Japan as Imagined by Arabs

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? How could its state institutions and society be transformed? In addition to this is a major element of modern Arab nationalist histories. 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 model for Arab intellectuals to review critically various aspects of Arab culture and Muslim nations.

By Mone Abaza

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Dmiration of Japan was already being expressed in reformist writers 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) points to the Japanese emphasis on sending students abroad. Al-Afghani juxtaposes this particular impulsion 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 excesses.1

The reformist Rashid Rida, who founded the journal al-Manar (The Lighthouse) in Cairo (published from 1898 to 1926), also used 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 Kamal, 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 Japan’s “failure”, they highlight a long list of factors which hampered “modern economic development” with the West. Al-Afghani, one such factor that appears in all of these comparisons is that the geographical remoteness of Japan rescued it from Western excesses.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 certain issues pertaining to gender and family status, and he highlights the need to reflect on our own culture. He argues that the Japanese traditions provide a model for Arab society. He praises the authenticity of Japan’s success story as a model for Arab society. He argues that Japan’s emphasis on sending students abroad helped it to overcome the “Westernization” of its culture. He sees Japan as a model for Arab society, as it shows how to overcome the “Westernization” of its culture. He sees Japan as a model for Arab society, as it shows how to overcome the “Westernization” of its culture.

1 Yuki and al-Tahtawi had futuristic visions of a new society, produced interesting travel accounts, and translated Western culture for their own societies. Both were also selective in their approaches. They were each considered great educators of their time and founded schools, encouraged women’s education, and created important newspapers to influence public opinion. Each believed in the movement of history and in the evolutionary aspect of civilizations, and both searched for a pattern that could fuse tradition with acquired Western ideas. Abbas’ interesting conclusion is that these two intellectuals were deeply influenced by the development of modern thought, Western Enlightenment, and ideas of progress and evolution; they shared the same source and terms of reference to inspire a second generation of intellectuals. According to Abbas, however, Yuki and Nakamura deserve praise for their more aggressive criticism of the traditional customs and morals on certain issues pertaining to gender and family status, and in his denunciation of Confucianism, and the traditional moral system and learning. Al-Tahtawi, on the other hand, was more accommodating with regard to traditional (Islamically) values. Most significantly of all, however, is that Yuki and Nakamura did not see the failure of Meiji Japan; he sees the dangers of Western imperialism. He therefore emphasized seeking independence and self-reliance. Abbas portrays al-Tahtawi as someone who underestimated Western aggression and depicts him as having “lacked a ‘clarity of vision’, missing the boat on modernization.”

Abu Zayd and Bushido

Accepting an invitation to teach at the Department of Foreign Languages at Osaka University, Leiden-based Professor Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd lived in Japan from 1985 to 1989. It was there that he discovered the significance of Nitobe Inazo’s (1863-1935) Bushido (The Soul of Japan, The Ethics of the Samurai, 1899).

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 directed 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 adores Nitobe Inazo because he shows a commitment to “become proficient in the art of Bushido” as seen in his careful endeavors 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 driven by national interests. 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 used 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 deviates the Saito 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 design 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 by Nitobe Inazo’s effort to self-explain Japan to the Japanese as an example to be emulated. 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 empire most was its geographic remoteness, which rescued it from Western excesses. He argues that Japan’s emphasis on sending students abroad. He observes flexibility, sincerity, and openness in the Japanese traditions. Abu Zayd admires Nitobe Inazo because his book shows a commitment to “become proficient in the art of Bushido” as seen in his careful endeavors at explaining Japanese culture to a Western audience in clear and honest terms. These two intellectuals were deeply influenced by the development of modern thought, Western Enlightenment, and ideas of progress and evolution; they shared the same source and terms of reference to inspire a second generation of intellectuals. According to Abbas, however, Yuki and Nakamura deserve praise for their more aggressive criticism of the traditional customs and morals on certain issues pertaining to gender and family status, and his denunciation of Confucianism, and the traditional moral system and learning. Al-Tahtawi, on the other hand, was more accommodating with regard to traditional (Islamically) values. Most significantly of all, however, is that Yuki and Nakamura did not see the failure of Meiji Japan; he sees the dangers of Western imperialism. He therefore emphasized seeking independence and self-reliance. Abbas portrays al-Tahtawi as someone who underestimated Western aggression and depicts him as having “lacked a ‘clarity of vision’, missing the boat on modernization.”

References

3. Al-Afghani, Nasr Hamid, The Lesson of Japan: Or We Shall Die Like the Samurai, translated from English by Near Hamid Abu Zayd, designed by the famous painted Helmi al-Tuni.
5. Al-Afghani, ad-Din al-Afghani (1838-97) put forward the example of Bahá’u’lláh, the founder of the Baha’i faith, as an example of how to achieve modernization. Al-Afghani argues that religion is a necessary 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 excesses.
6. Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo.