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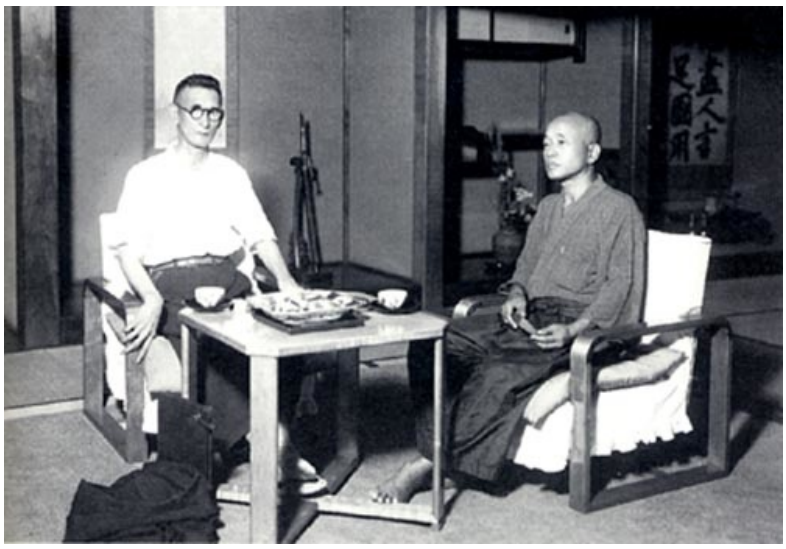
Imperial Japan's Islamic Policies and Anti-Westernism

Cemil Aydin Interview by Michael Penn

Cemil Aydin is a specialist on the intellectual and political history of decolonization and anti-Westernism, especially with respect to Japan and the Ottoman Empire.

Michael Penn: I'd like to begin by asking you how it is that you became interested in studying prewar and wartime Japanese scholarship on the Islamic world as well as the broader topic of anti-Westernism in Asia.

Cemil Aydin: In my graduate school education, I was initially interested in doing a global-comparative history of Ottoman and Japanese modernization. Like all Ph.D. students, my choice of a research topic emerged out of intensive readings for the Ph.D. examinations, conversations with professors and historiographical controversies. Well, after taking several classes with Akira Iriye, John Dower, Albert Craig, Herbert Bix and Andrew Gordon, I did have a general sense of the field. It was during this process, while reading Prof. Selcuk Esenbel's first articles on Abdurresid Ibrahim and Japan's links with Muslim Pan-Asianists, and an article by Harry Harootunian on the "Japanese Revolt against the West," that I first encountered Okawa Shumei's writings on the Muslim world. I remember being puzzled by the fact that one of Japan's leading Pan-Asianists was also the founder of Islamic Studies in that country. This exciting reading process coincided with the controversies on Pan-Asianism and historical memory provoked by a Japanese revisionist movie on Tojo Hideki and the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal called Pride. In the end, I decided to write a thesis on Okawa Shumei's Pan-Asianism, which allowed me to discuss two controversial issues, namely the roots of anti-Westernism and the complex relationship between Pan-Asianism and imperialism.



Okawa Shumei (left) and Ishiwara Kanji were known for radical nationalist and Pan-Asianist ideas. Okawa was also a pioneer of Islamic Studies scholarship in Japan

I completed my thesis just a year after September 11 while there was much scholarly and non-scholarly interest in the questions of anti-Westernism. As someone who worked on Japanese critiques of the West, I became very concerned about a particular view, highly influential in American foreign policy, which explained Muslim critiques of the West as an eternal conflict between Islam and Christendom. According to this theory of "What Went Wrong," Muslims were unique in their discontent with the international order and Western powers because they could simply not accept seeing Christians being more powerful and prosperous than themselves. Of course, you can imagine the policy implications of such an analysis. Students of Japan know well that rejection of the Western hegemony or modernity was a powerful theme in Japanese intellectual history, even though Japan had nothing to do with the Islamic tradition. Through comparison of anti-Western ideas of Pan-Asianism in Japan and Pan-Islamism in the Middle East, I tried to show that anti-Westernism is a complex, yet modern, phenomenon that is neither a religious conservative reaction to Western universalism nor a natural response to imperialism.

Michael Penn: Can you give us a general idea of how significant Japan's wartime scholarship on Islam really was? Broadly speaking, why does it deserve our attention today?

