Present Conditions and Issues of Education for Muslim Children of Intermarriage in Japan: A Case Study of Self-help Educational Activities by Japanese Mothers

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Abstract

Recently, Islamic education for children born of intermarriage between foreign Muslim and Japanese has become a major issue for those families living in Japan. In this paper, I will examine self-help activities by Japanese mothers who converted to Islam when they got married. The NPO CWIA (Children and Women Islamic Association) has gained attention for activities that utilize social capital to overcome the problems concerning the education for Muslim children of intermarriage. The founder and representative of the CWIA is a Japanese woman with Sri Lankan husband and three growing children. The CWIA’s activities, developed and implemented by Japanese mothers, are created in response to the issues that their children face first-hand. Particularly notable is the fact that Japanese women who converted to Islam when they got married are providing the children with a comfortable venue and a place for Islamic education.

Introduction

Since the latter half of the 1980s, there has been an increase in the number of single males coming to Japan as laborers from Muslim countries including Pakistan, Iran, and Bangladesh. Then, since the latter half of the 1990s, there has been a trend in which these Muslim males take up long-term residents in Japan by marrying Japanese women. The children of these couples began attaining school age in the mid-2000, and since then, Islamic education for children has become a major issue for Muslim families living in Japan (Takeshita, 2007). There have been numerous attempts in the past to establish Islamic schools in Tokyo and Nagoya metropolitan areas, where many Muslims live, as a means of resolving this problem, but none of these have come to fruition, in part as a result of issues involving capital and manpower.

In London, which has many Muslim immigrants, Muslim communities have been established, along with Islamic schools. An Indian Muslim immigrant male in his 50s, who raised three children in London, made the following comments: “When there were no Islamic schools, Muslim parents made the excuse that they could not give their children an Islamic education.
because there are no Islamic schools. Even after Islamic schools were established, however, they
did not send their children to those schools. Whether or not there are Islamic schools, parents can
give their children an Islamic education depending on their own individual awareness.”

In Japan how do Muslim parents pass on Islam to their children? In this paper, after analyzing
numerical trends involving Muslim children of intermarriage, I will examine the present
conditions and issues of education among Muslim families in Nagoya metropolitan area with a
particular focus on two main concepts: the “Spatial axis,” which refers to schools, communities,
and homes, and the “Temporal axis,” which refers to the children’s past, present, and future.
Next, I will examine self-help activities by Japanese mothers who are searching for ways of
overcoming these issues, and investigate activities aimed at building environments in which the
Muslim children of intermarriage can receive the benefits of both the father’s and the mother’s
culture. I hope that this paper will assist in promoting a deeper understanding of education for
Muslim children of intermarriage.

**Demographic features of Muslim children**

Because there are no items related to religion in the Japanese Population Census and other related
statistics, the only method of inferring religions is based on nationality. In this paper, I will look
at intercultural families comprising Japanese and foreign Muslim who came from Pakistan,
Bangladesh, Iran, and Indonesia. These are top four countries among the various nationalities of
foreign Muslims living in Japan (Kojima 2012: 2-3). I would like to make it clear at the outset
that although most of the residents of these four countries are Muslim, some are not, and that
there are also Muslims living in Japan who come from countries other than the four mentioned
above.

As indicated in Table 1, “Number of Muslim children by age,” the total number of Muslim
children of intermarriage living in Japan is 4,120 according to the definition outlined above. Of
these, 2,553 have a foreign father and a Japanese mother, and 1,567 have a Japanese father and a
foreign mother. Meanwhile, there are 2,056 Muslim children in Japan who have two foreign
parents, which means that about two thirds of Muslim children living in Japan are children of
intermarriage.

Looking at the ages of Muslim children of intermarriage, we find that the largest number fall
into the “five years and under” category, at 2,324. This is followed by children in elementary
school (aged 6 to 12), at 1,465, which means that 92.0% of Muslim children of intermarriage are
of elementary school age or younger. As I will discuss in more detail below, most of these

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1 This comment was obtained through an interview conducted by the author on Sep. 2nd, 2012 in London.
children have Japanese nationality, and will grow up and receive an education in Japan. During the course of the growth process, it would be most desirable for these children to form a multiple identity not only as Muslims but as Japanese as well, and to live in an environment where they can enjoy the benefits of both parents’ cultures.

Table 1 Number of Muslim children by age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of children</th>
<th>Muslim children of intermarriage</th>
<th>Muslim children with foreign parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foreign father Japanese mother</td>
<td>Japanese father Foreign mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-5 yrs.</td>
<td>1,432</td>
<td>892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-12 yrs.</td>
<td>924</td>
<td>541</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-15 yrs.</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-18 yrs.</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,553</td>
<td>1,567</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: the microdata of the 2010 Population Census in Japan Calculated by Kazumasa Hanaoka (Tohoku University)

In terms of the domicile, an overwhelming ratio of Muslim families where one parent is a Japanese lived in Japan five years ago. 91.2% of Japanese husbands and 91.7% of Japanese wives with non-Japanese spouses lived in Japan five years ago, and 77.5% of foreign husbands and 61.4% of foreign wives were residents of Japan at that time. This suggests that most of the Muslim children of intermarriage are born and raised in Japan, and is an indication of the importance of research related to the education of these children.

Actual conditions of Muslim children of intermarriage

Analysis of the ‘Spatial axis’ and ‘Temporal axis’

In order for Muslim children of intermarriage to have a clear definition of themselves and a broad and positive outlook for the future, their religious, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds must be effectively utilized both in their education and in their daily lives. In fact, however, they face a problem in that both the spatial axis and the temporal axis are separated in the context of their daily lives.

Sato (2010) analyzed the problems faced by children moving between cultures using the analytical framework of the spatial and temporal axes. “Separation of the spatial axis” refers to a lack of continuity in the child’s lifestyle venues such as schools, community, and home. “Separation of the temporal axis” refers to the separation of child’s past, present, and future. As such, the separation could be seen as affecting all aspects of the child’s development (Sato 2010: 8)

2 The source is the microdata of the 2010 Population Census in Japan, which was calculated by Dr. Kazumasa Hanaoka (Tohoku University).
If I apply the same framework to Muslim children of intermarriage, separation of the spatial axes refers to the fact that schools and communities do not understand Islamic education, as in the case of Islamic countries. From the perspective of the separation of the spatial axis, looking at the current state of education for Muslim children of intermarriage in Japan, we can find the following two main types of situations.

The first is that the most common cases are those in which the children attend Japanese elementary or junior high schools, and receive Islamic education in the home, although this education varies in its degree. In public venues such as schools and communities, the children are socialized within the Japanese educational system and Japanese values, while in private venues such as the home, they are socialized in an Islamic environment. In this pattern, there is a problem of separation in the spatial axes of schools and communities versus the home.

The second main type of situation involves cases in which the children attend Japanese elementary or junior high schools and receive Islamic education not only in the home, but also in a mosque on weekends. Children falling into this pattern often come from devoted Muslim families, and in which the parents frequent the mosque. There are also cases in which the child receives tutoring in Arabic. In this pattern as well, there is a problem of separation in the spatial axes of schools and communities versus the mosque and the home.

The separation in the temporal axis is a problem involving movement between cultures for Muslim children who have lived in Islamic countries. In the mid-2000s, there were a substantial number of cases in which Japanese mothers and children lived in the father’s native country, such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and so forth (and the fathers remain in Japan to work), so that the children could receive an Islamic education, but returned to Japan after a few years for a variety of reasons. These children lived in an Islamic environment within an Islamic community, and attended international schools, where they studied in English. There is a problem in that the past and present of their religious, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds lack continuity, in terms of both education and living environments.

Nationality of the children
Japan adopts the principle that if either the child’s mother or father has Japanese nationality, then the child can also be considered a Japanese national.

In some cases, children born of intermarriage between Japanese and foreigners and living in Japan have Japanese nationality only or, in rare cases, foreign nationality only, but many of these

3 For further details, see Takeshita (2008, 2010).
children have dual nationalities inherited from their Japanese and non-Japanese parents. However, Article 14, Paragraph 1, of the Nationality Law stipulates that, “A Japanese national having a foreign nationality shall select one of the nationalities, where he or she obtains foreign and Japanese nationalities prior to his or her becoming twenty years old, before his or her reaching twenty-two years old, and where that time when he or she obtained foreign and Japanese nationalities comes after his or her reaching twenty years old, within two years from that time.”

When children with dual nationalities reach school age, they are treated as Japanese, and they receive a notification of the start of school from the Board of Education in their respective municipalities. Even a basic school survey conducted on May 1 of each year states clearly that “persons holding both Japanese and foreign nationalities shall be considered Japanese.” Even if the child has dual nationalities, he or she is counted as a Japanese in basic school surveys (Sou 2002: 48).

