

Malay Muslims in Early Meiji Japan

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Abstract

This paper examines the activities of Malay and other Muslims in the treaty port of Yokohama in the 1870s and 1880s. Previous scholarship has often assumed that there were no Muslims in Japan in this period, and so the main purpose of this paper is to correct that misperception. Most of the Malays in Japan were sailors on British and Dutch merchant ships, but a few drifters seem to have stayed in port even after their ships pulled out. Additionally, one Malay head-of-state, Maharaja (later Sultan) Abu Bakar of Johor, made a state visit in 1883. This paper chronicles his activities in some detail, and suggests some possible reasons for his behavior during his travels. This paper concludes that the global dominance of European powers in this period stifled the development of Japan-Muslim relations due to treaty restrictions, and therefore there was no institutional presence of Muslims in Japan. However, this should not be confused with saying that individual Muslims were not present in Yokohama in this period, because they certainly were.

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Introduction

Japan's direct experience with Southeast Asian and other Muslims began earlier than many people suppose. Indeed, the existing accounts of Japan's relations with Islamic peoples overlook the fact that Muslims have been coming to Japan—and living in Japan—since before the Meiji Restoration of 1868. The largest number of these Muslim pioneers came, appropriately enough, from the geographically nearer regions of the Malay world. However, as will be demonstrated, there were also Muslims from more remote districts as well. The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of Muslims in the treaty port of Yokohama during the two decades of the 1870s and 1880s, when sources confirm their existence and chronicle some part of their activities. Finally, comments will be offered as to the possible significance of these early Japanese-Muslim contacts, as well as to the most powerful factor that limited the development of Japanese-Muslim relations in this period.

Malay Sailors

By far the largest number of Muslims who passed through Yokohama in the early Meiji period were Malay sailors. No independent Malay state had established treaty relations with Japan in this period, so all of these sailors arrived as crewmen aboard merchant ships flying either the Union Jack or the flag of the Netherlands.

It's not precisely clear when the first of these sailors appeared, but they were certainly in Yokohama by the summer of 1870: a published list of 114 people buried in the Yokohama General Cemetery between July 1870 and February 1871 includes no fewer than five Malay sailors.¹

The sources which provide our clearest glimpse of Malays in Yokohama, however, are newspaper reports of trials in the consular courts of Great Britain and the Netherlands. While these reports are very welcome in that they provide some useful details about Muslims in Japan, in another sense they are quite unfortunate. This is because, by the very nature of these sources, we learn only about Malays in trouble with the law and engaging in various criminal activities. We may presume that the large majority of Malay sailors were law-abiding and hardworking people. However, in the normal course of things no one commented on the activities of these men unless some unfortunate incident occurred. As a result, the historical

¹ *Japan Weekly Mail*, February 25, 1871.

record that remains gives us only a distorted picture of their activities. This is all the more true because the chroniclers were Victorian-era British reporters, who were not always noted for their sympathy for lower-class Muslims accused of crimes.

In any case, the reports of these trials do at least confirm the existence of Malay Muslims in early Meiji Yokohama, and so they do merit our attention.

The earliest case came in June 1872 when two Malays, “Abdool Saliman” and “Ali Pi Pie,” were arrested for getting in a fight and drawing knives. They were found guilty and sentenced to seven days in prison.²

Knife-fighting, in fact, was a recurring theme among Malay sailors, in particular those associated with the P&O Company’s steamer, *Sunda*. In August 1877 a Javanese sailor called “Ketchill” accused his shipmate “Suriman” of stabbing him in the back while he drinking water. A full jury trial was conducted, and in the end Suriman was found “not guilty” and released.³ A very similar case involving sailors of the *Sunda* occurred in April 1880. In this case, a Malay named “Mael” was convicted of stabbing his shipmate “Katchung” in a Japanese house after having had a quarrel with another sailor called “Cassim.” The record of the trial noted that both Mael and Cassim were natives of Singapore.⁴

Another kind of trouble that Malays occasionally became involved in were charges of desertion and vagrancy. For example, a Malay called “Amaeu” was found guilty of deserting his ship in March 1873.⁵ The summer of 1875 was notable for a number of cases involving vagrancy. One Malay was charged with vagrancy and given over to the Japanese authorities.⁶ The point to be noted here is that he was not apparently associated with any ship at that time, because otherwise he would have been turned over to one of the consular courts. In August, a Malay called “Botane” was given over to the Dutch authorities and charged with vagrancy “for the fourth time.”⁷ In the very same month a Malayan named “Dola” was also charged with vagrancy, but in this case the sailor may have been the victim of some kind of scam performed by an unscrupulous local businessman named P. Mendoza.⁸

² *Japan Weekly Mail*, June 8, 1872.

