

The Tokyo mosque: A case study

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Abstract: Tokyo Mosque with an adjoining Turkish Culture Center in Tokyo, Japan, is the largest and beautiful mosque in Japan. It was originally built on May 12, 1938 by immigrants from Russia who had come to Japan after the October Revolution. The mosque was demolished in 1986 because of severe structural damage. Under the direction and support of Diyanet İleri Başkanlığı a new building was begun in 1998. The construction was completed in 2000 at a cost of around 1.5 billion yen. The inauguration was held on June 30, 2000. Based upon personal observation, documentary studies, and interviews with the officials of the mosque, this study analyses the history, growth and development of Tokyo mosque. This study is justified by the fact that Tokyo masjid is the most beautiful mosque in Asia with its gorgeous, elaborately designed decorations and the solemn and stately architecture.

Keywords: Tokyo mosque, Turkey, Japan, Islam,

Introduction

A mosque, simply defined, is a place of worship for Muslims. Mosque is a translation of the word *masjid* which means place of prostration. The word *masjid* comes from the root “sa-ja-da” meaning to prostrate. Prostration in Islam symbolises complete submission of the believer to Almighty Allah (SWT). The first mosque in the world is *masjid al-ġarġm*, in Makkah. The first thing Prophet Muhammad (SAW) did upon his emigration from Makkah in 622 AD is to build the Quba mosque in Madinah. Subsequently, the Prophet (SAW) built another mosque in Madinah, known as the *masjid al-nabawġ* or the Prophet's mosque. Subsequently wherever the Muslim's have gone, they have built a Mosque for their needs in that community.

Mosque in Islam is a necessity. This is so because Islam is a religion to be practiced collectively. Therefore, all good things if they are done together has more of a reward than the same things done alone. Allah (SWT) never addresses Muslims in the Qur'an as believer but, always as believers. Consequently,

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Muslims are supposed to pray collectively in a congregation and participate in other acts of worship like fasting and hajj together. Therefore, there is a dire need for a mosque for collective prayer.

The mosque is the center for all Islamic activity as it used to be in the mosque of the Prophet (SAW) in Madinah. The mosque was not only a prayer room, but it was a school of knowledge where companions used to study the Qur'an and ask questions. It was a place where the Prophet (SAW) received delegations from foreign countries. It was a treasury from which charity work was done and it was a war-room where decisions and planning for wars imposed on Muslims were made. It should be a place where children can receive an Islamic education; a place where community social functions can take place with Islamic guidelines; and a place where Muslim men can socialize with other Muslim men and women with women.

In Japan, there are about 80 mosques of varying sizes located throughout the country. Among these, the Tokyo Mosque and Turkish Cultural Center is the largest. The mosque is a non-political entity in the strictest sense. Its *imām*, the prayer leader, does not talk or discuss any government groups or societies fearing that doing so may harm and compromise his impartiality. Even the supplication to Allah (SWT) is offered in very universal and generalized style without being specific to any event, calamity or country. Based upon personal observation, documentary studies, and interviews with the officials of the mosque, this study analyses the history, growth and development of Tokyo mosque. This study is justified by the fact that Tokyo masjid is the most beautiful mosque in Asia with its gorgeous, elaborately designed decorations and the solemn and stately architecture. Originally, the place was intended to be just a place to get together for a cup of tea. It is interesting to investigate how by 1938 the place developed into a mosque.

The mosque

The Tokyo Mosque is located in an expensive area. There is no Muslim population in the vicinity as it was in 1938-1940. As a result, there is very small attendance for the daily five time prayers. The Muslims in general are unable to afford the high cost of living and house rent in this area. The nearest Muslim resident from the mosque is at least 15 minutes by car. The train station is five minutes away and the bus stop is just in front of the mosque. But the Muslims are living far away. Therefore, the presence of Muslims on the daily regular prayer at

the Tokyo Mosque is very small. Another reason is that there are many mosques all over the city. Being unique in its beauty, cleanliness and with cooperative attitude of the staff, the mosque has become a popular visitor's attraction. Student groups from schools, colleges and universities visit the mosque for research and to understand Islam. Three languages, Japanese, English and Turkish, are used when the *imĒm* delivers his sermons on Fridays and other occasions. This is highly appreciated by the community. The *imĒm* is a *da'wah* oriented personality with charming manners and is soft spoken.