Cemil Aydin: To start with, there was an impressive boom of scholarship on the Muslim world in wartime Japan, which is not well-known today. More importantly, this scholarship was surprisingly sympathetic to Muslim societies, at times displaying identification between Japanese and Muslims as fellow Asians and Easterners with shared problems.

Understanding the characteristics and achievements of this scholarship is important in several ways: It gives us a unique perspective on the relationship between empires and knowledge if we compare Japanese scholarship with European scholarship on the Muslim world. Wartime-era Japanese scholars of Islam were not free from imperial projects and interests, and their work was framed by broader imperial needs and discourses. Yet, even when we recognize the complicity of area studies scholarship with imperial interests, there is another question: Did the fact that Japan was a non-white and non-Christian empire make any difference in Japanese Orientalist scholarship on the Muslim world? Looking at books and magazines published by Japanese scholars from 1937 to 1945, I realized that there are significant differences in comparison with Western Orientalism: a Pan-Asian discourse of civilization was shaping a stronger interest in modern Muslim nationalism against Western colonialism, and in some ways, Japanese scholars were more successful in their predictions and analysis of contemporary Muslim modernism. For example, while European scholars saw modernizing reforms in Turkey during the 1920s as a betrayal of Islam, Japanese scholars perceived them as necessary steps for the revival of the Muslim world -- something similar to what the Meiji reforms did for Japan. Moreover, Japanese scholars of Islam had a clear agenda of overcoming

Eurocentric biases and prejudices about Islam in their writings. In fact, in the heyday of Japanese imperial culture, they developed an almost internationalist vision of introducing the Japanese public to the unfamiliar world of Islam. Some were very critical of the Japanese public's ignorance of Islam at a time when they were claiming to be the leader or elder brother of Asia.

Michael Penn: How would you assess the wartime Japanese scholarship in comparison with Japanese scholarship on the Islamic world today?

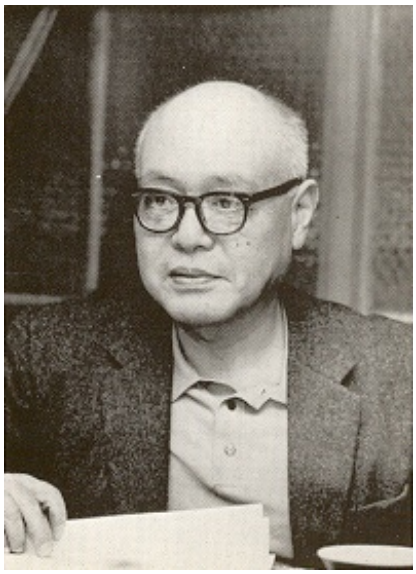
Cemil Aydin: There is, of course, a certain rupture, or a conscious break between the postwar and prewar scholarly interests on the Muslim world. For example, Professor Itagaki Yuzo, one of the leading names of postwar scholarship, is a very different person than Okawa Shumei. Many of the new scholars of Islam either had graduate training in America, or have been to Muslim countries for their education. This was not true for prewar scholars of Islam. The community of Islam scholars in Japan, at least in major universities, is a diverse group of people with a strong tradition of self-reflection about their discipline, especially in relation to Orientalism.

Nevertheless, I can think of one aspect of continuity from prewar scholarship to contemporary discourses on the Muslim world -- an implicit legacy of a kind of Pan-Asian identity. As a result, both the left and right in Japan (whatever these political ideologies entail in the Japanese context) are generally sympathetic to modern Muslim thought. This is a big contrast to Europe and America where scholars on the right see Muslim nationalism and Islamic movements as an enemy of the West. There is a staunchly anti-Muslim right wing or Christian fundamentalist rhetoric in America, and a small minority group of scholars feed them with academic analysis. No matter what intellectuals think of Japanese ignorance of the Islamic world, I cannot think of such a hostile rhetoric existing in Japan.

Michael Penn: In your article, you argue that the wartime scholarship surpassed what might be expected by research institutes whose funding and establishment relied deeply on military and colonial interests. Can you explain this?

Cemil Aydin: This is perhaps similar to contemporary America. A lot of Islamic studies research is funded and underwritten by governmental interest in the Islamic world. It is almost impossible to escape the framework of American imperial involvement as the indirect motivation behind these funding organizations. For example, the Carnegie Foundation in New York has a major initiative where every year they pick almost twenty scholars of Islam and support their research for two years. Does that mean that every scholar working in America today is serving the American empire in the Middle East? The fact that neo-con supporters of Bush policies blame the Middle Eastern Studies Association (MESA) for being extreme leftist, anti-American, pro-Arab and pro-Muslim indicates that knowledge production and empire processes are not that simple. This also does not mean that progressive members of Middle East or Islamic studies scholarship in America are free from the needs and interests of an American hegemony in the Middle East, even when American scholars of Islam are overall very critical of American foreign policy in the Middle East.

