

ISLAMIC CENTERS AND ORGANIZATIONS IN JAPAN: ACTIVITIES AND PROBLEMS

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Abstract: When someone thinks about Islam or the Muslim world, name of Japan does not come to mind immediately. There are neither clear records of any contact between Islam and Japan nor any historical traces of Islam's coming into Japan through religious propagation of any sort except for some isolated cases of contact between individual Japanese and Muslims of other countries before 1868. Islam was firstly known to Japanese people in 1877 as a part of Western religious thought. The real Muslim community life however did not start until the arrival of several hundred Turkoman, Uzbek, Tadjik, Kirghiz, Kazakh and other Turko-Tatar Muslim refugees from central Asia and Russia in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution during World War I. During 1900-1920 some other Muslims also went to Japan and living in this country as a small Muslim community they started publishing Islamic magazines as well as managed to convert a large number of Japanese people into Islam. In addition to building the mosques, as a natural outcome of the activities of Islamic communities in Japan various Muslim organizations and Islamic centers were established in the various parts of the country. These organizations and centers have been, more or less, means and source of supporting and strengthening the Dawah work of Islam in Japan. This paper is an analytical survey of Islamic centers and organizations in Japan examining their activities, problems and challenges.

Keywords: Japan, Islam, organizations, centers, activities, challenges

1.1 A brief history of Islamic organizations in Japan

Once the Muslim communities in Japan were started settling dawn in Japan, it was felt necessary to develop and expand the social bonds within the community and outside the community as well.

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According to Aziz M.A¹ the first Muslim association in Japan was organized in 1920 under the name of The Tokyo Islamic Order by Muslims living in Tokyo and its suburbs with Mr. Kurbanaly as a leader. Later on another party was organized in 1934 under the leadership of Mr. Ishaky in opposition of Mr. Kurbabaly in the name of Idel-Qural-Turko-Tartar Cultural Society.

After that, under the name of Great Japan Islamic Association a more significant organization in Japan was formed before the Second World War. However, Japanese people became more accessible to NRs including Islam after war.² This change was basically as a result of changes which were made in the Constitution allowing for religious freedom. Consequently, some of the dedicated Muslims thrived to form a new society for Japanese Muslims and in 1952; the Japan Muslim Association was established.³ To endeavor for the promotion of Islam in the country and to strive for establishing ties and bonds of friendship and goodwill with Muslim countries contributing to world peace were the main aims and objectives this association. On the other hand, for social and religious gatherings of Muslims the Tokyo Mosque was becoming a focal point.

After the sudden death of Sadiq Imaizumi, first leader of Japan Muslim Association in 1960, Haji umar Mita (1892-1974) was elected its second precedent. He was an octogenarian Japanese Muslim leader as well as a famous scholar. He undeniably played a fundamental role in the propagation of Islam in Japan. (Islamic Culture Forum Japan, 1975, pp- 2-28)

1.2 Islamic organizations in contemporary Japan

After “Islamic boom” in Japan various organizations were established in order to promote their religious activities. An Islamic center, Muslim organization or association can now be found almost in every large city of Japan. There are roughly fifty Islamic associations according to the estimate of Islamic Centre functioning all over Japan.⁴

Among these some are working very well as well as these are significant in their activities, influence and size. However, others are not so significant and serving presently the local community as a contact point or some running Mosques and weekends Islamic schools. In short, the base, size, and the function of these organizations are according to the requirements of the

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community in that area. Somehow a kind of diversity is also exhibited by these centers and organizations in terms of religious school of thought, nationality, educational institute, university or political affiliations. For a brief introduction to these we are classifying into the following categories:

Indigenous Muslim associations & organizations

- Islamic Circle of Japan
- Islamic Cultural Society
- Islamic Mission of Japan
- Islamic Center, Japan
- Council of Mosques, Japan
- Japan Muslims Peace Federation
- Islamic Welfare Corps and Fatiha Foundation
- Japan Muslim Association
- Japan Islamic Trust
- Japan Islamic Friendship Federation
- Japan Islamic Congress
- Council of Islamic Organizations of Islam
- (Foreign) Muslim Students Association of Japan
- Tokyo University Islamic Cultural Society
- Saitama Muslim Cultural Association

