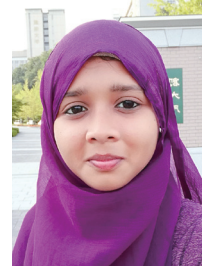


# Acceptance of Islamic Culture in Japan

By Parveen Begum



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## Introduction

Japanese society does not have much contact with Islamic civilization and therefore it is worth knowing how the Islamic community in Japan lives, follows its religion, and practices its customs and food in a monocultural country with conventional tradition, heritage and culture. The citizens of Japan are gradually progressing towards the acceptance of other cultures due to the increase in the immigrant population from different parts of the world. This article will present the views of Islamic people living in Japan and the communal responses from society.

## Islamic Religious Practice

The word “Islam” comes from an Arabic word meaning “submission or surrender to God out of one’s own willingness”. Islam is a monotheistic religion with “Allah” as one God and “the prophet Muhammad” as the messenger of God. It is also referred to as *Shahadah* in Arabic and is mentioned in the Quran, the holy book of Muslims, multiple times (*Image*). It is regarded as “sunnah” when a Muslim follows the principles of Muhammad – sunnah meaning the speech and deeds of Muhammad. The Quran consists of 30 units called “juzz”, with 114 chapters called “surah”. Devout Muslims

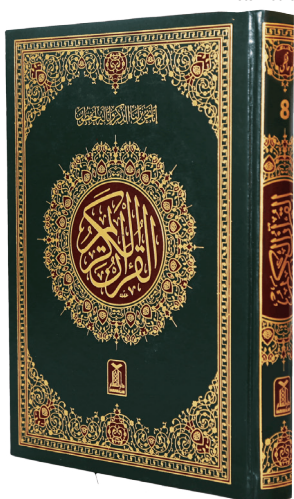


Photo: Author

The holy book of Muslims, the Quran.

believe it was revealed to Muhammad in the seventh century by Allah, and take as proof of this the surah Ibrahim 14:1:

*AlifLaamRa. We have sent down to you (this Book) in order that you bring mankind from darkness to the light by the permission of your Lord, to the Path of the Almighty, the Praised.*

Faith in one God, five obligatory prayers, fasting during the month of Ramadan, offering alms or charity, and performing Hajj (a mandatory pilgrimage to Mecca for Muslims at least once in their lifetime) are the five founding pillars of Islam. There are five obligatory prayers known as “Salah” in Arabic that are performed at different times and facing in the direction known as Qibla. These are the dawn prayer or “Fajar” performed before sunrise, “Zohar” at noon, “Assar” in the evening, “Maghrib” during sunset and “Isha” at night. The significance of prayer is mentioned in surah Taha 14 as: “*Verily I am Allah: there is no god but I: so, serve thou Me (only) and establish regular prayer for celebrating My praise.*”

Usually, men offer prayers in the “masjid” – a place for worship – and women pray at home. Before every prayer, there is a call for prayer from the priest of the mosque called “Adhan” in Arabic. Every Muslim is required to do ablutions – “wodhu” – before the daily prayers to cleanse themselves. Islamic people also follow a different, lunar calendar from the main Western calendar, and fast during its ninth month known as Ramadan. Usually, they do not eat or drink during the day from sunrise until sunset, in the belief of gaining rewards from Allah. Verses from surah Al-Baqarah state the importance of fasting: “*Oh, you who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that you many learn piety and righteousness.*”

There are two main festivals in Islam, called Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-al-Zuha. They are better known as Ramadan and Bakrid. The first day of the first month, Muharram, is celebrated as the beginning of the new year.

## Practicing Customs

Islamic culture is based on humility and simplicity in daily life. Permissible deeds and things are said to be “halal” and unacceptable ones are said to be “haram”. Devout Muslims believe in eternal life and that the way to reach paradise is to follow the preachings of the Quran and the principles of Muhammad. The rules are basically gender biased. As Islam emphasizes modesty, women are not allowed to expose themselves by the wearing of tight or transparent dresses. In addition, Muslim women wear a scarf covering their heads which is

called a hijab. The ardent devotee would wear a veil covering the entire face completely with only the eyes visible, which is known as a niqab. It is sunnah for the men to grow a beard. *“And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands.”* These verses from the surah An-Nur explain about the hijab for women.

