

THE RISE OF ANIME AND MANGA FAN CONVENTIONS IN THE SAUDI ARABIAN PENINSULA

Jonathan Tarbox
Prince Sultan University

Introduction

Over the past several decades, a great deal of scholarship has been done on Japanese media and fan culture in North America, Europe and Northeast Asia (specifically Korea and China) and to a lesser extent South America. However, relatively little work has been done on media and fan culture as it relates to other parts of the world, such as Arab and Muslim cultures in the Middle East. There are a number of reasons for this. The growth of Japanese media fandom in other countries has been expansive and attractive to scholars, while the growth of the same media in the Arabic/Muslim world has been more muted.¹ Local scholars in the Arabic/Muslim

world have so far shown limited interest in pursuing scholarship in this field themselves. And finally, the barrier of the Arabic language prevents Western scholars from pursuing research they might otherwise be interested in.

Nonetheless, consumption of Japanese anime and manga has slowly but surely taken root in the Middle East. The recent rise of fan conventions in this region in recent years is an opportunity to examine fandom in the context of the conservative cultural context which they appear, a context dramatically different from that of the North American, South American, European and East Asian markets.

At the risk of oversimplification, a great deal of studies about media and culture follows two lines of thought: 1. Media as it arises in, and hence reflects, a culture; 2. Media as it crosses from one culture to another, reflecting the relationship between these two cultures. However, in many cases the cultures in consideration fall inside the set of commonly overlapping concepts “modern / developed / industrial / first world” (and predominantly “Western”) or else the set comprises the “developing / second /

¹ As stated above, the author will refer to “the Arabic/Muslim world” as shorthand to refer to the Muslim countries of Northeast Africa and the Middle East and the cultural continuum contained therein. It is worth unpacking this term to avoid the impression that these are meant to lump these cultures and ethnic groups together. One meaning of “Arabic” is the ethnically Arab peoples of the Arabian Peninsula. Another meaning is adjective denoting citizens of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Still another meaning is the Arabic language. Arabic as a language is spoken in a broad swath of the world stretching from Morocco in Northwest Africa to all parts of the Arabian Peninsula and North to Iraq and Syria. Only the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula are ethnically Arabs. And not all Arabic speakers are Muslim; there are a number of Christian and Jewish communities in these countries who speak Arabic.

Nonetheless, there is a significant cultural continuity throughout this region that makes a term such as “the Arabic/Muslim world.”

third world.”² Cultures in both of these sets tend to share a number of features:

- developed television, film, and print industries, with easy access to the resulting media
- open access between the countries for media to flow internationally
- relatively low levels of cultural and governmental censorship

However, Saudi Arabia and other conservative Middle Eastern countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen lie outside the set of concepts listed above. Their media industries are either almost non-existent or under severe government censorship. They produce very little print or video media, and that which is produced is predominately government propaganda or religious material. Non-local and non-traditional media is often derided, discouraged or outright forbidden. Consequently, the consumption and acceptance of Japanese media, and foreign media in general, in this region allow us to consider issues and ask questions that might not be as apparent in other cultures.

This paper will focus on fan conventions in the Saudi Arabian Peninsula, with special focus on the first Saudi Comic Con which took place in Jeddah, KSA in February 2017 (Saudi ComicCon). It is hoped that this will serve to raise awareness in the scholarly community of new possible areas for further research and study. The paper will include information about media and fandom in

² These terms are certainly loaded, and debatable. However, defining and deconstructing them are outside the parameters of this paper.

general in the wider Arabic/Muslim world. It will also consider the challenges this fandom makes to traditional Saudi culture, and implications for the social dynamics of modern Saudi Arabia.

It should be noted at the outset that the author of this paper lives and works in Saudi Arabia, and has personally participated in some of the events mentioned. In places where the information lacks footnotes or citation of source, the information is based on the author’s personal observation.

Background

A consideration of the background, especially a clarification of the social and cultural concepts being considered, is in order. Phrases like “The Middle East” and “the Muslim World” are no more homogeneous or cohesive concepts than “Europe,” “the Western World,” or “Christian Culture.” Within the area referred to as “The Middle East,” there is a wide variety of cultures, each of them in a different point on the spectrums of modernity, economic development, and cultural openness. Countries such as Egypt and Turkey have developed economies, developed media industries, and officially secular governments.³ Other countries such as Jordan and Lebanon have a more limited media and economic development.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, countries such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have extremely conservative

³ Egypt in particular has a well-developed film and television business as well as a large publishing culture. A great deal of Arab film and television programming available throughout the Arab world is produced in Cairo.

societies, with a deliberate rejection of “modernity,” and almost non-existent media industries. Ever since its foundation in 1932, the monarchy has aligned with the highly conservative fundamentalist Wahhabi sect of Islam to maintain social control. Until very recently, the Mutawa religious police operated in tandem with the official government police, with their role being to maintain religious laws such as dress codes and prayer times, as well as to suppress perceived foreign influences (BBC News, 2017).

