"Local Mosques and the Lives of Muslims in Japan"
Kawakami Yasunori
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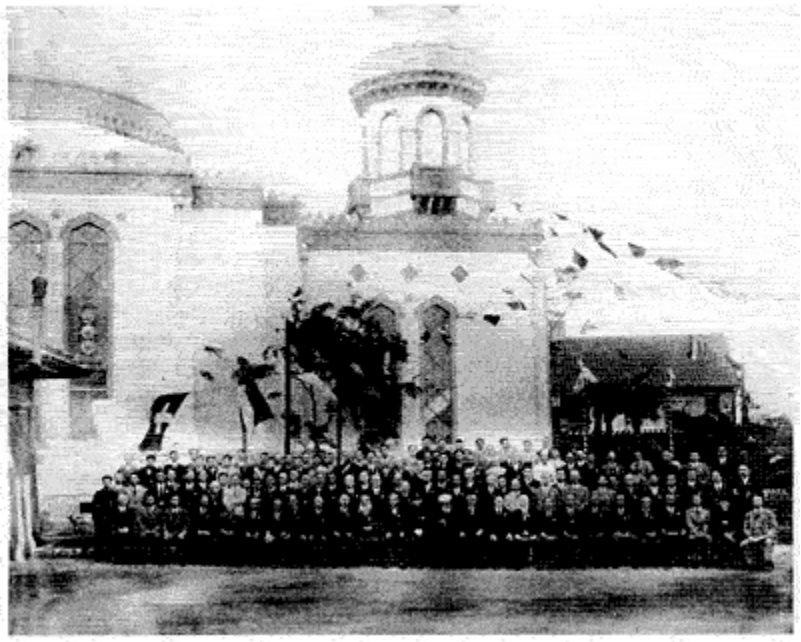
The history of Islam in Japan dates back roughly a century (the first Japanese to go on pilgrimage to Mecca did so in 1910, and the earliest Japanese mosque dates to 1935). The largest growth in the numbers of Muslims living and worshipping in Japan took place during the so-called "bubble economy" of the 1990s, when foreign workers (many from Islamic countries) entered Japan for employment. Despite subsequent restrictions placed on such workers, a number remained in Japan, marrying Japanese citizens and starting families. In his interviews with Muslim foreign workers and Japanese converts to Islam, Kawakami Yasunori suggests something of the intersection of personal experience and political context shaping this newest chapter in the history of Japanese religion. Even as some Japanese join the Islamic community as converts, and Muslim groups put down roots by building mosques and other long-term institutions, some Muslims retain a sense of connection with their countries of origin, and consider returning for the sake of their children's traditional upbringing.

Local Mosques and the Lives of Muslims in Japan

Kawakami Yasunori

The Muslim community in Japan has a history of about 100 years. For example, an Islamic mosque in Kobe dates from 1935.



Opening of the Tokyo Mosque, 1938

But the number of Muslims was relatively small before the 1980s. The number of Muslims in Japan grew rapidly in the mid-1980 during the bubble economy. At that time young men from Muslim countries including Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Iran came to Japan and worked in small businesses or factories which experienced labor shortages. But when the controversy over illegal foreign workers began, the Japanese government halted entry on short-term visits without a visa for citizens of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Iran. Following the collapse of the bubble economy in 1990, a number of Muslims acquired resident status and some obtained legal residence in Japan by marrying Japanese women. There is no accurate record of the religious affiliation of foreign residents in Japan, but we can estimate the approximate number of Muslims from the native countries of foreigners. Keiko Sakurai calculated the number of Muslims in Japan in 2000 to be 63,552 (Nihon no Muslim Shakai (Muslim society in Japan) Chikuma shinsho, 2003). Now many of them have families. They live and work with Japanese and send their children to Japanese schools. With the passage of time, they began to construct their lives as Muslims. Japanese can see the 'real Muslims lives' before their eyes in Japan today. Against the world-wide negative media campaign against Muslims and Islam, it is useful for Japanese to take the opportunity to understand the Muslims in their midst. —Morita Toyoko, Kobe University

"Allah Akbar!" (God is great!)

The Yokohama Mosque in Yokohama's Tsuzuki Ward echoes with the sound of Friday prayers chanted in Arabic. Worshippers in the 200-square-meter mosque number about 70—Muslims

from Asia, Africa and elsewhere. The premises were purchased last summer and then renovated, opening for services at the end of last year.

Before that, Muslims in Yokohama prayed in private apartments. On Friday, the holiest day of the Muslim week, worshippers would gather at one of their apartments for prayers, while police looked askance at the long lines of cars parked outside. Sometimes during the fasting month of Ramadan, police would get calls from neighbors uneasy about the large and mysterious after-sunset gathering of foreigners.

