

## ISLAMIC STUDIES IN JAPAN AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

by

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I would like to take "Islamic studies" here broadly as meaning the study of the Muslim world as well as of Islam as a religion. Then it goes more than a century back to the middle of the 19th century. Let me divide its history into four periods:

First Period, 1868 — 1930

Second Period, 1930 — 1945

Third Period, 1945 — 1970

Fourth Period, 1970 — present

(I) First Period (1868 — 1930)

This is a period of preparation. After the Meiji Revolution, Japan opened the door to foreign countries and launched to modernize the country, discarding the isolation policy of the Tokugawa feudal government. The Japanese began traveling abroad, either to study Western civilization or for political, diplomatic, or economic reasons. Foreigners also came in. The Japanese went not only to Europe and America, but also to China, India, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East, where they mingled with Muslims and encountered Islam. Yamada Torajiro and Ariga Bunpachiro, said to be the first Japanese Muslims, entered the faith either abroad — Yamada in the Ottoman Turkey, Ariga in India — or after returning to Japan.

The characteristic of this period is a series of researches, reports and translations of the Egyptian legal and judicial documents during 1870s. They are, for example:

*The Rights of Consular Jurisdiction in the Ottoman Turkey and Egypt*  
(1873)

*Reports on the Mixed Court* (1873)

*Records of Legal Revision of Jurisdiction in Egypt (Part II)* (1875)

*Documents on Revision of Jurisdiction in Egypt* (1875)

Translation of John Davidson's *Reports on the Mixed Court in Egypt*  
(1877)

*Legal Codes of Egypt* (1877)

All this work was undertaken by the Ministry of Justice. But why did



the Ministry of Justice become interested in the Egyptian judicial system? Taking power in Egypt in the beginning of the 19th century, Muhammad 'Ali launched a series of measures to enrich, strengthen and modernize the country. For this purpose, he raised foreign loans. But due to the failure, of financial management and other reasons, the Egyptian government could not pay even the interest and became bankrupt in 1870s. The British and other European powers began to interfere in the tax and revenue system of Egypt with a view to recovering the investments. These moves, however, triggered the patriotic military revolt led by 'Urabi Pasha in 1881—82, though it ended in failure and Egypt was put under the British protection.

Closely watching these international developments, the Japanese government was keen to know what was happening in the judicial system of Egypt, as Japan was also exposed to the various European influences and interferences soon after the adoption of the open-door policy.

In addition to the above-mentioned researches and reports, many books and articles at the turn of the century and thereafter. To give some examples,

*Modern History of Egypt* (by Tokai Sanshi)

*Egyptian Mixed Court* (by Hara Kei)

"Thus 'Urabi Pasha talks" (1891)

"Egyptian Question" (1893)

"The Suez Canal in International Law" (1897)

"The British and French Intentions in Africa and the Fashoda Crisis" (1898)

"An Aspect of the Fashoda Crisis" (")

"The Closing Part of the Fashoda Crisis" (")

"The Financial Situation of Egypt" (")

"The Progress of the Baghdad Railway Policy"

"The Absolution of 'Urabi Pasha"

"The Constitutional Government of the Ottoman Empire" (1908)

All these articles were mostly written on the basis of the European materials and appeared in the periodicals like *The Foreign Affairs* issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and *Journal of Historical Studies* issued by the Association of Historical Studies.

As to the Muslim life, there are some articles such as "Divorce in the Islamic Law," "The Marriage Custom of the Muslims." Perhaps these are also based on, or translations from, the materials of the European languages. In passing, it is interesting to know that the Japanese became acquainted with the Islamic culture and world through the Western languages. Unfortunately this has been more or less true until quite recently.