Associations for Muslim women

- Japan International Ladies Muslima Association
- Ladies Islamic Council
- Muslima Association-Al Hudaa

Organizations administered mainly from abroad

- Islamic Arabic Institute
- Arab Cultural Association
- Turkish Association of Japan
- Indonesian Islamic Centre
- African Muslim Association in Tokyo

The categorization for other regions in Japan which have more than one Muslim organization is as follows:

Osaka:

- Da'wah Islamic Osaka
- Kasai Islamic Society
- Osaka Muslim Association

Kyoto:

- Japan Islamic Mosque
- Japan Islamic Friendship Association
- Kyoto Muslim Association

Aichi:

- Toyohashi Muslim Association
- Islamic Association of Nagoya
- Aichi Bunka Centre

Kanagawa:

- Islamic Education and Information Center
- Pakistan Scholars Organization
- Odawara Kokusaai-kan

Hokkaido:

- Hokkaido Islamic Cultural Center
- Hokkaido Islamic Society

Shizuoka:

- Japan Muslim News
- Shizuoka Muslim Students Association

Some of above mentioned organizations are significantly known in Japan for their proficient function in offering the services to the Muslim community as well as efficient role in the propagation of Islam in the country.

1.3 Activities and challenges

Muslims have been facing tremendous and multi-dimensional challenges from the early contact of Islam in Japan. However, they are trying to meet

these challenges with limited human and financial resources according to their capacity. Some significant aspects of these problems and accomplishments of Muslim organizations are examined as following:

1.3.1 Literature on Islam: composition, translation and publication

As a matter of fact, the great need of the Muslims in Japan is up-to-date Islamic literature especially in Japanese language. In order to level out the problem of shortage of reasonable literature on various topics such as Islamic faith, values, its contribution in field science serving the humanity as well as on Muslim world particularly in the Japanese language, many organizations including Islamic Centre, Islamic Circle, Islamic Cultural Society and Japan Muslim Association have been struggling. These organizations are now publishing and distributing books including the translations of the holy Quran into Japanese language and issuance of magazines and newspapers in Japan. Just to mention as an example more than three hundred thousand books yearly in Japan are distributed only by the Centre.

Moreover, Centre produced more than thirty publications including books and booklets or translated into Japanese and then distributed to educational institutions and various organizations Muslims and non-Muslims alike all over Japan. The Centre also provides its help and support for publications on Islamic topics produced by different Muslim and non-Muslim scholars.

In the recent years, the demand for Islamic literature in Japan has increased tremendously because the Japanese youth and businessmen particularly have been showing an increasing interest to know about Islam and Muslim world perhaps due to the stereotypes created against Islam in the aftermaths of 9/11.⁵ Consequently, Japanese Muslim scholars are now much enthusiastic without any doubt to produce new-fashioned and convenient and expedient literature on diversified aspects of Islam.

1.3.2 Propagation of Islam

The case of building a mosque is quite different from propagation of Islam which means the spreading of Islam by assorted means. The means which are not only suitable rather attracting to Japanese mindset. Although, almost all organizations assert to propagate Islam in Japan, but largely Da'wah activities are carried out by the Islamic circle of Japan, Muslim association,

Islamic center, Tablighi Jamaat, Dawah Islamia and Kobe Islamic education center. The world Muslim congress has also been very dynamic.

