Cultural Encounter with Islam and its Reception in Japan: Its Historical Change and the Role Played by Foreign Muslims

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Abstract

In this presentation, the presenter will talk about how Japanese people have come to accept Islam through their encounters and relationships with foreign Muslims from the perspective of cross-cultural understanding. The presenter will also focus on the role played by foreign Muslims and their influence on Japanese people. The aim of this presentation is to illustrate how Japanese people came to understand and accept Islam, a religion unfamiliar to Japanese society. Japan's first encounter with Muslims can be traced back to ancient times. However, this was only a diplomatic encounter. The first encounter on a civilian level was made during the Meiji Era, when the Ottoman warship Ertugrul sank off the coast of Wakayama prefecture in 1890. Sixty-nine crew members were rescued by residents of Oshima Island, located near the site of the accident. The survivors were sent back to Turkey aboard two Japanese warships. Before WW II, Japan's colonial policies in northern and northwestern China made Islamic studies an increasingly important part of Japan's national policy at that time. Some Turkic Muslims in Central Asia came into contact with Japanese military men or Japanese government officials and were invited to Japan. In addition, Japanese traders in the Islamic regions also came into contact with Islam. Before WW II, thanks to the Japan's Islam policy (回教政策 Kaikyō seisaku), Islam was introduced and spread in Japan. The Japanese government invited foreign Muslim intellectuals and accepted Muslim immigrants from Central Asia, mainly Tatar Muslims. In other words, Japan accepted Islam for the purpose of political benefits.

After the war, however, Muslims in Japan had to make the Islamic circumstances (building masjids, Muslim cemeteries and so on) and maintain their communities on their own. Unlike in the prewar period, the Japanese government was no longer involved in Islam because of the principle of separation of politics and religion. In addition, Tatar Muslim immigrants, whose presence had supported Islam in Japan before and during WW II, moved to Turkey or other countries such as the U.S. However, this situation was to change with an arrival of foreign Muslim workers. In the late 1980s, Japanese economy boomed. Many companies in Japan suffered from labor shortages, in particular, small and medium-sized enterprises of the primary and secondary sectors of industries. Foreign Muslim workers came to Japan both legally and illegally and were welcomed to work in both sectors of industries. As a result of it the number of Muslim workers increased and some Japanese women converted to Islam to get married with them.

Today there are second (or third) generation Muslims living in Japan. There are also new foreign Muslim workers who have been invited to Japan as trainees. In addition, a large number of Muslim tourists have been visiting Japan in recent years. As hospitality (Omotenashi) tailored to them, some restaurants, which are located at popular sightseeing spots, provide halāl meals. Also, Muslim students wearing scarves can be seen in large cities of Japan on a daily basis. Some young generation Japanese have Muslim friends and they appear to enjoy experiencing different cultures and diversity.

As shown above, foreign Muslims have considerably influenced Japanese society. In other words, their presence in Japan not only brought opportunities for cultural exchange, but also influenced the acceptance of Islam by Japanese people.