

# **Islam in the Japanese Media: Between Prejudices and Promises\*\***

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## *Abstract*

*In terms of resources newspaper circulation and readership, television viewership and radio networks and audience, the Japanese media is supposed to be one of the world's most powerful establishments and yet paradoxically due to both its structural as well as political constraints its role especially in handling foreign news has been reduced virtually to a 'gate-keeping' function, The representation of Islam in the Japanese media has to be viewed and understood within this context This paper is an exploratory attempt to examine the representation of Islam in the Japanese media. It argues that it is not possible to understand the treatment of Islam in the Japanese media without understanding how the media is organized and its role in Japanese society. The paper also argues that as the representation of Islam in the media has also been partly a function of the history of Islam in Japan it is really not possible to understand the factors that have influenced the portrayal of Islam in the Japanese media without a good knowledge of how Islam itself has evolved in Japan and its place in the history of the Japanese nation, Finally, the paper will also show that while the extensive negative media coverage of Islam following the 2001 September 11 incident has reinforced the prevailing prejudices towards Islam, it has also at the same time, albeit unintentionally, created an unprecedented level of public awareness, if not interest, about Islam among the Japanese public*

## **Introduction.**

Prejudices toward Islam in Japan abound practically at all levels of Japanese society. The image of Islam has always been negative among the Japanese and media representations and misrepresentations of Islam have only served to reinforce the popular prejudices towards Islam. Japanese knowledge of Islam as a religion and their familiarity with the way of life of the Muslims as practitioners of the religion have been very limited, if at all they exist. There are many reasons for this. The nature of Japanese society itself, which tends to be culturally insulated from the rest of the outside world, has partly been responsible for this phenomenon. The way Islam has been portrayed in the media too, especially the disproportionate focus on negative news about the Muslims has also another causal factor. In fact, the history of Islam in Japan and especially the history of the relations between the Japanese and the Muslims have also been part of the problem. Yet, against the background of the prevailing negative popular perceptions of Islam in Japan, due to circumstantial factors, there has also been a corresponding rise in the level of awareness and interest in Islam, paradoxically facilitated by the same media that has been responsible for the circulation of negative images of Islam. Thus, while popular

prejudices toward Islam continue to prevail, at the same time, there have also been promising signs of greater empathy towards Islam and the Muslims. Apparently all the above explanations are inter-related and it would not be possible to understand the complete picture without examining the various ways in which these factors overlap with each other. This paper is an exploratory attempt to address some of the above issues in a comprehensive way. For purposes of focus and clarity the paper will be divided into five inter-connected sections, namely, (1) The Prejudices, (2) The Nature of Japanese Society, (3) The Japanese Media, (4) Islam in Japan, and (5) The Promises.

### **The Prejudices.**

Morimoto, one of the earliest Japanese Muslims to write about Islam in Japan argues that since the modern culture which is mostly Western came into Japan almost wholly from the Christian world, the bits of knowledge about Islam that found their way through this channel were distorted citing the example that "the image of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) portrayed (sic) in the DIVINE COMEDY of Dante or the picture of Islam drawn in the writings of the Japanese Christians like Kanzo Uchimura (1861-1930) were taken blindly by the Japanese intellectuals as well as the laymen to be the real face of Islam." [Morimoto 1980:5] He also suggests that 'a great many Japanese identify Islam with the guerilla activities or plane-hijacks'. [Morimoto 1980: 5]

In February of 2004, I asked a class of 32 undergraduates from the Faculty of Education, of a university in Yamaguchi prefecture, to write down on a piece of paper their image of Islam and where they thought they acquired that image from. Three students wrote that they did not know what to make of Islam while four wrote down fairly positive or neutral comments, but the overwhelming majority had nothing but negative perceptions of Islam. Fifteen of the students associated Islam with violence and terrorism. Four of them stated that it was a religion where women were oppressed. Two thought that Islam was synonymous with the Taliban; another two described it as the religion of the desert while the remaining two claimed that Islam was a henna shukyo or strange religion. The overwhelming majority also stated that their attitude toward Islam was influenced by the media.

Earlier, Kurasawa had also conducted another survey on about 60 3rd and 4th year undergraduates taking an elective course on "Religion and Society in the Islamic World". According to him the following negative images were common among the students:-

- (1) Militant and coercive: That Islam promotes war (referring to jihad). And that Islam expanded mainly through the military expeditions and forceful conversions into Islam. The oft quoted phrase by the students was, "The Quran in one hand and the sword in another."
- (2) Strict and repressive: That Islam enforces taboo of one thing or another and compels the people (Muslims) to perform five time prayers, fasting, etc. Islam denies amusement or pleasure of life, and is repressive by putting women under

strict control.

- (3) Fanatic and intolerant: That Islam is radical and intolerant of pagans. That the Muslims, historically, have destroyed their temples and chapels. Muslims are narrow-minded, promote hatred and do not hesitate to employ terrorism under the name of Islam.
- (4) Rigid and unprogressive: That Islam enforces cruel punishments like flogging, amputation of hands, stone pelting, etc., and does not treat even the minor defaulters humanely. That Islam enforces antiquated laws and negates modernization and progress arising from the advancement of human knowledge and science. [Kurasawa 1999: 15]

According to another Japanese scholar, Kawada, who also conducted some kind of survey on her students attending a general course which was not about Islam and who were also not particularly interested in Islam, the image of Islam among them changed drastically after the 9-11 Incident. Before the Incident, they generally saw Islam as an interesting religion with turbaned people praying. The Islamic image was that Muslims liked to wear unique clothes represented by the cultures of the different areas in Asia and Africa. Some saw Islam as a religion that had so many restrictions like having to pray so many times. Some saw Islam as a religion that discriminated against women. But there were also some who confessed to having no image of Islam and were willing to learn about it from the beginning. After 9-11, however, the responses were very different. There was no one who did not have any image of Islam. The common view of Islam held by the majority was the image of violence and terrorism. Jihad, Binladen and bombings were all equated with Islam.[Kawada 2004:12].

But interestingly, Kawada argues that the Japanese generally have a negative image not just of Islam but religion generally. She claims that the Japanese regard people who have religion as weak. She further says that some people regard Islam just like the deviant Japanese sect, Aum Shinrikyo. According to her, the Japanese saw the Muslims as backward before 9-11 but after the event they associated backwardness with violence. [Kawada 2004:12]

Sakurai, another Japanese scholar, writing in 2003 admits that there was a rise in antiIslamic sentiments in Japan after 9-11 but she thought this was also motivated by antiimmigrant feelings. Japanese attitude toward foreign Muslims can be divided into two, either they admire or look down on the Muslims, or respect or ignore. [Sakurai 2003:220] Essentially the Japanese have a foreign image of Islam. The religious duties of Muslims are viewed as foreign customs and not seen as having anything to do with religion. [Sakurai 2003: 221]

It is obvious from the above descriptions that there are no doubt a lot of popular prejudices towards Islam in Japan and within Japanese society. The role of the media in Japan in creating or perpetrating these prejudices is also not too difficult to locate but it

would not be fair to attribute the whole blame to the media because the way the Japanese society is organized and how it functions have also contributed to reinforce the above prejudices. It is therefore important to examine the context within which these prejudices have emerged in Japanese society and this is only possible by looking at the nature of Japanese society itself.

### **The Nature of Japanese Society.**

I recall not too long ago, a Black American appearing on a popular Japanese TV programme complaining that he experienced discrimination not only by the Japanese but even by their dogs because every time he walked past several houses in his neighbourhood in Tokyo which had dogs, they would bark threateningly at him whereas no such thing happened to Japanese passers-by. He related in the same programme how difficult it was for him, a coloured person, to rent a house in Tokyo because the Japanese were reluctant to do business with 'foreigners' especially nonwhites!

In another incident, an Indian university student who had an impeccable command of Japanese, doing part-time work at a convenient store outlet in Kyoto was baffled when his employment was terminated after just one day without the employer giving him any reason for his termination. The boy's co-worker, a Japanese student who was sympathetic to him, told me that the real reason for the sudden discontinuation of the boy's service was that his boss was convinced that the day the Indian boy started work at his outlet the earnings for that day dropped and he attributed this to the boy's dark skin-colour which kept the regular Japanese customers away. The boy, of course, was not told of this although he must have suspected something amiss.

There have been complaints of many *onsens* [hot-spring outlets] and *izakayas* [Japanese bars] in Hokkaido putting up public notices banning admission of Russians into these establishments. Stories of how the Japanese treat or rather mistreat their minorities especially the Koreans and the Chinese abound. In fact, there is always the tendency to emphasize the cultural homogeneity of Japan to the exclusion of others. Japanese society remains in denial of the existence of its minorities and has problems relating to its foreign population. Many third generation Korean Japanese are still unable to acquire Japanese nationality let alone get government jobs despite having met all the necessary qualifications and having lived in Japan all their life.

Many foreigners living in Japan have always complained of one kind of discrimination or another that they face in the course of their interactions with the Japanese. Most will probably admit that even though they might not have experienced discrimination first-hand they have not found it easy to be accepted into Japanese society. The Japanese try to insulate themselves completely from the foreigners who are usually regarded as outside elements whose place is really outside the place of Japanese society. In most cases, with very few exceptions, foreigners may work with Japanese companies, study in Japanese educational institutions, do business with Japanese partners or visit Japan as tourists but

they will only be able to operate in the peripheries of Japanese society and rarely within it.

