

Japan as Imagined by Arabs

Research >
East Asia

With the advent of colonialism and the foundation of modern nation states in the Middle East, Japan attracted special attention among late nineteenth-century Arab reformists. The victory of Imperial Japan over Tsarist Russia in 1905 gave rise to serious thought among many new nations about the West's hegemony. The Japanese revealed that they had mastered Western technology and could challenge Western power. Why did Japan make it, and not the Muslim nations? This is a major question still posed by modern economic historians. Indeed, Japan was, and still is, a fascinating model. It is the success story of a non-Western culture that maintained its traditions and yet could resist the West. Japan was thus used as a mirror for Arab intellectuals to review critically various aspects of Arab culture and Muslim nations.

By Mona Abaza

Admiration of Japan was already being expressed in reformist writings at the end of the nineteenth century. In his discussion of the decadence of education in the Ottoman empire and Egypt, the Pan-Islamic thinker Jamal ad Din al-Afghani (1838-97) puts forward the example of Japan's emphasis on sending students abroad. Al-Afghani juxtaposes this particular impulse with the useless missions that were sent from the Middle East. Such passages on Japan are revealing because al-Afghani is one of the first modern religious reformists to suggest that religion alone was not a sufficient element for the elevation of nations. According to al-Afghani, the lesson of Japan's success lies paradoxically in the fact that religion was neutralized. Al-Afghani argues that the refinement and elevation of this oriental nation was possible because religion did not intervene. The Japanese, he tells us, left pagan traditions behind and aspired towards the empirical sciences, and thus imitated the greatest nations. They introduced sound civic rules, and they discarded what they considered to be the bad customs of both the West and the East that did not suit their habits. What helped the Japanese nation most was its geographic remoteness, which rescued it from Western interests.¹

The reformist Rashid Rida, who founded the journal *al-Manar* (*The Lighthouse*) in Cairo (published from 1898 to 1936), also upheld Japan as an example to be emulated. Rida's central mandate for *al-Manar* was to promote the idea that Islam was not in contradiction with modernity, science, reason, and civilization. Rida was mainly concerned with how to enter the age of modernity, and his view of Japan was new in that he concentrated on its admirable ability to blend old and new solutions.² A contemporary of his, the Egyptian nationalist Mustafa Kamil, referred to Japan in a similar way in his 1904 book *The Rising Sun* (*al-shams al-mushriqa*).³

Economic Historians

In modern discourses on economic history, Japan still serves as a crucial role model. In the nineteenth century, Egypt under Muhammad Ali underwent transformations similar to those undergone by Meiji Japan; both experienced their first intensive encounters with the West. Economic historians have pointed out cultural similarities as well as changes caused by industrialization, the agricultural revolution, and the creation of infrastructures. In order to explain Egypt's "failure", they highlight a long list of factors which hampered "modern economic growth". As with the analysis of al-Afghani, one such factor that appears in all of these comparisons is that the geographical remoteness of Japan rescued it from Western interests.⁴

In discussing the role and anatomy of the state in the Middle East, Ghassan Salame brilliantly summarizes the fascination of Arab intellectuals with Japan. He focuses his attention on Egyptian economist Galal Amin's argument that the failure of Muhammad Ali's Egypt versus the relative success of a state undergoing modernization, such as Japan, was due to Egypt's centrality versus Japan's relative geographical isolation.⁵

The introduction of Enlightenment into non-Western societies is an issue of scholarly contention that seems to occupy significant space in comparative Egyptian-Japanese studies. Two eminent scholars are interested in this issue. Both the Egyptian historian Ra'uf Abbas and professor of philosophy Nasr Hamid abu-Zayd, were able to visit Japan. Ra'uf Abbas was invited as a fellow at the Institute of Developing Countries from 1972-1973, and then as a visiting professor at Tokyo University from 1989-1990. In 1980, he published *Japanese Society during the Meiji Period*. This work is considered the first of such scientific studies based on primary sources to be published in Arabic. Its success led Abbas to undertake *The Japanese and Egyptian Enlightenment*, a comparative study of the biographies of two contemporaries, Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901) and Rifa'a al-Tahtawi (1801-1874),⁶ in which Abbas discusses how the birth of the modern state and the related questions of development were the main concerns of these two pioneers of enlightenment. Both