Every Friday is considered as an auspicious day and especially men are obliged to offer the noon prayer, Zohar, in a mosque and trading or ignoring the call for prayer can have several consequences. There is a separate surah indicating the significance of Friday, the Jumma prayer verses 9-10: *“O you who believe! When the call is proclaimed for the Salah on Al-Jumu`ah (Friday), then hasten (Fas`aw) to the remembrance of Allah and leave off business. Then when the Salah is complete, you may disperse through the land, and seek the bounty of Allah, and remember Allah much, that you may be successful.”*

## Food Habits of Muslims

Despite the variations in eating habitats and cuisine based on where Muslims live, it is forbidden to eat pork. Furthermore, restrictions on eating also include dead animals, blood, any animal that has been slaughtered without mentioning the name of Allah, and killing it in a cruel or violent way by gunshot, arrows and so forth. Consuming alcohol is also prohibited in Islam. The pig is regarded as a disgusting animal in the religion, as explicitly mentioned in surah Ma`iddah 5:3. Pious Muslims follow these injunctions and refrain from eating and consuming pork and alcohol.

## Methodology & Discussion

I interviewed a handful of Muslims from various countries who are currently living in Japan about their lifestyle. Subsequently, I also asked some Japanese citizens about their views on Islamic people living in Japan. Two different types of questions were prepared for the interviews, which were conducted according to the convenience of the participants and did not last more than 15 minutes. The participants were informed beforehand regarding the purpose of the interview and their personal identities were not revealed. Seven Muslims – five women and two men – participated in the interviews, one each from Indonesia, Syria, Iran, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Singapore, who had lived in Japan for at least two years.

Most of the interviewees live with their families in Japan and they reported that the facilities offered in Japan were favorable for daily life. Despite the high cost of living compared to their home countries, they felt that the public schools, child day-care facilities, insurance, and other socio-economic policies were beneficial for living in Japan. They said that there are only a limited number of mosques with extended facilities and these are available only close to the Tokyo region. Mostly, the working people find it difficult to attend Friday prayers at a mosque because in Japan the public holidays are on Saturday and Sunday, whereas in their own countries there is a public holiday on Friday. Some students said they were permitted to pray on campus as there is a prayer room for Muslim students.

Regarding food habits, responses revealed that most of the Muslims

rely on online shopping to buy food from their home countries and halal meat (slaughtered in accordance with the Islamic way). Most of them refrain from buying foods, snacks and drinks outside and are very particular about the ingredients. Some universities offer halal foods in cafeterias for students. Certainly, most of them feel tired while fasting in the month of Ramadan. When the Muslim women were asked about the hijab, they said they appreciated the Japanese community's respect towards other cultures. The Muslim women wear the hijab freely and are able to practice their faith without any major harassment. Interestingly, the women who do part-time jobs stated that wearing the hijab was not a hindrance for them during the process of hiring.

I interviewed five Japanese citizens – three women and two men – to assess their responses to the Islamic community. Three of them, university students, replied positively that they have Muslim friends from different countries and it is fun to be with them. The other two, who are working people, answered that they have do not have any Muslim friends and hearing the word Islam or Muslim gives them an image of people wearing long white single-piece dresses with a scarf on their head and beards like *sheikhs*. Most of them were not very familiar with the beliefs and rules that are followed by Muslims. Some university students said they were surprised to hear from the Islamic students about their lifestyle and how they sincerely follow it. For instance, one of the interviewees reported that it would be hard for anyone to fast a whole month. Intriguingly, most of the Japanese citizens acknowledged that there is a lack of comprehension about the concept of religion, but they would support the right of others to follow their beliefs.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the codes of conduct and practices vary from one religion to another. There are some countries which have strong cultural bonds and influences that are contrary to the principles of other religions. But the spread of globalization has not seen Japan become isolated and there are increasing numbers of foreigners arriving here due to its conducive education, social and economic policies.

## Interview Questions

### Interview questions for Islamic people

- Where are you from?
- How long you have been in Japan?
- How do you practice your religion freely in Japan and what are the constraints?
- What are your insights into Japanese culture?
- Do you think Japanese people are open towards other cultures?

### Interview questions for Japanese citizens

- Do you have any Islamic friends?
- What do you know about Islam?
- How do you feel about Muslims in Japan?
- How open are you to other cultures and towards Muslims?

**JS**

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