
Living in Japan as a Muslim: Current Situations and Problems

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Abstract

The world's Muslim population has been constantly increasing over the years. Japan, too, has experienced/ observed an increase in the number of Muslims residing in the country. Being Muslim in a non-Muslim country is not easy. Therefore, Muslims in Japan have encountered a variety of hardships trying to live out their faith in Japan. The difficulties of following Muslim orthodox as it is done in Muslim-majority countries have led many Muslims in Japan to adopt a more flexible and compromising way of practicing their faith. Muslims face problems no matter where they are in the country, and without government regulations there are no consistent standards, particularly regarding what is Halal and otherwise. There is a serious lack of trust that Halal brands are in fact Halal. By pointing out problems that Muslim residents are currently facing and knowing how they deal with the problems, the current circumstances could be improved. Thus, this paper tries to recognize the current Muslim situations and identify current problems in order to reach effective solutions in the future.

Keyword: Muslim, Japan, Current situations, Problems

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Background

It is said that Japan started to have interaction with Islam in 1887 when Prince Komatsu Akihito visited Istanbul, then part of the Ottoman Empire, where he met Abdul Hamid II. In return for the Japanese prince's visit, the sultan sent his army to Japan. After about three months, they set sail for their trip back home. In route, their ships were caught in a thunderstorm, resulting a devastating accident. The survivors were rescued and treated in Japan until they were well enough to be sent back home (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2014). "During the periods of 1890 and the end of the war, it was the time when Islam was promoted by non-Muslim Japanese. During the time, there were Japanese Muslims although they converted to be Muslim for business reasons. Thus, very few of them chose to be Muslim after the war" (Akiko Komura, 2015). There was a Japanese journalist on the ship to the Ottoman Empire who was later converted to be the first Japanese Muslim.

In 1902, there was a plan to build a masjid in Yokohama although it was unsuccessful. From 1904 till 1905, during the Russo-Japanese War, the Russian Muslim prisoners of the war were brought to Osaka. Obtaining the information about Islam in Japan, a group of Turkish Muslims who settled in Russia at that time started to move to Japan in order to seek Asian support for oppressed Muslims in Russia (Usmanova, 2006). Since then, religious propagation by Muslim academics was successively implemented, and an Islamic missionary group was organized, reportedly resulting in the conversion of around 12 thousand Japanese nationals to Islam although that number has been disputed and remains controversial (Islamic Center of Japan, 2009).

Japanese interactions with Islam were intermittent. Being affected by political and economic situations in Japan and around the world, the position of Muslims in Japan changed. Nouh (2012) categorized those Muslims into three groups: (1) very few non-Japanese Muslims who came to Japan for various reasons, (2) several Japanese who converted to Islam to serve the objectives of Japanese policy, and (3) a small number of Japanese who encountered Islam while traveling outside Japan and meeting Muslims (Nouh, 2012).

Having closer connections with non-Japanese Muslims, the number of Turkish immigrants from Russia increased, with most settling in Tokyo or Kobe (Nouh, 2012). In Tokyo, these Muslims established an ethnic school in 1927 (Usmanova, 2006). With the support of Indian traders, the first masjid was founded in Kobe in 1935 followed by one in Nagoya in 1937 and in Tokyo in 1938, symbolizing "the presence of Islam and of Muslims in Japan." Although Islam is promoted mainly by non-Japanese Muslims by forming Muslims groups and communities at that time, the first Muslim association operated by Japanese was founded in 1952, comprising of approximately 74 Japanese Muslims (Nouh, 2012).

"In late 1980, reasons to visit Japan shifted from religious reasons to economic reasons. The Japanese booming economy and exemption of visas started to encourage Muslims mainly from Iran, Pakistan and Bangladesh to travel to Japan. In the meantime, as more opportunities to meet Muslims in Japan are provided, more Japanese women were converted and had families with foreign Muslim husbands" (Komura, 2015).