In January 2006, the local Islamic community decided to purchase a two-story reinforced concrete building and turn it into a mosque. The price: 100 million yen. The contract called for a 10 million yen down payment in March, with the remaining 90 million yen to be paid within four months. An appeal went out for contributions from foreign Muslims all over the country—in Osaka, Nagoya, Toyama, Niigata and Hokkaido.

“There it was, May already, and we’d collected no more than 20 million yen,” recalls Iqbal, a 43-year-old Pakistani used car dealer.

Iqbal came to Japan in 1988, and launched his dealership three years later. Now he owns three used car showrooms in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Business is good, but “When there’s no mosque, something important is missing from your life,” he says.

A mosque is more than a place of worship. It occupies a central role in Islamic life. Adults not only pray there but also attend sermons as well, given by religious teachers. Children study the Koran there. The mosque collects charity and assists the poor. It forms the core of the Islamic community.

A Tokyo Mosque in Yoyogi

There are currently between 30 and 40 single-story mosques in Japan, plus another 100 or more apartment rooms set aside, in the absence of more suitable facilities, for prayers. Many Muslim communities have plans to build mosques in the near future.

Mohammad, 38, runs an Asian grocery store in Tsunashima, Yokohama. The Sri Lankan had 520,000 yen in savings, and was thinking of donating 300,000 yen towards the purchase of the mosque. He changed his mind and donated 500,000 yen, virtually emptying his account.

He says: "When you make a contribution to a mosque, God prepares a house for you in heaven. It's thanks to God that I've been able to make my way in Japan up to now. And God will continue to help me in future."

Mohammed, the seventh-century founder of Islam, was a merchant of Mecca, and many passages in the Koran reflect a merchant's manner of thinking—as, for example: "Who is there who will lend a good loan to God? For He will double it for him, and for him is a generous reward."

The deadline for payment of the 90 million yen was 11 am July 20. On July 10, the community was still 5 million yen short. Iqbal worked the phones, contacting foreign Muslims all over Japan. On the morning of July 20, 2 million yen arrived in cash. That, plus contributions forwarded directly to a special bank account, just made up the required amount.

In Nagoya, local foreign Muslims, most of them used car dealers, got together and purchased for 46 million yen a suburban building that had previously been a clothing store, turning it into the Nagoya Port Mosque, which opened last autumn.

"Wherever in the world Muslims live, it's only natural that there be a mosque," says Hanif, a 36-year-old Sri Lankan.

Factory Workers

"Come to prayers, prayers are more important than sleep."

At 5:30 on Sunday morning, the muezzin summons the faithful of Shin-Anjo, Aichi Prefecture, to worship at the New Anjo Mosque. Among the more than 300 who had been here for Saturday night prayers, about 100—this reporter with them—spent the night at the mosque.

More than half the worshippers are Indonesians working at nearby factories turning out auto parts and other products on a subcontract basis. The workers are participants in a three-year program that since the early 1990s has offered training (for one year) and on-the-job experience (two years) to about 5,000 overseas applicants. Second in numbers only to the Chinese are those from Indonesia, the world's largest Islamic country.

"Don't cheat people," says the preacher. "Earn your profits by just means only. Profits are given to you by God. He wants to test you in your use of them. Help the needy, follow the way of Islam—and God will reward you."

"It's hard to say afternoon prayers at work," says one trainee. "And if there's overtime, I can't say prayers after sunset either."

Muslims pray five times a day—in the morning, just after noon, around 3 pm, after sunset and at night. Morning and nighttime prayers can be recited at their lodgings. The noon prayer can be said during the lunch break. But mid-afternoon and sunset prayers present a difficulty.

"When I first came," says another trainee, "I said to the boss, 'Give me time to say my prayers, and in return I'll work really hard for you.' All it takes is 10 minutes. And a serious Muslim who says his prayers is serious about his work, too."

In their home countries, most offices and factories set aside space for prayers. But Japan, even as it welcomes Islamic workers, offers very little in the way of workplace prayer space. Prayer and work do not mix naturally here.

"I'm going to my lodging to get some sleep," says an Indonesian trainee as he leaves the mosque at 8 am Sunday. "I have to go to work this evening. I'm on the night shift."

He works from 8 pm to 8 am every night except Saturday. This is his third year in Japan. He's worked the night shift for the past year. "It's good for me," he says. "I asked for the night shift. It means I can pray five times a day."

Pilgrimage to Mecca

Monir Morshed is a 32-year-old Bangladeshi engineer working for a computer company in Tokyo's Shinjuku Ward. At the end of last year, he went on a pilgrimage to Mecca.