Fig. 1: The Tokyo Mosque



Source: Siddiqi, 2017: 77.

The history of the establishment of Islam in Japan started with the establishment of Tokyo Mosque in 1938. The Tokyo Mosque was the climax of growth, expansion and strengthening of the political and social relationship between Japan and the Muslim world which needs a brief recapitulation as follows:

1. Around 1904/1905, the Turkish government sent a goodwill army delegation to Japan under the leadership of Admiral Barto Pasha. It was to counter the influence of Russia against Turkey and Japan.
2. Early Muslims such as Torajiro Yamada, Shotaro Noda and Bumpachiro Ariga had started their Islamic preaching activities much earlier. They were searching for places for the Muslims to get together and assemble for prayers.
3. Around 1912, according to Abu Bakr Morimoto, Omar Yamaoka who had performed Hajj earlier used to travel all over Japan preaching Islam and telling stories about the Hajj. He wrote about his Hajj experience and the Arab people. This stirred some interest among the Japanese to start finding out about the Arabs and Islam (Abu Bakr, 1998).
4. Sultan Abd al-Hamid took keen interest in Japan and positively responded, in 1908, to the request of Emperor Meiji of Japan to send Muslim scholars to Japan to increase their knowledge about Islam (Samir Abdul Hamid, 1995).
5. An International Religious Conference on Islam was held in April 1906 in Tokyo which attracted scholars and leaders from Muslim countries.
6. In 1914, the First World War had just ended and Japan was trying to build new allies in Asia. Turkey was a Muslim empire known as the Ottoman

Empire and was the base and seat of the caliphate (*khiĒfah*) which was abolished in 1924. However, the Turkish caliph played a big role in strengthening the spread of Islam. Trade and cultural exchange also helped in strengthening the existing relations between Japan and the Asian Muslim countries. For these reasons, the Japanese diplomatic missions and scholars started visiting Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

In this context, the visits of Al-Haj Abdur Rashid Ibrahim in 1908, the great Tatar Islamic preacher, is very important. He revisited Japan in 1939 and became the Imam of the Tokyo Mosque. Mohammad Hussain and MawlviBarkatullahBhopali who taught Urdu at Tokyo University in 1909/1910 also played an important role in promoting Islam in Japan.

The developments mentioned above supported the establishment of mosques in big cities of Japan including:

1. Masjid Izumi, Ohtsu, Osaka, in 1905, a prayer space built by Russians who came as war prisoners of Japan.
2. Masjid Kobe which was planned by Indian traders and businessmen in 1928 but completed and opened for prayers in October 1935 with the permission of the Emperor of Japan.
3. Finally, comes the mosque, in the capital city Tokyo, which was built in 1938.

The Tokyo mosque: History and structure built in 1938 and rebuilt in 2000

The Tokyo Mosque was constructed in 1938 by individuals from Turkey led by their leader Muhammad Abdul Hayy Qurban Ali and the local Japanese Muslims. It was built for prayer assembly but eventually used for other purposes such as socialization of Kazan, Turkish and Tatar migrant Muslims from Russia. It was opened to the public on May 12, 1938. The opening ceremony was attended by high ranking political and military officials of Japan and diplomatic representatives of Muslim countries.

In 1986, the mosque was demolished because of the severe structural damage; in particular, the interior wooden walls of the mosque had decayed. Various groups played their role for the reconstruction of the Tokyo Mosque. The local Muslim community, the Turkish Association in Japan and the Turkish

government all contributed significantly towards rebuilding the Tokyo Mosque. It is to be mentioned here that the mosque was completely under the control of the Department of *diyanat*, the government of Turkey. The financial as well as administrative affairs were under the Turkish Embassy. The Imam is a Turkish government employee. He gets all instruction from Turkey after sending monthly reports. He sends monthly reports about the affairs of the mosque and carries out the policies dictated by the *awqaf* (endowment) Department of Turkey. The land and buildings for Tokyo Mosque were donated by Tokyo Turkish community.

