

From “Look East” to “Look Malaysia” Malaysia as a mediator for Islamic economy

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With 30 years of Look East Policy, more than 5000 students from Malaysia had come to study in Japan. These 30 years were periods of change for both countries; Malaysia achieved high rates of economic development including establishing the brand-new economic field so called “Islamic market”, while Japan experienced a various social and cultural problems in the era of post-economic bubble burst. In view of the wide range of social and economic transformation which took place in both countries, various approaches are needed to estimate what has been achieved in the period of LEP. The social and economic change in each country induced a change in the relationship between Malaysia and Japan; for example, Malaysia is seemed to be playing the leading role in so-called “Islamic economy” in these years and Japanese companies has just started to learn the system and philosophy of this new fields. In recent years, mass media frequently pick up Islam in Malaysia as a reference in advancing entry into Islamic economy and increasing information on this topic mirrors the demand of industries and peoples wanting to know or learn about Islamic finance and consumption culture of Muslim societies.

Thus, this paper, using newspaper’s articles, intends to make preliminary consideration about the transformation of understandings or views of Japanese society towards Malaysia, especially its religious culture in relation with the economic development through the periods of LEP. Though this is rather an indirect approach to estimate the achievement of LEP, it would offer an essential point of view to envision the mutual understandings and relationship of between two countries.

■ 1. Background, Aim and Method of this study

1.1. Background: Representation of Islam in Southeast Asia in Japan

By look east policy, over 5000 students said to be sent to Japan in these 30 years. Though the comprehensive survey has still done to grasp the academic and employment attainment of the policy, some researcher ambitiously to do it. Thus, this paper does not intend to measure the attainment of the policy, but concentrate on incidental and indirect side of the policy. My intention in this paper is to consider how the Japanese society’s view, understanding or representation on Islam, especially Islam in South East Asia has been in these 30 years represented in Malaysian case.

In Japan, Islam is generally recognized as a religion of Middle East or Arabic society. Thus the representation of Islam has also been connected to Arabic elements such as “religion of desert”, and because of the Gulf war in 1990s and battleship between Palestine and Israel, Iran and Iraq, “Islam” has often been represented as problematic religion. On the other hand, Muslim society in south east Asian countries tended to be paid less attention, although the close relationship in economical and regional terms. The fact that a first book titled “Religion of Islam in south east Asia” has published only in 2012 also proved this tendency.

In 2000s onward, academic writings on Islamic resurgence in South East Asia, especially after Bali bombing in 2002, writings on Muslim society in Indonesia, has increased. Though the research perspectives are rich in diversity, those writings more or less shared a sense of crisis toward representation of

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“Indonesian Islam” by Japanese media that often recall it in connection with violence. They endeavored to inform actual life of Muslims in Indonesia for general readers².

About writings on Islam in Malaysia, though research interests are concentrate also on the Islamic resurgence³, being small in numbers and seem to be freer from such a sense of crisis. However, especially since a middle of 2000s, Islam in Malaysia has got into the limelight because of her pioneering role in Islamic finance and Halal market economy. Malaysia, by institutionalizing Halal certification system and legislating acts concerning about “Islamic” financial system, is now referred as a model or main partner for Japanese industries wanting to take part in Islamic market and in such stories, “Islam” is attached with economic activity in positive sense.

However, if we look back a past presentation on “Islam” or “Islam in Southeast Asia/ Malaysia” in these 30 years, one may know that such a positive expression or reference itself are only found in last 10 years. This might have mirrored the changes of both Japanese and Malaysian situation, in political, economical and societal terms and this may be an important topic to consider the future relationship between Japan and Malaysia. In this paper, I intend to make a preliminary consideration about transition of representation on “Islam in Malaysia” by Japanese media.

1.2. Aim of this paper

The aim of this paper is to understand basic line of transformation of representation of Islam, Malaysia, and Muslims in Japan in media discourses. Research question is; what kinds of imaginations or expectations on Islam or on Malaysia have been mirrored in such representations. In other words, I would like to reveal that how is/has been the general assumption of Japanese society about the relationship between religion and modern society, and how have it changed. For the purpose above, I used media database of Religious Information Research Center (RIRC)⁴. The database is a collection of files of major national and regional newspapers, popular press and newspapers and also journals published by religious organizations⁵.

1.3. Key words; Islam, Malaysia, Muslims in Japan and Look East Policy

In this research, I put keywords search for following topics; “Look East Policy”, “Islam and Malaysia”, and “Halal and Islam” to know how was and is the portrait of them.