How can children with dual nationalities attending Japanese schools, which have monocultural characteristics, form a multiple identity related to each country and ethnicity? And how can families create an environment in which the children can enjoy the benefits of both cultures? These are major issues for Muslim families of intermarriage, and by extension, for intercultural families.

The NPO CWIA

Activities

One of the roles of family is to pass on cultural capital to the children (Nagayoshi and Nakamura 2012: 59). Islamic education is basically conducted within the home, but there are limitations to home teaching Islam. Particularly if the mother is Japanese, because she converted to Islam when she got married, it is difficult that she could provide her children with Islamic education in the same way that a born Muslim could. These limitations in human capital can be supplemented by the social capital that can be gained through Muslim networks (Takeshita and Hanaoka 2015).

The NPO CWIA (Children and Women Islamic Association) has gained attention for activities that utilize social capital to overcome spatial and temporal separation. The CWIA conducts activities through unofficial collaborations with the Quran classes at the Nagoya Mosque. The CWIA was established in August 2010 to create places where Muslim children of intermarriage could feel comfortable, and to expand on venues for interactions with the community. The founder and representative of the CWIA is a Japanese woman in her 40s with a Sri Lankan husband and three growing children. The CWIA’s activities, developed and implemented by Japanese mothers, are created in response to the issues that their children face first-hand. Particularly notable is the fact that Japanese women who converted to Islam when they got
married are providing the children with a comfortable venue and a place for Islamic education.

The children gather here have fathers with very diverse nationalities, including Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka. 27 children, ranging from the first year of elementary school to the third year of junior high school, spend time here every Saturday from 4 PM to around 8:30 PM, doing homework, studying English under an invited English teacher, or just playing games. They eat dinner together in the evening before splitting up to go home. Because the fathers of the children who attend the CWIA study groups speak many different native languages, they learn English, which serves as a common language, so that they can communicate with their fathers’ relatives in English, even if only a little. A Japanese mother with experience as a high school teacher acts as a teacher for subjects other than English. Two other mothers act as her assistants.

CWIA’s activities also act as a venue for building friendships among Muslim children of intermarriage. This is a gathering place for Muslims living in a similar environment, and in this gathering place, the older children act as role models for the younger ones. In schools and communities, there is a tendency for children to play with other children of the same age or grade, but CWIA’s activities place an emphasis on interactions transcending the boundaries of school grades. An environment has been put in place in which the older children read books for the younger children of their own volition, even when there are no teachers or parents present.

Connections on the spatial axis

One of the goals of CWIA’s activities is to achieve a connection where a separation has arisen on the spatial and temporal axes for Muslim children of intermarriage. I will examine the connection on the spatial axis, which refers to schools, the community, the mosque, and the home, from the perspective of the following four points.

First, CWIA members visit elementary schools along with foreign Muslim students and parents from countries such as Syria and Algeria to act as class coordinators for international education at public elementary schools. They talk about their home countries and about Islam, and they interact with the students, for example by playing games together. The CWIA representative said, “We hope that these activities will promote a deeper understanding of Islam not only among Japanese students, but among the teachers as well.”

Furthermore, at the children’s study group held every Saturday, Muslim children of intermarriage gain an awareness of the interrelationship with studies at school, for example involving school homework, preparations, and review of classroom work. In this way, they can make an effort to avoid separation of the spatial axis.

Second, CWIA is actively involved with the local community, making efforts to see that the
children are not marginalized or targeted for social exclusion. The building currently utilized as the CWIA office was once a halal shop. During the period when that shop existed, the relationship with neighbors had deteriorated, for example because of large numbers of unknown foreigners coming and going or because of the problem of illegal parking, and as a result, the shop had become isolated from the community. When the CWIA was established in 2010, however, the building was purchased by the female Japanese representative of the CWIA, who since then has made steady progress in improving relationships with neighbors, as a result of her own determined personal efforts. These improvements have even reached the point where Japanese mothers and Muslim children of intermarriage hold a “Children’s Café” at the CWIA office, as a venue where Muslim children of intermarriage can interact with other children from the community. Through these activities, the CWIA enriches the social relationship of Muslim children of intermarriage, and helps them to find a place where they feel comfortable and accepted.

The CWIA has also adopted a strategy of increasing its recognition among the general public by fitting its own autonomous activities into the framework of government measures. By obtaining certification from the Aichi Prefectural International Association for International Exchange Promotion Operation, the CWIA receives subsidies for operating capital, and is also expanding its network with other NPOs. Furthermore, the fact that its activities are considered part of the Aichi Prefectural International Association’s International Exchange Promotion Operations has helped to strengthen the community’s trust in the CWIA.

