

UNDERSTANDING MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN CENTRAL JAPAN: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Perceptions of integration can significantly vary among different nationalities, particularly within Japan's growing Muslim communities. While the Filipino non-Muslim community has established a relatively strong presence in Japan, Muslims from Indonesia surpass them in population size. However, both communities actively engage through civic associations and social networks, contributing to a smoother integration into Japanese society. These associations facilitate local activities, foster camaraderie, and promote disaster preparedness, intercultural events, and participation in local festivals. In this study, an ethnographic approach was employed, using participant observation and short-focus interviews in Central Japan from January to May 2024. The aim was to explore the challenges faced by Muslim minorities as they strive to coexist harmoniously with the Japanese community in their respective localities. This includes close collaboration with semi-government and para-state organizations, reflecting McVeigh's concept of the "bureaucratic blurring of state and society" (1998).

Keywords: Muslim Communities, Japan, Indonesians, Filipinos, Multiculturalism

INTRODUCTION

Over two decades ago, migration scholars predicted the inevitable presence of foreign workers settling permanently in Japan. Shimada (1994) even proposed an alternative approach—one that balanced reduced reliance on foreign labor with a greater openness to "integration" for the remaining migrants. Milly (2020) characterizes this approach as Japan's "quiet openness" to increased immigration. Presently, a "dual scenario" unfolds: a seemingly strict national immigration policy coexists at the local level with initiatives promoting local citizenship and integration. Cities and prefectural governments actively foster multicultural coexistence between Japanese citizens and foreigners under the banner of an "internationalization" policy. However, the concept of social integration is loosely associated with the term "multicultural coexistence," which essentially aims to "overcome systemic, cultural, and linguistic barriers in Japanese society" (Nagy, 2012, p. 9). In essence, these policies do not primarily offer "settlement strategies" or "pathways to naturalization," as Nagy (2013) concludes, but rather aim to assist migrants and foreign residents in adjusting to Japanese society. Kim and Streich (2020) call this seemingly odd situation and fragmented scenario as "Tabunka Kyosei without immigration policy."

Perceptions on multiculturalism and integration can significantly vary among different nationalities, particularly within Japan's growing Muslim

communities. While the Filipino non-Muslim community has established a relatively strong presence in Japan, Muslims from Indonesia surpass them in population size. However, both communities actively engage through civic associations and social networks, albeit uncoordinated and independent from each other, contributing to a smoother integration into Japanese society. These associations facilitate local activities, foster camaraderie, and promote disaster preparedness, intercultural events, and participation in local festivals. In this commentary, the author aims to explore the challenges faced by Muslim minorities as they strive to coexist harmoniously with the Japanese community in their respective localities. This includes close collaboration with semi-government and para-state organizations, reflecting McVeigh's concept of "bureaucratic blurring of state and society" in Japan (1998). The paper offers recommendation for collaboration between and among Muslim minorities through philanthropic and charitable activities.

METHOD

This commentary is part of the bigger project of the researcher as a Japan Foundation (JF) Fellow and Visiting Researcher at the University of Shizuoka which aims to explore the sustainability of social protection policies and other programs for migrant workers in Japan. The author is also an Advisory Board Member of Better Engagement Between East and Southeast Asia (BEBESEA) of the Human Rights Working Group (HRWG) funded by the Sasakawa Peace Foundation (SPF). This paper is a reflection of the author in the conduct of his comparative case study research design through participant and direct observation. Key-informants included government officials and non-state actors in-charge of multicultural activities in major cities of Chubu region including Nagoya, Gifu, Shizuoka and Hamamatsu. In-depth interviews involved Indonesian and Filipino Muslims in Central Japan through short-focused informal conversations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Muslims in Japan comprised only a handful compared to the total foreign-born population and the Japanese citizens, respectively. Despite the seemingly difficult situations they are facing as Muslim minorities, studies have revealed that the population has gained traction as the fastest growing religious adherents in Japan – with both Japanese converts (reverts) and Muslim immigrants – joining the fold. According to a 2021 survey conducted by Tanada Hirofumi of Waseda University, the number of Muslims in Japan has already exceeded 200,000 and the number of masjids (mosque) created has increased from 15 to 113 in March 2021. Okai and Tokuda (2024) and Okai (2023) cited a report that in 2022 the number of masjids is said to be more than 160 with over 230,000 Muslims in Japan. Muslims are concentrated in major urban areas such as Tokyo and Aichi-ken (Nagoya). When contrast to roughly 3 million foreign residents in Japan, this figure is significantly increasing and interestingly more than 80 percent came to Japan from 40 countries in Asia, while around 47,000 are

considered Japanese citizens and permanent residents married to Japanese Muslims citizens.

