

☆ SOCIETY

BENJAMIN FREELAND TAKES A LOOK AT THE COMING-OF-AGE OF ISLAM IN JAPAN.

CRESCENT MOON,



RISING SUN



JAPAN IS KNOWN THE WORLD OVER AS A HIGHLY homogeneous country and with less than 1 percent of the total population claiming non-Japanese origin, this characterization is rather difficult to dispute. That said, however, this ethnic and cultural homogeneity cannot be said to characterize all aspects of Japanese society and, most markedly, does not apply to the country's religious fabric, which is – and always has been – extraordinarily diverse.

Traditional religion in Japan has always represented a complex tapestry of Shinto sects and Buddhist schools. Beyond this lies a bewildering array of *shin shukyo* (new religions), as well as numerous spiritual imports from overseas, most significantly Christianity, which accounts for some 0.7 percent of the total population and is itself divided into innumerable sub-groups.

Also to be found within this spiritual mosaic is Islam, a relatively young and largely ignored religious phenomenon in Japan but nonetheless one that is steadily growing in numbers and in visibility. No reliable statistics exist on the number of Muslims currently residing in Japan but estimates place the figure at between 30,000 and 100,000 adherents, with Japanese converts to the religion accounting for anywhere between 10 and 33 percent of that total. What is clear, however, is that Islam is among the fastest-growing religions in Japan, and one unparalleled in the challenge it poses to the country's deeply entrenched social conventions.

Of the world's major religions, Islam has the shortest history of exposure in Japan. Awareness of Islam in Japan probably began with Edo-era silk trade in the 18th century, in which Persia was an important intermediary. However, owing to the maritime prohibition in effect at the time, no direct contact with the religion was possible until the latter half of the 19th century when the fledgling Meiji government forged diplomatic ties with the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire.

Japan's first bona fide Islamic community was born in 1917 when a contingent of Turko-Tataric Muslims from Central Asia fleeing the



Bolshevik Revolution took refuge in Tokyo and cities in Kansai, and established communities known as 'Mahalle-i İslamiye' (Islamic Districts) in these areas. It was these communities that oversaw the building of Japan's oldest and best-known mosques – the Kobe Mosque (built in 1935) and the Tokyo Camii Mosque (established in 1938) – as well as the translation into Japanese of the Qur'an.

The post-war era then saw Japan emerge as a steady diplomatic and economic ally for numerous Islamic countries in the Middle East throughout often tumultuous times, further improving relations between Japan and the Islamic world.

Although overall awareness of Islam in Japan remains low, so it would appear does the level of anti-Islamic sentiment, helping make Japan an increasingly popular destination for students and job seekers from Muslim countries, particularly after the events that unfolded on the morning of September 11, 2001. It's worth noting, however, that the terrorist attacks on the United States and the subsequent media hysteria surrounding Islamic fundamentalism appear to have had a paradoxically positive effect on Japanese-Islamic relations, with the general public informing themselves about the religion to a greater degree than ever before.

Amir T. Arai, vice-president of the Japan Muslim Association (JMA), represents the face of a small minority: Japanese converts to Islam. Born Takuo Arai in Ibaraki, nothing about the affable 64-year-old man's appearance would suggest his Arabic language studies at Tokyo's Takushoku University had led him to adopt the religion of the Prophet Mohammed. Following his conversion in 1962, Arai decided to pursue formal studies of Islam at Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, and this in turn led to a career as an expert in Arab-Japanese relations and employment with a major Japanese oil company operating out of Abu Dhabi. Now retired, he devotes his energy to promulgating the word of Allah through the JMA, a group that caters largely to Japanese converts.

Although Arai notes that Japanese Muslims tend to keep a low profile out of fear of standing out, he is quick to vouch for their seriousness and devotion to their adopted faith. "Japanese Muslims tend to



TOKYO CAMİİ, TOKYO'YA HİCRET EDEN KAZAN TÜRKLER'İ TARAFINDAN YAPILIP, 1938 YILINDA İBADETE AÇILMIŞ 1986'DA YIKILARAK, TÜRKİYE CUMHURİYETİ DİYANET İŞLERİ BAŞKANLIĞI VE TOKYO CAMİİ VAKFI DELALETİYLE YENİDEN İNŞAA OLUNMUŞTUR. BETONARME KABA İNŞAATI KAJIMA CORPORATION, İNCE YAPI İŞLERİ TÜRK USTA VE SANATKARLARI MARİFETİYLE YAPILMIŞTIR. MİMARİ, MUHARREM HİLMİ ŞENALP'TİR.

