The Face of Japan as Seen Through Disaster: Tradition Living in Modernization
(Religion and Disaster in Contemporary Japan)
Dr Amelia Fauzia
(UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta)

Introduction

“When you are in a hardship, you pray to God”. This is a widely known proverb in Japan. It shows a tendency of society which has a strong religious tradition. However, those people stricken by 11 March tsunami last year did not locate God for help. They did not “blame” God and they believe that disaster is not from God. This worldview tends to rational and secular, a more positive responses to disaster mitigation and preparedness that reduced casualties. Looking at modern-secular Japanese society of which majority of its citizens acknowledge no religious affiliation, but at the same time the majority of the population following Shinto and Buddhism is really confusing, yet interesting. Japanese society has a distinct concept of tradition and religion. Then, modernity, tradition and religion uniquely intermingled in Japanese society producing tradition living in modernization.

This report paper is a reflection from a trip to Japan and some additional readings, focusing on disaster and religion in Japan. The trip is a program designed and organized by the Japan Foundation for young Muslim intellectuals of Southeast Asia to learn about Japan in ten days visit to Tokyo and several places in Iwate prefecture. I would like to thank the Japanese Foundation for giving me this great opportunity to visit and learn from Japan, and to connect and share with other Southeast Asian young Muslim intellectuals who joined the program.

This report paper is divided into four small sections: (1) observation on religion; (2) observation on disaster; (3) Japan and Islam; and the last (4) is an epilogue on reconciliation of tradition and modernity.

Conflicting Pictures of Religion in Japan
In general Japanese society is secular, of which the majority (about 70%) of its population does not embrace religion (Reader, 1991). There is separation between religion and politics, there is no religious education at public school, and there is general indifference to religions (Miichi, presentation, 2011). Term “religion” in this respect refers to established religions. As in reality the majority of the population embraced Shinto (about 95%) and Buddhism (about 76%), they referred these religions as “traditions”. There has been a bad impression of religions especially due to the case of Aum Shinrikyo, a new religion established in 1984, of which in 1995 carried out sarin gas attack in Tokyo subway. In Japanese context, this case led to a view that religion is bad.

“Unconscious” Religiosity: Kagura (God’s Dances)
Religious tradition is regarded as cultural tradition. No surprising that about 30% of Japanese population acknowledged that they followed both Shinto and Buddhism at the same time. The majority of people does religious activities, such as visiting and praying at temples and shrines. Even, many people who regarded themselves as secular and atheist paid a visit to Shinto shrines or Buddhist temples, and follow a religious ritual for funeral. So, even though most Japanese people looks secular and agnostic, they are “unconsciously” religious (a term I borrowed from Minako Sakai). One examples of this unconscious religiosity is Kagura dances.

Kagura is a series of ritual dances introduced by a Shinto priest in 1,700 CE to pray for good harvest, health, and peace. The dances was performed and attended by community and became village festivity. My colleagues and I attended the first big Kagura performance held after the
(March) tsunami in Miyako City, of which I enjoyed a lot, in terms of knowledge, spirituality, arts, food, and hospitality of the people. The performance showed among other the Sun-Goddess dance (Mikagura), a purification dance to dispell evils (Kiyoharai), deity of mountains dance (Yama-no Kami) who guards forestry work and agriculture, and deity of the sea dance (performed by Ebisu, one of seven deities of fortune) to pray for a good catch of fish and safe journey across the sea.

While it showed this Kagura is prayers and deeply religious, interestingly, those people involved including the dancers and leaders of Suemae Kagure preservation center regarded it as tradition. They learned this tradition from their parents and therefore they are doing the same thing, passing this Kagura dance tradition to their children. Eventually, according to them, more than 80% of schools in Iwate prefecture teach or have Kagura in their school curricula.

Complementing Religious Tradition: Born as Shinto, Die as Buddhist
When religion is perceived as tradition, practicing more than one religious traditions are widely accepted. Today’s picture of Shinto and Buddhism shows complementary, not rivalries. In a Shinto shrine there is often a Buddhist temple. A household may have both Shinto and Buddhist altars. Shinto has no established doctrine and religious institution. It looks like the beliefs of animism in Indonesian context. It highlights the importance of tradition and family, love of nature, physical cleanliness, and worship and honors to deities and ancestral spirits. Buddhism is more institutionalized, focusing on Siddharta figure, believing in reincarnation, and stressing on morality.

When it came to celebrating birth and other life achievements, Shinto tradition is generally used; but for mourning death, Buddhist funeral is more commonly used. Now, marriage using Christian tradition, which is regarded modern and fashionable, becomes a trend too. Reader (1991, 16) explains that “Japanese do not live in a system that demands full-blooded belief-orientated and exclusive commitment,” but situational and complementary in the context of their social and cultural life. Therefore, Japanese tradition has strong adaptability when it comes to social change such as modernity and technology. What remain important is family which plays as a unit in channeling religious tradition.

