

Identities and Agency of Religious Immigrant Women in Japan : A Study of Muslim Women’s Experiences in the Tohoku Region

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Introduction

While one of the most influential narratives across Europe today is said to be the presumed “clash” between Western and Islamic civilizations, it is quite different from the situation in Japan. Located in East Asia, traditionally there has been little interaction between Japanese society and Islam. Even today, Muslim immigrants in Japan receive little social or political attention compared to their counterparts in Western countries. However, it is worth mentioning that today, the presence of Muslim in Japan is greater than ever.

Research on Muslims in Japan began mainly after the influx of foreign workers in the 1980s. It was also during this period that Islam became known to the Japanese public. The majority of Muslims who came to Japan were men because Japan was in the midst of the so-called “bubble economy” at the time and needed a lot of workers. As a result, early studies of Japanese Muslims tended to focus on their status as “workers”. In recent years, with the diversification of the status of residence of Muslims in Japan, research targeting a wider range of Muslims has also been seen. However, few studies have focused on immigrant Muslim women, and little is known about their living conditions and social status. Moreover, although immigrant Muslim women’s agency in the West has been extensively studied, the details of the lives and possibilities of agency of Muslim women in Japan remain unknown. There is therefore an urgent need to explore the everyday life of international Muslim women in a different context to reflect into the original theoretical debates and enrich the ethnographic knowledge.

This report focuses on the experience and individuality of first-generation immigrant Muslim women in Tohoku region, Japan, to examine how highly educated Muslim women who have migrated as international students or expatriates to Japan negotiate with their surroundings. And how they exert their agency in accordance with different situations.

Muslims and the Islamic Environment in the Tohoku region

The Tohoku region has not been a popular location for foreign residents to live in Japan, and this is true for Muslims as well. Of the 150,000 Muslims with legal residency status living in Japan, only about 3,500 live in the Tohoku region (Tanada 2019), or just 2% of the total. However, even just in the Tohoku region, considerable disparities can be seen. The Muslim population is mainly concentrated in Miyagi Prefecture. And almost half of Miyagi Prefecture’s population, about 750 people, stay in the capital Sendai. Calculating the number of people from Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt, and other countries where most of the people are Muslims, it adds up to 758 people (Sendai city 2019) . I assume that this number is roughly the same as the number of Muslims. Of these 758 people, 252 are women and 506 are men (Sendai city 2019) . In other words, there are

twice as many males as females. It is clear that Muslims as a whole are a minority in the Tohoku region, and Muslim women in particular are a minority within a minority.

There are two features about the Islamic environment in Sendai that are worth mentioning. Firstly, the scarcity of Muslim-friendly facilities. According to the Sendai Muslim Guide to Sendai produced by Indonesian Muslim Families in Sendai and the Muslim Cultural Association of Tohoku University (2019), there are only 19 restaurants in Sendai that serve halal food. And in the entire Sendai area, there is only one official prayer room in a public space. Despite the small Muslim population, the number of Muslim-friendly establishments is not sufficient to meet their needs.

In addition to the scarcity of Muslim-friendly facilities, not everyone considers these resources that claim to be halal to be trustworthy. On the one hand, it comes from the lack of knowledge about halal food in the host society. On the other hand, it comes from the “deliberate misrepresentation” by restaurants that claim to be halal. During my fieldwork, my informants and I have repeatedly found that things with halal certificates have proven to be non-compliant with certain Muslim standards, a situation often perceived by informants as a case of stores abusing halal certificates for profit. With these two points in mind, it is worth noting that Islamic conditions in Sendai do not allow Muslims to live in the same manner as they do in their home countries. Therefore, Muslim women here in Sendai must find their own way out.

The Lives of Muslim Women in Sendai

More than a religion, Islam is said also to be a way of life to Muslims. It is not only because Islam require believers’ complete submission to Allah, but also because Allah is believed to be sovereign over everything. Thus, Muslims perceive that meaningful life is to serve Allah’s purpose and living a life that is linked to an eternal life on one hand, and attaining existential meaning from worldly goals and moral virtues on the other (Mohamad, AbdRazak, and Mutiu 2011). However, it is up to the believers themselves to determine the extent to which they follow the teachings of Allah. In this section, by focusing on various aspects of life, I will show how my Muslim informants balance their lives in a secular society with their faith in Islam.

Table 1. Informants information

Name	Place of origin	Age	Occupation at the time of the interview	Marital status	Remarks
Shahida	Saudi Arabia	30s	Student	Unmarried	Stadied in the UK for 6 months.
Imani	Algeria	20s	Student	Unmarried	
Jameela	Indonesia	30s	Student	Divorced	Worked as a civil servant for 12 years
Rahma	North Africa	20s	Student	Unmarried	Studied in France for 4 years.
Sana	Yemen	30s	unemployed	Married	Accompanied her husband to Japan 10 years ago

(1) Halal food

Halal is an Arabic word that translates to “permissible”, and Halal food is that which adheres to Islamic law. Considering the definition of halal food may vary from school to school in terms of interpretation or personal understanding, and the fact that believers can choose their own way of performing Islam, their practices can vary greatly.

Keeping in line with her old ways, Shahida says, “If you don’t kill an animal in the Halal way, that animal will get very scared before dying. Then it will have a bad effect on its meat and eating it will harm your body. There is scientific evidence about it too. It is true and required by God, so I try my best to follow it.” Shahida tries her best to consume only halal food and avoid suspicious things.

Agreeing with Shahida’s idea that there is a reason that Allah requires humans to eat halal food, Imani also tries to find halal things to eat. Imani states: “Before I took it for granted, but after coming to Japan I realized it shouldn’t be that way. And I started to read more about it how common meat farms work in this world and realized not doing it in a halal way is not only bad for animals but also bad for the environment.”

However, different from Shahida and Imani, Rahma has a different idea on this “It is true that Allah recommends us to eat Halal, but there are no strict rules prohibiting us from eating haram. I lost five kilos in the first month of my arrival in Japan, I thought I couldn’t hold on to it any longer, and I don’t think God wanted me to be unhealthy, so I started eating non-halal food.”

Facing a new social environment that lacks Muslim-friendly facilities has prompted opportunities for Muslim women to rethink the teachings of Allah. Even if they choose to act in a way that seems inconsistent with the teachings, it facilitates them to examine the reasons and values behind it and stimulates them to explore new possibilities in their exposure to Islam.

(2) Hijab (Veil)

Similar as halal food, different choice can be seen on the practice of hijab. Says Shahida: “I don’t want men to come to me because they think I’m pretty or whatever, I want them to respect me because of my intelligence or my inner beauty. It is required by God and I feel I’m closer to God when I’m doing so.” She chose to follow Allah’s teaching for her own good.

Rahma chose a rather direct way. She wears veil in her home country to respect the culture, but does not wear it abroad and claims there is no direct connection between veiling and devoutness, as the following quote illustrates:

“I’m not wearing veil because I’m overseas. Doing so allows me to avoid racism and to integrate myself more easily into a non-Muslim society. (··) Another reason is that I think that one need to be pious enough and a great person to wear veil and I might consider wearing it when I think that I am religiously mature enough.”

In terms of Rahma’s behavior, she may not seem like a “good Muslim”, yet her narrative suggests that the Muslim identity means a lot to her and that not wearing the hijab does not negate his faith in Allah. While unlike Shahida and Rahma, Sonia, from Tokyo, offers a different kind of response.

“After the great Tohoku earthquake and devastation, I was scared so I decided to wear hijab because it is required by Allah and to protect myself from the punishment of Allah in the grave after death. After wearing the hijab for more than nine years, I have found inner peace. Wearing the hijab has given me a feeling of being a pearl in a shell and I feel proud to wear it now.”

It is clear from what they say about the veil that Muslim women adopt a very different approach to fulfilling Islam. But while the hijab may mean different things to them and their choices may seem contradictory, what they have in common is that they believe they are on the right path and have strengthened their faith in Islam by corresponding differently to the practice of hijab while developing new ways to survive in a secular society.

(3) Living in Tohoku

In contrast to the tendency of believers in Sendai to usually develop a different lifestyle, Muslim women in Sendai tend to have similar ideas about living in the Tohoku region. Shahida states: “In Europe, I could easily find Halal restaurants and people wouldn’t stare at me while I pray in public, so I could basically do what I always do there. It is not true here, but people are more friendly to Muslim.”

Sana’s thoughts are similar to Shahida’s and notes that differences in attitudes in the host society can actually affect her life: “The Japanese in the Tohoku region are less stereotypical about Muslims, so they treat me as who I am. If I lived in Europe or America, I don’t think I could be able to live like this.”

Says Jameela: “Japanese people don’t know that well about Islam, so I need to study Islam more so that I can explain to Japanese people when they ask me why I do what I do.” She sees the lack of knowledge about Islam in the host society as an opportunity to gain insight into the teachings of Islam.

From the narratives of three different Muslim women living in Sendai, their situation as Muslim women immigrants in Sendai, Japan, is very different from that of Western countries due to the different status of Muslim-friendly facilities and the different attitudes of the host society toward Muslims. However, as Muslim women are a minority and on the margins of power in the Tohoku region, they still encounter different difficulties. Nevertheless, they tend to view their situation in a positive light, seeing it as a good opportunity to live without discrimination and to improve the image of Islam in Japan.

Conclusion

The findings of this research suggest that, in addition to Japanese people’s indifferent attitude towards Islam, insufficient Muslim-friendly facilities in Tohoku region also create difficulties to Muslim women’s daily lives in terms of clothing, food, and public religious activities. However, despite these inconveniences and difficulties, Muslim women tend to perceive their situation positively and benefit themselves from this less Islamophobic environment. Faced with the new situation in Japan, Muslim women agentively translate it into the opportunity to re-examine their

Muslim identity. In addition, they tend to see this as a chance to live free of discrimination, and a good opportunity to promote the image of Islam in Japan. I argue that Muslim women's agency is demonstrated in a 'cooperative' manner while they seek to find a way to balance religion and daily life in Japan, rather than through acts of resistance to their religion or authorities, as is often claimed to be seen in the context of Western societies. This shows the potential impact of the social environment on the ways in which religious women's agency is exercised.

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