³ *Japan Weekly Mail*, September 1 and November 10, 1877.

⁴ *Japan Weekly Mail*, May 1 and May 8, 1880.

⁵ *Japan Weekly Mail*, March 8, 1873.

⁶ *Japan Weekly Mail*, May 15, 1875.

⁷ *Japan Gazette*, August 9, 1875.

⁸ *Japan Gazette*, August 9, 1875.

The month of August 1875 witnessed two very strange cases involving charges of the theft of policemen's umbrellas. In one case, a Singapore Malay called "Lucas" was convicted of this crime.⁹ About a week later, "Ismail" of the P&O steamer *Malacca* was also charged with stealing a policeman's umbrella, but in his case the charges were dropped.¹⁰

Judging by the falling number of references, the employment of Malays as sailors on European merchant ships seems to have declined as the 1880s progressed. The latest reference to Malay sailors came in December 1894, when a group of them petitioned to leave their employment aboard the British merchant steamer *Afghan* and return home. The Malays were complaining that the weather was just too cold in Japanese waters.¹¹ Although their petition was denied by the British consul, it may provide us with our best clue as to why Malays stopped coming to Yokohama at about this time.

Other Muslims in Yokohama

The newspaper accounts of consular trials also include various cases involving Muslims who were not Malays. Among these, Indian Muslims appear to have constituted a majority. A very early such resident was an import-export merchant named "Abdel Kader." He became involved in two financial disputes with other merchants. One of the trial records clearly suggested that Abdel Kader had been living in Japan since 1865, well before the Meiji Restoration.¹²

The fragmentary, and sometimes contradictory, nature of the newspaper records make it unclear whether the Abdel Kader mentioned above was the same as the Abdel Kader Mulla Esabhoy involved in a prolonged dispute with the Yokohama Customs House in late 1878, and who was later stricken with cholera in the summer of 1882. Esabhoy and his associates were described at various times as Hindus, Parsis, and Muslims.¹³ However, if he was indeed a Muslim, and if he was the same fellow who had been operating his business in Japan since 1865, then Abdel Kader Mulla Esabhoy was a major pioneer of direct Japanese-Muslim relations in the modern period.

Two other cases involving Indian Muslims appeared in these decades. One was the case of

⁹ *Japan Weekly Mail*, August 7, 1875.

¹⁰ *Japan Gazette*, August 9, 1875.

¹¹ *Japan Weekly Mail*, December 22, 1894.

¹² *Japan Weekly Mail*, March 8, 1873 and September 1, 1877.

¹³ *Japan Weekly Mail*, November 2, 1878 and June 10, 1882.

a certain Shaikh Robi Ullah who was accused of stabbing a Japanese man. Shaikh Robi Ullah, however, insisted that he was just defending himself after having been jumped by four or five men.¹⁴ The other case involved a man named Muhammad Assam, who was being sued for debts.¹⁵

Finally, there was one case each involving an Arab and a Turk. The first case was that of Marmadalla, described in various sources as an “Arab,” “coloured,” and a “black man”—all of which, of course, could have been true. He worked as a fireman on the P&O steamer *Malacca*, and was an associate of the previously-noted Malay called Ismail. In early August 1875, Marmadalla was arrested on suspicion of raping a Japanese woman named Tatsu, who was a young immigrant from Hachioji working at a hotel. Marmadalla was convicted of the crime and sentenced to a three-week imprisonment with hard labor.¹⁶

The final case to be mentioned here was of a man accused of larceny and claiming to be the subject of the Ottoman Sultan. Since there was no European consulate that handled such cases, he was brought before the Japanese authorities. However, although an interpreter between the Turkish and Japanese languages was located, the Japanese authorities refused to pay any fee for his services, and thus he refused to translate and the case had to be dropped.¹⁷

A Malay Head-of-State in Japan

If it seems that only lower-class characters came from Malay and other Muslim lands to Japan in the 1870s and 1880s, there was one case of a very different nature. Indeed, it was in this period that the first Muslim head-of-state set foot on the Japanese islands. This was the 1883 visit of Abu Bakar, Maharaja of Johor.