As for the religion of Islam itself, a book entitled *The Life of Muhammad* was written by Sakamoto Ken'ichi in 1899. He also translated the Qur'an into Japanese later on in 1920, though not directly from the Arabic. I believe this is the first Japanese translation of the Qur'an. In addition, the first hajj, 'Umar Yamaoka Kotaro made the first pilgrimage to Mecca in 1909



as mentioned before, accompanied by a Tartar refugee to Japan, 'Abd al-Rashid Ibrahim. On his return, Yamaoka tried hard to interest the Japanese in the international political situation of the various Muslim peoples then under the control of the Western powers, stressing the importance of understanding Islam.

## (II) Second Period (1930 — 1945)

The study of Islam or the Islamic world in its real sense started in this period, though it covers only fifteen years. What lay behind these academic interests and activities? It was obviously not the result of the Islamic revival, since the number of the Muslims in Japan was almost none, nor was there any systematic propagation of Islam (*da'wah*), as was being done by the Christian missionaries.

After the Meiji Revolution in 1868, Japan quickly modernized and militarily strengthened the country. This was abundantly proved by her victory in the two wars with China (1894—95) and Russia (1904—05). The Japanese imperialistic interest was gradually expanded into the surrounding overseas areas. In 1931 the Japanese invaded Manchuria, North-Western part of China, establishing the puppet state of Manchu-kuo the following year. The Marco Polo Bridge Incident in 1937 touched off full-scale war between Japan and China, and in December 1941 Japan went to war with the United States. There were large Muslim populations not only in China but also in South-east Asia and India, which were under Western rule. Since the actions of these Muslims affected Japanese national policy, the "Muslim question" became a matter of genuine concern. It was in this context that many Japanese developed an interest in Islam and some even went to be converted to Islam.

Pilgrimages to Mecca were also organized. At the time, this was a very difficult undertaking both economically and physically. Nur Tanaka Ippei made the pilgrimage second to Yamaoka's in 1924. Despite the obstacles, pilgrimages were organized every year between 1934 and 1938. Wakabayashi Han, one of the rightist leaders, was the primary backer of these pilgrimages. Like Yamaoka, he preached that understanding of and friendship with the Muslim peoples was important to Japanese national policy in Asia and the Pacific.

A mosque was built in Kobe in 1935, and one in Tokyo in 1938. Around this time a number of academic organizations for the study of Islam were formed, foremost among them was the Institute for the Study of the Muslim Areas founded in 1938, which issued the journal, *The Muslim Areas* and other reports. The Association of Islamic Culture formed in 1937 with its organ, *Islamic Culture*, was absorbed and expanded in the following year in the Great Japanese Association for Islamic Studies and issued the periodical, *The Muslim World*. This Association, headed by a general, named Hayashi Senjuro, encouraged the study and research on Islam and the Muslim world under the financial support of the military circles.



With the end of World War II and the beginning of the Allied Occupation, however, pre-war institutions and organizations were disorganized and disbanded, even when they remained undestroyed during the war. The Great Association was no exception. Its library was either destroyed in fire under heavy bombardments, or confiscated by the GHQ. It is reported that a part of the library is preserved in the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. In the meantime this Association was later revived as a pure academic organization, with a new name of Association for Islamic Studies in Japan in 1963 and started issuing an academic journal. *The World of Islam*.

There was another organization, Research Bureau of East Asian Economy, in the South Manchurian Railway Company, which had the Islamic section where the late Prof. Maejima Shinji and Okawa Shumei, rightist ideologue and one of the earliest translators of the Qur'an into Japanese, were working as the staff. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs had also the research section and issued *The Muslim Affairs*. It is not an exaggeration to say that all the Japanese intellectual resources were mobilized to the study of the Muslim world and its culture and religion. There were, therefore, many scholars who, no one cannot imagine from the postwar activities, participated in these researches. However, almost all of these scholars gave up and quit the study of Islam and the Muslim world after the war, except a very limited number of scholars, such as the above-mentioned late Profs. Maejima Shinji and Gamo Reiichi, and Prof. Izutsu Toshihiko and others, who continued their study after the war and transmitted the pre- and mid-war heritage of Islamic studies in Japan in the post-war generations.