BAŞLAMA : Nisan 1998 Muharrem 1419
BİTİŞ : Nisan 2000 Muharrem 1421

THE OLD TOKYO JAMII WAS INAUGURATED BY KAZAN TURKISH EMIGRANTS IN 1938 AND WAS DEMOLISHED IN 1986. IT WAS REBUILT BY THE TURKISH REPUBLIC RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS PRESIDENCY AND TOKYO MOSQUE FOUNDATION. STRUCTURAL FRAME WORK WAS COMPLETED BY KAJIMA CORPORATION AND FINISHING WORK WAS PREPARED BY TURKISH CRAFTSMEN AND MASTERS. THE ARCHITECT IS MR. MUHARREM HILMI SENALP.

STARTING DATE : 1998-1419 A.H.
FINISHING DATE : 2000-1421 A.H.

東京ジャーミイは、東京に居住したカザントルコ人によって1938年に新築の場としてオープンされ、1986年に老朽化のため取り壊された。その後トルコ共和国宗教局の援助により東京モスクフアンデーションによって再建された。躯体工事は鹿島建設、内部及び外装仕上げ工事はトルコ人職人と技術者によって行われた。設計はムハッレムヒルミシニナルプ、渋谷区役所と区民の協力の協力で感謝します。トルコ大使館
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be very academic, very studious and very serious about their practices," Arai says. "We have to be, as we don't have the luxury of being surrounded by Islam in our daily lives."

The JMA, established in 1952 as Japan's first officially recognized Islamic organization, acts as a support network for both Japanese and expatriate Muslims living in Japan, helping its members practice their religion in harmony with Japanese society and encouraging awareness of Islam through Arabic language classes, religious workshops and weekend excursions.

While he notes the image of Islam as a spiritual fountainhead for terrorism prevalent in the Western media is less prevalent in Japan, Arai worries that such negative images are starting to become permeate Japan society. "My ambition is to educate the people of Japan as to the true nature of Islam," he says. "Ours is a religion of peace and we need to make this clear."

As a Japanese convert to Islam, Arai represents a minority within a minority, as a significant majority of Muslims in Japan are newcomers from overseas. These newcomers, predominantly South and Southeast Asians (with increasing numbers from the Middle East and North Africa), represent the more visible face of Islam in Japan.

Representative of this face is Imam Ensari Yentürk, an energetic young Turkish cleric and the current director of the Tokyo Camii Mosque and affiliated Turkish Cultural Center. Yentürk, a representative of the Turkish Department of Religious Affairs (the Camii's primary sponsor), considers that while living a Muslim life in Japan remains challenging, the past decade has seen life become considerably easier for Muslims in Japan.

"As recently as six years ago it was extremely difficult to find *halal* meat (butchered in accordance with Islamic strictures), but now it is quite easy to find," Yentürk says. Certified halal meat, imported primarily from Brazil, can indeed now be found in a significant number of import grocery stores in the larger commercial centers, and is even starting to appear in some regular supermarkets, notably the Hanamasa chain.



Resources

Islamic Organizations & Mosques

While challenges invariably remain, life has become considerably easier for observant Muslims in Japan over the past decade, particularly in major urban centers. Much of this is thanks to the activities of the increasingly numerous Islamic organizations and mosques operating in the country. Below is a partial selection:

Islamic Association of Nagoya (Nagoya Mosque): 2-26-7 Honjin Dori, Nakamura-ku, Nagoya, Aichi, tel: 052-486-2380

Islamic Center Tokyo: 1-16-11 Ohara, Setagaya-ku, Tokyo, tel: 03-3460-6169, fax: 03-3460-6105

Islamic Cultural Center Sendai: Makuda Apartment 101, Kita-memachi 2-16, Sendai, tel/fax: 0222-68-2802

Japan Islamic Trust (Otsuka Mosque): 3-42-7 Minami-otsuka, Toshima-ku, Tokyo, tel: 03-3971-5631, fax: 03-3447-1697

Japan Muslim Association: Valore Yoyogi 1004, 2-26-5 Yoyogi, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo, tel: 03-3370-3476, fax: 03-3370-3420

Kobe Mosque: 2-25-14 Nakayamate Dori, Chuo-ku, Kobe, Hyogo, tel: 078-231-6060

Osaka Islamic Center: #104 3-2-7 Dekijima, Nishi-yodogawa-ku, Osaka, tel: 06-6477-9862