The Number of Muslims in Japan

Pew Research Center reports in 2017 that the number of Christians is the

largest in 2015 followed by Muslims. The number of Christians comprises 2.3 billion, while that of Muslims consists of 1.8 billion people, making up 24 percent of the world population. The number of Muslims has been dramatically increasing especially in the Asia-Pacific region by 79.5 percent since 2010 till 2015, which is the most dramatic increase in the region, compared with other religions such as Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Also, the global Muslim population is expected to keep increasing by 70 percent by 2060 (Hackett and McClendon, 2017). Japan, like many other countries, has no official statistics about its Muslim population. Although the number of them is unclear and can only be estimated according to other statistical reports, Tanada (2015) estimated the approximate numbers of foreign Muslims, illegally-migrated Muslims in Japan, Japanese Muslim spouses (usually wives) who converted after marrying foreign Muslims husband, and other Japanese Muslims. The number is estimated based on the statistics of foreign residents in Japan released by the Japan Immigration Association and the ratio of Muslim population of the foreign residents' country. According to his research as of 2012, the number of the entire Muslim population in Japan is estimated approximately 101,375 people. 88,937 of them are expected to be non-Japanese, 7,622 are Japanese converts to Islam (mostly women) who married Muslims spouses (mostly non-Japanese), 2,566 are illegal migrants, and 2,250 are other Japanese (Tanada, 2015).

Masjids in Japan

Although there was about 30 years of time when no new masjids were constructed after the first and second masjids, one in Kobe and the other in Tokyo, the number of them has been dramatically increasing. In fact, 13 masjids were newly opened before 2000,

and another 48 places were founded in the next 10 years. Eighty-one masjids were reportedly constructed by 2009 and located in many different parts in Japan. Tanada and Okai (2015) expect the number of masjids to continue increasing as the number of foreign residents from Islamic countries continues to grow. As of 2014, it is reported that another 7 masjids are expected to be built.

In order to understand reasons and planners of constructing Masjids, Tanada and Okai (2015) analyzed tendencies that encouraged local Muslims to build masjids in their neighborhoods and categorized them into four groups depending on budgets: (1) masjids constructed by an order from the top such as governments, (2) ones by local Muslim residents without external support, (3) ones by local Muslim residents with external support, and (4) ones by local Muslim students. Many masjids in Japan look different from ones in other countries because many of them are renovated houses or buildings. It seems that these architectural characteristics are often seen in small cities and suburbs. As the number of masjids increases, Tanada and Okai (2015) noticed an interesting trend. In the past, they only constructed one masjid per prefecture, but nowadays there may be two or more, which has prompted a separation of Muslims by nationality, sect, and other factors.

The Current Muslim Situation in Japan

Even though the number of Muslim residents in Japan has been increasing, Nouh (2012) points out some problems facing Muslim communities in Japan. They are unstable and not easy to maintain because many foreign Muslims are only temporary residents while many Japanese Muslims are assigned to work overseas by their employers. Many people also come to Japan only for study or vocational training whereupon after completion, they are sent to their home

country or another country to start work. Socially, Japan's polytheistic and multi-religious culture in which people have no problem melding Shinto, Buddhist, and other practices into their lives also makes it difficult for locals to understand and accept monotheistic religions. Such religions do not allow believers to celebrate any other religious events or festivals. Within families, "it is not easy to form a united Japanese Muslim family within Japanese society" (Nouh, 2012).

In fact, Agency for Cultural Affairs (2014) reports that the number of Japanese who believe in a religion was 190,219,862 in 2014. However, the actual Japanese population in 2014 was only 127,083,000 in 2014 (Statistic Bureau, 2014). This means the number of people who believe in a religion exceeds the actual population by approximately 1.5 percent. According to the Central Intelligence Agency of the US (2012), 79.2 percent of the population believes in Shintoism, 66.8 percent believes in Buddhism, 1.5 percent believes in Christianity. The total believers accounts for more than 100 percent since many people believe in more than one religion. Therefore, it is possible that one household belongs to multiple religions. It is also possible that each family member believes in different religions.

It has been about 130 years since Japan had its first interaction with Muslims and welcomed Muslims to its land. Today, there are reportedly 101,375 Muslims in Japan, including converts and children. Those with young children will have greater involvement in receiving public services, such as education and health care. For Muslims, utilizing public services is both problematic and at times controversial. Japan is multi-religious country in the way its population believes in multiple religions and gods. Therefore, it is very common that many Japanese are not accustomed to the sort of religious-centered lives that Islam requires of its

adherents. Public services and other governmental services are based on Japanese culture and Japanese society. Today many Muslims encounter religions-related issues in their social lives. Above all, issues related to the Japanese educational system are often raised and discussed because religions cannot be taught in public schools. In regards to education, Article 15 of the Basic Act on Education states that, "The attitude of religious tolerance, general knowledge regarding religion, and the position of religion in social life shall be valued in education. (2) The schools established by the national and local governments shall refrain from religious education or other activities for a specific religion" (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology). This legislation is enacted in light of freedom of religion that is ensured by the Japanese constitution.

Problems of Muslims Found at Schools

When it comes to younger children, using public services are often unavoidable for their families because attending an elementary school and junior high school is mandatory. Considering this unfamiliar but serious issue, Tanada and Okai (2010) conducted a survey on the current situation of education among Muslims by interviewing 96 families. The result of the survey mainly reflects the answers of parents, whose children receive mandatory education in Japan. The survey reports that more than 90 percent agreed that Islamic education was absolutely necessary and/or stated that they required Islamic facilities or Islamic schools for their children. Despite their demands, 50 percent of the parents were satisfied with the Japanese educational system. The biggest concern in letting their children go to school was school lunch. In Japan, there is usually only one option for school lunch every day. Currently, schools are urged to take

special measures only for those who are allergic or have health issues. Measures may vary depending on schools, but each school usually provides alternative options by removing allergens or allowing students to bring their own lunch from home. With no special measures taken for religious problems at school, about 60 percent are worried about school meals. In fact, Shizuoka Newspaper reports (2017) that the large number of parents are worried about school lunch. Most of the students are required to “take their lunch with them, take their side dishes with them when the menu contains pork, or eat school lunch, leaving pork uneaten.”

Food-related issues are very common for Muslims in Japan, even as adults. A study by Nakano, Okunishi, and Takaka (2015) among university students had 44 percent of respondents claiming to have difficulties finding food and beverages due to the limited availability of halal ingredients, lack of halal menus, and ingredient labels that did not provide enough information to know if it was okay to consume. Muslims must always be aware of exactly what they are eating, because there are many things that their religion prohibits them from consuming. Off-campus shopping was difficult because many Japanese foods contain alcohol, pork, or pork products, including pork extract. Ingredient labels are also written in Japanese with no English translations which can make it even more cumbersome for those who are not literate in Japanese.

Even on university campuses where many foreign students attend, Muslim students reported difficulties finding Halal foods. Kishida (2009) did research regarding Halal food availability in Japanese universities. She asked 48 national, public, and private Japanese universities about Halal dining on their campuses. Her study revealed that 6 universities (5 national and 1 public or

private) provided Halal meals prepared based on Islamic law in their university cafeterias. Another 10 universities (9 national and 1 private or public) provided general lists of ingredients so that students could make their own choices about what to consume. The other 32 universities did not give any special consideration towards religious diet restrictions. Looking the results of this research, public services in Japan do not always meet the needs of Muslims. Japan's policy of religious freedom and consequential lack of special consideration for any particular religion means that Muslims in Japan must think of alternative options to fulfill their religious needs. Nouh (2012) maintains that this problem exists because the Japanese government, both local and national, have “little experience of direct communication with Muslims.”