The situation of Japanese scholars on Islam was similarly complex. There clearly were some left-inclining or liberal scholars among Japanese scholars working in Islamic studies from 1937 to 1945. After all, Takeuchi Yoshimi, a leading left voice in postwar Japan, was also a young scholar of Islam during that time. Hence, academically sophisticated members of the Islamic studies community mostly did what they were already doing in terms of their research and publication. One can still read them today with interest and learn something from that work. There were also many articles and pamphlets, mostly motivated by a short term imperial agenda, that do not seem to have much value today.



Takeuchi Yoshimi's influential intellectual career started at the Institute for Islamic Studies with research on Chinese Muslims

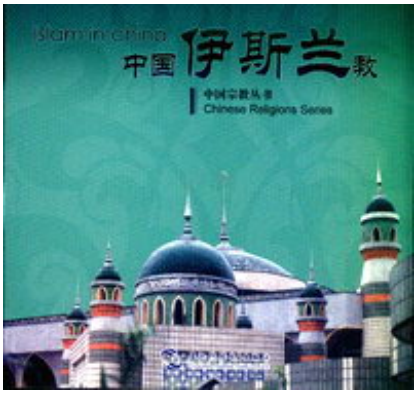
Michael Penn: You note that Okawa Shumei at one point identified Islam as more part of "Western civilization" than "Eastern civilization," but then seemed to backtrack and not follow through on his own insight. Why did Japanese scholars seem to have such difficulty deciding whether Islam was "East" or "West"?

Cemil Aydin: Okawa Shumei's writings provide good examples of the contradictions between serious scholarly thinking on the role of Muslim societies in world history, and dominant Pan-Asianist views. According to the dominant Pan-Asianist perception of the world, the Muslim world was mainly in Asia, although it had parts beyond Asia. One should be aware of the fact that Europe, the West, the Islamic World, Asia were all geopolitical terms, assumed to be in competitive power relations, and their reality was rarely questioned, even by non-Asianists. We do know that different branches of European Orientalism gave these geographical imaginations an historical and cultural content. More importantly, most of the Realist international relations or world politics literature also took these entities as basic units of analysis and prescription. For example, a book by an American white supremacist and Harvard Ph.D. in international history, Lothrop Stoddard, titled The World of Islam, became well read in its Arabic and Ottoman translations. It is primarily about the Islam-West relationship in world politics at the end of World War I. Stoddard's book was one among hundreds of books in the first quarter of the twentieth century that conceptualized a domain of Islamic World as a reality, despite the stark diversity and disconnectedness in this imagined unity. Okawa Shumei read and used that book in his research as well. Pan-Asianism relied on this geopolitical thinking.

Lothrop Stoddard

On the other hand, Orientalist literature produced enough knowledge on history, literature and religion to challenge these basic assumptions. Japanese scholars of Islam could actually read the products of European Orientalism to challenge the basic premises of Orientalism. Okawa was instrumental in establishing one of the best library collections on Islam and the Muslim world during the 1930s, especially by buying all the published materials in these fields in European languages. He was himself a good researcher, and in his book published in 1942 he does note that categorizing Islam as an Eastern, non-Hellenistic civilization, as the Other of the West, is a fallacy, because in many ways, Islam is a Western religion, much closer to European civilization than to Far Eastern civilizaation. He notes this with some delight, because challenging the Eurocentric prejudices of Islam in European writings was one of the main agendas of Japanese scholarship.

Okawa does not address the paradox that, in one place, he talks about Muslims as fellow Asians, with whom Japan must have solidarity against the West, and in another place he emphasizes that Islam is a Western religion, closer to Christianity than to Buddhism. For him and many others of his generation, the geopolitical meanings of the Islamic World, Asia and Europe were a reality not to be challenged by fine historical and scholarly insights into world history and comparative religions.



Islam in China

Michael Penn: I presume that the Japanese military authorities briefly became interested in Islam because they viewed it as a sort of anti-Western warrior religion that they could utilize to challenge British power and for other purposes in China?