Third, the CWIA works in close collaboration with the Nagoya Mosque, and cooperates with various Islamic organizations. The CWIA office’s location, just a three-minute walk from the Nagoya Mosque, has been one of the main factors facilitating these collaborations. Every Saturday, children participate in the CWIA study class after they finish the Quran class in the mosque. The CWIA representative made the following comments: “Of course it is important to pass on to the children knowledge and values as a Muslim, but our main goal is to help the children to live in Japan with pride as a Muslim.”

Fourth, the CWIA was established as an extension of a mother’s contributions in the home. Japanese wives convert to Islam when they get married, and face a variety of struggles, but with cooperation from their husbands, they make every possible effort to raise their children as Muslims. When halal food was not readily available in Japan as it is now, Japanese wives sought out halal ingredients, and at times even made direct inquiries to companies handling food materials as the need arose. A Japanese woman who was the wife of the representative of the Nagoya Mosque was the first person in Japan to create a list of halal foods, in 1998.

Whenever Japanese mothers enroll their children in kindergarten or elementary schools, they
make efforts to gain the understanding of the kindergartens or schools, for example with regard
to school lunches, girls’ clothing, and so forth. In order to counter the argument that “it is
impossible to raise a child as a Muslim in Japan,” these women made possible what had been
considered impossible, in every aspect of daily life. It is because of the determined efforts of
these Japanese women that it has gradually become easier to raise children as Muslim in Japan. A
Japanese mother in her 50s with a Pakistani husband and four sons said: “We don’t want our
children and grandchildren to have the same problems that we faced as the first generation. We
want to resolve whatever problems can be resolved during our generation.” The representative of
the CWIA stated: “We wanted to leave behind a kind of bridge between our generation and the
next. That was one of the reasons that we started up this NPO.”

Japanese mothers have applied themselves diligently to raising children in the border between
Japanese society and Muslim society, for example by negotiating with the schools that their
children attend, establishing relationships with the regional community, and exchanging
information with Muslim female friends at the mosques. It is exactly because they were born and
raised in Japan as non-Muslims and became Muslims when they got married that they are able to
understand both Japanese and Muslim societies. This is also why the CWIA, which is operated
by those Japanese mothers, is able to achieve connections on the spatial axis.

Connections on the temporal axis
A representative example of the problems involving connections on the temporal axis is one in
which the Japanese mother and child move to the father’s native country and the father remain in
Japan to work, so that the child can receive Islamic education, and then later return to Japan.
However, these families face problems that the teaching of Islam, the child’s father’s native
language, culture, and the child’s educational history in the father’s home country are not
emphasized in Japanese school life. There is also a significant gap between the awareness of the
parents, who want their children to remember their life in the father’s home country, and the
awareness of the children, who are becoming socialized at a Japanese school, where they are
subject to peer pressure.

In order to overcome these problems and achieve connections on a temporal axis, as part of its
activities, the CWIA incorporates English, and makes time to introduce the father’s country to the
children. In this way, they can instill in the children a sense of pride in their ability to carry on the
cultures of these countries. It is reasonable to say that the venue itself, in which the children can
come in contact with friends in similar circumstances, represents one connection on the temporal
axis.
Conclusion

In Japanese education, there is no assumption of differences in religion or values. For this reason, Islamic education for Muslim children of intermarriage is limited to the home or to the Quran classes in mosques. Looking at their day-to-day lifestyles, however, we can see the need to provide education in response to the full breadth of these children’s lifestyles, and to offer effective support in appropriate venues. In that sense, the CWIA’s activities have gained recognition for providing a venue for connections on temporal and spatial axes based on the real-world circumstances of Muslim children of intermarriages, and for contributing to the creation of an environment for forming and maintaining the multiple identity of these children. Adopting such a multiple identity carries with it many difficulties, however, so these children must also acquire the strength, self-respect, and tolerance required to face these challenges. An awareness of fostering these qualities is therefore also required in the CWIA’s activities. In the future, the CWIA is expected to further strengthen its collaborations with government, community volunteer organizations, and other NPOs, and to conduct activities with a view toward collaborations with schools as well.

When one mentions “education for Muslim children of intermarriage,” there is a tendency to think of the Quran and Arabic classes in Japan. The greatest emphasis, however, should be placed on education that covers all aspects of human development, and which takes into account continuity on the temporal and spatial axes.

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