The reconstruction of the mosque began with fund raising activities. A committee was formed on Friday April 12, 1996, headed by a Kazan Turkish migrant leader, Mr. Temimdar Muhit and its secretary was AbdurRahmanSiddiqi of Pakistan. The committee solicited funds from the Muslims all over the world including those living in Germany, Holland, Belgium, France, Austria, Norway, and Australia, the German Muslim community donated the highest amount of about US\$600,770.00 followed by Holland with US\$138, 975.00. Among individuals, one should mention the Indonesian Minister H. E. Mr. Zuhail who donated US\$450,000.00; Malaysian cabinet Minister Anwar Ibrahim gave US\$300,000.00 and Pakistani business community donated US\$295,000.00. The total amount collected was US\$1, 974,166.00.

Once the fund was available, a group of six engineers headed by Muharrem Hilmi Senalp from Turkey was sent to Japan from the Diyanet Religious Department of the Turkish government to administer the construction of the mosque. These engineers from Turkey were supported by six Japanese engineers from Kajima Architect and Engineering Co. Ltd, Tokyo. The ornamentation was based on Ottoman religious architecture. Around 70 Turkish craftsmen performed the finishing details, and a considerable quantity of marble was imported from Turkey. The construction was completed in 2000 at a cost of around 1.5 billion yen. The first Friday sermon (*khutbah*) was delivered by Nuri Yilmaz, the head of the Turkish delegation to Japan. The sermon was delivered in standard Arabic which was translated to Japanese language by Abdur Rahman Siddiqi on June 30, 2000. Since then the Mosque is under total Turkish government management and control.

The significance of this event could not be underestimated as it marked a milestone in the institutionalization of Islam in Japan. The establishment of a

mosque anywhere is indicative of a growing Muslim population in that area. It shows organizational and financial capacity, an emerging sense of "belonging" and an anticipation of long-term residency of the newly arrived Muslims in Japan. All this could not be done without the support of the state and the people of the country.

The mosque is characterised by beautifully-designed doors, which feature intricate geometrical designs characteristic to Islamic architecture. The first floor is a Cultural Center which facilitates interaction among worshipers and visitors. The walls and the ceiling of the Center is covered in elaborate, finely-worked ornamentation. The room is filled with books and resembles a mini library. The second floor is a place of worship. Its floor is covered with blue carpeting and rays of sunlight sparkle through blue stained glass.

Activities of the Tokyo mosque

The Tokyo Mosque gave priority to educate people in Islam. The education plan includes a move by the Turkish government to invite students to Turkey for full graduation, study of all university subjects plus Turkish language. This was to be done by the *diyanet* Department based on the initiative of Tokyo Mosque. The discussion with imam Ansari of Tokyo Mosque (January 10, 2010) revealed that the Tokyo Mosque management has the following projects and expanded activities in addition to five daily prayers:

1. Translation of the Qur'an into Japanese language.
2. Solving family disputes among Muslim couples.
3. Advising on matters of job and financial problems.
4. Assisting other smaller mosques and places of prayers all over Japan.
5. Allowing them to collect donations at the door of the mosque on Fridays and Eid days (Muslim festivals).
6. Collecting aid funds for Muslim countries hit by natural disasters such as earthquakes.

The Tokyo Mosque has designed series of programmes for the effective functioning of the mosque along with other institutions and individuals in Japan. The mosque has demonstrated its capability of discharging various functions just as the masjid-e-nabwi had rendered to the Muslims during the early phase of

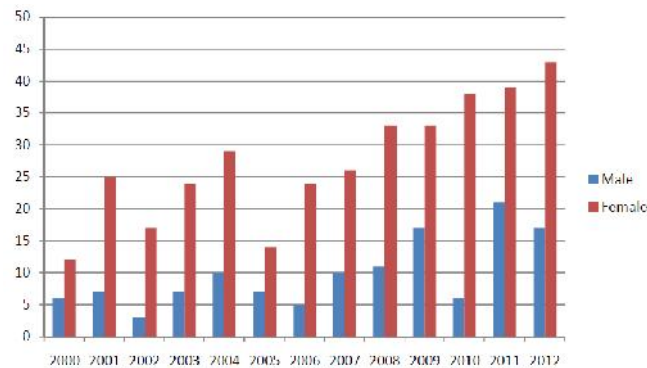
Islamic civilization. For example, between 2004-2010 the mosque conducted and registered 186 marriages, issued 352 certificates of conversion to Islam, conducted 87 conferences and seminars. This is in addition to conducting daily congregational prayers and Friday prayers where the worshippers generally number around 5,000.