What the above indicates is simply that in Japan the boundaries of Japanese society are clearly determined. Japanese culture is supreme and whatever the Japanese accept of outside influences will be 'Japanized'. There seems to be a noticeable element of either xenophobia or a delusory sense of racial superiority among the Japanese when they interact with others even to this day. It is no surprise therefore that the uniqueness of Japanese society has fascinated so many scholars. Japan has been universally recognized as the most successful of the countries outside the Western world to have achieved modernization and to have done so on its own terms. There are plenty of examples to show that the Japanese have devised their own way of managing modernity. Japan is no doubt a modern success story. Even Samuel Huntington, in his controversial book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, accords the Japanese the status of a civilization. S.N. Eisenstadt, one of the world's leading social theorists, considers Japan as a civilization with its own unique characteristics although not in the category of what he describes as Axial civilizations. Eisenstadt states that "The distinctiveness of Japan lies in its being the only non-Axial civilization that maintained - throughout its history, up to the modern time - a history of its own, without becoming in some way marginalized by the Axial civilizations, China and Korea, Confucianism and Buddhism, with which it was in continuous contact." [Eisenstadt 1996:14] He further writes that "In contrast with other non-Axial civilizations, there developed in Japan not only an elaborate "wisdom" literature and discourse, but also a highly sophisticated philosophical and aesthetic discourse, the like of which can only be found in Axial civilizations.

These rather general characteristics, which distinguish Japan from Axial and other non-Axial civilizations, hence are closely related to some of the distinctive aspects of the Japanese historical experience - namely a tendency to continuous internal institutional change, and an openness to outside influences combined with a great ability to "Japanize" these influences on both the institutional and the ideological levels. Outside items - ideas, artifacts, technologies, styles of dress - have continuously been adopted, so much so that Japan has often been called a country of imitations and imitators." [Eisenstadt 1996:14]

Japan's success in the modern world today, from any perspective, is really awesome. It is the world's second largest economy with one of the highest standards of living. It is one of the safest countries on earth with a very low crime rate. Its technological and scientific resources are not only sophisticated and up-to-date but have also been made available to its citizens in all kinds of practical ways. The social cohesion that Japanese society enjoys is strong. Japanese society is probably the most highly organized society in the world. Politically too, Japan has enjoyed an unprecedented level of stability. It was ruled by one political party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) for an uninterrupted period of 38 years from 1955 to 1993 enabling it to foster the notion of Japan as a country and a company at one and the same time; the idea of Japan Incorporated. Although the opposition wrested power from the LDP in 1993 it was only able to be in office for a brief period. The LDP has regained its preeminence in Japanese politics serving as the dominant partner in a new coalition government with the New Komeito Party. Japanese

nationalism seems to be much alive. Although state Shintoism has been banned since the end of the Second World War shrine Shintoism continues to be freely practiced in Japan. Thus, it is not quite correct to suggest that there is a religious vacuum in Japan after the war. Japanese religion, or rather Japanese religions, continue to occupy a role in Japanese society.

The literacy rate in Japan is among the world's highest and life expectancy is also among the world's highest. There is also a remarkable level of personal freedom in Japan. It is probably the only country in the developed world where soft pornography is openly sold at every local convenient store and where adult videos are easily available at every video rental shop throughout the country. Japan also seems to enjoy unprecedented economic, technological, scientific and cultural hegemony over much of the world. Despite the ongoing economic hiccups, on balance, Japan seems to be a country which has everything going its way. This is the context within which Japanese attitudes towards 'foreigners' including Islam have been shaped in Japan.

Hiro interestingly takes the position that despite Japanese contacts with many religions over a long period of time the Japanese have not actually accepted any outside religion because to them religions are complex.[Hiro 1992:230] On the other hand, Nakata while conceding that the Japanese find it difficult to understand Islam argues that the Japanese cannot understand not only Islam but all religions and this is mainly due to the Japanese having the ideology of nationalism that perpetuates the myth that Japan can survive on its own forever. [Nakata 2001: 79]. He criticizes Japanese scholars of Islam who argue that since the Japanese believe in many Gods they cannot understand the concept of monotheism that Islam espouses dismissing it as an ideological position. [Nakata 2001: 75]

But, as indicated earlier, this has also been a function of the media. It is therefore important not only to examine the structure of the media but also the constituency it serves.

### **The Japanese Media.**

The Japanese media is said to be one of the most powerful in the world. [Inoue 2004:55] It is a major industry in Japan whose presence seems to be ubiquitous and whose influence is immense. According to Inoue in an NHK survey undertaken in 2000 of people's reading, viewing and listening habits, the scale of media intrusion into people's privacy became alarmingly evident. It was discovered that the average Japanese spends 4 hours and 27 minutes everyday, a significant portion of their daily life, as captives of the media. The world of the media is actually an unreal world but because of the intrusion of the media into their lives many people have become confused and have trouble identifying the actual boundaries between the real world and that of the media. He argues that the media in Japan has disproportionate influence on the people and therefore in a sense controls them. Inoue also dismisses the idea that there is objectivity in the media categorically suggesting that the media is always subjective. [Inoue 2004] But the media

is not a monolith. There are significant differences not only between the different media like newspapers, radio stations, television companies and the publication industry but also within each of these media sectors. Nevertheless there are universal unwritten rules which all of the different branches of the media in Japan conform to including self-censorship especially in the management of foreign news. The Japanese media's treatment of Islam has to be viewed within this context.

