

Some Issues Affecting Muslims in Japan¹

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In his book entitled, *Islam in Japan : Its Past, Present and Future* Abu Bakar Morimoto made many interesting remarks and suggestions regarding Islam in the country. In his Preface he rightly mentioned that Japan is perhaps one of the countries in the world where Islam, “has found its way last.... Its course of events is being watched not only by the Japanese people but also by the people of the world, specially those of the Muslim countries” (1980 : iii). Given his deep knowledge of his own society and culture which he described as highly materialistic and very modern Morimoto thus raised a very interesting question : “Is the spread of Islam in Japan really possible?”

The basic aim of this paper is to examine some of the issues raised by Morimoto and other Muslims concerning Islam in Japan. Most of all the paper attempts to understand the Japanese response to Islam as part of a social and cultural process that has been experienced by many other countries in various parts of the world. For this reason this paper shall discuss some of the practitioners' own views and perceptions of their religion in this largely Buddhist-Shinto country. In addition, the paper shall suggest efforts that need to be taken not only to alleviate the problems faced by the growing community but also avoid frictions between members of the growing community and the mainstream society. It is hoped that these suggestions could contribute to efforts already made by relevant bodies to better understand and deal with issues relating to the growing community and a cultural minority in Japan.

Japan and Islam

We are uncertain whether Japan is the last country in the world that has seen the

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light of Islam. However, students who are familiar with the history of Islam in Asia, and most of all in Southeast Asia would not deny that indeed Japan, unlike her nearest neighbours China and South Korea, is one of the latest countries in Asia that had been exposed to Islam. In fact as Morimoto rightly says in his book, Islam in Japan is 'still in its cradle' meaning it is still at its early stage (ibid, 95). But what is certain about Islam in this country or other parts of Asia is that it, 'has not spread by sword' (quoted in Hussein Khan). Rather, it has spread slowly and gradually among Japanese who have been exposed to the religion through contacts with Muslims both in and outside Japan. On the other hand, I would argue that the recent history of Islam and the disseminating of Islamic message or *da'wah* in Japan seem to suggest that the dynamism and the increasing proliferation of Islam in this country have been very much tied with the efforts of foreign Muslims to practise, maintain and strengthen their faith in a predominantly Buddhist-Shinto country.

It is difficult to provide the exact number of Muslims in Japan. Suvendri Kakuchi (1998) mentions that the official number of Muslims in Japan runs up to 70,000 while simultaneously maintaining that the actual number may be bigger if the number of Muslim workers coming from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Iran, China, and Central Europe who have overstayed in Japan are taken into account. Quoting *Japan Times* (1997) The Islamic Guidance Society of Japan gives the official estimate as roughly between 100,000 to 150,00, most being foreigners. However, in spite of the fact that there were said to be 'thousands of Japanese' who had converted to Islam during the Middle East Crisis and the Oil Shocks in the 1970s, one Japanese Muslim website claims that there are only 3,000 Japanese who have registered as Muslims (Hamanaka 1985 : 3).

Whatever the figure of Japanese Muslims may be, Japanese scholars and writers generally acknowledge that Islam is a fast growing religion in Japan and despite being described as 'difficult for many Japanese to understand ...the religion has attracted more and more converts in this country in recent years' (Kakuchi, p. 2). In fact, one Japanese scholar mentions in his paper that, Islam is 'developing rapidly in various areas' to the extent says this scholar, 'one can see mosques from Sendai in the North to Hiroshima in the West' (Komai 1999 : 3). Hence, in spite of the many great doubts that Muslims like Morimoto might have about the prospects of Islam in Japan, Islam did quietly establish itself in the country.

Watching Islam in Japan

As Morimoto rightly remarked, the spread of Islam in Japan is not only being watched by millions of Japanese but also by Muslims from other parts of the world. There are a number of reasons why apart from Muslims all over the world, scholars, observers, analysts and critics of the religion are eager to know how Islam spreads and performs in Japan.

Japan is acknowledged as one of the world's greatest industrialized nations. Among Muslims generally there is a genuine interest to know whether the spread of Islam, which has widely affected industrialized countries in Europe and America, would equally affect this great industrial and modern country in the Far East. Also, among Muslims especially there is a great deal of curiosity to know whether the growth of Islam in Japan is consistent with the global trend of Islam being the fastest growing religion in the world with 1.2 billion adherents. Durrani (2001b : 1) mentions that in America Islam is said to be the fastest growing monotheistic religion with some seven million Muslims adherents coming from all classes, races and walks of life. These Muslim adherents include doctors, lawyers, labourers, teachers, firemen, chefs, journalists, judges, black-rights activist and religious leader and a number of well-known sports personalities (ibid).

According to a major study conducted by the Hartford Institute for Religious Research, the increase in the number of Muslims in America is marked by the increase in the number of mosques that has grown by 25 percent in the past five years (Durrani 2001a : 1). It is perhaps for this reason that one American columnist on a very popular religious website had posted an article with a curious title, 'Islam : The Next American Religion?' (Wolfe 2001 : 1). For those who are into gender studies, it is of interest to note that in America women converts outnumber men by four to one (Berrington 1993). Similarly, the same trend is also being observed in Europe. A study conducted on Muslim minorities in Europe claims that Islam is now the second largest religion in Europe after Christianity (Islamic Voice 1999 : 3).

In a separate article it is speculated that the rate of conversion to Islam in Great Britain has prompted a prediction that Islam will rapidly become a religious force in England (Berrington, ibid). Also, it is equally of great interest to note that many of the converts to Islam in Great Britain are between the ages of 30 to 50. Moreover, it is also

found that a great number of the younger Muslim converts are students which suggests that Islam is making an intellectual impact in Great Britain. For those who are involved in Muslim gender studies, even British writers find it most ironic that most of the British converts are women in spite of the widespread view that Islam treats women poorly (ibid).

For Japanese Muslims who have been immensely concerned and have continually emphasized on the need for Islam in Japan to be well-tailored to the socio-cultural milieu, the words of an American-born Muslim worker should reassure them of the need to determine the kind of 'Islamic model' that Japan could formulate or follow. Says this Muslim sister in Great Britain, 'Western converts are coming to Islam with fresh eyes, without all the habits of the East, avoiding much of what is culturally wrong. The purest tradition is finding itself strongest in the West' (Berrington, ibid). A serious Muslim scholar should find this remark academically interesting and should spend some time to contemplate on how could the purest tradition of Islam be strongest in the West.