Tokyo Camii (Turkish Cultural Center): 1-19 Oyama-cho, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo, tel: 03-5790-0760, fax: 03-5790-7822

Tsukuba Muslim Residents Association: 315-10 Kaname, Tsukuba, Ibaraki, tel/fax: 0298-64-3235

Halal Food

The following is a selection of purveyors of halal foods in the Kanto area:

Asian Shopping Center: 1-18-16 Nishi-ikebukuro, Toshima-ku, Tokyo, tel: 03-3971-2966

Asia Shopping Center: 2-6-2 Motoyokoyama-cho, Hachioji, Tokyo, tel/fax: 0426-46-7686

Baharia (Erhan Candas): 2F, Hokuto Honsha Bldg, 2-14-3 Yoyogi, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo, tel: 03-3320-0340, e-mail: baharia@baharu.com. Online shopping available at www.baharu.com/baharia

Dhaka Halal Foods: Pacific Palace Tsunashima 106, 2-11-2 Tsunashima-Nishi, Kohoku-ku, Yokohama, Kanagawa, tel/fax: 0455-31-5057

Jafar & Family Store: 2-10-9 Hyakunin-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo, tel: 03-5337-0644, fax: 03-5337-0463

Ohtsuya Shouten: 4-6-13 Ueno, Taito-ku, Tokyo, tel: 03-3834-4078

The Hanamasa chain also provides halal products. Consult their website at www.hanamasa.co.jp (Japanese only) for outlet locations.

Travel

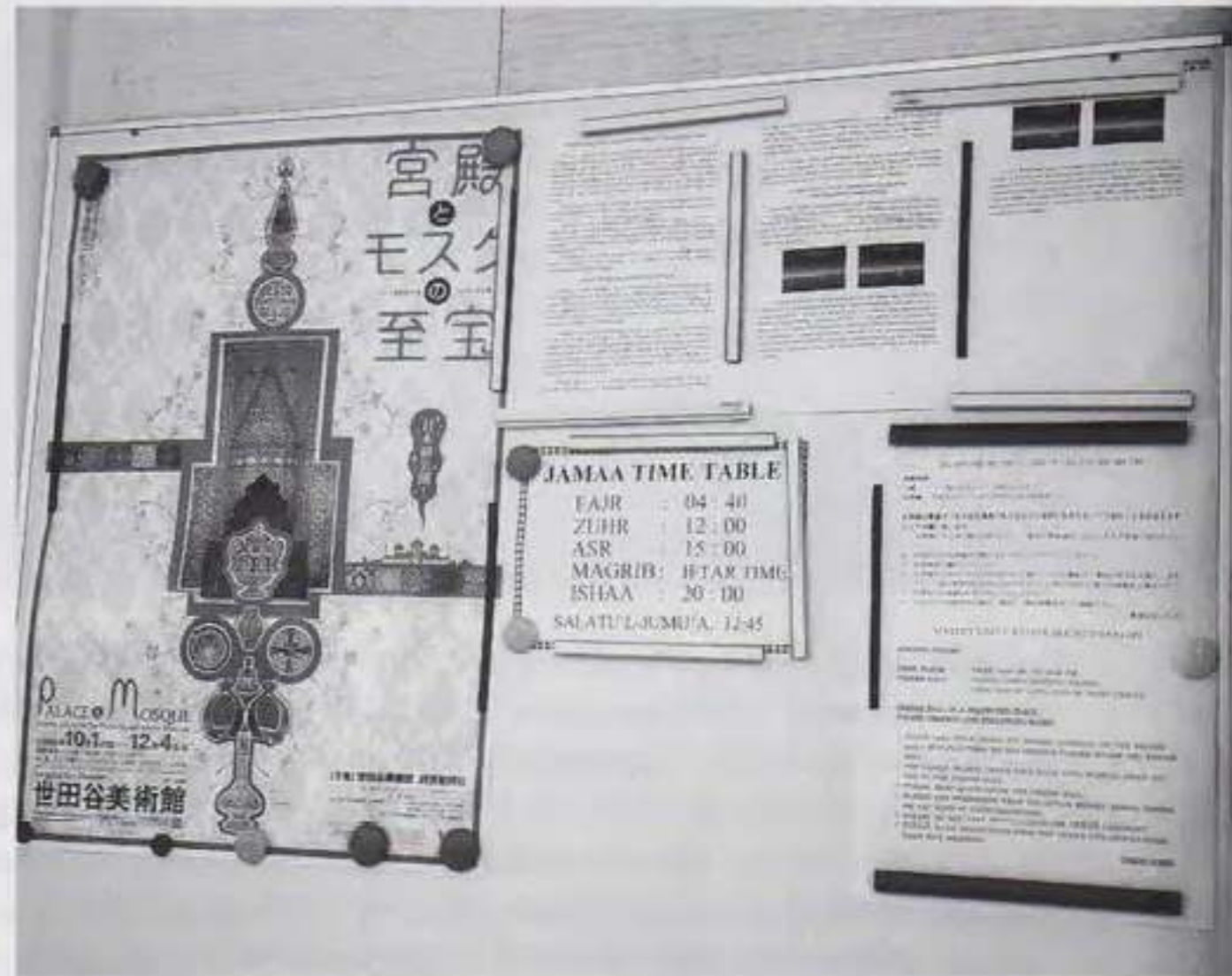
Also worth mentioning is the travel agency Air1 Travel. A Muslim-run company, Air1 Travel specializes in Hajj and Umrah package tours for Muslim pilgrims to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia, as well as travel to other centers in the Islamic Middle East. Head Office: Shinichi Bldg, 602-2-8 Yotsuya, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo, tel: 03-5919-0199, fax: 03-5919-0198, web: www.air1travel.com