The Embassy of Indonesia in Tokyo in citing MOJ report (2023) said that out of the 122,028 Indonesians in Japan, roughly 70% are considered temporary migrant workers (mostly trainees, skilled labor and designated activities). Moreover, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), when ranked by nationalities and regions, the top four recipients of Japanese visas were China, Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia which accounted for around 90% of the total number of visas issued (MOFA Press Release, 2019). Regardless of their roots back home, the reasons for coming to Japan are the same -- mainly for work and opportunities, not necessarily religious; however, Japanese society has to face the fact that they are welcoming people with diverse backgrounds, including Muslims. Some scholars argued of the need for mutual adaptation that is if Japan wants to keep foreign residents, Japanese citizens and employers must be willing to also accept migrant workers wholeheartedly not just for the utilitarian concept of addressing labor shortage but profoundly for the truest essence of integration in the context of diversity, equity and inclusion.

Scholars have paid particular attention on the definition of migrant integration as a two-way process requiring adjustments of behavior and attitudes of both immigrant and host community groups (as cited by Katherine Okumura, 2024). Integration is "the two-way process of mutual adaptation between migrants and the societies in which they live, whereby migrants are incorporated into the social, economic, cultural and political life of the receiving community... including related notions such as social inclusion and cohesion" (IOM, 2019, p. 106).

"Integration is a societal process where the responsibility rests not with one particular group but rather with many: migrants, host communities, public authorities and institutions, social and economic partners, civil society organizations, churches, religious and other philosophical communities and the private sector. Empowering both migrants and host communities to actively engage in the integration process is essential to achieve sustainable and successful integration" (European Commission, 2020).

"Integration does not only depend on the commitments, efforts, and achievements of immigrants...but also on the structure and openness of the receiving society" (Klarenbeek, 2021; p. 902)

Seiger and Nagata (2020) challenges the prevailing dichotomous conceptions between the host and the migrant. They argued that in the context of Filipino migrants in Kyoto, earlier groups of migrants facilitated the integration of newly arriving migrants by fostering ties with local residents. Likewise, Esteban (2012) highlighted the importance of networks with religious organizations and local church in navigating their marital lives vis-à-vis Japanese society. The work of Takahata and Ruiz (2023)

revealed that having livelihood assistance (*seikatsu hogo*) was a part of the migrants' survival strategy and that migrants' network with local Japanese people plays a huge part in addressing their major problems. Nevertheless, the recent studies of Takahata (2023) which delve into the welfare issues for ageing immigrant women (mostly former entertainers) have revealed their anxieties regarding whether to remain in Japan or return to the Philippines in later years. As in the earlier studies, Filipinas still long to go home and hopes to settle down in the Philippines (see also Carlos & Plantilla, 2021; Kim, Balgoa & Yamamoto, 2022).

Furthermore, Weiner and Hanami (1998) forecasted that Japan would eventually open up and adopt policies that are more open to diversity and inclusion. In fact, Shinohara and Alcantara (2023, p. 16) argued that as the number of foreign workers in Japan rose significantly due to labor shortage and as a consequence of rapidly aging population, Japanese companies have begun addressing diversity and inclusion issues, including those related to racial harassment. They concluded that "...while the employment rate of foreigners gradually increased, the percentage of foreigners in middle and top management positions remained stagnant" (p. 35). These examples highlighted the growing attention to such matters and Japanese companies are actively working towards addressing diversity and inclusion issues.

Recently, Milly (2020) describes this "muted" approach as Japan's "quiet openness" to more immigration and integration. Nevertheless, a "dual scenario" exists today such that a strict national immigration policy is being juxtaposed at the local level with local citizenship and integration programs. For instance, cities and prefectural governments initiate activities promoting the multicultural coexistence of Japanese citizens with foreigners, under the banner of an "internationalization" policy. However, accordingly to the Migration Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), Japan still scores 47/100, slightly below the average MIPEX country (49/100) as Japanese policies still refuse to recognize that is a country of immigration. The report noted that "despite Japan's initial steps towards developing an integration policy in 2006 and 2009/10, little has improved since 2010. Japanese integration policies improved by +1 point in 2018 with the establishment of 'one-stop-shop comprehensive consultation centers for multicultural coexistence.' These centers in over 100 locations across Japan provide foreign nationals with quick information and advice in many areas of life, from residence procedures to employment, health, social security and education," the report said (MIPEX, 2020).

Stephen Robert Nagy (2013 as cited in Villa, 2021) has intensively written about social integration and policies on multiculturalism at the local level in Japan. Nagy's researches clarified that in order to address for an absence of national/state-level immigration policies, local governments had started employing their own localized incorporation and social integration policies. Nagy articulated on the role played by local governments in terms of service

provision “being the immediate interface between foreign residents and the national government” (Nagy, 2012, p. 126). The services which primarily focused on newcomers to Japan include “language assistance, cultural training and information in a variety of languages about local government services and the rights and obligations of legally residing foreign residents” (Nagy, 2013, p. 10). However, as Nagy has pointed out, these provisions are service-based and not within, for its intent and its purpose, the genuine definition of integration or multiculturalism (Nagy, 2008, 2013). In fact, the definition of social integration is rather associated in a loose sense to the term “multicultural coexistence” which is basically meant to “overcome systemic, cultural and linguistic barriers in Japanese society” (Nagy, 2012). In other words, these policies are not intended to provide “settlement strategies” or “avenues for naturalization”, as Nagy (2013) has concluded, but to “provide help to migrants/foreign residents so that they can adjust to the Japanese society” (p. 9) (see also Tegtmeier Pak, 2001).