Every year more than two million Muslims from all over the world journey to this holiest of Islamic sites. "The pilgrimage washes your sins clean," Monir says. "You feel as if you've been reborn."

He came to Japan in 1993 on a Japanese government scholarship. He graduated from the Tokyo Institute of Technology, went on to graduate school to do a master's course, and then stayed in Japan to work. Last year, he began to think seriously about going to Mecca. He gave his employers notice that he would be taking three weeks' leave towards the end of the year. In summer, he began to observe Islamic teaching with particular rigor. Dining with colleagues, he refrained not only from drinking but also from so much as touching a sake bottle.

In September, there was an office party. "Before, when we poured each other drinks, my colleagues would pour my juice while I poured their beer. But I couldn't do that any more, so I made up for it by serving their vegetables for them."

Devout Muslims must abstain not only from alcohol, but also from food or cakes flavored with alcohol. "Strictly speaking, it's not right for me even to attend dinners where alcohol is served," Monir says. "However," he adds—in an apparent concession to Japanese ways—"socializing is important, too."

In Islam, there are specially qualified holy men who answer questions put to them by believers. These questions can be about anything, from matters of faith to human relationships, business and contracts, even politics. Answers are grounded in the Koran and in judgments rendered by great scholars in the past.

Shaikh Hafiz Salman, 43, graduated from a religious seminary in Pakistan and now serves as imam at the Otsuka Mosque in Tokyo's Toshima Ward. "Muslims living in Japan are beset by questions that simply don't arise among Muslims in the Islamic world," he says. "It's my job to address these questions."

Monir consulted Shaikh Hafiz regarding whether it was acceptable for him to attend office parties. "It would be best not to, but if you must attend, do not touch alcohol," Shaikh Hafiz replied. Monir's leave of absence began on Dec. 20. At a year-end party just before, his boss took him aside and said, "Take care of yourself; we'll see you next year." Monir had felt uncomfortable about taking time off. "It pleased me that the boss spoke to me like that," he says.

Children Learn Arabic

At the mosque in Ebina, Kanagawa Prefecture, about 10 children around age 10 are learning the Arabic alphabet. Every day from 4 pm to 8 pm, the mosque holds Koran classes. They started last November, at the urging of Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslims living in the area who wanted their children to be properly versed in the ancestral religion and the Arabic language. The classes are taught by the parents themselves.

Children learn Arabic at the Yokohama Mosque

Slaiman, a 39-year-old Sri Lankan who lives in neighboring Yamato and deals in used cars, sends his two sons, age 8 and 4, to classes at the mosque. He himself began studying Arabic at age 5 at a mosque school in Sir Lanka. He wants to give his own children a similar religious environment. “The Koran is written in Arabic,” he says. “If the children don’t learn it now they won’t be able to read it properly or understand the meaning of the prayers.”

Islam is not faith in isolation. It teaches faith, morality and human relations as a whole, and children must learn it early if they are to fully master it. “Japanese schools teach only knowledge—not how to be a good human being,” says one Muslim father.

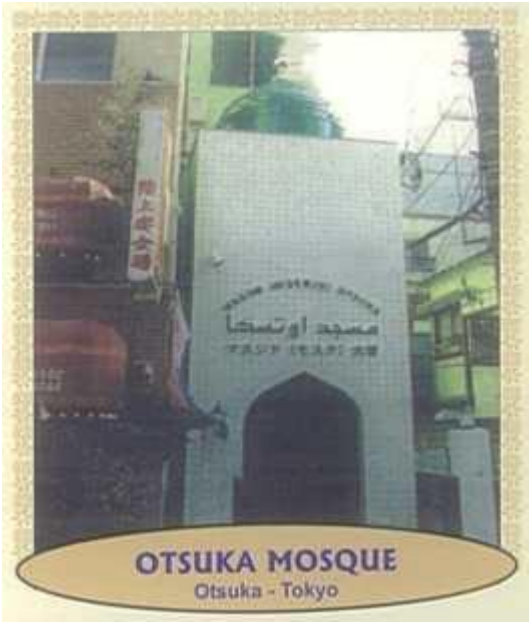
Nasr-abdllah, 49, operates an Asian grocery store in Shinjuku Ward. Originally from India, he has plans to open an Islamic school. “Foreign Muslims living in Japan are deeply troubled about their children’s education,” he explains. “In some cases, the father wants to send the children to school in his home country, but his Japanese wife is opposed. Some couples have divorced over this.” Nasr-abdllah’s Japanese wife took their six children to Malaysia for two years, to give their three daughters, when they reached school age, the benefits of Islamic schooling.