There are eight characteristics of the Japanese media that need to be understood to be able to comprehend the issue of the representation of Islam in the Japanese media. The first is the constitutional provision on the separation of religion from the state which proscribes any form of religious propagation in the state-owned media organization like the NHK. In the spirit of the constitution no broadcast supporting or propagating a particular religion is allowed although taking up religion as a theme of learning or as a cultural phenomenon is recognized. Private broadcasting companies too do not undertake the propagation of any religion although religious broadcasts on a commercial basis sponsored by religious organizations are sometimes allowed. [Morimoto 1980: 109-110]

The second is its sheer size. Tasker had observed in 1987 that newspaper circulation per head in Japan was the highest in the world.[Tasker 1987:129]. The situation has not changed much since then. *The Daily Yomiuri*, which is Japan's largest newspaper has a daily circulation of 10,075,479 while its nearest rival, *Asahi Shinbun*, has 8,259,173 and *Nikkei*, a distant third has 3,017,239, which is more than the *USA Today's* figure of 2,617,000 which is supposed to be the largest circulation newspaper in the United States. The influential *New York Times* has a daily circulation of only 1,677,000! *The Daily Telegraph* of the United Kingdom has a circulation of only 895,000 and *The Times* only of 635,000! France's *Le Figaro* only has 359,000 and *Germany's Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 381,000. From the above comparative figures it is obvious that on the basis of the readership figures Japanese newspapers have a very wide and loyal following and what appears or does not appear especially as news items matters. According to Inoue, before 9-11 Islam was altogether ignored in the Japanese media but after that it was the negative aspects of Islam that were consistently highlighted.

The third is that the Japanese media also does not exist in a vacuum. It is always part of something - the Japanese state, an international network or a business conglomerate. Hence, there will be organizational, political and business constraints that the media will have to reckon with. The media has to know its off-limits and its allowable parameters. There are of course differences between newspaper companies but these are not so great as in the U.S. or Britain. For example, *Yomiuri Shinbun* is associated with conservatism;

*Sankei* is seen to be patriotic; *Asahi Shinbun* is perceived to be liberal; while *Mainichi Shinbun* is more middle of the road though a little liberal. Nevertheless, they all exercise self-censorship of one kind or another. There are also business connections between the newspaper companies and television stations. For example, *Sankei* owns Fuji TV, *Yomiuri Shinbun* controls Nihon TV, *Nikkei* owns TV Tokyo and *Chugoku Shinbun*, a

regional newspaper based in Hiroshima owns RCC, which is affiliated to Nihon TV. *Mainichi Shinbun* used to own TBS but not any more although there still exists some relationship between the two. Inevitably, the political bias and business interests of these media establishments will be reflected in their programming as well as editorial policies. The public broadcast corporation, N.H.K. is invariably bias towards the government. Nihon TV, because of its affiliation with *Yomiuri Shinbun* is more conservative while TBS appears more neutral.

The fourth feature is that there is also censorship imposed from above by people in power at various periods of time in Japan's postwar history. Immediately after the war the U.S. Occupation authorities American General Headquarters [GHQ] imposed severe restrictions on the Japanese media. There was really no free press. The press was allowed then to criticize the Japanese government but not the U.S. Occupation. According to Tasker, "Pre-publication censorship was imposed, first to prevent a resurgence of nationalism, then to stifle leftist opposition to GHQ policy. Again, newspapers were being deliberately used to shape public opinion. When the occupation ended the triple alliance of bureaucrats, businessmen and conservative politicians became the new establishment with a new set of priorities to be promoted." [Tasker 1987:134]

It has just been revealed by the *Mainichi Shinbun* recently that the reports written in September 1945 and filed by the American reporter, George Weller, the first foreign reporter to enter Nagasaki following the U.S. atomic attack on the city on Aug. 9, 1945 were suppressed by the American General Headquarters [GHQ]. [Mainichi Shinbun 17 June 2005] Sakurai writes that after World War 2, the Islamic community in Japan came under the control of the GHQ and it was difficult for the Muslims to even organize themselves into an association at that time. They could only gather informally to hold discussions. [Sakurai 2003: 205] The invisible profile of Islam was striking during this period. As has been observed by various people this trend continued for a long time until the outbreak of the 9-11 Incident.