As I expected, the search results of “Islam” and “Malaysia” were enormous in number (over 3800 results), include wide range of topics from Malaysian local festivals to international security “in the age of terrorism”. The periods of results cover 28 years, from 1985⁶ until 2012. On the results, I put intensive

2 Books like Miichi’s *The Future of Islamism in Indonesia* (2004), Kurasawa’s *Awakening of Indonesian Islam* (2006) and Kobayashi’s *The Deployment of Indonesian Islam* (2008) are representative. Miichi and Kurasawa gave description about Islamic culture in Indonesia, and both devotes pages on mass passion for Islamic resurgence, while Miichi analyzed the relationship of Islamic resurgence and politics in Indonesia, Kurasawa described it as a lifestyle of her own neighboring Muslims in *kampong* (village) in Jakarta, the biggest city in the nation. Kobayashi also pointed out the necessity for Japanese society to understand the actuality of “Islam in Indonesia”, drawn mechanism and historical process in fixing and regenerating Islamic norms in Indonesia.

3 Tawada, in *Anthropology of Malay Islam* (2005), described the phenomenon of Islamization in Malaysia as a result of “bidding up mechanism” between Malay-Muslims. Torii, in *Malaysia under the Mahathir regime — 22 years aiming for “Developed Islamic country* (2006), adopting a perspective of policy research on finance and diplomacy, argued Mahathir regime was aiming to re-establish Malaysia as “Developed Islamic country”.

4 RIRC is a research organization founded in 1998, to collect information and media reports about religious bodies as well as religious/spiritual phenomenon mainly in Japanese society. Though the range of the collection is limited to “religious” news, the definition of “religion”, “religiousness” is set so broad as to include Shinto, Buddhism, memorial/customs, interrelationship between politics and religion, activity of Imperial family, trends of new religion, other spiritual/cultural epidemics both in Japan and foreign countries. Its foundation was 2 years after the tragic incidents executed by Aum Shinrikyo.

5 For example; Catholic shinbun, Christ shinbun, Bukkyo times, Bunka joho, Chuugai nippo, and so on. The collection only covers Japanese press.

6 The date of news files had started in 1985, earlier 10 more years than establishment of the Center by one of the founding members of the Center. Totally, the database of the Center is one of the few collections containing wide range of media reports on “religious” events.

search and extracted articles noting the encounter of Japanese and Malaysian Islam. To be more specific, articles reporting experiences of Japanese businessman in Malaysia; articles on business trends in Malaysia; articles on Malaysian local news in which it has description on difference in attitude toward religion between Japanese and Malaysian; and articles covers voices of Muslims in Japanese society.

■ 2.From Look East to Look Malaysia: a transformation of discourse according to periods

2.1. Three terms of periodization

From the result, I divide the period into 3 parts. The first period covers from 1985 until 1995. The last year of this period is recorded by “Sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway system”, executed by *Aum Shinrikyo*⁷. It is said that general attitude toward “religion” or “religiosity” of Japanese people, include medias, scholars, and ordinary people also, have atrophied after the series of “*Aum* incident”. Putting that incident as the marker of the periodization is made under rather a hypothetical purpose to analyze whether the news articles over the foreign religion is affected by this general attitude or not. The second period is from 1996 to 2001. This period end with the *Ajinomoto* incident, remembered as a stumbling experience in managing industries in Muslim society. This incident related to the issue of religion, economy or market, and mutual understandings more directly than the first periodization. The third period is between 2002 and today, an age of marked prosperity of “Islamic market”.

2.2. 1985-1995: From distant other to Asian neighbor

The beginning of this period is colored by mixture of biased terminology; “Orientalism” and discourse of prioritizing profit; while considering Islam as distant and unfamiliar religion, it looks ahead to assure the interests from soaring Asian economy. For example, an economic article in 1985 titled “soaring Asia” positioning Islamic teaching as “the third way” to productivity, still adopts dichotomous representation between modernity and religion; prayer and productivity; god and modern management (*Nikkei*, 1985/01/15). Though the article pointed out that there existed a cohabitation of religion and business logic, this described as surprising phenomenon. This kind of imaginary is also noticeable in another reportage in the next year. The article, covering the Japanese staff’s experience in Malaysian branch, explained the proper attitude toward different religion of local people that they have to take “generous attitude” such like “to wait patiently” and “concern and adjustment” (*Yomiuri*, 1986/02/16). From these article, I guess that the understanding on religious culture of local Muslims was superficial and the approach toward such locality was rather passive or avoidance. However, at any rate, the articles referring Malaysia as a preferable or appealing economic partner have increased toward 1990s and these described Malaysia as “honorable student of the economy” (*Mainichi*, 1988/10/13), or “Silicon Valley of the East”, while dichotomous wording like “High-tech industry in Islamic state” was also deep seated (*Sankei*, 1991/03/17).