As an anthropologist who is informed of the history of Islam in Southeast Asia my own interest in examining the growth of Islam in Japan is basically academic, comparative and theoretical in nature. Students who are familiar with the history of Islam in Southeast Asia would know that there is a great deal of debate as to who were responsible for the dissemination of Islam in the region. One group of scholars theorizes that the growth of Islam in Southeast Asia was the result of efforts of Indian traders operating in the region in the 13th and 14th century (Tarling : 1992). Another group of scholars, however, argues that the spread of Islam in the region was due to the local princes or chiefs own initiative. Apart from this concern on origin, there was also the concern on the types of Islam in Southeast Asia. Thus according to Ibrahim et al. (1985), "the colonial administrators had talked about many 'Islams' - Javanese Islam, Minangkabau Islam, Sundanese Islam, Achenese Islam, Buginese Islam, Malay Islam and so on...." The writer's early interest in the history of Islam in Japan was partly guided by these concerns of early historians of Islam in Southeast Asia (see Awang Hasmadi Awang Mois : 2001).

Aside from the concern on origin, another main concern of the historians of Islam in Southeast Asia is the character of Islam that had established itself in the region : the way in which it adapted to or transformed the local scene. On the basis of some historical studies that have been done by a number of scholars it is generally concluded that the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia had occurred through a process of peaceful selection which spanned centuries (Ibrahim et al. 1985 : xi). In the case of Southeast Asia's biggest

Muslim country Indonesia, the process of Islamization according to Geertz had been, a 'gradual process, a slow accretion of minor changes rather than a series of spectacular quantum jumps' (1969). In fact Geertz had referred to the process of Islamization in Indonesia as 'painfully gradualistic' (ibid, 203). Furthermore, scholars of Southeast Asia have also concluded that the process of Islamization had no definite beginning and neither does it have any end. Rather, it will be a continuing process that not only affects the present situation in Southeast Asia but equally its future (Ibrahim et al. ibid).

However in the case of Indonesia, Geertz (1976) has argued that due to the existence of early beliefs and religions such as animism, Hinduism and Buddhism, the kind of Islam that has grown in Indonesia appears in many configurations. While there is a tendency towards orthodoxy in places like Sumatra, South Sulawesi and West Java, a rather syncretic blend of Islam that combines elements of animism, Hinduism and Buddhism had established itself in Central and Eastern Java. In his book Geertz (ibid) refers to these variants of Islam that is found in Java as *santri*, *priyayi* and *abangan*. The *santri* variant refers to the more orthodox version of Islam being largely adhered to by the coastal merchant class, the *priyayi* version being more inclined towards Hindu and Javanese mysticism; while the *abangan* is the more animistic and largely ritualistic version with a great emphasis on the observance of rituals and rituals for religious well-being. It is because of their indifference to the injunctions in Islam that the *abangan* group is referred to by Geertz as nominal Muslims – Muslims only in name.

Considering the fact that Japan too had been very much influenced by traditional beliefs and religion such as Shintoism and Buddhism (as well as Christianity) it would be of interest to discover what kind of religious configuration Islam in Japan would finally take. In a short essay Siddiqi has stated that at the moment there are different brands of Islam in Japan, 'Saudi, Al-Azhar, Iran type, and Indo-Pak style' (2001 : 1). However, to be able to answer some of the comparative questions that have been raised by scholars of Islam in Southeast Asia it would be useful to briefly examine the history of Islam in this country to determine the kind of Islam that has found its way here and the kinds of configurations that it would probably take in future.

Islam in Japan

The history of Islam in Japan is relatively new or quite recent. In fact as Hamanaka mentioned in his article, Islam arrived in Japan about one century ago (ibid). The

Japanese knowledge on Islam started with the coming of the Turkish naval vessel on a goodwill mission to Japan in 1890 and its sinking on its way back to Turkey shortly after. This was followed later by the emigration of Turko-Tartar Muslims from Central Asia following the upheavals of the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917. Among all these misfortunes that befell Muslims from Turkey and the Turko-Tartar community from Central Asia it was probably the sinking of the Turkish naval vessel with 609 people on board and the death and burial of 540 passengers near Kushiro in Japan that first attracted the attention of a few Japanese to Islam. For, after the kind-hearted Japanese on Oshima Island rescued the surviving members of the Turkish ship's crew and helped to bury their dead, a highly educated and high ranking Japanese by the name of Toraiji Yamada decided to express his utmost sympathy to the members of the bereaved families by collecting donations and personally delivered these donations to the members of the bereaved families in Istanbul. In the process, Toraiji Yamada, at the age of 26 was presumably the first Japanese to discover Islam in a Muslim land called Turkey. In fact it was widely speculated in the *Mainichi Shimbun* in August 1893 that Toraiji Yamada might have been the first Japanese Muslim taking the name of Khalil Yamada upon his conversion to Islam (Morimoto 1980 : 16-17).

Nevertheless, since the officially known conversion of the first Japanese by the name of Mitsutaro Takaoka (later known as Omar Yamaoka) to Islam and his pilgrimage to Makkah in 1909, an increasing number of Japanese gradually and steadily became attracted to the religion and in the process helped to spread the faith. While some Japanese had embraced the faith through their exposure to the Turko-Tartar Muslim refugees from Central Asia and Russia, others had been attracted to Islam through their contacts with Indian traders who had established themselves in Kobe at the end of the 19th century. Together these groups of Muslims of Turkish and Indian descent contributed to the early proliferation of Islam among a few highly educated and noble Japanese. However, it was during the period of the Second World War that a number of Japanese who had served in China and Southeast Asia came to discover and learn about Islam through contacts with the local Muslim community where they served. Consequently a number of them had embraced Islam while serving overseas and returned as some of the Japanese Muslims pioneers.

The large number of recent converts to Islam amongst Japanese is also a result of similar, albeit peaceful and increasing contacts between Japanese and foreign Muslims in Japan and abroad. It is a by-product of the global or transnational economy that Japan

is aggressively engaged in. From the number of reports about conversions in various parts of Japan it is evident that the interests in Islam amongst Japanese have not diminished with the end of the Second World War. Rather in recent years it has increased with the increasing contacts between Japanese and foreign Muslims all over the world to the extent conversion to Islam amongst Japanese not only occur in the country but also outside Japan including in Indonesia and Malaysia in Southeast Asia as well as in France and England in Europe.

However, the height of this process of conversion was said to be during the 1970s at the time of the Arab-Israeli War, when Japan along with other major industrial countries in the world faced an oil embargo being imposed by Saudi Arabia. According to an interview published in a leading Japanese daily, Japan's economy was really hurt by the embargo to the extent the Japanese government had to beg King Faisal of Saudi Arabia to lift the embargo (see *The Asahi Shimbun* 31 October 2001). Whatever it was it was during the oil crisis that 'thousands of Japanese' were said to have converted to Islam. What happened to these 'thousands' of Japanese Muslim converts or where had they disappeared remains a mystery to scholars of Islam in Japan.