The fifth characteristic of the Japanese media is its inherent dependence on the Western world for the supply of international news. There was an empirical research which was conducted about ten years ago which shows that the Japanese media gave more time to U.S. and European news. Half of the international news coverage was U.S. related and only a small percentage was given to 'other news' and even then, this would invariably be 'other news' including about Islam, as seen from the lens of the Western media. This factor is also actually a function of how international news is produced. As Western media agencies like Reuters, A.P. and A.F. P. and more recently CNN and BBC virtually dominate the sources of news as well as news flows they tend to set the agenda as to what to give priority to in terms of news highlights and circulation. Even Japanese media agencies concentrate on the Western world especially the U.S. For example, in one major Japanese media company, out of a total of about 400 Japanese journalists sent to 30 countries in the world, 170 of them were stationed in the U.S.; 70 to China; 30 to South Korea; 6 to Brazil in Latin America and only 20 to Africa, most of whom were located in Cairo. [Inoue 2004: 114] It was this factor of great dependence on the Western media that

virtually reduced the role of the Japanese media in Japan to that of a mere 'gate-keeping' function which only demands editorial selection of what news to highlight from the very limited choices provided by the Western suppliers of news. It was also through this mechanism that negative perceptions and portrayals of Islam in the Western media have made their way into the Japanese media, merely replicating the Western prejudices towards Islam in Japan.

The sixth characteristic is the subservience of the Japanese media to the American media, in particular, due to a combination of complex factors demanding politically correct considerations that have to be made taking into account the U.S. Japan Friendship Treaty as the benchmark for the special relations that Japan is supposed to enjoy with the U.S. Although the more liberal news networks like *Asahi Shinbun* sometimes try to circumvent this constraint, most other Japanese media establishments tend to conform. In the post September 11 era when the American media was used to serve as an instrument of American hegemony in the world seeking to undermine the position of radical Islam, the effect reverberated in the Japanese media.

The seventh characteristic of the Japanese media as represented by Japanese television, is that, with the qualified exception of the state-owned NHK, it is notorious for its commercial, consumerist, hedonistic and escapist tendencies. Japanese television creates an unreal world of continuous entertainment programmes which tend to insulate people from the real world and place them in an artificial setting. Save for the news and some documentaries, the world of the Japanese television media is invariably the world of soap-opera, movies, one quiz show after another, sports and cheap comedy. The representation of Islam within these programmes is usually confined to romanticized accounts of Muslim peoples and their esoteric cultures.

The eighth characteristic of the Japanese media is that, probably because of the constitutional provisions of academic freedom, the right of expression and the freedom of information, there also exists all kinds of alternative media, which though marginal and not mainstream, have also a very important role in the Japanese media world. In addition to this, the print media in Japan too enjoys great freedom. For the Muslims in Japan, just like other marginalized groups, it was these alternative media channels that have made it possible for them to organize their own information networks which could, at the very least, help to circulate their own version of news and views within their own constituencies. This factor explains the emergence of a number of Muslim newspapers like *Mussurim Nius* [Muslim News], *Kaiho ArrIsuramu*[AI-Islam Bulletin], *Arr-Unma*[AI-Umma] and magazines like *Al-Irshad*, *The Journal of Islamic Guidance and As-saram* [As-salam], the official publication of the Islamic Center of Japan. The corpus of recent literature on Islam too has been growing steadily. A combination of the above developments, as we shall see later, has helped create the necessary environment to facilitate a better understanding of Islam in Japan.

### **Islam in Japan.**

The history of Islam in Japan is fairly recent and even to this day Islam's presence seems to be either marginal or even invisible. Even in terms of the population of Muslims in Japan there are no clear figures. There have been various claims. One source suggests that there are about 150,000 Muslims in Japan while another gives a more modest estimate of only about 70,000 people with the Japanese making up only one tenth of that population.[Sakurai 2003: 37]

It is believed that the earliest contact between the Muslims and the Japanese occurred in 753 A.D in China. [Komura 1988: 9] A year later in 754 A.D during the Nara Period one traveler from China who appeared to be Muslim visited Japan. [Komura 1988:11] In 1275 A.D. when Kublai Khan sent a delegation of five people to Japan, two of them were thought to be Muslims. But this encounter ended tragically because they were all killed. [Komura 1988: 11] It was not until 1890 when Ottoman Turkey sent a naval vessel to Japan on a goodwill mission that the Japanese had a real opportunity to come into direct contact with a Muslim power. But the mission ended in a disaster when the Turkish ship was shipwrecked in the sea of Japan while returning to Turkey.[Morimoto 1980:9] The subsequent contact between the Japanese and the Russians occurred after the end of the Russo-Japanese War when the Japanese brought back to Japan a large number of Russian prisoners-of-war, some of whom were Muslims. The first mosque was known to have been built in Nagoya in 1905 to cater for the needs of the Muslims. But basically this was again an encounter of unequals with Islam making its way to Japan as the religion of the vanquished with all its negative connotations.