Hossein, a 43-year-old car dealer in Katsushika Ward, has been in Japan 20 years, but he and his Japanese wife plan to take their three children to his native Bangladesh next July so the elder children, a 10-year-old daughter and a 7-year-old son, can acquire the beginnings of an Islamic education. They currently attend a local elementary school. Forbidden by their religion from eating pork or any meat not prepared in accord with Islamic rites, the children bring lunch from home following the same menu but prepared to conform to their faith. School authorities waived the usual dress regulations, allowing the daughter to wear an Islamic scarf.

Hossein says: “Soon, my daughter will have to don a full veil, which exposes only the eyes. It will be hard for her to attend Japanese school. As for my son, I want him to grow up to be an Islamic scholar in Bangladesh.”

There are many Islamic schools in Western nations with large Muslim populations, but in Japan, there is not a single Muslim elementary or junior high school. The Otsuka Mosque in Toshima

Ward plans to register itself as an educational corporation and establish an Islamic school, but for now all it can offer is a daycare center with no official status.



Japanese Muslim Praises His Religion

For a man in his mid-30s with no previous experience as a computer engineer, Ibrahim (Ken) Okubo faced a wall of difficulties starting his new profession as a systems engineer.

Okubo would go through 35 interviews over a period of six months before finally landing a job.

During this time, the Japanese Islamic convert was supported by the foreign Muslims he would meet at the mosques. They would offer to help him in any way they could. Some introduced him to potential employers. “In Islam, it is God’s will to help people in difficulty. They do not expect anything in return and you don’t have to give something back as is the custom among the Japanese,” Okubo says. “The idea is that the reward will come from God. Many Japanese think that they have no one but themselves to turn to, and personal relationships can become stifling.”

Okubo was around 20 when he took an interest in foreign cultures. He began attending Arabic lessons at the Islamic Center-Japan in Tokyo’s Setagaya Ward. He eventually came across Tablighi Jamaat, a nonpolitical missionary group from Pakistan focusing on Islamic revival. “I was overwhelmed by their intensity when praying to God and their warmth as people,” Okubo says. He converted to Islam and spent four months in Pakistan doing missionary work.

Islamic Center of Japan

Currently, there are seven mosques in Japan that belong to Tablighi. Okubo is one of the few Japanese participants in the group. Okubo, now a 41-year-old systems engineer living and working in Tokyo, is widely known among the Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and other foreign Muslims living in Japan.

On the first day he reported to work at his new company, he explained to his superior that as a Muslim, he would not go out drinking and that he would have to pray during work hours. His employer gave his consent, and Okubo now prays twice in the afternoon in the employee lounge or on the fire escape landing.

Exchanges between foreign Muslims living in Japan and the Japanese are quite limited. Yet encounters at the workplace and other areas are increasing in number. When it happens, the Japanese often feel that Muslims have a sense of stability as people who accept their fate as God's will. It has inspired some Japanese to become believers.

Ogawara Hiromasa, a 35-year-old company employee from Saitama, came into contact with Islam after he graduated from high school. Ogawara joined a printing company where he met a Pakistani colleague. Ogawara soon became fascinated by his way of life. "He was strong and always held a positive view," Ogawara says. Ogawara befriended him, and would sometimes help him with child care and shopping before eventually becoming his pupil. Ogawara converted eight years ago. "Today, it is frightening in Japan where people can easily take offense just by hearing a choice of words that they do not like. Things are more relaxed in the world of Islam," he says.

Although an accurate number of Muslims in Japan is not available, Muslims from Asian nations such as Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh make up most of the foreign Muslims, numbering between 70,000 and 100,000. The estimated number of Japanese Muslims ranges from thousands to tens of thousands. The Japan Muslim Association estimates from registrations that there are somewhere between 7,000 and 10,000. Of the Japanese Muslims, the biggest group consists of

women who converted when they married Pakistanis and Bangladeshis who came to Japan in the 1980s to work.

Indian Muslim Nasr-abdllah, 49, who runs an Asian food store in Tokyo's Shinjuku Ward, married a Japanese woman 16 years ago. "The Japanese do good deeds but worry too much about other people's opinion. Sometimes my wife is preoccupied with school and garbage collection and ends up delaying her prayers," says Nasr-abdllah with a wry smile.

The Japanese feel Islam is something far removed from them. Yet a large number of Muslim populations exist in Asian countries. The number of Muslims is steadily increasing in Japan where they work as businessmen, computer engineers and specialized trainees. Our understanding of Islam holds an important clue in the internationalization progressing around us.

Kawakami Yasunori is a senior staff writer for the Asahi Shimbun. This article appeared in The Asia Shimbun *on May 4, 2007. Posted at* Japan Focus *on May 30, 2007.*