In addition, the mosque holds an annual bazaar which is open to both Muslims and non-Muslims to participate and benefit from. Other social services rendered by Tokyo Mosque are family consultation, library services, *Janazah* (burial rites), Qur'an teaching to all groups of people willing to learn and much more.

The conferences and seminars are designed to cover a wide range of topics, both cultural and educational. The main objective or outcome of these programmes is to unify the Japanese and the Islamic cultures. In other words, bridge the ideological gaps that exist between the Japanese and the Islamic civilizations. Thus, academics and scholars are invited and given specific issues that need urgent attention to be addressed. For example, in 2010 the Tokyo Mosque successfully organised six conferences/seminars on issues relevant to the Japanese society. One of the important topics was to investigate why the Japanese community needs Islam. Similarly, six conferences were held in 2009 and 2008 respectively on related topics.

According to the Tokyo Cultural Waqf Department, the Tokyo Mosque has been publishing many books in Japanese language from 2002-2011. Some of these books include: Basic teachings of Islam; Life and message of Universal Prophet Muhammad (SAW); Life and thoughts of Moulana Jalaluddin Rumi; Muhammad (SAW)'s Message of Peace; Islamic Animation for Children; Qur'an with Turkish Meaning; and *Khutbah* (Sermons of Friday Prayer in Japanese. These books are very popular among students and scholars in various universities. Some of these books are written by Turkish scholars.

These academic and cultural activities have made possible for the Japanese citizens to better understand and appreciate Islam and eventually to enter into the fold of Islam. Beginning with 18 conversions in 2000, the number of Japanese converts increased significantly to 60 in 2012 giving a total of 460 Japanese converts. Noticeably, the rate of conversion among the female is double and sometimes three times of the males. This is shown in fig. 2.

Fig. 2: Japanese conversion to Islam by gender, 2000-2012

Source: Siddiqi (2014): 93

Tokyo mosque's general plan for future activities

The Tokyo Mosque has an elaborate and comprehensive plan for activities which are summarised below:

1. Cultural Centre near the Tokyo Mosque in the adjacent open plot
2. Employment of female staff for service of Muslim ladies and their education
3. Celebrating Mawlid al-Nabi on a large scale with cooperation of all Muslim organizations in Japan
4. Systematic teaching of Qur'an for children and youth
5. Organizing Hajj groups from Japan
6. Establishing Animal Slaughter (qurban) House
7. Issuing Halal certificates to slaughter houses
8. Sending newly converted Japanese Muslims to Turkey for education and training
9. Inviting politicians and leaders of other religious groups for Iftar during Ramadan
10. Sending greeting cards to prominent personalities in Japan on Islamic occasion as a part of the da'wah activities
11. Organizing social activities with the cooperation of local government offices
12. Promoting Islamic welfare activities

13. Publishing research and educational books of scholars
14. Organizing International Qur'an recitation competition

Conclusion

The Tokyo Mosque is a representative institution in Japan. Many institutions and organisations in Turkey supported and cooperated for the success of the Tokyo Mosque project. Both state and non-state actors had made invaluable contributions to the completion of this project.

From available records, it is clear that the early Muslim migrants could not afford to purchase premises for a mosque or a small room for prayers and a boarding house. They were not living near Port Yokohama where they could get jobs and make some earnings. It means that the early Muslims were able to use their personal contacts and public/political relations and their quality of leadership to obtain a piece of land in the heart of the capital city, Tokyo. It shows their farsightedness with unity, planning and mutual cooperation.

In the construction of the Tokyo mosque, Muslims in Japan received all the support from the Turkish government who, as of today, control the activities of the mosque. The mosque continues to perform all function associated with the mosque established by Prophet Muhammad (SAW).

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