However, Islamic Circle of Japan probably is the most active organization since a couple of decades. This is a non-ethnic, non-sectarian, independent grass root organization working for establishing pious, Allah fearing and peaceful society in Japan. Since its establishment in 1992, 21 Tarbiya annual three-day camps focusing on a variety of significant issues related to Islam and Muslims in Japan has been arranged by this organization.⁶

In Addition Seerah conference is arranged every year during the summer vocations and prominent Islamic scholars, Ulama and renowned Qurraa such as Imame Kaaba are invited to guide the growing Muslim population in Japan particularly the new generation. Activities initiated on local level such as daily children Quran teaching, weekly daroos and overnight program to fulfill the spiritual requirements of local Muslim population are countless and are aimed especially to make immigrants a true believer so that they can represent Islam in its true shape. This of course is the most efficacious and emphatic way to propagate Islam in Japan. Last but not least distinctive characteristic of Islamic Circle of Japan is its organizational structure having more than 15 departments to work almost in every aspect of life on grass root level.⁷

Although rest of the organizations is also working efficiently to propagate Islam however, it is true in my humble opinion that the character building of Muslims living in Japan is not in their focus. The difficult task of conquering the hearts of Japanese people cannot be accomplished merely on the basis of lectures or publishing voluminous books on Islam. In any case the active role of most of the Muslim organizations for welfare work in disasters and calamities in Japan and worldwide also helped a lot to amputate the stereotyped image and depict a true face of Islam.

1.3.3 Religious education on basic and higher level

It is an astonishing fact that no religious education is imparted in public school aided by the Japanese government. On the other hand where religious education is given as a matter of course and for this reason, such schools are not granted aid by the government.⁸

To fulfill this requirement schools in various parts of Japan were established by Muslim organizations and these schools were very small in number.

Consequently, basic religious education was mostly given in Mosques.⁹ The need of Islamic higher education could not be met in Japan. Thus young Muslims for their higher Islamic education were sent to Islamic universities in the Muslim world. In this regard, several Islamic countries are requested by Japan Muslim Association so that educational opportunities for Japanese youth in their universities could be explored. Haji Umar Mita, the second president of the Association very keen in sending young Japanese to these universities and eventually some of them sent to get the education. These efforts were very beneficial for the Muslim youth as these opportunities enabled them to acquire knowledge of Islam and the Arabic language.¹⁰

1.3.4 Human resource development in Dawah

As it is obvious that the stereotyped image of Islam is one of the major hindrances in the fruitful propagation of Islam, highly trained Dawah workers and sincere missionaries are always one of the main challenges faced by Muslims all over the world. The discourse of accurate propagation of Islam will remain quite difficult without fulfilling the demands of required Dawah worker to remove the misunderstandings which are prevalent in the masses.¹¹ In Japan too this felt increasingly from the early presence of Islam in Japan. But, unfortunately little (I mean by this on collective level only. A lot of sacrifices, no doubt, were made by individuals) could be achieved by Islamic organizations in this respect, perhaps due to lack of funds or more importantly due to lack of attention towards human resource development in the field of Dawah.

1.3.5 Interfaith dialogue

While exploring the achievements and failures of Muslim organizations, interfaith dialogue is another direction of activities about which we do not find considerable efforts from Muslim side in pre-war era. Highlighting the similarities and common values in Shinto, Buddhism and Islam might have led to a more positive interaction between people of Japan and Muslims.

However, after the government initiative on several research projects on Islam after 9/11, Muslim associations, particularly in universities and research institutes drew their focus toward it and many conferences were held with the collaboration of indigenous and international organizations.

For example, the Japanese Association for Religious Studies organized an international conference in August 2002. During the conference a dialogue

between Islam and Japanese Buddhism was observed. As a result, to engage into the study of and dialogue with the three monotheistic religions in addition to oriental beliefs such as Buddhism the Centre for Monotheistic Religions (CISMOR) of Doshisha University was established. Various research projects attempting to understand monotheistic religions including Islam and many conferences were instigated by CISMOR.¹²

Moreover, the World Religions for Peace conference was held in Kyoto in 2006. This was also fruitful accomplishment as participation of representatives of most world religions including Japanese Buddhism and Islam was witnessed. It was decided during the conference that religious diversity and the role of religions in world peace should be accepted and respected. From their side, Muslims initiated models of dialogue with “oriental beliefs” including Buddhism. The International Islamic Forum for Dialogue could rightly be considered another example for this discourse. To study and further discuss the theme of “Harmony, Peace and Global Values from the perspective of the Muslims and the Buddhists” this forum arranged a conference in Singapore on 23–23 November 2008. This was held with the collaboration and cooperation of Singapore Buddhist Lodge and the Jamiyah Singapore.