Concerning the intellectual attitude of those scholars, I would like to quote a bitter comment and confession by the late Prof. Nohara Shiro who started as a chinologist and turned later to the study of Islam.

After World War II, the object of Islamic studies itself has changed a great deal. But what is this change? What is the meaning of its change? We have to conduct our study, keeping this question in mind. In short, we could manipulate the object of our study before and during the war. Sometimes it was also the object of the imperialistic rule. After the war, however, the object of our study has changed. And the matter is what effect it has to our study. To put in another way, the Islamic studies those days was the research in the framework of the national policy, rather than the attempt of mutual understanding. This was the general character of those studies, though with some exceptions. Therefore, once the policy collapsed, the researches also could not stand. This is the problem.

### (III) Third Period (1945 — 1970)

The defeat of the war and the occupation of the Allied forces were a great shock to the Japanese people. But they were too busy and preoccupied with surviving, reconstructing the economy, and making Japan over into a



democratic nation. They had no time, nor interest in Islam and the Muslim and any other worlds. But Japan gradually emerged from the Occupation and embarked on rapid economic growth. Meanwhile, Asian and African countries gained independence and came to have a major voice in the United Nations. To mention some significant events,

Nasir's Revolution in Egypt (1952).

The Afro-Asian Congress in Bandung (1955)

Nasir's Nationalization of the Suez Canal and the Suez Crisis (1956)

The Unification of Egypt and Syria (1958)

Qasim's Revolution in Iraq (1958)

The UN's Declaration of the Liberation of Colonies (1960)

Formation of OAU (1963), etc.

Along with this international development and Japan's gradual economic recovery, the young generation of people became, interested with great sympathy in Afro-Asian political neutralism, non-alliance policy and nationalism against the European colonialism, while they were critical upon the American influence on the Japanese policy. Some of them thus turned to study the Muslim world. They are mostly the students, graduates and teachers in the field of Oriental and western history. It was during this time that I myself began to study Islam as a graduate student. However, there were few books in European languages, much less in Arabic and Persian. Nor were few teachers in this field, much less from the viewpoint of Comparative Religion. So I had to learn Arabic by myself, and eventually got a scholarship to study to Harvard University.

Anyway, once again the Japanese came into economic contact with the peoples of Asia and Africa, including the Muslim world. Various Muslim groups were organized, and the Islamic Center, Japan, an international missionary organization was one of them.

#### (IV) Fourth Period (1970—present)

This period began in the 1970s, when attention was focused anew on the Muslim world by a number of events that occurred in the Middle East: the oil crisis engendered by the fourth Middle East War in 1973, Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979, the occupation of the Haram Mosque in Mecca by the Muslim radicals the same year, Soviet's invasion into Afghanistan and the Muslim resistance, Iraq-Iran war in 1980, the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981, etc.

For Japan in particular, the "Muslim question" again assumed importance because of the need to ensure a stable oil supply. But these happenings disclosed the importance and vitality of the spiritual value of Islam, as Islam was so far regarded at most, as one of the elements for understanding the Muslim world.

The characteristic of this period is the tremendous variety in approach to the study of Islam—history, philosophy, comparative religion, econo-

mics, anthropology, and so forth. And the number of the students and scholars has greatly increased, and many institutions, departments and schools for the study of the Muslim areas, as well as the facilities were fairly improved. Nowadays it is not very difficult for students and scholars to learn and study in those areas. One of the important steps in this course was the start of the Department of Islamic Studies, where I have been teaching, in my University of Tokyo. This is the only department in the Japanese universities and colleges, national or private, especially devoted to Islamic studies (Islamic religion, thought, philosophy and institutions) as one of the Humanities. In spite of these improvements, there still remains much to be desired. The long-cherished establishment of the National Institute for Middle Eastern Studies has only come to a final step toward the realization recently. Thank you.