Islamic Education in Japan

It is said that it is difficult to receive Islamic education in Japan. Although there are 101,375 Muslims residents in Japan, there are only 81 masjids as of 2014 (Tanada and Okai, 2015). As of the year till 2017, Tanada states in an interview that, “It is more likely that the number of masjids exceeded 100 places throughout the country. In addition, plans for future masjids are discussed in many places in Japan” (Tagawa, 2017). However, some prefectures have no masjids. The role of masjids is very significant among Muslims in terms of Islamic education. Tanada and Okai (2009) says masjids are places not only for worship but also for education. They are also places where requests of Muslim residents can be heard and delivered to the Japanese governments. Masjids may also provide other services in addition to Islamic education, such as Arabic lessons, organize camping trips, host Ramadhan celebrations, offer cooking classes, sell

Halal food, and provide information about the local area. Overall however, Muslim community efforts are very limited and many do not involve themselves in such things.

The necessity of Islamic education, on the other hand, is very high among Muslim residents in Japan. The survey conducted by Tanada and Okai (2010) shows approximately 95 percent of Muslim parents think Islamic education is necessary, and about 91 percent think facilities for Islamic education is needed. Although only 27 percent of parents actually take their children to Islamic education facilities, 76 percent of respondents indicated they were thinking about sending their children to Islamic schools in the future. That 76 percent potentially faces a problem of availability of Islamic schools. The actual number of Islamic schools and education facilities in Japan is unknown however, considering 91 percent of respondents claimed they needed Islamic educational facilities, it is quite likely there are not enough options. When thinking about their expectations for such a school, 79 percent of the parents expect their children to learn Islamic manners followed by how to read the Quran (52 percent) and how to memorize Quran (51 percent).

Currently, many Muslim children attend Islam-related classes at masjids or learn about Islam at home. However, some masjids end up cancelling their classes due to a lack of teachers and/or managers (Tanada and Okai, 2015). Another option is for Muslim parents to send their children to international schools where they can receive Islamic education. However, there are very few schools that teach Islamic studies. One of them is established only for Indonesian nationals, and the other international school is not licensed. Taking this fact into account, masjids are

the only places for Muslims to receive Islamic education in Japan.

Japanese Way of Being Muslim

Living in non-Muslim countries is not easy for Muslims, but it is true that there are Japanese Muslims living in Japan. There are two cases of Japanese Muslims interviewed by journalists. A Japanese Muslim convert in his 20s was interviewed in one case. The article (Kanda, 2017) reports the man converted after studying and learning about Islam. He went to a restaurant to eat a pork cutlet on the day he decided to be Muslim because he would not be allowed to eat pork after conversion but he admitted he still eats pork. He also does not always give prayers when he is busy with his work, and he drinks alcohol when his colleagues ask him out. Another case of a Japanese Muslim convert shows a similar way of living in Japan as a Muslim. When he visited Algeria, he was interested in Islam and started to read the Quran. In 2000, he decided to convert to Islam because he agreed with its teachings in terms of human rights and dignity. However, he states that, "It is almost impossible not to eat pork in Japan because corn starch contains pork extract and bread contains lard" (Saito, 2012).

Looking at these two cases of the Japanese Muslims, it seems very difficult to practice according to Islamic principles, even with the utmost effort. Being Muslim requires not only their self-effort, but also support and understanding from people surrounding them. While the Japanese government has taken little action for the Halal industry, many Japanese associations have started to penetrate into Halal certification. So many Halal certification organizations are reportedly established. As a result, Halal certification is not standardized and is completely dependent on examining organizations. There are even certifications called local Halal. Chikushi

(2014) contacted the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and Consumer Affairs Agency to ask about this unstandardized Halal certification problem. However, the government has not come up with any solutions.

Problems of Halal Food and its Certification

Although the Japanese government has been urged to take action on halal food supplies due to the increasing number of Muslim tourists as well as the rapidly growing Muslim market, they have yet to come up with any solutions to meet the demands. Instead of urging the government, some corporations, local governments, and private companies have started Halal certification for their products by certifying as so-called local Halal or

Halal friendly products. In order to prevent unauthorized certifications from increasing their number, some Muslim associations also started to provide authorized certification by adopting certification systems and standards from other countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, UAE, and Singapore. According to Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) (2017), there are six associations that are authorized by different countries. The standards of each association are consistent with the certified countries although the Halal standards between the countries are not very different. In fact, products that are not certified by UAE, but by Malaysia, Indonesia, or Singapore can be exported to Middle Eastern countries.