An agreement for mutual aid with the World Buddhist Council based in Taiwan was also managed by the International Islamic Forum.

In addition, a conference with title of “the Conference for Dialogue between Islam and the followers of Oriental Beliefs” was held in New Delhi, on 20–21 February 2010. In cooperation with major Indian Muslim organizations including Jamia Millia Islamia’s Zakir Husain Institute of Islamic Studies, Interfaith Coalition for Peace, and The Milli Gazette, this conference was arranged by the World Federation of Muslim Scholars.¹³

Another striking point about interfaith dialogue with Buddhism is that some Muslims, both Japanese and non Japanese attempted to explore a Japanese prophet aiming to relate to local traditions and hoping to exert substantial influence upon future Muslim-Buddhist relations through their involvement in interreligious dialogues and hermeneutical activities.¹⁴

Moreover, recently established Japan Muslim Peace Federation (is an umbrella organization for a bunch of Muslim associations in Japan. It

comprises multi-nation, multi-race and multi linguistic people) is also working on this.

This Federation hosts annual seminars at the University of Tokyo to introduce the personality of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) to Japanese people. The fifth seminar of the series was held on October 14, 2012. The topic of this year's seminar is "Muhammad (peace be upon him) as a Bridge for Buddhism, Christianity and Islam". A famous Islamic scholar Sheikh Yusuf Estes from the US will be the key-note speaker.

1.3.6 Graveyard

As a matter of fact, one of the major problems faced by overseas Muslims all over the world is to bury some of their beloved one's dead body according to the teachings of Islam. Japan is no exception for Muslims rather there they have been facing more difficulties and sever challenges in this regard as compare to other Muslim minority communities in the world.

The problems encountered by Muslims in Japan are diverse including cremation and the cost paid on these occasions. Since the norm in Japan is cremation before burial whereas Islamic teachings instruct deceased Muslims should be buried without cremation. Although burial without cremation is allowed according to the state laws, many local governments in Japan, such as Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya, cite sanitary reasons in prohibiting the practice via ordinances and other forms of regulations.¹⁵

With regards to the place of burial although the places nationwide where Muslims' bodies could be buried were explore by various centers like the Japan Muslim Association and the Islamic Centre Japan but unfortunately their requests were mostly refused by cemetery managers. Nevertheless, there are three major graveyards located in Koshu, Yamanashi Prefecture west of Tokyo, Kobe and Yoichicho besides more than a couple of local graveyards. Kobe's cemetery is administered by the city government and allows only city residents to be laid to rest there. The graveyard in Yoichicho is situated in isolated part of Hokkaido, making it inconvenient for relatives to visit graves.

Burial in suitable place and with ease is becoming a greater issue because the population is growing and becoming older. Thus worries have become greater than before among Muslims about places for unending rest in Japan. The problem does not lies only in the scarcity of place but also of its price,

as the price of one burial is about 6,400,000 Japanese Yen in a local graveyard established in Ibaraki prefecture.

1.4 Conclusion

After an overview mentioned above, first of all the services rendered by these organizations need to be highly appreciated. However, it is also essential on the other side, that the efforts and activities of the organizations must be analyzed so that a comprehensive strategy and sound methodology based on Quran and Sunnah, in the field of propagation of Islam can be adopted for next century which suits the Japanese on intellectual level as well as the common mind.

When we see overall the activities of these organizations we find that the available scarce resources were utilized just to meet the requirements of their time due to the lack of planning and vision, thus they could not achieve outstanding results. The situation prevailing in Muslim organizations in Japan now is not much different from that of past and it seems to remain the same unless, in order to achieve the desired goals in future, a radical change in methodology of Dawah and a well-planned long term scheme is adopted by the organizations and Islamic centers. This must be done with the help of the thought provoking and visionary Japanese Muslims intellectuals after the evaluation and the assessment of the appropriateness of current strategy in today's dynamic world with socio-economic, political and technological innovations.

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