ILLUSTRATION GUIDE

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Jafar & Family Store (Halal Food Store) near Shin-Okubu Station; Prayer Timetable at Tokyo Camii Mosque; Multi-lingual Qur'ans
 PAGE 26: Minaret, Camii Mosque
 PAGE 27: Roof, Camii Mosque
 PAGE 28: JMA members
 Mohammed Ali Syaril and wife Zetty from Malaysia, with three-month-old daughter Noor
 PAGES 28-29: Exterior, Camii Mosque

ALL PHOTOS BY BENJAMIN FREELAND



Yentürk also notes that Japanese companies and universities are becoming more flexible in regards to *salat* (the five daily prayers required of observant Muslims), previously a frequent grievance among Muslims in Japan, with some more flexible employers even permitting Muslim employees to attend mosque services on Fridays.

Like Arai, Yentürk believes that discrimination against Islam is generally less acute in Japan than in many other countries. "I've occasionally encountered bigoted attitudes and during the [hostage-taking drama in Iraq involving three Japanese nationals earlier this year] received some angry phone calls, but otherwise there is no big problem with discrimination here," he says.

Conversely, he says the media frenzy surrounding Islamic fundamentalism sparked by the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent war in Iraq has helped stimulate interest in Islam, particularly amongst young Japanese. "I have people coming up to me all the time, asking about the meaning of jihad and the significance of our practices," he says, adding that his mosque has overseen some 150 conversions since its re-inauguration in 2000.

While interest in Islam may be on the rise, the overall level of awareness of the religion remains low and for some Muslims, particularly women, this can still be a source of much frustration.

Masume Karami, an Iranian student studying for her Master's at Hitotsubashi University, says people can still be shocked by simple things such as clothing. "I get stared at on the train because of my *hijab* (headscarf)," she says. "I've also had people tell me they were shocked by the bright-colored clothes I wear, saying they thought

Muslim women were only allowed to wear black."

Firoz Mahmud, a native of Bangladesh and a Fine Arts student at Tama Art University in Hachioji, agrees. "It [Islam] is still very unknown [to the Japanese]," he says. "We are often forced to explain why we don't eat pork or why we don't drink [alcohol]."

Others allege that Muslims from overseas invariably face less in the way of social problems than their Japanese counterparts. "In Japan there are a lot of [social] rules and, as such, Japanese who convert to Islam can feel quite isolated socially," says Abdel Ilah Tabet, a Moroccan researcher in Computer Science at the University of Tokyo. "It's easier for us because we're expected to be different."

However, all agree that in spite of these frustrations Japan is still largely free from the sort of anti-Islamic currents that plague much of the rest of the world.

"From what I hear from my colleagues in the United States, we don't face the same problems here," Tabet says.

In addition, all agree that although there are still many challenges to living a Muslim life in Japan, it is becoming easier all the time. Indeed, all evidence points to Islam establishing a firm foothold in Japan. Mosques, until recently non-existent outside Japan's largest cities, are now opening throughout the country, Muslim student associations have sprung up throughout the Japanese university system and the Tokyo Islamic Center is currently overseeing the construction of Japan's first Islamic school.

"Living in Japan is not difficult for me," says Karami from Iran. "I do plan on returning home eventually, but for now I'm happy to be here."