It is believed that the first Japanese conversions to Islam occurred in 1892 when Yamada Trajiro and Ariga Bunpachiro embraced Islam. Yamada went to Istanbul and converted to Islam. [Komura 1988: 47] The first Japanese Muslim to perform the Hajj in Mecca in 1909 was Mitsutaro Yamaoka who adopted the name Omar Yamaoka after becoming a Muslim. Bumpachiro Ariga a Japanese Christian, who went to Bombay, India, for trading purposes converted to Islam under the influence of the local Muslims there and took the name of Ahmad Ariga. Upon returning to Japan they began the propagation of Islam. The first Japanese Muslim who translated the Quran, Mita Ryoichi, converted in China. [Komura 1988: 47-48]

But the most significant development for Islam in Japan occurred when several hundred Muslim refugees from Russia and Central Asia were given asylum in Japan and settled in various major cities in Japan following the Bolshevik Revolution. Through their efforts some Japanese converted to Islam. The existence of a growing number of Muslims in Japan created the need for mosques to be established and in 1935 the Kobe Mosque was built following which the Tokyo Mosque was inaugurated in 1938. The Tokyo Mosque especially was built with financial assistance from the Japanese public including the government leaders. The 1930s saw the consolidation of Islam in Japan under official patronage but this also coincided with the rise of Japanese militarism. This was also a period which has been described as the 'Islamic Boom' in Japan with the emergence of a

number of Islamic research organizations such as the *Isuramu Bunka Kenkyu-sho* [Islamic Culture Institute] which was established in 1932 by 17 scholars and which published three issues of '*Isuramu Bunka*' (Islamic Culture) a year; *Kaikyo-ken Kenkyu-sho* [Muslim World Research Institute] established in 1937 by Prof. Hisao Matsuda and Prof. Koji Ohkubo and which published the monthly 'Kiakyo-ken' (Muslim World); Dai-Nippon *Kaikyo Kyokai* [Great Japan Islamic Association] established in 1938 with Prime Minister General Senjuro Hayashi as President and Mr. Hajime Matsushima and, subsequently, Mr. Kentaro Ohmura as Secretary-General and which published the monthly "*Kaikyo Sekai*" (Muslim World) and *Tokyo Isuramu Kyodan* [Tokyo Islamic Congress] established in 1940 by Hajj Takeshi Suzuki. The Department of Inspection, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan also published the quarterly "*Kaikyo Jijo*" (Islamic News) since 1938. [Morimoto 1980: 10] But it was obvious that these so-called Islamic institutions were being used by the Japanese military government for propaganda purposes. The defeat of Japan in the Second World War led to the disbandment of these outfits and constituted another major setback for Islam in Japan. The American Occupation immediately after the end of the war severely constricted the development of Islam in Japan for obvious reasons.

It was only in 1952 when the Japan Muslim Association was established that Islam was able to be developed again. The new contacts established with Muslim countries enabled some Japanese Muslims to further their Islamic studies in those countries. Likewise, as Japan's economic and commercial ties with Muslim countries grew many Japanese were able to work and do business there leading to greater direct contacts between them and the Muslims. Conversions of Japanese to Islam for marriage reasons also became more common. There was also a small but growing number of Muslim students who came to study in Japan especially in the late 1950s and 1960s. In 1966 the Islamic Center of Japan was set up as a non-political and purely non-commercial organization committed to 'spreading Islam in Japan' and acquainting the Japanese people 'with Islam from its original sources since whatever so far have been published in this country about Islam, belongs to the unauthentic Euro-American sources'. [Morimoto 1980: 46] Although there was growing interest on Islam during this period, its presence was still hardly noticed. It was not until the 'Oil-Shock' of 1973 that the Japanese began to take stock of their economic vulnerability due to their dependence on the Muslim of the Middle East for their energy supply and began to show a renewed interest toward Islam and the Muslim world.

Islam is also broadcast as a subject of the university and high school level correspondence by the Educational TV of NHK. [Morimoto 1980: 110] There was also a special real time broadcast of the Hajj performance which was going on in Mecca on 31 December 1973, the eve of the New Year, by the same TV channel. [Morimoto 1980: 111] A large number of books on Islam written by Japanese scholars was published during this period that a number of universities in Japan began offering courses on Islamic culture and society. [Kurasawa 1999: 15] According to Nakata, Islam is now explained in a balanced manner in the Japanese High School Ethics Textbook although

History Textbooks still reflect the Euro-centric view of Islam which does not highlight the historical contributions of the Islamic civilization. [Nakata 2001 :101]

In May 1974 the Islamic Culture Society of Japan, open to Muslims as well as non-Muslims, was established with the aim of promoting understanding of Islam among the Japanese people and the mutual understanding between the Muslims of the world and the Japanese people through cultural and human contacts and through various publication activities. [Morimoto 1980: 49] Subsequently, several more Muslim organizations were established in Japan. A large number of books on Islam written by Japanese scholars were published during this period and that a number of universities in Japan began offering courses on Islamic culture and society. There was also an increase in the number of Japanese researchers who are proficient in Arabic as a result of studying in the Middle East [Kurasawa 1999: 15; Sakurai 2003: 205-206]

