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Zen in Brazil : cannibalizing Orientalist flows

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Rocha, C. (2013). Zen in Brazil : cannibalizing Orientalist flows. In E. Camayd-Freixas (Ed.), *Orientalism and Identity in Latin America: Fashioning Self and Other from the (Post) Colonial Margin* (pp. 200-216).

Abstract

In considering the Japanese Diaspora in Brazil, I will examine how European ideas of Orientalism mediated the Brazilian cultural elite's perceptions of Japan, Buddhism in general, and Zen. Rather than viewing Japanese immigrant communities in Brazil as a source of the "exotic East," Brazilian artists and intellectuals – and eventually the general public, - were inspired either indirectly by ideas of Orientalism originating from cultural centers in the West such as France, England, and the United States, or directly through assumptions about the "authenticity" of Japan itself. As a result, Zen was never confined to the narrow boundaries of the temples established by Sôtô Zenshû (the only Japanese Zen school in Brazil), but has been disseminated in elite culture.

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Title	Zen in Brazil : cannibalizing Orientalist flows
Language	eng
Date	2013
Author	Rocha, Cristina Western Sydney University
Extent	17
Handle	http://handle.uws.edu.au:8081/1959.7/526486
Subjects	Zen Buddhism Brazil Japan Orientalism postcolonialism
FOR code	220405 - Religion and Society 200211 - Postcolonial Studies 200206 - Globalisation and Culture
SEO code	950404 - Religion and Society
Publication Type	book chapter
Relation	Orientalism and Identity in Latin America: Fashioning Self and Other from the (Post) Colonial Margin
ISBN	9780816529537
Start Page	200
End Page	216
Publisher	University of Arizona Press
Place Published	U.S.A.

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Indeed, Zen in Brazil has never been isolated from trends occurring elsewhere. The arrival of Japanese immigrants, the rotation of Sôtôshû missionaries among various temples outside Japan, Brazilian intellectuals traveling to metropolitan centers and translating books on Zen, the media, and more recently the internet have meant that Brazil has received inflows, but it has also produced counterflows of Zen. Widely perceived as an overwhelmingly Catholic nation, Brazil has experienced in recent years a growth in the popularity of Buddhism among the urban, cosmopolitan upper classes. In the 1990s B