In 1990s, articles have begun to refer Muslims living in Japan as our “neighbor” (“next to you”, *Asahi*, 1990/01/13). In addition to religious events like Ramadan (*Weekly Yomiuri*, 1991/05/05, *Asahi*, 1992/06/11, *Kitaguni*, 1992/06/12), seminars held by Muslim foreign student “to explain the life style of Muslim”, were reported (*Asahi*, 1991/10/01). In these articles, there seems to be an attitudes to understand others as they are and to rethink what Japanese deem as common sense toward religion; “faithful to the precepts”, “never miss the prayer”, “Japanese students to rethink” (*Kumamoto-nichinichi*, 1991/03/16). Attitudes perceived from these articles also passive ones, but it shows positive change, considering Islam/Muslims not as “stranger” but “neighbor”, living within our society and also in Asian

7 *Aum Shinrikyo* (1987- 2000(banned)) is a cult religion executed a number of anti-social and illegal activities including terrorism like Sarin gas attack. Sarin gas attack was taken place on 8th March 1998, in the commuting subway train of Tokyo. Sarin is nerve gas with lethal and the attack was made indiscriminately. 13 people were killed and 6300 people said to be wounded.

region. A representation of Islam as “the religion not to be deceived” is also impressive, which published in August 1995, five months after from the Sarin attack by *Aum Shinrikyo* (*Osaka-nichinichi*, 1995/08/18).

2.3. 1996-2001: Atrophy, relativism and stumbling

It is said that after the *Aum* incident, the negative stance toward “religion” was intensified in Japanese society. However, it is uncertain whether “problematic” representation on Islam in Malaysia quoted below was reflection of such atmosphere; “radical regime”, “strong Islamic discipline” (*Kitanihon*, 1997/06/28etc.); and “radicalism penetrate into people’s lives” (*Nagasaki*, 1997/10/20) so on⁸.

However, it seems to be far reaching to conclude that the news reports on Malaysia of this period were filled by negative reports. As a whole, except referring opposition party PAS (*Parti Islam Semalaysia*) as a “radical regime”, by increased number and scope of the reports extends variety of topics from local/national politics or business trends to small findings or notes on travel/cultural experiences. It is more proper to say that the interest toward Islam was diversified in this period. Islam was described not only as “religion of others”, but also as a reference for comparison with “religion” in Japan.

Reports on event for cultural interchange by oversea students (*Nagasaki*, 1997/10/19, Touou, 2000/01/05etc) or celebration of breaking Ramadan (*Chunichinagoya*, 1999/01/27, *Shonai*, 2000/01/09) kept appeared and being stable in number and tone. Some articles were even trying to stand close to their situation; “can’t they understand?” (*Nishinohon*, 2001/06/25) And another article, reported about symposium titled “think Islam and Japan” in Tokyo, said that Islam is a key to understand Asia (*Sankei*, 1996/11/29). As this shown, there was recognition on importance of understanding Islam to build a relationship with Asian countries.

On the other hand, The turmoil concerning “*Ajinomoto*” from the end of 2000 to early in 2001 reported as a bitter “lesson” for “indulgent management” or “lack of sensitivity”. As one paper expressed that it is “difficult challenge for foreign company” to do “management in different religious country” (*Sankei*, 2001/01/11), it was first time for Japanese industries and also for Japanese society to confront with Halal/Haram criterion directly.

In September 2001, there also happened another big incident. After the 911 attacks, Muslims in Japan in various ways raise their voice not to make people “misunderstand their religion” (*Asahi*, 2001/09/17). The number of articles on this kind of effort climbed to 18 only in this year.

2.4. 2002-today: describing Malaysian Islam

Articles of year 2002 and 2003 was colored by security issue and resignation declaration of the then Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. The resignation of the then PM Mahathir Mohamad was taken as of surprise and indicating opaque future. In the midst of the turmoil above, travel sketches in Malaysia or reports on local news did not decrease. There were also reports of Islamic banking and Halal market, but these were rather sporadic than continuous at this time.