In his lengthy and important introduction to *Bushido*, Abu Zayd expresses great admiration for Japan and explains that he translated it from English into Arabic in order to make Arabs aware of the fact that they have been directing their gaze too much towards Europe. Their perception of the East is "whimsical" and mythical, he writes, and most Arabs reduce Japan's success story to that of an affluent consumer society. Abu Zayd admires Nitobe Inazo because his book shows a commitment to "become a bridge across the Pacific", as seen in his careful endeavours at explaining Japanese culture to a Western audience in clear and honest terms. Arabs, according to Abu Zayd, make no efforts at understanding the Other, but rather they are ethnocentric and epicentric. Although there are more attempts from the Japanese side to understand the Arabs, Arab-Japanese relations and mutual interests are primarily materialistic.

It could be argued that Shinto religion, lacking a founder or a central sacred scripture, is difficult to compare to monotheistic Islam. Still Abu Zayd's endeavour in this respect is interesting because he uses Japan to direct a bitter critique of the misuse of Islamic religious discourse while he praises the syncretic aspects of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shintoism. In his discussion of the family system in Japan, he devalues the Sadat government's propaganda that sought to make an instrument of the family in order to further his authoritarianism. Abu Zayd also admired Japanese architecture and lifestyle for resisting Americanization, unlike the designs of houses which can be seen among the Egyptian middle class. He praises the authenticity of Japanese performances of rituals and contrasts them with the double standards of some practices of the Middle East. Where he sees manipulation of the contemporary religious discourse in Egypt, he observes flexibility, sincerity, and openness in the Japanese traditions. Abu Zayd's main aim in discussing the Japanese model is to learn by comparison, by confronting cross-cultural encounters and "translating" them. "We", the Arabs, do not show any serious efforts to know ourselves better and reflect on our own culture.

To sum up, Abu Zayd is fascinated with Nitobe Inazo's effort at self-explanation, but, at the same time, he uses this Japanese example to critique his own society. In Japan, he argues, the foreigner must adapt to the Japanese lifestyle and food habits, while Egyptians would qualify this as underdeveloped and, instead, try to live up to American standards. Arab society is too infatuated with the West, resulting in complete dependency. As already mentioned, modernization in Egypt led to the transformation of traditional architectural styles into a mere emulation of European and American architecture. The Japanese, meanwhile, still sleep on futons, eat on the floor, and dress in *kimonos* – and continue to thrive in a highly advanced technological society.

All these attempts to interpret Japan hint at a Middle East whose gaze is being directed towards Asia. To be sure, it is an imagined Japan tainted by centric notions, but such attempts are also most interesting in terms of their interpretation of the Other. <

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Bushido translated from English by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, designed by the famous painter Helmi al-Tuni.



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- 1 al-Afghani, Jamal al-din, *The Complete Works*, edited by Muhammad Immara, Cairo: dar al-Katib al-Arabi lil tiba'a wal nashar (1968).
- 2 Shahin, Emad Eldin, *Through Muslim Eyes: M. Rashid Rida and the West*, Herndon, Virginia: The International Institute of Islamic Thought (1993).
- 3 Laffan, Michael F., "Mustafa and the Mikado: A Francophile Egyptian's Turn to Meiji Japan", in *Japanese Studies*, vol.1, no.3 (1999); 269-286.
- 4 An important publication among these was Roger Owen's *Cotton and Egyptian Economy*, which shaped a whole generation of economic historians in Egypt and concluded with a comparison of Egypt with Japan.
- 5 Salame, Ghassan, "'Strong' and 'Weak' States: A Qualified Return to the Muqaddimah", in *The Foundations of the Arab State*, London, New York, Sidney: Croom and Helm (1987).
- 6 Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 1990.
- 7 Abu Zayd, Nasr Hamid, *al-bushidu: al-makawinat al-taqlidiyya lil thaqafa al-yabaniyya*, (*Bushido, The Traditional Elements of Japanese Culture*), al-Kuwait: dar Su'ad al-Sabbah (1993).