Furthermore, Takeyuki Tsuda (2006) pointed out the thriving solidarity between migrants and the host society at the local level. Tsuda claimed that there exists “local citizenship” which refers to “the granting, by local governments and organizations, of basic sociopolitical rights and services to immigrants as legitimate members of these local communities” (p. 7). This includes social integration programs and policies by local governments for immigrants, services offered by local NGOs as well as local activism to demand and secure basic rights for immigrants, or through city government level-NGO partnerships (co-development) (Yamanaka, 2006; Fauser, 2014; Villa, 2021).

Similar to Catholicism and protestant churches, masjids are also important centers for foreigners of faith, both in terms of their faith and daily life (Okai and Tokuda, 2024, p. 141). Although, quite a number of studies have pointed out the challenges of Muslims living in Japan but even within the Islamic community there have been disagreements on how to lead a Muslim life as minorities (see also Okai & Takahashi, 2023; Srifauzi & Suwandono, 2023). Regardless of this background, Muslim civic associations played a huge part in negotiating a community life as neighbors in their respective localities. Okai (2023, p. 51) argued that these connections may lead to new initiatives and that awareness of the possibilities created by such diverse connections will be an important element in overcoming social divisions and realizing coexistence.

Indeed, these small initiatives, albeit fragmented and un-coordinated efforts, and community-driven volunteerism and for Muslims, their duty to ummah, and perhaps for non-Muslim considered philanthropic and charitable from a Western point of view, are paving way for solidarity and thriving local ethnic communities. For instance, in Yaizu and Shizuoka, Filipino Muslims who are closely working with the locals share information to non-Filipino Muslim compatriots on how to go about with their daily lives

such as inquiry on accessing health care services, education for children, employment and social pension.

Yaizu City in Shizuoka Prefecture is widely acclaimed as the second highest frozen tuna and bonito producer due to the fact that the city is “home to many fish-processing factories” (Takahata, 2021, p. 115). According to Sachi Takahata, a professor from the University of Shizuoka, Nikkeijin workers have been largely employed here since the 1990s, mostly South Americans (e.g., from Brazil and Peru). In the 2000s, Filipino Nikkeijins started to arrive and an ethnic enclave was formed in the Oigawa area facilitated by a migration industry which provided housing near their workplaces. A decade later, due to the influx of the Nikkei population who mostly came from Davao, an upsurge of Filipino-speaking (Visayan) migrant children was observed at the local elementary schools. A few Nikkei Muslims family from Cotabato and Lanao also works at a local factory nearby. Consequently, a group of concerned Japanese citizens have been providing Japanese language learning support for children with foreign roots in the city since 2014. The increasing number of Filipino immigrants and foreign residents in Yaizu and Shizuoka led to the growing number of foreign-born and Japanese-Filipino Children (JFCs) who are facing many challenges and difficulties while living and adjusting to the Japanese society and its education system.

On the other hand, the works of Sugibayashi and Sa-u (2017) and Shiozaki (2015) pointed out several challenges and problems of Muslims found in schools and Islamic education for Muslim children in Japan. To address these concerns, the Japan Dahwa Foundation (JDF) which was originally founded in 2010 as a Shizuoka Muslim Association (SMA), introduced special classes for Muslim children. A similarly related situation is observable at a masjid in Hamamatsu, Shizuoka-ken where Arabic classes and Islamic education is also offered during the weekends.

In addition, one huge concern for Muslims in Japan is access to Halal foods, and other products. Hisao Tomizawa (2019, p. 629) argued that “where as the concept of halal is based on the religious values and norms of Islam, the halal industry is generally characterized by the fact that it involves non-Muslims as well as Muslims, both as producers and consumers.” Hence, both Japanese and foreign residents (Muslims and non-Muslims) must work together in order to facilitate a more inclusive society.

Unfortunately, Japan has yet to implement strategic policies and long-term measures to genuinely integrate foreigners into Japanese society. There is a noticeable lack of a clear governmental vision regarding the hiring and settlement of foreign workers. As Kim and Streich (2020) highlight, “there are officially no immigration and integration policies...,” leaving local governments to take the initiative. These local entities have pioneered incorporation policies and eventually promoted tabunka kyōsei, a prototype

integration policy aimed at both Japan's ethnic minorities and foreign residents (p. 192).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Muslim communities, like other ethnic minorities in Japan, must contend with the country's somewhat exclusive and exclusionary policies towards immigrants and foreign residents. Despite these challenges, Muslims have found ways to thrive by collaborating with like-minded Japanese individuals and local officials, immigrant civic associations, philanthropic leaders, and non-profit organizations. These partnerships work towards fostering a more inclusive and multicultural environment, demonstrating resilience and a commitment towards community development.

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