It is worthy of note that apart from the influx of migrant workers coming to Japan in 1970s there were equally a substantial increase in the number of students from the various parts of the Muslim world coming to Japan to pursue higher studies. Because of the needs to fulfill various religious obligations viz., the obligatory Friday prayer, the performance of the nightly prayers during the Holy Month of Ramadan, Islamic religious studies (*usrah*), payments of various Muslim dues and tithes, these foreign Muslim students in Japan have established Muslim students associations throughout the country to cater to their religious needs and interests. Thus presently there are Muslim students associations found in Hokkaido right up in north to Kyushu in the south. It is through contacts and exposure to these foreign Muslim students that a growing number of Japanese students too have come to discover and learn about the religion. For a large number of foreign Muslims the contacts with fellow Muslims from other parts of the world provide an opportunity to restudy, rediscover, renew and refine their Islamic knowledge and faith. This process of restudy and refinement of the faith is known in Islamic terminology as *tajdeed* and is enjoined by the religion and forming part of an on-going process of reeducation for Muslims worldwide. This is a process, which in the words of Geertz (1976) in the context of Indonesia would differentiate between a *santri*, a serious, and practising Muslim and an *abangan*, a Muslim only in name.

Thus, Muslim scholars would agree that the question raised by Morimoto as to whether the spread of Islam is possible had in fact been answered. Indeed the presence of Muslims, their institutions and organizations as well as the availability of basic Muslim food items like *halal* meat in many parts of Japan today amply testify to the fact that Islam has not only established itself, but has spread to various nook and corner of the country. However, the spread of Islam in the country would not have been possible without the vigorous and zealous efforts of a number of Muslim individuals, groups and organizations operating in Japan who had laid the foundation for the establishment and growth of the Muslim community.

Pioneers and Propagators

Among the many individuals who may be described as pioneers and contributed to the spread of Islam in Japan was Imam Abdul Rashid Ibrahim Bey, a Turkish leader of the Muslim Patriotic Movement in Russia. During his presence in Japan he was responsible for converting about a hundred Japanese many of whom subsequently played a very important role in the establishment of Islamic associations, organizations or foundations in Japan (Samarrai, 1997 : 1). Some of these early Japanese Muslim followers of Ibrahim Bey later played a very significant role in the proliferation of Islam in their country.

One of the earliest prominent Japanese Muslims who had made a very significant contribution to the development of Islam in Japan was Haji Omar Mitsutaro or Omar Yamaoka. A disciple of Abdul Rashid Ibrahim Bey, Omar Yamaoka was officially the first Japanese to perform the hajj in 1909. On his return from the hajj, Haji Omar Yamaoka helped to propagate Islam in the country by giving lectures and holding discussions on the religion as well as relating his experiences while performing the hajj in the Holy Land. In addition he also wrote and published a number of books about his journey to Makkah. A contemporary of Haji Yamaoka, Ahmad Ariga, was another Japanese Muslim pioneer who had equally contributed to the growth of Islam in Japan by translating various works on the religion and getting involved in the translation of the Al-Quran into Japanese. A former Christian businessman, Ahmad Ariga, embraced Islam after his visit to a mosque in Bombay in 1909. On his return to Japan he was active in the *da'wah*.

Yoshio Imaizumi was another Japanese Muslim pioneer whose name deserves mention as one of the most vigorous and important figures in the history of Islamic

da'wah in Japan. Yoshio Imaizumi discovered Islam through his association with the early Turkish Muslims in Japan. On embracing Islam in March 1929 he took the name of Sadiq Yoshio Imaizumi. During the Second World War he served in the Indonesian Island of Celebes but was subsequently transferred to Bandjarmasin in Kalimantan Indonesia. His experience in Indonesia gave him a very good opportunity to learn about Muslim life in Southeast Asia, a region popularly known in the Indo-Malaysian terminology as *Nusantara*. On his return to Japan after the Second World War, Sadiq Imaizumi became one of the founders and the first president of Japan Muslims Society. Being a devout Muslim, Sadiq Imaizumi helped to propagate Islam throughout Japan through a series of lectures. Owing to his earnestness and dedication to Islamic *da'wah* he managed to attract many converts to the faith among his Japanese audience. Some of his religious admirers became followers of Islam and two of them viz., Yusof K Imori and Sadiq Katayane later became famous as top Arabic and Islamic scholars. Anticipating the future needs of the Japanese Muslim community, during his term as the president of the Japan Muslims Association, Imaizumi sent two young Japanese Muslims for Islamic training and education in Al Azhar University in 1958.

Apart from Imaizumi, Haji Umar Ryoichi Mita was another outstanding Japanese Muslim pioneer who had contributed considerably to the spread of Islam in Japan. One who may be described as the pride of Japanese Muslims, Haji Umar Mita converted to Islam in Beijing under the guidance of Imam Wang Reilan of Nyuchie Mosque in Beijing. Also described as a Japanese economist and thinker, Haji Umar Mita was formerly a Buddhist priest and preached Buddhism for quite a period of time. Born Ryoichi Mita, to a Samurai family, Haji Umar Mita was impressed with Islam after having met with Muslims in Manchuria. Because of his vast first hand knowledge of Chinese Muslims, Haji Umar Mita was elected as a counselor to the Supreme Council of the Federation of the Chinese Muslim Association. On his return to Japan from Beijing in 1945 he helped to establish the Japan Muslim Association in cooperation with a group of foreign Muslims residing in Japan.

It could be argued that the establishment of the Japan Muslim Association (JMA) marked a formal beginning of the Muslim community (*ummah*) in Japan. For, prior to its establishment, Muslims all over Japan were somewhat disorganized and had been living their own separate and individual Islamic life. However, with the establishment of the JMA, Muslims all over Japan were united and placed under an umbrella organization. As one of its founding members, Haji Umar Mita was elected as the second

president of the JMA on the death of Sadiq Imaizumi. Through their vigorous and painstaking efforts Haji Umar Mita and a number of his Muslim companions like Haji Muhamad Mustapha Komara and a Japanese Muslim printer, successfully published the Japanese meaning of the Holy Quran on 10 June 1972. During his lifetime Haji Umar Mita intensively studied the Al-Quran in Pakistan, Makkah, Madinah, Jeddah, Taif and Riyadh.

Professor Abdul Karim Saitoh was another important figure in the growth and the propagation of Islam in Japan. Abdul Karim Saitoh embraced Islam in 1957 in a ceremony held at Kobe Mosque under the guidance of Maulana Karim, leader of the tabliq group in Kobe. Chosen as the Third President of the JMA he organized various activities as well as made serious efforts to strengthen the Islamic brotherhood (*uh-uwwah*) and community in Japan. One of his significant and farsighted efforts to increase the understanding and growth of Islam in Japan was sending a number of Japanese Muslims to Muslim countries in the Middle East for training in Islamic life and culture. With his ability to communicate in various languages he embarked on a series of efforts to enhance goodwill and friendship between the Muslims of Japan and Muslims of other countries. Among one of his most great contributions to the Islamic community of Japan while serving as the Third President of JMA was his initiative to register JMA as a Muslim religious organization in order to gain official recognition of the Japanese government. To complete the project Professor Karim Saitoh managed to obtain some financial help from the Saudi Arabian government to acquire a piece of land required as a form of security.