Cemil Aydin: They indeed had such beliefs and at some point they devised fantasy-driven policies based on the assumptions that Muslims were very anti-Western and always sympathetic to Japan -- and one should not forget that some of these images of Muslims being violent and anti-Western were coming from Europeans. Professor Selcuk Esenbel has written in detail about the Japanese military's "Islam policy" in her American Historical Review article a couple of years ago. As she also noted, it was not unique to the Japanese Empire that they were planning to use a geopolitical entity, religion or ethnic group against other rival empires. Actually, both the German Empire and later Italian Empire had plans to use so called "Muslim rage against the West" for their own purposes, and thus became interested in Pan-Islamism. The policy impact of these stereotypes about Muslims is still worth investigating. During the revolutionary acts of violence against British rule in India around 1907, for example, Orientalist-ethnologists at the German foreign ministry assumed and argued that this was the Muslim revolt and rage, although actual violent acts were being committed mostly by Hindu nationalists. Somehow, violent Hindu revolutionaries did not fit into German notions of the Orient.

Japanese military authorities were aware of what other empires were doing, and in one Islam policy pamphlet they did note the history of "Islam policy" by the German and Italian Empires. But then, they argued that Japan would be more successful in gaining Muslim support because it had no negative history in the Muslim world, and Muslims had sympathized with Japan since the Russo-Japanese War. In reality, Japanese efforts to gain the support of Chinese Muslims against Chinese nationalism did not produce any results. Indeed, there was significant support among Chinese Muslims for both the nationalists and the Communists in China against Japanese imperialism. More importantly, there was no single Muslim world to warrant such an Islam policy.

There was also a more anti-colonial "liberation" discourse in Japanese policies on Islam, one that emphasized Japan's mission to liberate Asia, including subjugated Muslims. This is again a highly common imperial strategy, Think about how many times Muslims were liberated by the Western Empires such as Britain, France and America: Saving Arab Muslims from the Turkish oppression, liberating Muslim women from the domination of fundamentalist men, or minorities from majority Sunni yoke, and even bringing secularism to save moderate Muslims from theocratic rule. Somehow, being an anti-imperialist empire was not a peculiarity of Japan. All empires

played the game of emancipation.

Michael Penn: It's ironic that today the negative image of Islam in Japan is chiefly associated with its perceived connections with violence and terrorism while in the late 1930s, the anti-Western struggle of some Muslims was regarded by many Japanese as the most attractive feature of the West Asian region. This seems to tell us more about Japan than Islam, wouldn't you say?

Japanese Muslim agents who joined 1934 and 1936 pilgrimages

Cemil Aydin: You are right. Violence and terrorism can have positive meanings when they are seen as a temporary means for a noble goal. Hence, "jihad" against colonialism—Western colonialism—did not seem bad for Japanese observers. At one point, liberal members of the Islamic studies community, such as Okubo Koji, described Japan's Greater East Asia as a Holy War (sometimes translated as "jihad") against unjust European hegemony in Asia.

It is interesting that Japanese scholars often emphasized that seeing Islam as a "religion of jihad" is a product of European Orientalist biases, and that the Japanese should see Islam as a religion of love given the strength of the Sufi tradition within Islam. In fact, Okawa Shumei corrected himself in this regard. In his earlier writings, Okawa, like Kita Ikki, referred to the principle of "Koran ka, ken ka" (Either the Quran or the Sword) as a common pattern of the spread of Islam. You either accept Islam or you face the military might of the Muslims. In fact, Kita Ikki saw this as a good thing. However, in his later scholarly writings, Okawa emphasized that Islam actually spread peacefully through merchants and scholars, not through military conquest, and the Japanese phrase "Koran Ka, ken ka" was a sheer internalization of Christian polemics against Islam.

Kita Ikki

In his postwar reflection on his Islamic Studies days, Takeuchi Yoshimi makes a very wise comment on this. He says that Islam, like Christianity, can neither be a religion of the sword nor a religion of love. Yet, Japanese scholars felt the need to emphasize the love aspect against European Orientalist discourses.

Michael Penn: At the end of the Pacific War, the Japanese scholarship on Islam quickly disappeared from public consciousness and most of the scholars moved on to other subjects. Why did Islamic studies in Japan collapse so completely in the 1950s and 1960s?

Cemil Aydin: Once the Japanese Empire ended, most of the infrastructure for Islamic studies scholarship was lost. Who would care about area studies in a time when the Japanese nation was stripped of its empire and facing the challenge of recovery and rebuilding. It was also practically impossible to revive anything during the 1950s. For example, the biggest Islamic Studies library in Tokyo burned down during the aerial bombing. Some other books were taken to the US during the occupation and never returned. There was also a new mood of "Leaving Asia" and "Joining the West" among Japanese intellectuals. In fact, Takeuchi Yoshimi noted the negative results of this loss. While being critical of the imperial complicities of prewar Islam scholarship, Takeuchi underlined the fact that this scholarship had also made positive contributions such as introducing an unfamiliar world civilization to Japan, contributing to an understanding of world history and globalization beyond Eurocentric narratives, and a necessary sympathy for Third World nationalisms.

Some members of the prewar Islamic Studies establishment continued doing research. The most famous of them was Izutsu Toshihiko, who was still young at the end of the war, became a well-known international authority on the Quran and Sufism. The very fact that the Islamic Studies community in Japan has grown rapidly since the 1970s, after Japan became a great economic power, is also highly interesting, and must have something to do with the earlier efforts.

Toshihiko Izutsu started his education in Islamic Studies at the suggestion of Okawa Shumei, and learned Arabic in wartime Japan from two prominent Muslim Pan-Islamists, Abdurresid Ibrahim and Musa Carullah

Michael Penn: I have just finished reading your excellent book on anti-Westernism. It seems that in many ways, the "global moment" of the Russo-Japanese War can be seen as the highpoint of genuine affection between Japan and the Islamic world. Why did that moment pass so quickly? Today, it is almost completely forgotten.

Cemil Aydin: The 1905 Japanese victory became a turning point in the history of decolonization beyond the Japanese Empire's intentions and actions. After all, 1905 was a war between two Empires (Russia and Japan) through the involvement of a third empire, the British. But the turn of the 20th century imperial world order was so closely linked to the legitimacy of race ideologies and notions of White-Christian superiority that Japan's victory shattered these legitimacy discourses. After 1905, all major anti-colonial nationalists, whether in the Muslim world or beyond, could use the Japanese example in their arguments and mobilization efforts. Admiration for Japan was related to intellectual contestation over rising nationalism throughout Asia. The global moment of the Russo-Japanese War lasted about a decade while anti-colonial nationalism was utilizing a Pan-Asian discourse. During this decade, the Japanese Empire did not support any anti-colonial national movement, nor did it have to. In fact, Japanese authorities expelled some of the Vietnamese students and Indian nationalists who came to Japan to learn from them. After World War I, due to the Bolshevik Revolution and Wilsonian ideals, Japan's role as a metaphor in anti-colonial thought decreased. Thus, during the late 1930s, when Japanese propaganda referred back to 1905 as a moment of their leadership in Asia, they no longer had a broad audience. It may be forgotten now, but before World War II, the Japanese education system taught all Japanese children about the admiration of Turks, Arabs or Indians for their nation. That became a somewhat unhealthy, narcissist reference.

Michael Penn: One final question, a hot potato. Your book suggests that anti-Westernism before 1945 was not really a conservative reaction or a retreat into some kind of primordial identity, but rather a reflection of the crisis of legitimacy affecting the European-based international order as a whole. In 2007, should we view the global spread of anti-Americanism in a similar way? In other words, is the loss of legitimacy of the American-dominated international order the primary factor that gives rise to anti-Americanism today?

Cemil Aydin: I think this parallel exists, though a lot has changed from the late 19th to the late 20th century. The basic argument of anti-Americanism today -- that American imperialism is violating the universal values that the imagined and highly-stereotyped West proclaims -- is similar to the colonial era anti-Westernism that posited that European imperialism contradicted all the Enlightenment ideals the West was preaching to the rest of the world. In other words, in both cases, anti-Westernism and anti-Americanism, there are claims of unequal and unjust power relations in an unstable world. I should also note that the anti-Westernism of the last century has complex intellectual lineages, relying on the critiques of modernity in the West, and an authentic civilization discourse formulated to challenge the European discourse of racial and religious superiority. Today's anti-Americanism has roots in Cold War-era European thought. Yet, the legitimacy crisis of a single global international order is still the main reason behind the current anti-Americanism.

Cemil Aydin was recently profiled by History News Network as a "Top Young Historian."

Cemil Aydin is the author of The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought , Columbia University, New York, 2007. Recent publications include "Beyond Eurocentrism? Japan's Islamic Studies during the Era of the Greater East Asia War (1937-1945)," in Renee Worringer, ed., Princeton Papers: Interdisciplinary Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Volume XIV: The Islamic Middle East and Japan: Perceptions, Aspirations, and the Birth of Intra-Asian Modernity, January 2007.

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