Japanese Halal Certification Organizations authorized by Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and UAE

Certification Organization	Malaysia	Indonesia	Singapore	UAE
	JAKIM (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia)	LPPOM-MUI (Institute for Foods, Drugs and Cosmetics The Indonesian Council of Ulama)	MUIS (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore)	MOCCE and ESMA
Japan Muslim Association (JMA)	O	O	O	
Japan Islamic Trust	O			O
Japan Halal Association (JHA)	O		O	O
Japan Halal Unit Association (JHUA)	O			
Japan Asia Halal Association (JAHA)	O			
Muslim Professional Japan Association (MPJA)	O	O		

(Source: JETRO, 2017)

Due to growing interest in the Halal market and increasing number of Halal certifications, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries conducted a survey with a help of Mitsubishi UFJ Research and Consulting in order for the government to comprehend the actual situations regarding Halal certifications. The report (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2015) shows that only 80 food suppliers are halal certified in Japan, while 26 companies in the food-service industry and the hotel industry are certified in Japan. These numbers may not reflect the actual numbers that exist today because the number of Halal

certifications are growing rapidly in Japan. It would also imply that officially Halal-certified products or restaurants are fewer than people may see in daily life. Many universities have started to provide Halal food; however, this number suggests that the Halal food that universities provide may not be officially certified as Halal. While Muslim associations have been working hard to increase the number of Halal foods, unauthorized certifications remain, so even if one is eating something labeled Halal, they must make sure it is officially Halal. If it is not given official status, one cannot be confident that the food is truly Halal.

Number of Halal-Certified Suppliers (Manufacture)

Item	Number
Processed Food	16
Seasoning	15
Beverage	11
Snack	9
Food additive	6
Supplement	4
Noodles	3
Chicken	3
Beef	3
Milk product	2
Grain	2
Ingredients of supplement	2
Egg	1
Fish	1
Aroma chemical essence	1
Whale meat	1
Total	80

Number of Halal-Certified Suppliers (Food-service and hotel)

Category	Number
Restaurant	15
Hotel	9
Cafe	1
School cafeteria	1
Total	26

(Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2015)

Conclusion

Although the exact number of Muslims residents in Japan, both foreign and Japanese Muslims, is unrecognized, the number has been reportedly increasing and will keep increasing. Today supposedly more than 10,000 Muslims lives in Japan. Although local governments are urged to provide support, they remain very cautious about providing services due to the sensitive nature of religious issues and a lack of experience with such problems. In order to meet the demands of Muslims, local communities, Muslim associations, and private companies have been taking action. Some do it in order to support Muslims, others do it as a business venture to tap into an untapped market. In order to eliminate all the confusion, particularly around Halal foods, Japan is being encouraged to establish a single Islam-oriented organization to define Islamic standards nationwide to help Muslims integrate better into society. Establishing such an organization

requires a lot of time and effort as well as a deep understanding of Islam and Islam in Japan.

The lack of knowledge about Islam and low support for Islamic accommodation among Japanese citizens has made it difficult for Muslim residents to live in Japan as proper Muslims. On the flipside, Muslims in Japan strive to adapt to Japanese culture and life in Japanese society. It is easiest for those who are born and raised as Muslim in Japan, because they will be familiar with Japanese culture, Islamic teachings, and how to incorporate both into their lives. Muslim converts such as Japanese Muslims who formally held non-Islam beliefs, on the other hand, may face many problems since they are used to their original culture in terms of practices and food. As a result, there are soft Muslims who partially follow the Islamic laws. Living as a Muslim is very difficult in Japan, and it is almost impossible to follow exactly what Muslim laws dictate. There is no choice but to compromise.

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