Another prominent Japanese figure in the propagation of Islam in Japan and Mongolia was Haji Mohammad Mustapha (Fujio) Komura. Mustapha Komura worked with the Ministry of Justice upon his graduation from Tenri College of Foreign Languages in 1935 but was later posted to Manchuria until his resignation from the service in 1938. It was while working in Manchuria that Fujio Komura came into contact with members of the Chinese Muslim community in Manchuria. Nevertheless, it was not until his return to Japan in April 1938 that he finally embraced Islam under the guidance of Imam Ibrahim Bey (the renown Turkish Imam) and Ahmad Ariga, one of the early Japanese Muslims.

Shortly after his conversion to Islam Haji Mustapha Komura went to Inner Mongolia in July of the same year and established a Mongolian Muslim Association serving

as its Chief Adviser. In addition to establishing the Mongolian Muslim Association, Haji Mustapha Komura also helped to establish a Muslim Junior High School, found a Muslim Boys Scout as well as a Muslim Women's Association. Showing his serious concern for the welfare and education of Muslims in Mongolia Haji Mustapha Komura also helped to send Muslim students from Mongolia to study at Waseda University and the Hokkaido University in Sapporo. After the war Haji Omar Mitsutaro Yamaoka returned to Japan where he was active in *tabliq* activities with foreign Muslims. Among his many accomplishments was sending Japanese Muslim students to various Muslim countries for Islamic education as well as helping Haji Umar Mita to translate the Al-Quran into Japanese. He was equally involved in the establishment of the Osaka Mosque in 1978.

These early Japanese Muslims who had returned to Japan after the Second World War were responsible for spreading and establishing small Muslim 'communities' or families of their own in various parts of Japan where they had originally come from. Undoubtedly the efforts of these Japanese Muslims to propagate Islam in Japan through their organization called Japan Muslim Association would have been extremely difficult without the complementary work of zealous *da'wah* groups like the Tabliq Jama'at of Pakistan and India who had spent periods of time in Japan disseminating the message of Islam between 1956 and 1960. These *tabliq* groups helped to refresh and reinvigorate the spirit and knowledge of Islam amongst foreign and local Muslim communities in Japan.

It could also be argued that the proliferation of Islam throughout the islands of Japan would have been equally difficult without the contribution made by the *da'wah*-conscious Muslim students from Pakistan, India, Turkey, various Arab countries and countries in Southeast Asia. Primarily because of their basic and urgent need to fulfill various religious obligations these groups of Muslim students formed Muslim Students associations in campuses where they study and in the process helped to propagate and strengthen the Islamic fraternity in the country. Moreover, their decision to form the Muslim Students Association shows their strong awareness of this need and their subsequent decision to cooperate with Japan Muslims Association to establish the International Islamic Center completes the whole process of strengthening the Islamic brotherhood and community in the country. Without the synthesis of Muslim Students Association and the Japan Muslims Association the various Muslim groups in Japan would have remained as separate Muslim entities. The merging of these two groups into a single body originally called the International Islamic Center, and presently called Islamic Center

-Japan helps to consolidate the position of the Muslim community in Japan.

Thus the establishment and spread of Islam in Japan owed tremendously to a number of both foreign and local groups and individuals. They include early Muslims in Japan who were of Turko-Tartar origin from Central Asia as well as Indian and Pakistani traders who came to Japan at the end of the nineteenth century. These early groups of Muslims from foreign land had paved the way for the understanding of Islam amongst the Japanese community and subsequently helped to foster greater understanding between Japan and the Muslim world. In later years these groups were not only joined by migrant workers but also by foreign Muslim students who had helped to establish the faith as part of their process of socio-cultural adaptation and maintenance of their religious faith in a foreign land. As may be seen from the history of Islam in Japan the Islamic religious influence that had landed in Japan had come from many places including in the early stage from Turkey, Central Asia, China, sub-continent Asia and Southeast Asia. At a much later stage some Japanese Muslims had acquired knowledge about the faith through personal discovery and advanced studies in Europe and the Middle East.

Perceptions of Japanese Muslims

In spite of the fact that Islam has been described as difficult for many Japanese to understand, the religion has attracted more and more converts in the country in recent years (Kakuchi 1998 : 2). According to Hamanaka (1985) these converts are from the middle class group who live in the metropolitan areas and suburbs. The list of Japanese converts includes company directors, businessmen, shop owners, journalists, artists, salaried workers (civil servants), housewives, nurses, university students, professors, bank officials, teachers, engineers and many other professionals. What are some of the principal reasons for the growing number of conversion to Islam among the Japanese?

Some early Japanese Muslim pioneers like Umar Mita was especially attracted to the religion for several reasons. As a person who had the experience of being a Buddhist priest and familiar with Buddhist philosophy, Umar Mita describes Islam as a religion that is simple to live because as he says its teachings are so simple, easy, practical and intelligible. He also describes the religion as, 'so logical that even the most ignorant person would understand its language' <<http://www.usc.edu/>>. Moreover, he considers Islam as straightforward and practical and whose knowledge as not being monopolized by any particular group. Most of all Umar Mita says Islam as a religion

contains a complete code of life, or what is described in Islamic terminology as *ad-deen*, a way of life <<http://thetruereligion.org/people.htm>>. Other Japanese Muslims like Abdullah Uemera are impressed with the religion because of its ideological emphasis on human and social equality rejecting what he describes 'all sorts of racial or class discrimination'. Instead, according to him, in communities where Islam has long been established the religion has infused a spirit of human fraternity <<http://thetruereligion.org/people.htm>>.

Several other Japanese before their conversion to Islam have similarly noticed the spirit of human fraternity that is found in Islam as mentioned by Uemera. One of the younger groups of Japanese Muslims like Muhammad Kyoichiro Sugimoto finds Islam as attractive because of its humanitarian and philosophical concerns. For Sugimoto his experience of living among Bangladeshi Muslims teaches him about the Islamic philosophy of human kindness and brotherhood that extends beyond the simple family and geo-political boundary. As a person trained in cultural anthropology Sugimoto's fieldwork experience of living amongst the Bangladeshi Muslims clearly shows that in spite of the pressing problems of poverty and political corruption that the Bangladeshi Muslims have to live with, they have not lost their great sense of hospitality fostered and nurtured by the Islamic philosophy of human kindness and universal brotherhood (see Sugimoto).

While a number of Japanese have converted to Islam for some of the reasons mentioned, Japanese women converts cite marriage as one of the principal factors for their conversion. Some of these Japanese women converts' husbands include Muslim men from Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, Africa and the Middle East. It was reported in *Japan Times* that out of 80 marriages registered at the Islamic Center-Japan in 1992, 40 were marriages between Muslims and Japanese women converts (in Nakano 1992). In 1998 Islamic Center-Japan reported an increase to 100 marriages with a majority of the brides being Japanese who had converted to Islam (Kakuchi 1998 : 1). It is apparent from this report that the trend of conversion to Islam in Japan is comparable with the conversion pattern in America or Europe i.e. more women convert to Islam than men.