The extent of these religious/cultural laws are important to mention, as they will be discussed in regards to the genre events related in the body of this paper. First, media culture is restricted, movie theaters are banned, and modern music concerts rarely happen. Publishing, apart from textbooks and instructional manuals, is limited almost exclusively to religious materials.

Next, there are the dress codes. Saudi law requires that all women leaving their home and going out in public must wear an *abaya*, a thick, opaque (predominately black) robe that covers her body from the neck to the wrists and feet. They are also required to wear a *hijab*, a scarf which covers the hair and neck. Beyond the legal requirements, women from certain communities completely cover the face including the eyes, and wear black gloves, effectively covering every single inch of their bodies. Men, for their part, are strongly encouraged (although not legally required) to wear Saudi traditional clothing. Short pants and short sleeves are discouraged.

The final restriction that concerns this study is gender segregation. Women are

restricted from spending unnecessary time interacting with men who are not their direct family relations. Many public buildings, including banks, schools, and private businesses, have separate entrances for men and women. Parks and beaches are frequently segregated by gender. Many restaurants do not allow women to enter unless accompanied by a male family member. Single men, for their part, can be denied entry to shopping malls during the peak hours.

Infringement of any of these laws can result in extremely serious punishments, including fines, imprisonment, and corporal punishment.

As with any culture, there is an opposite wave of influence that counters the perceived mainstream. The majority of homes have satellite television, with complete access to Arabic language programming from outside the kingdom as well as channels specializing in foreign film and television. The internet is also widespread, and anything not available on television can easily be pirated. One result of this is that anime, both subtitled and dubbed into Arabic, have been a staple of children and young adult programming for well over two decades. An entire generation has grown up watching *Dragon Ball* and *Naruto*.

Fan Festivals in Saudi Arabia

It is with this background that we can observe the rise of fan conventions in the Arabian Peninsula. The first and largest event is the Middle East Film & Comic Con (MEFCC), an annual multi-genre

convention held in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, since April 2012. It is run under the model familiar to any attendee of a North American fan convention, showcasing comic books, genre film and television, genre publishing, toys, and games, including significant programming about anime and manga. It also includes programming about emerging Arabic language content. In 2017, its sixth year, the convention is reporting 60,000 attendees, although it is unclear whether this is turn-style or unique (Newbould, 2017).

Taking place in Dubai, UAE, this event cannot be considered revolutionary or challenging to the local cultural order. It is not surprising that an event such as this would occur. The United Arab Emirates is a rapidly developing economic hub in the region that has focused its energy on modernism and financial success, rejecting conservatism in favor of financial progress. However, its direct proximity to Saudi Arabia and the large numbers of Saudi tourists mean that any event such as this one is certain to have an effect on Saudi Arabia.

The more important event that merits attention is the first ever Saudi ComicCon (SCC), which took place at the Takeoff Social & Air Sport Center in Jeddah during 16-18 February 2017. Organized by a local company, Time Entertainment, it was also supported by the Saudi government's General Entertainment Authority. The programming, layout and atmosphere convention also would be familiar to attendees of North American conventions. There were a number of panels and autograph-signings by genre celebrities from projects including *Game of Thrones*,

Breaking Bad, and *Doctor Strange*. There were also a significant number of cosplayers, and attendees enjoyed screenings of popular properties.

There were, however, a few important differences from standard conventions. Men and women entered the event space through separate entrance ways, although they were not segregated once inside. Women were still expected to wear an *abaya* (there was a separate women-only tent where women could take off their *abaya* and cosplay for each other). Both male and female cosplayers were prohibited from any kind of cross-dressing. And "indecent" symbols or images that might be considered to go against Islamic teachings were prohibited (Britton & Basma, 2017).

As should be apparent, what is fascinating about SCC was that it happened at all. The event was widely covered by local and international media because of the all cultural prohibitions that were being broken, or at least challenged. Young men and women freely mixed inside the event hall, enjoying video (if not actual theatrical showings) of foreign content, with extremely relaxed application of traditional dress codes.