Abu Bakar was a unique figure in 19th century Malayan history.¹⁸ He originally became the leader of his small state in 1864 as Temenggong of Johor, but later was able to increase his status to Maharaja in 1868, and finally to Sultan in 1885. This accomplishment was all the more remarkable in consideration of the fact that Abu Bakar’s territory directly adjoined

¹⁴ *Japan Weekly Mail*, October 9, 1880.

¹⁵ *Japan Weekly Mail*, December 18, 1880.

¹⁶ *Japan Weekly Mail*, August 14, 1875. *Japan Gazette*, August 9 and August 13, 1875.

¹⁷ *Japan Weekly Mail*, November 20, 1880.

¹⁸ Although Abu Bakar is a historical figure who very much deserves a full scholarly biography, such work has, regrettably, not been done.

British Singapore, and that more than one British Governor of Singapore had hoped to reduce, not enhance, the political independence of Johor.

As Farish A. Noor has convincingly argued, the main strategies employed by Abu Bakar to maintain his position included pre-empting British criticism by reforming his state along European lines, and then traveling the world in order to increase international recognition of himself and his small state.¹⁹ Abu Bakar calculated, shrewdly, that if he became a well-known political figure all over the world, this could serve to trump the local ambitions of the Governors of Singapore. It is in this context that the then-Maharaja of Johor visited Japan and China in 1883.

The Maharaja touched at Nagasaki before making his main landing at Kobe on May 22, 1883, with a party of eighteen people.²⁰ At first, the Japanese press had a great deal of difficulty identifying exactly who had come to their country. The earliest reports had it that the visitor was the King of Malacca.²¹ Even after this had been corrected, one newspaper went on to suggest that Johor was somewhere in British India.²² The Japanese papers couldn't even agree on the name by which to designate their guest, with titles ranging from Prince Jo-ho-re to Prince Maha to His Highness Ahoka.²³

One newspaper gave a description of Abu Bakar as a man in his forties, dark-skinned and stoutly-built, with a bold look about him. He spoke English and wore Western clothes except for the "Indian-style cap" on his head.²⁴

The Japanese government treated Abu Bakar with great respect, according him the privileges of any European head-of-state that might visit. When he landed in Kobe, a Foreign Office official named Jiro Nakamura was already waiting for him.²⁵ Within a day or two of his arrival, he traveled overland to Osaka and began to tour local sights such as the Tennoji district, Sumiyoshi Shrine, and Osaka Castle.²⁶ During his visit to Osaka Castle, Maharaja Abu Bakar was told stories about the 16th-century warlord Hideyoshi Toyotomi,

¹⁹ Farish A. Noor, *The Other Malaysia: Writings on Malaysia's Subaltern History*, Silverfish Books, Kuala Lumpur, 2002, pp. 15-55. I am indebted to Tim Yap Fuan of the National University of Singapore Library for bringing this source to my attention.

²⁰ *Jiji Shinpo*, May 25, 1883.

²¹ *Jiji Shinpo*, May 19, 1883.

²² *Choya Shinbun*, June 15, 1883.

²³ An example of the first is in *Yubin Hochi Shinbun*, May 21, 1883; the second in *Tokyo Nichi Nichi Shinbun*, May 19, 1883; and the third in *Choya Shinbun*, June 19, 1883.

²⁴ *Yubin Hochi Shinbun*, May 23, 1883.

²⁵ *Tokyo Nichi Nichi Shinbun*, May 19, 1883.

²⁶ *Tokyo-Yokohama Mainichi Shinbun*, May 27, 1883.

and pleased his hosts by commenting on Toyotomi's courage and wisdom.²⁷

On May 24, Abu Bakar traveled to Kyoto and was shown some of its famous shrines and temples such as Nishi-Honganji, Kinkakuji, Kitano Jinja, and Myoshinji. He also was introduced to traditional Japanese *kyogen* theater.²⁸ He left Kyoto on May 28, first heading to a festival at Nara and viewing the Great Buddha.²⁹

Abu Bakar then made his way overland toward the Tokyo-Yokohama area, stopping at several points along the way. Upon viewing the temple Omi-Mitsuiji, he declared it the most beautiful sight he had seen in Japan.³⁰ After a stop at Ise Jingu shrine, he went to a Japanese *onsen* in Hakone.³¹

Finally, at 5:30 pm on June 13, 1883, Maharaja Abu Bakar and his party arrived in Yokohama in a four-horse carriage, and he immediately took up residence in the Grand Hotel.³² He began to socialize with both upper-class Japanese and foreign residents of Yokohama. His demeanor won praise from an English newspaper which noted that his "affable and genial manners have won him much popularity."³³

He spent about a week in the Yokohama area, making short tours to nearby districts such as Kawasaki, Enoshima, Kamakura, and Kanazawa.³⁴ During the latter visit, he was hosted personally by Governor Oki of Kanagawa Prefecture.³⁵

On June 21, Maharaja Abu Bakar took a train from Yokohama to Shinbashi station in Tokyo. From there, a carriage and a group of Japanese officials brought him to his appointed residence, which was a mansion owned by Mochiaki Hachisuka, Japan's ambassador to France.³⁶ Over the next few days he was guided to the British Embassy by Basil Hall Chamberlain, visited the Asakusa Kannon and Yasukuni Shrine, and viewed race horses.³⁷ He even found time to invite photographer Shinichi Suzuki to Hachisuka's mansion and

²⁷ *Yubin Hochi Shinbun*, May 30, 1883.

²⁸ *Yubin Hochi Shinbun*, May 30 and June 1, 1883.

²⁹ *Yubin Hochi Shinbun*, June 5, 1883.

³⁰ *Tokyo-Yokohama Mainichi Shinbun*, June 8, 1883.

³¹ *Jiji Shinpo*, June 13, 1883. An *onsen* is a hot spring, which Japanese often use for bathing.

³² *Jiji Shinpo*, June 15, 1883.

³³ *Japan Weekly Mail*, June 23, 1883, p. 170.

³⁴ *Tokyo-Yokohama Mainichi Shinbun*, June 17, 1883 and *Jiji Shinpo*, June 19, 1883.

³⁵ *Jiji Shinpo*, June 19, 1883.

³⁶ *Jiji Shinpo*, June 22 and June 30, 1883.

³⁷ *Jiji Shinpo*, June 25 and June 26, 1883.

have his pictures taken there in Japanese costume.³⁸

On the morning of June 26, 1883, the Maharaja, in a carriage flanked by mounted policemen, was brought to the Imperial Palace for a short visit with the Meiji Emperor. Also attending the audience were the Princes Arisugawa and Komatsu, senior Japanese political officials, and Harry Parkes, the British ambassador. After the main audience, they moved to a parlor for tea, sweets, and conversation. The meeting was short, however, and broke up by 11 am.³⁹ Over the next day and a half, follow-up visits occurred between Abu Bakar, Harry Parkes, and Prince Komatsu.⁴⁰ Once again, the British press offered tribute to the Maharaja's behavior: "He has shown himself a genial and appreciative traveler, not less curious about Japan's old fashions and customs than impressed by the evidences of her new civilization."⁴¹

At the beginning of July, Abu Bakar traveled north to Nikko in order to view its famous natural beauty. He was accompanied on this trip by Power Le Poer Trench, a British embassy official who would become charge d'affaires the following month.⁴²

After the Maharaja returned to Tokyo on July 7, he spent another three weeks in the Tokyo-Yokohama area. Many more personal visits occurred, with officials such as Aritomo Yamagata and Kaoru Inoue being specifically mentioned.⁴³ The biggest single event was a major banquet on July 10 at the Hama Detached Palace, which included imperial family members, top government officials, and European diplomats. A musical band from the Imperial Japanese Navy added to the festivities.⁴⁴

One point that gained attention was the fact that Maharaja Abu Bakar was making large purchases of Japanese traditional goods and artwork such as ceramics, lacquerware, and Japanese swords.⁴⁵

After several delays, the Maharaja boarded the Mitsubishi mailship *Tokyo-maru* and

³⁸ *Jiji Shinpo*, June 26, 1883.

³⁹ *Jiji Shinpo*, June 27, 1883.