However, not all Japanese women Muslim converts have adopted Islam as a prerequisite to marriage. In fact a few accepted the religion because of their own disillusionment with religions like Buddhism and Christianity that they have experimented with. Others converted to Islam out of their own personal choice, genuine interest, self

-discovery and desire. A couple of these ladies discovered Islam while studying in Europe : one by the name of Rukaiya came to discover Islam initially through a very strong interest on the Arab world, the Arab people, their life and culture. Although Rukaiya admits that she had met Arabs in her language class who were 'not religious at all' she was equally amazed to discover that the same group of Arab classmates would 'always show great concern, understanding, love and pride in their religion'. Also, to her great surprise almost all of these 'not at all religious' Arabs fast during the Ramadan. It is because of her desire to find the answer to this phenomenon that she resorted to reading numerous books about the Arabs and finally about Islam. Like the Japanese male Muslims, this lady's main reason for conversion was because the religion was 'simple and logical but never against human conscience' <<http://thetrue religion.org/rukaiya.htm>>.

Another Japanese lady Nakata Khaula discovered Islam while studying in Paris. Although she initially came to study French literature she finally ended up with a very strong desire to study Arabic – a pursuit that had led to her discovery and conversion to Islam. Her strong interest to study Arabic had taken her to Egypt and subsequently to Saudi Arabia where she not only learned to wear the Islamic head veil or *hijab* but also the *niqab* the facial veil popular among the Saudi Arabian ladies. In Khaula's opinion although Westerners and non-Muslims regard the *hijab* as a symbol of women oppression in Islam it is no different from the headdress that form the Christian nuns habit everywhere. To Khaula the *hijab* like the Christian nun's headdress is part of her religious identity which has no social or political significance and which no one should question. At the personal level some converts mention that Islam provides them some kind of emotional peace, while others were attracted to Islam because of its emphasis on sincerity, honesty, morality, trustworthiness, cleanliness and self-discipline. On the other hand, some Japanese converts mention that Islam appeal to them because of the many similarities between Islamic and Japanese values viz., honesty, trustworthiness and the tremendous emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge and learning.

Some Problems Affecting Muslims

As a cultural minority living in a largely Buddhist society there are numerous problems that foreign and Japanese Muslims have to encounter. They include stereotypes, marginalization and subtle discrimination. However, among all these, according to the President of Japan Muslim Association, Misaku Higuchi (2000), the problem of

misconceptions, misunderstanding and prejudices about and against Islam are some of the greatest that Muslims in the non-Muslim world have to bear with. There are misconceptions about the term *jihad* and many Islamic rituals and practices. Adds Higuchi, when it comes to Islam, the media tends to distort the facts just to entertain the public, who do not know where to direct or vent their fear or anger; and the television is responsible for this distortion (ibid). One professor from the University of Tokyo, Yuzo Itagaki argued that these prejudiced views about Islam that have taken hold in Japan are of 'Western origin' (*The Asahi Shimbun* 24 November 2001, p. 2).

Some Japanese scholars like Sanada has made similarly remarks about the biased ideas and misconceptions about Islam amongst many Japanese (2000 : 4). The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Japan, H.E. Yohei Kono is equally aware of this problem and its political or diplomatic implications to Japan's relations with the Islamic countries on whom Japan is particularly dependent for its energy to run its economy. Thus in his official address to the International Symposium on East Asia and the Muslim World in Tokyo in May 29 2000, the Foreign Minister openly admitted that, 'Islam does not enjoy sufficient understanding of non-Islamic world about its faith, value and culture'. He added, 'We notice, for instance, that Islam is argued sometimes in relation to terrorism and violence, thus suspected as driving force of conflicts. I believe that this is far from the truth' (Kono 2000).

Why have there been many misconceptions, misunderstandings and prejudices about and against Islam? In one article Sanada (ibid) argued that the principal cause of this problem is that many Japanese do not make an effort to understand Islam either through the newspapers, television and other media. Nevertheless, given what Higuchi describes as the tendency for the Japanese (and Western) media to distort facts to please the public, efforts to understand Islam via such methods mentioned by Sanada would be in vain. Instead it could lead to even more confusion and misconception. Itagaki (ibid), who heads the Islamic Study Forum established by the Foreign Ministry to advise the Japanese government on Islam, has made similar remark when he said in an interview with a renowned Japanese daily that he regrets the fact that, 'While some Japanese intellectuals say with an air of pride that they have a good knowledge of the West they know nothing of the Islamic world'. To Itagaki this amounts to acknowledging 'their ignorance of the West'. For, according to Itagaki 'Western world's modernization, democracy and liberty have their origins in links with Islam' (*The Asahi Shimbun*, ibid).

Because of their lack of knowledge about Islam a large number of Japanese are therefore very ignorant about many basic issues relating to Islam compared to Christians living in Europe or America. For instance, quite a large number of Japanese are simply unaware of the basic Islamic laws relating to food ; especially the laws regarding what is religiously permitted and edible (*halal*) and what is religiously prohibited and inedible (*haram*). Most Japanese are unaware that pork is forbidden or *haram* for Muslims and so are alcoholic drinks and wines. Moreover, most Japanese are ill informed about the slightly complicated Islamic law that says that although chicken or beef are edible they have to be properly slaughtered according to Islamic rites to render them *halal* for Muslim consumption. Undoubtedly this is very complicated matter for non-Muslim Japanese to understand and consequently a large majority of non-Muslim Japanese are baffled by the fact that Muslims would refrain from buying and eating beef and chicken sold in Japanese supermarkets or served in Japanese restaurants and school canteens.

In Japanese schools this concern about *halal* and non-halal (*haram*) food has become a constant source of irritation between Muslim parents and Japanese schoolteachers. The main complaint amongst Muslim parents is that because of their ignorance about pork and its extracts being Halics to Muslims, many Japanese schoolteachers would insist on Muslim school children eating the same kind of food served to their Japanese schoolmates. For the same reason many Japanese schoolteachers could never understand why Muslim parents would seek permission for their children to bring their own lunch instead of taking the food served in schools. This issue becomes even more difficult when some Japanese teachers choose to ignore what may appear to be trivial but nevertheless a very important matter in any religious practice. Instead some schoolteachers choose to act against the simple Japanese value of religious tolerance and freedom of religious expression as enshrined in their constitution. Thus in an elementary school in Shiratsuka this had turned into a very thorny and sensitive issue between Bangladeshi Muslim parents and the teachers of the Shiratsuka Elementary School when the Tsu Board of Education decided to halt a two-year program that provided Muslim students with special pork-free school lunches (Chan 2000 : 1).

