge.
- Tsuda, T. (1993). *Anthropological Quarterly*. 66 (2). 101–103. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/3317111](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3317111)..
- Greenfeld, K.T. (1994). *Speed tribes: days and nights with Japan's next generation*. HarperCollins publishers. New York.
- George C. (n. d). *The rebellious Japanese motorcycle gangs Influencing global fashion. Highsnobiety.*, <https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/bosozoku-japanese-gangs-fashion/>.
- Callahan, K. (2014). *The Bosozoku are Japan's disappearing rebels without a cause*. Jalopnik. <https://jalopnik.com/the-bosozoku-are-japans-disappearing-rebels-without-a-c-1642416129>
- Davis A. (n. d.). *Bosozoku*. Subcultures and society. <https://haenfler.sites.grinnell.edu/subcultures-and-scenes/bosozoku/>.
- Osaki, T. (2016). *Japan's Bosozoku bikers: a vanishing rebel breed*. Japan times. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/12/13/national/social-issues/japans-bosozoku-bikers-a-vanishing-rebel-breed/#.XhE9B0czY2w>.