⁴⁰ *Jiji Shinpo*, June 27, 1883 and *Choya Shinbun*, June 28, 1883.

⁴¹ *Japan Weekly Mail*, June 30, 1883.

⁴² *Tokyo-Yokohama Mainichi Shinbun*, July 2 and July 7, 1883; *Japan Weekly Mail*, July 7, 1883. Power Le Poer Trench became charge d'affaires of the British Embassy on August 25, 1883. Eventually, in August 1894, he became British Ambassador to Japan in his own right.

⁴³ *Jiji Shinpo*, July 14, 1883 and *Tokyo-Yokohama Mainichi Shinbun*, July 20, 1883.

⁴⁴ *Jiji Shinpo*, July 10, 1883 and *Tokyo-Yokohama Mainichi Shinbun*, July 11, 1883.

⁴⁵ *Tokyo-Yokohama Mainichi Shinbun*, July 8 and July 13, 1883; *Jiji Shinpo*, July 12, 1883; and *Yubin Hochi Shinbun*, June 25 and July 12, 1883. Many of these items can be viewed today at the Abu Bakar Royal Museum in Johor Bahru, Malaysia.

departed Yokohama on August 1, 1883.⁴⁶ The Foreign Ministry's Jiro Nakamura accompanied him as far as Nagasaki.⁴⁷ Abu Bakar then continued his travels to China, but never again returned to the Japanese islands. Indeed, he was the only Muslim head-of-state to visit Japan until the 20th century.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to revise our understanding of how and when modern Japan first came into contact with Islamic peoples. Most accounts of Muslims coming to Japan often begin only with the 1890 visit of the Ottoman warship *Ertugrul* or even some later date. In fact, as this paper has shown, Muslims had been coming to Japan since the very beginning of the Meiji period.

Certainly, when speaking of the 19th century, the number of Muslims visiting or residing in Japan never exceeded more than a handful. Even among these, most were humble sailors, drifters, or petty merchants. Nevertheless, they did exist, and laid the first groundwork for a Muslim community in Japan that eventually grew into the tens of thousands by the end of the 20th century.

However, what did not exist in the early days of Muslim travel to Japan was any kind of institutional presence. Many Muslims were under European colonial rule at this time, so Muslims were most likely to be represented by the British or Dutch consuls, who were not necessarily very attentive to their interests in Japan. The few remaining independent Muslim states, such as the Ottoman Empire, were unable to successfully establish diplomatic relations with Japan due to complications in the international treaty system.

As for the Maharaja Abu Bakar of Johor, he did not, apparently, make any effort to establish treaty relations with Japan. Although he was acknowledged by the British as an entirely independent and sovereign Sultan by 1885, in realistic terms he had no choice but to stay tightly within the British political fold. His trip to Japan may have been part of his campaign to raise his international profile, but he probably calculated that any effort to try to establish formal treaty relations with Japan or other states would simply be too provocative to British statesmen and administrators.⁴⁸ Therefore he confined himself to demonstrating his "affable

⁴⁶ The delays may have been partly related to the death of Tomomi Iwakura.

⁴⁷ *Choya Shinbun*, August 1, 1883.

⁴⁸ In this context, it is probably not entirely coincidental that Harry Parkes took such an interest in Abu

and genial manners” to Japanese and Europeans alike. In this way, he could gain a useful degree of personal sympathy while avoiding any hint of threat to British interests.⁴⁹

In sum, then, it can be said that some personal contacts between Muslims and Japanese followed quickly upon the opening of the Meiji era. However, the diplomatic and institutional weakness evident in those early contacts reflected the fragility of the Muslim and Japanese positions in the world order at that time. Both the Japanese state and Muslim leaders like Abu Bakar had to operate in an international atmosphere of strong European dominance. Consequently, they had to focus all of their energies on maintaining their own formal independence, and reserved for each other only polite expressions of mutual admiration.

Bakar while he stayed in Tokyo, or that Power Le Poer Trench accompanied the Maharaja on his visit to Nikko. Aside from being good hosts, they probably wanted to keep an eye on him as he interacted with the Japanese authorities.

⁴⁹ In any case, after Sultan Abu Bakar's death in 1895, and the accession of his less-formidable son, Ibrahim, the British were soon able to reduce Johor to a state of greater dependency.

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