The simple solution for this kind of problem is to allow Muslim school children in Japan to either bring their own lunch to school in lieu of the school inability to provide special pork-free school lunch or be given a strictly vegetarian meal just as Muslim, Jew or Hindu school children attending schools in America or England are generally permitted to do. For a country that prides itself in the western model of education this

policy of allowing school children of different religious faiths bringing their own lunch to school could be also be adopted in Japan. Indeed as the previous Foreign Minister, Yohei Kono had suggested the Japanese government needs 'to improve its understanding of Islam' not only to deepen ties with Muslim states for material and economic gains ; but also to enable them to solve simple problems experienced by a growing community now present in Japan. The Japanese government's ability to solve this simple but important issue could contribute to better understanding and harmony between members of the small and growing Muslim community and the mainstream Japanese society. Moreover, this would help Japan to remain as a country that is well known for peace, tolerance and racial harmony.

Another major problem encountered by Japanese and foreign Muslims alike is the problem of finding a proper cemetery for the increasing Muslim community. Again this is an old and serious issue that the Muslim community in Japan would never be able to solve without the kind intervention of the government. Unfortunately, according to some of the latest reports available on the Internet the relevant Japanese authorities have not done very much to help to solve this urgent and most pressing problem (Hussain Khan 2001 : 4 ; Siddiqi 2001 : 2). Much worst, it is also reported that the government of Japan does not even exempt Japanese Muslims from the Japanese law of compulsory cremation of all dead bodies of Japanese nationals (Hussain, *ibid*). This may be attributed to the general lack of knowledge about Islam at the highest level of authority in the country. Thus in their 1996-1997 *Yearly Report*, the Islamic Center-Japan mentioned of two cases that almost turned into ugly religious incidents when non-Muslim Japanese relatives of the deceased insisted on cremating the deceased and according them un-Islamic funeral rites. Fortunately, the Islamic Center-Japan had prepared the right plan of action and was able to intervene in time to save the deceased from being cremated, a practice that is most repugnant in Islamic eschatology. The dispute over how the funeral or burial should be conducted was amicably solved when the non-Muslim Japanese members of the deceased finally allowed their dead Muslim relatives proper Islamic burial rites. However, there are many unreported cases of dead Japanese Muslims who were cremated much against the deceased Muslim relatives consent ; simply because the Japanese law stipulates that the dead must be cremated and the non-Muslim members of the deceased family's insistence on according Buddhist funeral rites to the deceased in spite of the fact that the deceased have converted to Islam and by right be accorded proper Muslim funeral rites.

According to Komai (1999), in its attempt to solve this acute burial problem faced by the Muslims of Japan, Japan Muslims Association in the Yamanashi Prefecture has made an arrangement with a Buddhist temple called Bunshuin to allow a portion of the Buddhist graveyard on En Mountain for Muslim burial. However, it is not known to what extent has the Islamic Center-Japan managed to solve this outstanding issue for the Muslims throughout Japan. In their 1996-1997 *Yearly Report* Islamic Center-Japan only mentions that there is only one graveyard in the country that belongs to Japan Muslim Association. However, the price for one grave is reported to be ¥900,000 (app. US\$ 9,000) including car rentals. The price is indeed very expensive for ordinary Muslims and would be beyond the reach of many. Perhaps this explains why many Muslims in Japan silently allowed their dead to be cremated (Islamic Center-Japan 1996-1997 *Yearly Report* p. 9).

There are other problems experienced by the growing Muslim community in parts of Japan. Some of these problems are very sensitive and provocative that need proper and careful handling by the relevant authorities to avoid possible ethnic tension and friction between the Muslim community and the largely Buddhist community. One of the most serious of these incidents occurred in Toyama where a local woman desecrated the Holy Quran purportedly 'to strike back at her uncaring father' (*Mainichi Daily News* 19 November 2001 : 1). The Muslim community were extremely infuriated with was reported to be 'police inaction' over the matter and as a result when the news spread to Muslims in Japan hundreds from various parts of Japan came to Toyama and the Foreign Ministry in Tokyo to protest and demand police action. To appease the feelings of Muslims in Japan the Pakistani Embassy in Tokyo had appealed to the Japanese government to act over the matter (*Islam Online* 2001 : 1). It was reported later that the woman, which had provoked the anger and strongest protest amongst the local Pakistani Muslim community was finally arrested and found guilty for the desecration of the Holy Quran (*The Japan Times* October 14 2001). However, although she was convicted, she was sentenced to one-year imprisonment, suspended for three years (*Mainichi Daily News*, *ibid*). Her ludicrous psychological claim that the desecration was done out of spite for her father would remain as an interesting puzzle for many Muslims living in Japan.

Visions of Japanese Muslim Community

The establishment and growth of Islam and Muslim communities in Japan has introduced a new sub-culture in the midst of what used to be a predominantly Buddhist

-Shinto society. It has equally introduced a new cultural knowledge as well as exchange between foreign and Japanese Muslims and the largely non-Muslim Japanese population. Although Islam came and established itself much later than other religions like Christianity, it has seen an interesting and rapid growth in Japan, changing its physical as well as social landscape.

Japanese Muslims frankly admit that it is indeed difficult to get used to their new life as Muslims especially in a social and cultural milieu that is not conducive to Islamic practice. However, amidst the admission of their own weaknesses in carrying out the dictates of Islam Japanese Muslim pioneers whom we have discussed earlier have shown that they were serious about their religion and have worked extremely hard to serve their faith. Nevertheless, there are serious concerns among Japanese Muslims as regards the kind of Islam that has appeared together with the various groups of Muslims that have landed on the shores of Japan. More interestingly a number of Japanese Muslims have already envisaged their version of Islam that should appear in their country.

For instance, Kume (1999) feels somewhat bothered by she describes as the big gap between the Islamic teachings and the cultural practices of foreign Muslims living in Japan. She feels that some of the cultural practices of the Muslims found in Japan are inconsistent with the teachings of Islam. Moreover, according to Kume, there seems to be disagreement between Muslims concerning Islam that is being taught to Japanese Muslims either due to their cultural background or lack of tolerance for others (2000). Thus Kume suggests that Islam that is to be practiced in Japan should take into consideration 'Japanese culture' history and national character, especially the uniqueness of the [Japanese] society'. As a Japanese Muslim she regrets what she describes as 'a form of segregation' between foreign and Japanese Muslims. She attributes this problem to the lack of empathy for Japanese culture among foreign Muslims and partly due to the lack of basic knowledge of Islam amongst Japanese Muslims thus resulting in great misunderstanding. In her opinion adopting better attitude among those concerned could help to rectify this problem (1999). Kume mentions two important things required to build her vision of Muslim society viz., true knowledge of Islam and the spirit of tolerance (2000). Realizing the importance of proper Islamic education to achieve her objectives Kume (1999) has strongly suggested an Islamic education committee be established to handle the issue of Islamic education for the growing Japanese Muslim community.