The situation changed a lot around 2005, since anew act enabled foreign capitals to enter into Islamic banking. The articles about Islamic monetary have increased dramatically. Islamic monetary market in Southeast Asia attracted attention as “where oil money to reflux” (*Nikkei*, 2005/06/06, 2005/08/29, 2006/06/07), and advancement of Japanese banks and companies to this market reported one after another. The number of such report amounted to 15 in 2006, 51 in 2007 and 47 in 2008. But in 2008,

⁸ Since these articles were about opposition party, it can be thought that these negative terms reflect political climate rather than Japanese general attitude toward religion. At any rate, there must be advanced study to think linkage between Japanese general attitude and media representation on events in abroad, and it’s not included in the scope of this presentation.

some have started to point that Japan is “missing chance” or “behind Asia” in entering this new field (THEMIS, 2008/09/01, *Nikkei*, 2009/11/01). General tone of articles also changed from previous periods at this stage. One article said “the age is coming that cannot discuss without Islamic money” (THEMIS, *ibid*), and another said that now Japan have to “understand the belief to seize the business opportunity” (*Nikkei*, 2008/04/10). At this stage, there is not negative representation on Islamic economy, but putting tribute on it as “Islamic way”.

Articles on Halal market have increased bit late from that of monetary market, though reported sporadically since early 2000s. From 2010 onward, the term “halal” seems to become leading role in Islamic, or, Asian market. Halal market, including not only foods, but also cosmetics, daily necessities and pharmaceutical products, boast wide area and keep expanding according to demand of consumer in Muslim societies. So halal market, said to possess 1.2 billion (*Hokkaido*, 2006/05/28) or 1 billion (*Nikkei*, 2011/01/28) people, is now referred to as synonym to “rising Asian consumption” (*Nikkei*, 2009/07/09).

Also some article pointed the fact that acquiring halal certification could lead small industries to enter into the broad market (for example, article titled “*Yuzu-Kosho* for Islamic market: cleared the religious criteria: halal certification is expected to revitalize the village producing *yuzu Kosho*”, *Mainichi*, 2012/02/01).

■ 3. Bridging Islam and Japan

Halal market is deeply related with consumer culture in Muslim society. By that fact, today, halal market or “Islamic consumption” sounds more familiar and represents more understandable image for ordinary Japanese people. It is partly because that they are getting accustomed and recognized with life of Muslims as neighbor, classmate or family member, and partly because of increasing exposure to the media information quoted above. The phenomenon like “Islamic idol” and “Islamic fashion”, epidemics of pop-culture, is also appearing in media and reducing the barriers toward “former unknown religion (for Japanese)”. In this aspect, halal market could attract more attention from wider range of people or companies compared to Islamic monetary (for example, article titled “Learn Islamic business from Malaysia”, *Sankei Express*, 2011/12/02).

Impressing enough, ex-students from Malaysia to Japan is playing role to lead this interchange as a founder of Malaysia Halal Corporation. The company conducts consulting service, holds seminar and assists Japanese industries to acquire halal certification. Business paper took up about this company two weeks (*ibid* and *Sankei Express*, 2012/12/09), and his remark is also quoted in online business news¹⁰. Not only that, Malaysia itself is also a key to access to Halal market, since she holds developed management system on Islamic administration. Thus, it is convincing that LEP students, as a person knowing Malaysian system on religion and as a person who may have experienced to explain his own religion towards Japanese, could play a leading role to bridge between Japan and Malaysia in this growing economic field.

■ 4. Conclusion

So far, I collected media articles on Islam in Malaysia, and organized them into 3 blocks of period. From that process, the transformation of media discourse was perceived clearly than I expected. At the first period, from 1985 to 1995 the skepticism on the integration of Islam (or religion in general) and modern management felt strongly. In the second period, such tone was drunk by attitude to doubt the

9 Yuzu-Kosho is a kind of spicy paste of Japan, originally produced and consumed only in Kyushu (the southern island) region.

10 <http://jbpress.ismedia.jp/articles/-/35139> (2012/5/9, reference date: 2012/5/18.)

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relationship between religion and society, which Japanese had built up for 50 years. At this stage, in one way, “religion” was taken as negative one, but on the other way, it was difficult to trivialize the role of “religion”. Reports on Malaysia had increase in number and variety, but “*Ajinomoto*” turmoil as bitter experience to remember. At the third period, after overcome international and domestic political crisis, big wave of rising Islamic finance and halal market repaint the media tone again. Drawn as an intersection of “Asian consumption market” and “oil money”, the presence of Islamic market is unquestionable. And it is no doubt that these changes of Japanese media reflect the effort of establishing financial and market system on Malaysian side. Today, concept of halal is spreading in Japan, and it forms a part of understanding of religious culture on Malaysian Islam. In this dimension, Look East Policy, started in 1982 to learn from Japan, is also changing form as to bridge between Japan and Malaysia.