Religious Tolerance
There is religious freedom and religious tolerance in Japan. It seems that the tolerance is supported from two factors, ignorance of religion and non-missionary types of existing Japanese religion. The first has been indirectly mentioned in above paragraphs, showing that attachment to religion is not favourable. Japanese state and society is secular, though strongly preserving its tradition. The second factor is the background of Shinto and Buddhism that are less active in proselytising activities compared to Islam and Christianity. Characters of the two religions and ignorance toward religions brought low potentials to religious conflicts and led toward religious tolerance. Well, it does not mean there was not any religious tention between the two. There were religious persecutions in Japanese history and as well as state favoritism on religions. This history became a background to the creation of modern secular state and the law for religious freedom.

Motsuji and Chusonji Temples recorded religious intolerance and conflicts as impacts of power and politics, one of which became their background in stressing tolerance and peace. The Chusonji temple and the Pure Land Garden of Mostuji temple have been founded by Hiraizumi who wished for peace. The excerpt in Chusonji temple bell shows cries and prayers to those souls of human and animal victims of wars, both friends and foes, to relieve their sufferings and brought them to the Pure Land, which is free from the pain of this world. The bell became a symbol of peace.
Religious tolerance is shown in religious centers, such as shrines and temples, where everyone is welcome regardless of gender, race, and religion. This may also be because of religious ignorance. For example, people went to religious festivals without really noticing what their religions are. Many Shinto followers went to Buddhist temples and vice versa.

Religious tolerance and the practice of religious freedom are also seen in the growing of hundreds of new religions. These new religions are small in number and actually still one big family of Shinto and Buddhism. Therefore they do not provocingly competing each other. Interestingly, this new religions are still attached to the mainstream religions and therefore -- to some extends — strengthened and increased the number of the mainstream religions (Reader, 1991). In this case the freedom of religion does not harm the mainstream religions. In fact, presence of new religions provide positive impacts for big mainstream religions; something which Indonesia needs to learn.

**Worldview Behind Disaster Response**

*Do Not Blame God*

The proverb cited in the introduction had been mentioned by a resident of Taro village, Miyako city, Iwate Prefecture, and agreed by other residents whom mostly are in their sixties. The above resident himself was victim of 11 March tsunami last year. The person and others explained that opposite to the proverb, in most cases Japanese people --including him-- never think of God or even asking help from God when they were struck by hardship such as tsunami. During disaster, people did not imagine God, but they tried to save themselves and their families. They did not “blame” God as the cause of disasters, nor accepted disasters as destiny. The residents whom my colleagues and I met were smiling and told us certainly that cause of tsunami was an earthquake. People do not believe that misfortune came from God, but from nature. This worldview does not mean that people were less religious because they embraced religion and were activists of Kagura dance.

Another example is a graduation speech by a student of Hashikami Junior High School after the tsunami, which is provided by Dr. Miichi. The student said: “We have been trained and prepared well. But before the terrible power of nature, we were so powerless that it deprived us of our important thing without mercy. This was too merciless to think of it as a suffering by the Above. We are painful and upset that we can’t stand it. But although we have faced difficulty, we will not blame the Above. We will bear our fate, and live on as we help each other. This is our mission from now on.”

The above thoughts and responses grew from Shinto philosophy. There is positive impacts from this theological view, that people is more positive thinking, trying hard to save themselves and their families. This positive thinking has been taken through years so Japanese have good system of disaster preparedness at schools. In Kamaishi City, almost all students were safe -- despitess of their schools had been destroyed-- due to well organised disaster preparedness.

*Ganbate and Independency*

After the March earthquake and tsunami, non Japanese public especially in Indonesia aware of term *ganbate*, means “face the challenge” or “do the best”, a term which commonly used by Japanese to encourage and support someone to do their best, such as in writing assignments, competition, including recovery from hardships and disasters such as earthquake and tsunami. Public in Indonesia learned that this motto has a spirit to working hard, never gives up, and using someone ultimate ability. The spirit of *ganbete* is hand in hand with the spirit of independency.
Independency and working hard are very visible in disaster recovery. Response from Japanese government to international public, right after the March tsunami, is empathetic, strong, and yet surprising as it refused aids from other countries and international agencies. Although the government later revised the announcement after some criticism and requests, still this shows Japanese character on independency. This is also seen in the works of Magokoro.net and Fukko Girls.

Magokoro.net is an NGO working in disaster relief and reconstruction in Tono, Iwate prefecture. It was established in response to the March tsunami and became the biggest one in the area. A question from which country the most donation came is a strange one. Indeed, most donation came from Japan itself, from the people, and only few from foreign countries.

Fukko (rehabilitation from disasters) Girls are nine students of Iwate Prefecture University who voluntarily works to support by promoting products of small businesses in tsunami affected area, such as pine key holders and seaweed, in order to run their business again and create jobs. In two-days event in Tokyo they could raise more than 700,000 yen sales. Magokoro.net and Fukko girls are examples of many other voluntary works and organisations working on reliefs and rehabilitations.