Sakurai believes that conversion to Islam is on the rise in Japan not only due to intermarriages with Muslims but also as a consequence of greater contacts that Japanese now enjoy with Muslims. [Sakurai 2003:208] This is interesting considering that her work was published in 2003, about two years after September 11. Hiro, writing much earlier, confesses that she sees Islam as a simple religion which she thinks will be likely accepted by the Japanese if they come to know of it. [Hiro 1992: 230] Kawada too claims that the Japanese Muslims are increasing in number. [Kawada 2004: 17] Nakata is bold in suggesting that Islam cannot be understood from outside and that the Japanese culture is now mature enough to be able to accept Islam since Islam is no longer in the narrow confines of Japanese society but has become part of the Japanese culture. [Nakata 2001: 258-260] His optimism was probably a little premature because although there were indeed signs of the revitalization of Islam taking place on a scale unprecedented in Japan in its history 9-11 threw in the unknown factor. The negative images that the incident brought to Islam have only served to arouse old Japanese prejudices, suspicions and even fears toward it. Many Japanese Muslims who were enthusiastic about their new faith earlier because of the changed circumstances have had to lie low and to even conceal their religion. But it appears that the position of Islam in Japan though under assault has become much more defensible as there already exists a pool of young, confident, well-trained and highly qualified Arabic-speaking Japanese Muslim scholars to stand up for Islam not as foreign Muslims but as home-grown practitioners of the faith. One such scholar, a graduate of Tokyo University, Japan's premier institution and a Ph.D holder has been confident enough to criticize of his alma mater in Tokyo arguing that the Islamic Studies Department there actually did not teach Islamic Studies but rather Orientalism because the Islamic specialists were unfamiliar with the Quran and were not able to use it as the main point of reference in their courses.

### **The Promises.**

The negative impact of the 9-11 Incident on Islam is felt everywhere including Japan. Islam was put on trial especially in the media in a manner unprecedented in recent times. For Japanese Muslims, the situation was even worse because Islam was just beginning to

revitalize. Paradoxically, while on the one hand Islam came under severe media scrutiny, on the other hand, it gained public visibility which was unimaginable just not too long ago. A great number of Japanese from all walks of life, albeit for different reasons, became more curious about Islam and wanted to know more about it. Talks, lectures, forums, seminars, conferences and courses on Islam were much in demand throughout Japan. And this time, many Japanese Muslims themselves, who have become competent in Islamic knowledge came forward to participate in these activities to explain Islam. The whole series of seminars, discussions and lectures on Islam actually served as a critical counterweight to the negative media representations of Islam that continued to take place.

But there were also four other ways in which the media prejudices against Islam were being challenged or neutralized.

First, the proliferation of courses on Islam in Japanese universities and educational institutions has created viable alternative channels of communication for Islam to be properly explained. The growing number of graduate students interested in Islamic studies has also consolidated the Islamic constituency because of the readily available local pool of expertise on Islam to serve the needs of the Japanese. The existence of Middle-East educated and Arabic-speaking Japanese Muslim scholars has also created a new intellectual leadership for the Japanese Muslim community. It was some of these Japanese Muslim intellectuals who emerged to defend Islam in the media when it was negatively portrayed. The existing prejudices toward Islam in Japan will also most likely be addressed by the Japanese Muslims themselves. This is what some of the scholars quoted earlier meant when they referred to 'the Japanization of Islam' or , the need for the Japanese to recognize that Islam is now already part of their society."

Second, again because of the demands for fresh insights into Islam, NHK Educational TV [Channel 12 in Kyoto or Channel 3 in Tokyo] broadcast a special series of nine programmes in Japanese in April and May of 2002 under its Human Studies course entitled "Isuramu Sekai o Yomu" [Understanding the Islamic World] or literally, "Reading the Islamic World". Each programme was broadcast three times on Tuesday at 23:00 to 23:30 hours, Wednesday at 15:30 to 16:00 hours and Saturday 01:45 to 02:15 hours. The nine programmes were:

1. April 2, 3, and May 4: "The Expanding Islamic World"
2. April 9,10, and May 11: "Muhammad and the Holy Qur'an"
3. April 16, 17, and May 18: "Acts of Worship and the Umma"
4. April 23, 24, and May 25: "Islamic Civilization at its Golden Age"
5. April 30, May 1, and June: "Waves of the Islamic Revival"
6. May 7,8, and June 8: "Islamic Law Renaissance and Islamic Banks"
7. May 14, 15, and June 15: "Challenges of Islamic Revolution"
8. May 21,22, and June 22: "Islamic Solidarity and Nationalism"
9. May 28,29, and June 29: "Toward Civilizational Dialogue of the 21st Century"

There is also a textbook written by Kosugi, with the same title as the TV series, *Isramu Sekai 0 Yomu* [Reading the Islamic World] NHK *Ningen Koza* [NHK Human Lecture Series] Tokyo: NHK, to accompany the programmes which is easily available at most bookshops. The Series is written and presented by Professor Kosugi, Professor of Islam in the World at Kyoto University. He was also the editor and presenter of the earlier highly-acclaimed four-programme series of *Isramu Choryu* [Currents of Islam] produced in 2000.