Apart from Kume, Morimoto (1980) is another Japanese Muslim who is concerned

about Islam and Muslims in the country. Like Kume, Morimoto, is keen on having a kind of 'untainted' or 'purist' Islamic culture in Japan. Morimoto argues that Japan is a rich soil for such an Islamic culture if, 'it comes in its original form...leaving aside the peculiar manners and customs...found in Muslim countries' (ibid p. 5). Morimoto admits that it is difficult for Japanese Muslims to live a strict Muslim life in a society that is predominantly non-Muslim, unless as he says one has a very strong and resolute mind (ibid, p. 107). Likewise, it is not easy either for a Japanese Muslim or a foreigner to preach Islam unless a person is strong in faith and morality. More importantly, to be a successful preacher a foreign Muslim must be well versed in the Japanese language in to be able to communicate with his subjects. Furthermore, Morimoto also argues that the command of the language is a passport to the people's heart (ibid). Indeed, no experienced anthropologist would disagree with Morimoto's suggestion as to the importance of knowing the language of the group one is dealing with. Thus among some Japanese Muslims that the writer has met there is a great deal of concern about the Islamic society that could serve as a model for Japan.

However, to be able to come up with the ideal Muslim society in Japan, Japan Muslims must take into consideration a number of realities. Some of these have been mentioned by a number of Japanese Muslims themselves in many conferences and essays. For instance, in a short essay Kume has mentioned two important points regarding the growth of Islam in Japan viz., the lack of educational facilities and the tendency among Japanese people to worship different kinds of faiths or observe different kinds of religious rituals in different occasions (1999). The general attitude among Japanese is that they are not very much concerned about which religious sect (Buddhist or Shinto) they belong to. Similarly Morimoto (ibid) has mentioned that throughout their history the Japanese people have a tendency to borrow and absorb foreign culture ...therefore in matters of religion there is ample room for borrowing and absorbing... In the course of history, many foreign religions came to Japan intermixed with the local ones, influenced as well as was influenced by the traditional Japanese religions and by and by fostered the present religious concepts of Japan (1980: 6-7).

In a short note presented at the International Islamic Conference organized by the Islamic Guidance Society and Islamic Circle of Japan in Kobe on 12 August 2001 Rahman Siddiqi has similarly expressed his anxiety about this Japanese tendency in Siddiqi's terminology 'to Japanize everything before adopting it'. He added this goes for language, foods, western dress and fashions.... They would like [to do] the same with

Islam but the basics of Islam cannot be amended to suit a certain culture' (Siddiqi 2001).

Many Japanese Muslims have realized that it would take a long period of years before the Muslim community in Japan could really take its own shape, mould or configuration. Whether it takes the 'purist' and the ideal version, a version that is closest to the teachings of Islam based on the Holy Quran and the Sunnah (the practices of the Holy Prophet and his Companions) as desired by concerned Japanese Muslims remains to be seen. However, given what Siddiqi describes as the Japanese tendency to 'Japanize' everything including Islam, Japanese Muslims could expect that the Islam that they are hoping to establish in Japan may be not much different from the Islam that they have seen coming from Pakistan, India, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Malaysia or Indonesia. This is the religion of Islam that Japanese Muslims have complained to be so mingled with the cultural elements of the people who have transferred it to Japan. This religion of Islam, which is intermingled with the cultural practices of the people of the land, will also appear in Japan particularly if Kume's suggestion that Islam that is to be practiced in Japan, "should take into consideration 'Japanese culture' history and national character, especially the uniqueness of the [Japanese] society" (2000).

It should be of interest for Japanese Muslims like Morimoto, Kume and others who are very persistent on establishing the 'purist' model of Islam to learn that however imperfect the religion of Islam practiced in foreign countries have been it had converted a good number of Japanese Muslim pioneers while they were exposed to Muslims in Turkey, China, India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Egypt, Libya and Saudi Arabia. This has been the religion of Islam some Japanese Muslim pioneers have in fact helped to spread in Manchuria and Mongolia. The religion of Islam that many Japanese pioneers have learned may not be the ideal or perfect version of Islam – one that is closest to Islam practiced at the time of Holy Prophet and his Companions – one that many Japanese Muslims in this country are thinking of implementing. However, in terms of its fundamentals or basic teachings it is the same religion that Japanese Muslims are thinking of establishing in Japan. This is the religion of Islam that has been given different cultural expressions by the people of the countries concerned. What Japanese Muslims have been unable to do is to differentiate the faith from the practitioners of the faith, the followers, from the religion that is followed. In addition, Japanese Muslims have yet to understand that there are different schools of Islamic jurisprudence that influences Islamic practice in various parts of the world. Perhaps because of their ignorance about these issues, there have been constant complaints amongst Japanese Muslims about the

inconsistency between the practice and the theory of Islam. As some Japanese Muslims themselves have readily admitted Islam in its purest or ideal form is not an easy religion to practice especially in a non-Muslim country like Japan. Thus they should be able to understand that among foreign Muslims one could expect to find some truly good and practicing Muslims as well as some who are Muslims only in name.

For Japanese Muslims, Geertz's study on *The Religion of Java* could provide some general idea on the impact of the Islamization process on the people of Java who were once animists, polytheists, Buddhists and Hindus. According to Geertz (1976) the process of Islamization in Java is a painfully long and gradual process. It did not take ten or twenty years ; it took a hundred of years and has continued until today. But what exactly happened in this process? According to Geertz, because of their different geographical and social backgrounds as well as the process of Islamic internalization that has taken place Islam that has appeared amongst the Javanese appears in three dominant patterns : the *priyayi*, *santri* and *abangan* variants. The *priyayi* variant is a variant of Islam that contains highly complicated Hindu-Javanese mysticism practiced by the traditional members of the upper class hierarchy. On the other hand the *santri* variant is one that is practiced by the coastal Muslim traders ; one that is closer to the orthodox Islam brought by the early Muslim traders from India and Arabia, one that Japanese Muslims would probably describe as close to the Islam practiced by the Holy Prophet ; while the *abangan* variant is one that practiced by the ordinary, rural peasant society. This is the variant that has been described by Geertz as having been 'syncretized' or blended with the traditional and folk elements of Javanese animism and Hinduism. Amongst this *abangan* there is a greater concern on ceremonies rather than a concern on the application of Islamic philosophy and ideology. Because of their lack of concern for the fundamentals in Islam, Geertz refers to this group as nominal Muslims - Muslims only in name.

It should be noted that the Javanese Muslim variants are Geertz's ideal constructs and may not easily be identified or noticed in reality. Nevertheless, these constructs would be useful tools for observers and practitioners of Islam in Japan to utilize and to be able to identify the various kinds of Islam that has grown in Japan. With these analytical tools in mind it would perhaps be possible to identify the kinds of Muslim groups that are now present in Japan. It would perhaps be possible to categorize the early Japanese Muslim pioneers and their devout descendants as the *santri* of Japan while the 'thousands of Japanese Muslims' who had converted to Islam in 1970s and who have

disappeared would have to be traced and redefined. Some of the questions which would enable us to define the category they would belong to include : do they still stick to Islam or have they forsaken the religion and gone along the path of Japanese who have the tendency to blend and practise all kinds of faiths or religions and celebrate all kinds of religious festivals? Have they chosen to 'Japanize' their Islamic faith for their own convenience? Do they refer to themselves as Muslims or are they Muslims only in name?