My own curiosity to find faith-based organisations working on disaster relief or rehabilitation did not really succeed. There were not many activists and scholars I met during the visit aware of this type of organizations. In fact, there were many faith-based works on disaster, including Buddhist temple and Shinto shrines, but mainly working unnoticed in secular environment of Japan. Minority religions, such as Islam and Christianity, and new religious organizations, such as Soka Gakkai, were active in providing disaster reliefs. Barbara Ambros wrote on the big role of Japanese new religions in disaster relief (CNN belief blog, 22/3/11). For example, Soka Gakkai turned its headquarters and centers into shelters for providing food, supplies, and emergency communication. Tenrikyo created Tenrikyo Disaster Relief Hinokisho corp. In addition, there is a Faith-based Network for Earthquake Relief in Japan (FBNERJ). Muslims and Islamic organizations, such as Turkish communities and Dompet Dhuafa Japan, also participated in disaster reliefs, due to open and non-discriminatory environment.

Japan and Islam
The number of Muslim is about 100,000 people, which is 1% of 125 millions population. Majority of Muslims came from Asia, namely Indonesia, Iran, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt, and Turkey, who came mostly as trainees and workers (Midori, presentation, 2011). Conversion to Islam is encouraged by trade, marriage, and government policy. The development of Islam in Japan is positive due to non-discriminatory policy. There are two aspects that arise the encounters between Japan and Islam. First the welcome face of Japan to Islam and second the growing Islamic studies.

Lack of Stereotyping against Islam
Encounters between Japan with Islam began in 1868, but went far from intensive, due to geographical distance between Japan and the Islamic world and less economy interest between the two. Significant development with Islam (studies and Muslim figures) started from the Second World War, where the Japanese military used religion as an entry into some countries like Indonesia. studies began to appear and Muslim leaders in Japan.

Generally, Japanese society is more welcome and tolerant to Muslims. The reasons -- which have been mentioned in the section on religious tolerance-- are Japanese ignorance of religion, and the fact that Shinto and Buddhism did not have bad historical encounters with Islam. Muslims live peacefully. Turkish community even could established Turkish school in
Tokyo. Islamic center is growing, now there are two centers, established by Turkish community and by Saudi government.

_Growing Islamic Studies_

Studies on Islam was mainly part of Asian studies. As the global interest on Islam after the September eleven, Japanese interest on Islam grew. While the previous Islamic studies stressed on Asia, a new “Islamic” area studies looks to give more emphasis to a wider area studies in Muslim societies. Since 2008 the government adopted a program called “Islamic” Area Studies (IAS) to empirically study the nature of Islam and its regional Muslim societies (IAS brochure, 2011). The program is funded under the National Institute for Humanities (NIHU) program and held in Waseda university, Tokyo university, Sophia university, Kyoto university, and Toyo Bunko. At Sophia university, research interests on Middle East area seems higher compared to Indonesia and Southeast Asian Islam. This area studies represent Japanese interests in economy and global politics in positioning modern Japan. Indonesian Islamic studies is quite active in the Sophia University, encouraged by Prof. Kawashima Midori.

_Epilogue: Reconciliation between modernity and tradition_

The picture of religion and disaster in modern Japan is a picture of reconciliation between modernity and tradition. Japanese society succeeded in locating the two so it could move forward to be one of economic giants in the world and be a developed country. I might have been influenced much from reading of _Japanese Samurai Code_ (De Mente, 2005), but I agree that the understanding and implementation of _Bushido_ (the code of warriors) has encourage a match reconciliation between modernity and tradition in Japanese context. Japanese interestingly could interpret and contextualize Bushido in modern day challenges.

Principles of Bushido are integrity, courage, benevolence, respect, honesty, honor, and loyalty. Some of these principles are implemented in religious tradition. Some were creatively used in business and economy, and also in governance. The way tradition (including religion) is perceived and embraced is progressive. Tradition is preserved through family, is treated as a tool not object. The Legends of Tono (_Tono Monogatari_) by Yanagita Kunio (Morse, 2008) shows rich folklore. This folklore is actually almost the same as what is found in many parts of Indonesia. But unfortunately many Indonesians see this as fait accompli with modernity, while Japanese see that folklore as local wisdom.

Tradition was not static, therefore it is adaptable for modern day too. For example, Kagura dancers who previously were limited only for male due to Buddhism, now have female dancers. The dancer of “God of Sea” performed in the Sueme Kagura Preservation Center was female. Bushido tradition was also adapted to modern life of business and economy in Japan.

To end my observation report I would like to mention two things that Indonesians could learn. First, Japanese thought to response to disaster provides positive impact to disaster management and preparedness. The power of nature does not stop them to always be prepare for any disaster. This thought, which is close to the rational thoughts in Islamic theology (such as of Qadariyah and Mu’tazilah), needs to be encouraged in Indonesia to suppress dominant predestination theological though (such as Jabariyah) to better preparedness against disaster and save more lifes. Second, Japanese uses bushido to bridging their tradition to fit modernity. Indonesian could look for certain rich Indonesian traditional values that may help bridging transition into modernity without losing traditional values.

Finally, accounts and observation of this report on Japan maybe superficial and do not touch deeper analysis, due to only ten days visit and short readings. Longer observation and research
will provide better picture of Japan, related to religion and disaster, that can be beneficial for Islamic studies and disaster management in Indonesia.

_Arigato gozaimashita!_
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