Third, through the creation and use of alternative media channels, especially newspapers to disseminate information on Islam and the Muslims primarily to the Muslims themselves. Sakurai gives a comprehensive list of the newspapers that are in circulation among the various Muslim networks in Japan, foreign as well as local. The very fact that such networks exist and that they are able to create and sustain their respective communicational channels which sometimes overlap with each other underline the viability of such networks. These networks must also have large supporting constituencies.

Finally, the use of the printed media in the form of books and articles to explain Islam either from the Islamic viewpoint or from informed perspectives has also contributed significantly to enrich the corpus of Islamic literature written in Japanese for the consumption basically of the Japanese readership. This has been the most significant development in terms of the growth not only of Islamic studies in Japan but also the trend to counter the prevailing prejudices toward Islam either brought by the media or perpetrated by other factors.

### **Conclusion.**

It is obvious from the foregoing analysis that the media in Japan has a role in the conception, circulation and even propagation of negative images toward Islam and the Muslims especially in the wake of the September 11 Incident. But prior to this it was the conspicuous absence of Islam in the Japanese media that was the problem. Yet, the role of the media cannot be fairly and sufficiently understood without taking into consideration the various overlapping contexts that it has to operate in, cultural, commercial, political, constitutional and organizational. The tendency to misrepresent

Islam in the Japanese media or only to highlight its negative aspects has no doubt resulted in the negative perceptions of the Japanese public toward Islam and the Muslims but it would be erroneous not to attribute these prejudices to other factors which lie outside of the media establishment. Popular prejudices toward Islam and the Muslims among the Japanese have also been a function of how the Japanese people generally view the outside world. Historically and culturally, the Japanese have always been suspicious of 'foreigners' or 'outsiders'. The cultural, intellectual and religious influences that the Japanese adopt from 'foreign' sources have always been through the process of the Japanization of these elements. The Muslims have always had a foreign image in Japan. As we have seen above, the history of Islam in Japan is not only recent but has also been

controversial. The period when Islam appeared to gain a special place in Japan coincided with the rise of Japanese militarism. It would appear that it was the manipulation of Islam by the military leadership of Japan in the 1930s that gave it both media and public visibility. But with the demise of Japanese militarism after the end of the Second World War, Islam became invisible again until the oil-shock of 1973, when the Japanese were forced to re-examine their attitudes towards Islam and the Muslim countries. The late 1970s and 1980s witnessed the phenomenal economic growth of Japan which emerged to become the world's second largest economy. These two decades were also the decades which saw greater contacts between Japan and the Muslim countries and the corresponding growth of Islamic Studies in many universities and educational institutions all over Japan. This was also the period when more Japanese converted to Islam and many eventually went to study in the Islamic centres of learning in the Middle East especially at Al-Azhar University and in Mecca. Conversely there was also an upsurge in the foreign Muslim population in Japan for all kinds of reasons. This development did not necessarily lead to the elimination of the popular prejudices toward Islam and the Muslims. In fact in some cases they intensified further the existing prejudices but at least there was a growing visibility of Islam in Japan although its position was still peripheral. The marginal place of Islam in Japanese society was reflected in the marginal space given to it in the media. This was to change after September 11. The media focused on Islam but highlighted all the negative aspects of it. The reasons for this have been explained earlier but what was clear was that Islam and the Muslims were put on trial.

Paradoxically, although prevailing prejudices were revived or reinforced there was also renewed curiosity about Islam and the Muslims among the Japanese which led to an unprecedented level of awareness if not interest on both. Islamic Studies became a field of inquiry which continued to attract a lot of interest among Japanese students. Many universities now offer Islamic Studies either as a subject or even as an academic package in the liberal arts or social sciences. Research projects on Islam such as the Islamic Area Studies Project which is supported by the National Institute of Humanities in collaboration with a consortium of leading Japanese Universities and which has a Secretariat at Waseda University have played a leading role in awakening interest on Islam and the Muslims in Japan. The growing interest on Islam has also encouraged the Japanese Muslims to assert their presence in Japanese society by coming forward to explain Islam through all kinds of activities including using the media to present a more balanced image of Islam. At the same time, the alternative Muslim media, which had been created earlier, continued to be effectively used to disseminate information, news and Islamic knowledge for the internal consumption of the various Muslim constituencies in Japan. Nevertheless, it is probably unrealistic to expect the negative treatment of Islam and the Muslims in the Japanese media to suddenly disappear because this issue is so intertwined with a whole range of factors that may not be directly related to the media itself. Yet, one thing seems to be certain in view of the fact that a viable Japanese Muslim community has emerged in Japan, and that is, it is more likely than not that its members, especially those well informed about Islam will now also rely on the media to try to correct the perceived misrepresentations of Islam in Japan.

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