As innocent as an event like this might seem, its challenge to the status quo did not go unnoticed by traditional authorities. Protesters started online complaints about this Western-style event in the traditional Islamic Kingdom, calling for a boycott. One hashtag branded it a "devil-worshipping festival" (Britton & Basma, 2017).

Moreover, the General Authority for Entertainment, the very body that supported the event, announced that it will penalize the

organizers for an unspecified “violation.” It has not been publically stated what the violation or penalty were, and thus it is currently unknown how this will affect the event and its relationship with the government (Russia Today, 2017).

Despite the condemnation and penalty, Time Entertainment is currently planning a greatly expanded version of the show next year. They have also mentioned plans to do a similar event in Riyadh.

There are two other events which have occurred in the recent past which further shed light on inroads fan culture is making into traditional Saudi Culture. The first is the Japanese Speech Contest at the Japanese Embassy in Riyadh. The contest started in 2007, and has been an annual fixture at the embassy ever since. The only relevance to this paper is that, when the speakers have been asked their reason for learning Japanese, the answer has consistently been that they were fans of anime and manga. This demonstrates the extent to which anime and manga is continuing to influence Saudi youth.

The other event is the Japanese Cultural Week at the King Fadh Cultural Center in Riyadh, KSA. Also sponsored by the embassy, this event in April of 2017 served to introduce various aspects of Japanese culture to the Saudi public. Two of the main features of the festival were a manga reading area and a booth introducing various manga drawing contests sponsored by the Japanese government and several manga publishers. Another highlight of the show was theater showings of Makoto Shinkai’s anime *Kotonoha no niwa (The Garden of Words)*. Attendance numbers have been hard to

obtain, as the event was not ticketed and open to the public. But the event space was filled to capacity both days it was held, and the film screenings were standing room only.

A cultural festival such as this may seem innocuous at first glance. But, like the Saudi Comic Con, it was condemned as a threat by conservative extremists. Japanese embassy staff had originally planned to do this event in Jeddah in the fall of 2016, and had been publicizing it far in advance. But after several weeks of publicity, the embassy began receiving threats from anonymous sources to disrupt and destroy the event, claiming it was an insult to traditional values. As a result, the Jeddah event was cancelled. In the case of the Riyadh event, publicity was done only one week before the event occurred, forestalling any chance for organized protest or other more dangerous responses. Yet despite this lack of publicity, the event was full.

Conclusion

The occurrence of these conventions and festival in the Arabian Peninsula allows a number of observations and provokes a series of questions. Japanese anime and manga fandom is not simply choice of entertainment product. Rather, it is perceived by many as threat to traditional culture, one that some would say must be fought against. Conversely, others perceive it as a positive that should be embraced. What challenge to authority and order does foreign media fandom create? Can the introduction of fan convention culture precipitate change in a conservative society? Does fandom actually cause such change, or

is it simply a symptom of a larger social phenomenon? Are these fans and convention attendees an outlying minority, or are they representatives a significant section of population? Will a traditional culture like the Saudi be able to accommodate the influx of fandom, and if so, what level of tension will such an adaption involve?

The author of this paper intends to follow these changes as they progress. He hopes this paper will encourage others in the field of media studies to consider the changes in this region as well. There are an enormity of economic, social, political and technological changes occurring in the Saudi region. Observing the adoption of Japanese media fandom and the behavior of the fans could well provide a window into the wider changes evolving in this part of the world.

References

- BBC News. "Saudi Arabia Plans Female Religious Police." *BBC*. (18 Oct. 2012). Accessed 7 August 2017.
- <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19992267>.
- Britton, Bianca, and Basma Atassi. "Crowds Flock to Saudi Arabia's First Comic Con." *CNN* (20 Feb. 2017). Accessed 1 August 2017.
- <http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/19/middleeast/saudi-arabia-comic-con/index.html>.
- Newbould, Chris. "MEFCC 2017: Another Super Year for the UAE's Top Pop-Culture Event." *The National (UAE Edition)* (9 Apr. 2017). Accessed 7 August 2017.
- <https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/television/mefcc-2017-another-super-year-for-the-uae-s-top-pop-culture-event-1.86411>.
- Russia Today. "Saudi Arabia's First Comic Con Penalized for 'Violation.'" *Russia Today* (24 Feb. 2017). Accessed 6 August 2017. <https://www.rt.com/news/378478-saudi-comic-con-violations/>.
- Saudi ComicCon. (2017). Accessed 5 August 2017.
- http://www.saudicomiccon.com/index_en.