Discussion

This paper has attempted to discuss some issues raised by Japanese Muslims concerning Islam, and their response as well as perceptions of the religion. Some of the issues discussed are specific to Japanese adherents of the new faith while others are common to both Japanese and foreign Muslims. In fact, some of these issues are experienced by Muslims worldwide viz., misconceptions, prejudices and stereotypes and ignorance about the world's fastest growing religion.

Some Japanese Muslims like Nakata Khaula, have written about their experiences of trying to live with the various misconceptions, prejudices and stereotypes about Islam and Muslims. This includes the experience of facing prejudices about Muslim women's dress or headdress called *hijab*. Nakata Khaula mentioned that in France, Muslim women's *hijab* became such a controversial issue to the French government that school children wearing the *hijab* are simply banned from schools while Christian nuns wearing a similar form of headdress are left untouched. Many Christian researchers would be able to testify that in majority Muslim countries like Malaysia and Indonesia Christian nuns wearing their religious habit are never bothered or banned from wearing their headdress like Muslim women wearing the *hijab* have experienced and being discriminated against in Christian France. Because of such an intense focus on everything about what Muslims do or wear in the western media, Japanese Muslim women converts often report of their difficulty in deciding the proper dress to wear upon their conversion (see Nakano 1992). Indeed in the issue of dress the decision is often difficult because of the different kinds of dress worn by Muslim women from region to region.

In this paper the writer has also attempted to show that despite Morimoto's pessimism, various reports about Islam in Japan prove that Islam has established itself in the country. In fact there are reports that say that say that 'thousands' of Japanese converted to Islam at the height of the Oil Crisis during the 1970s. As I have stated earlier what

happens to these 'thousands of converts' remains to be answered. However, in spite of the many doubts that Japanese Muslims may have about the number or actual figure of their fellow Japanese Muslims (see Hamanaka 1985) the Muslim population has grown in Japan to the extent says Komai, 'one can see mosques from Sendai in the north to Hiroshima in the west' (1999). In many ways this development has followed similar patterns obtained in other countries like England and America where there seem to be more female than male converts.

Nevertheless, although Islam has gained a foothold in Japan, as Morimoto rightly remarked, it still remains at its early stage. It has a long way to go and many major problems to be solved. For an ordinary practicing Muslim the biggest of this problem, apart from the issue of providing and getting *halal* food for living is the issue of finding a burial site for its faithful and increasing adherents. The Japanese government's kind understanding and assistance in this issue would help to strengthen goodwill and cooperation between the adherents of the faith and the Japanese authorities. Up to date the relevant Japanese authority has not done much to help the Muslim community in Japan to overcome this issue. According to Siddiqi, 'although a graveyard is available' the issue of getting 'permission to bury' in Japan is a big problem since the normal practice in a Buddhist country like Japan is cremation (2001 : 2).

There will also be the question of Islamic schools to provide Muslim children with the required knowledge of the religion and the tradition. A number of Muslims have complained about this issue in interviews and essays presented in various seminars (see Nakano 1992 ; Siddiqi 2001 ; Kume 1999 and Hamanaka 1985). Geertz's (1969) study in Java has shown that two elements have played a very important role in the growth and the development of the Islamic community in Indonesia viz., the school and the *ulema*. While the early Japanese Muslim pioneers have shown their foresight in this issue by sending Japanese Muslims for Islamic education in Muslim countries, the absence of proper Islamic school has remained a main concern amongst foreign and Japanese Muslims in their efforts at producing an Islamic community that is well versed in the religious tradition. Some keen Japanese Muslims like Kume, Hamanaka and others have long been aware of these basic needs of the growing community and suggested measures to be taken to solve them. In this regard Hamanaka (ibid) has suggested not only the setting up of an Islamic university to provide Islamic education for Japanese Muslims but also a more prominent role played by Japanese Muslim graduates from the Middle East in the religious affairs of the Japanese Muslim community.

Despite many and diverse problems that remain to be solved for the growing Muslim minority, the Japanese government on its part has shown some interest to understand Islam and the Muslim community by setting up the Islamic Study Forum in the Foreign Ministry and the Islamic Area Studies Project under the aegis of the Japan Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (*The Japan Times* 29. 12. 2000). However, it remains to be seen whether the establishment of these various groups are principally economic and diplomatic gestures on the part of the Japanese government to appease the Arab-Muslim world on which Japan is so much dependent for its energy supply. One who is well read in the history of Islam in Japan would have noticed that at the time of the Second World War the Japanese Military government had similarly established various research institutes and associations to ensure that its oil supply from the middle east remain intact and that it would get moral support from the Southeast Asian Muslim population it was going to invade. Nevertheless, the fact some members of the authority and academic groups have established study groups or forums to discuss and understand Muslims and Islam worldwide is a good indicator that Japan has recognized that the spread of Islam is a global phenomenon that needs to be understood like other global phenomena.

Conclusion

Students of history and religion would agree that in spite of its late history in this country, Islam has made tremendous progress not only in terms of the number of followers but also in terms of the quality of those who have converted to the faith. In the history of Islam in Japan we have seen that some of these pioneer Japanese Muslims have not only adopted the religion brought by and acquired from foreign Muslims but equally helped to disseminate the faith to parts of China like Manchuria and Mongolia. In this process of Islamic growth in Japan, foreign and Japanese Muslims have been dependent on each other not only for the strengthening and rejuvenation of the faith but also for the general welfare of the community.

The fact that some Japanese Muslims themselves have been able to tell the difference between Islam as taught and Islam as practiced by Muslims from many parts of the world amply shows that there is an increase in knowledge and awareness about the religion amongst followers of the faith in this country. However, it remains to be seen whether Japanese Muslims could establish Islam based directly on the Holy Quran and the Sunnah in this country given the lack of Islamic infrastructures for the proper growth and development of the Japanese Muslim community. Given such inadequacy Japanese and

foreign Muslims alike would have to fully utilize their existing facilities like *mussalah* or mosques to provide urgent social and religious services needed by the growing and increasing community. Also, given its not 'too young' history it is probably high time for the Islamic Center-Japan to come up with its own Council of Islamic scholars (*ulema*) to solve the various complex and pressing issues faced by the Muslim community in Japan. In addition, time has also come for the Japanese Muslims who have been trained in Islamic knowledge and education overseas to play a more dominant role in the religious affairs of the community since they are the natives of the land and the people who have a better understanding of the culture which the Muslim cultural minority in the country are dealing with. Moreover, they are also the people who have better conception of the Islamic model Japanese Muslims have been thinking about – a model that would take into account the country's history, culture and national character.

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