Since the latter half of the 1980s, a large number of Muslims have come to Japan from countries such as Pakistan, Iran and Bangladesh in order to work. In the 1990s there was an increase in the number of Muslims marrying Japanese women and forming families in Japan. The children of these families are now reaching school age and educational problems among second-generation Muslims are emerging.

Muslim Transnational Families: Pakistani husbands and Japanese wives

Shuko Takeshita

I conducted a case study analysis of fami-
lies comprising Pakistani husbands and
Japanese wives. These families, faced
with the difficulties of bringing up their
children with Islamic values in Japan, chose
instead to relocate the wife and children to Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Japanese schools have an atmosphere of
conformity in which pupils generally eat
the same lunch and wear similar cloth-
ing. Elementary schools and junior high
schools provide school lunches using (processed) pork. Many Muslim moth-
 ers obtain lunch menus from the school
in advance, and prepare lunches that look
similar to those provided by the schools.
However, some children say they don’t want
to be the only ones eating a boxed
lunch from home when all the other chil-
dren are eating the lunch provided by the
school. Equally, some parents worry about
their child being isolated or bullied, so they
let their child eat the lunches provided by
the school, the same as the other chil-
dren.

Japanese junior high school regulations
do not permit girls to wear a veil, because
students are required to wear a specific
school uniform at both public and private
schools. More than 30 mosques through-
out Japan provide some classes teaching
the Koran and Arabic to Muslim chil-
dren in the evenings and at weekends.
It remains difficult, however, for Muslim chil-
dren, who are subjected to the problems
of school lunches and clothing and spend
most of the day at Japanese schools where
it is hard to pray, to form a Muslim iden-
tity from the social, cultural and system-
atic perspectives. Therefore, when the first
children of ‘mixed’ marriages reach school
age, we observe an increase in the number
of transnational families – cases where the
Japanese wife and children relocate to an
Islamic country for the Islamic education
of their children. These families are now
reaching school age and educational problems among second-generation Muslims are emerging. In about one third of the cases in the study, the wife said, “I wanted to come to Sharjah rather than go to Paki-
istan.” Among the reasons noted were:
“Sharjah is safer than Pakistan”; “I’m free
to go out on my own”; and “I don’t have
to live with my husband’s family.” It appears,
then, that the wives feel some resistance to
relocating to Pakistan. Although initially,
many of the husbands wanted to raise their
children in Pakistan, their wives disagreed
with the idea, and eventually, relocation to
Sharjah came about as a compromise.

Social Networks

In Sharjah, there is a support network com-
piled of about 30 Japanese Muslims. Homogeneous networks give individuals
a feeling of security and belonging, and
assist the individual in maintaining their
Japanese identity as a part of a complex
self-definition. This network also functions
despite the lack of resources – for exam-
ples, in terms of exchanging information
and advice on schools and education, medical
facilities, and providing assistance when
problems arise – and this ties into a sense
of empowerment. Because the husbands
visit Sharjah an average of once every
three months and the wives’ ‘ki no do’ do not
live nearby, these Japanese Muslims use
the practical and mental support obtained
through this network to assist one another
in their daily lives.

In the case of the children as well, and
particularly when the period of residence
in Sharjah is short, gathering with other
children in the park or in private homes
and playing while speaking in Japanese
provides a release valve for the stress
that even young children experience. It func-
tions as a venue for maintaining their Japa-

nese as a conversational language.

Semilingualism

By relocating to Sharjah, the parents fulfill
their initial goal of raising their children in
an Islamic environment. However, because
this involves relocation of school age
children the problem of language must be
faced. As public schools in Sharjah are
limited to children with UAE citizenship,
all of the children covered in this study
were attending international schools and
receiving education in English. The Korean
and Arabic are both required studies at
these international schools, and Urdu, the
official language of Pakistan, is an elec-
tive subject, so children are able to learn
their father’s native tongue. After three to
five years of living in Sharjah, there is a
tendency for the language used among
siblings to shift from Japanese to English,
but in all of the families covered in this
study, the mother and children commu-
nicated in Japanese. Up until the fourth
year of residence in Sharjah, about half
of the mothers interviewed were teaching
their children to read and write Japanese.
Japanese language education is not only
undertaken to ensure a means of com-
munication between the mother and chil-
dren, but also as a means of maintaining
the identity of being Japanese, as part of
a complex self-definition.

Five years after living in Sharjah, all cases
of home study in Japanese reading and
writing disappear. A number of reasons are
cited: (1) As the children move into the
upper grades in school, they are busier with
their schoolwork, and have less time for
extra studies. (2) It is difficult for mother
and child to keep the relationship of teacher
and student, and (3) As the stay in Sharjah
becomes longer, the possibility of returning
to Japan becomes less likely. As a result,
the children find it difficult to maintain the aca-
demic level of Japanese they possessed on
leaving Japan, although they do maintain
their conversational language.

Development of proficiency in pri-
mary language can promote the develop-
ment of second- or even third-language
proficiency. Therefore, Japanese plays an
important role as a primary language when
the child acquires English as a bilingual,
or yet another language as a trilingual.
However, the development of this primary
language is hindered by relocation and an
abrupt encounter with the language of the
host country before the primary language
is sufficiently acquired. Moreover, it takes
about five years for children to reach the
level where they can study effectively using
their second language. When a child grow-
ing up in a bilingual environment is unable
to supplement their primary language with
reading and writing skills before acquiring
an academic level in a second language,
the child may not achieve a level typical of
his or her peers in either language. This
is referred to as a ‘temporary semilingual
phenomenon’. If relocation of the child takes
place during infancy, then the over-
all development of language is delayed.
If relocation takes place at about 10 years
of age, there is a delay in the development
of abstract vocabulary and the ability to think
abstractly. Children suffer psychological
stress and frustration, albeit temporarily,
and become unstable emotionally. The end
result is that as the stay in Sharjah grows
longer, an increasing number of parents
come to see it as acceptable for Japanese
to be learned solely as a conversational
language, and instead place an emphasis
on the child’s ability to acquire English as
an academic language.

Among the subjects in this study, there
were families that wanted to live together
in the near future, but had not determined
when and where that would be. Muslims
operating used vehicle export businesses
in Japan do not necessarily have bases
only in Japan; in many cases, these busi-
nessmen have extensive worldwide net-
works, with business activities spanning
several countries. It is clear however, that
in relation to forming a family, these busi-

nessmen are more likely to relocate to a
country where they can apply their trans-
national networks more advantagously
to their educational and life strategies.
The parents willingly invest in their children’s
English education, seeing it as an invalu-
able resource – no matter where the fam-
ily lives in the future. They have selected
an educational strategy which they believe
will assist the children in attaining a higher
social position.

Children acquire the internal conditions
appropriate to the society of their host
country through relocation. Although it
is possible to predict that they will form
a Muslim identity, they may end up with
the problem of being semilingual if the
relocation takes place during their school
years. The first priority in the educational
strategies of the families in this survey is
the formation of a Muslim identity, and the
second is their English education. The
longer a family lives in Sharjah, the more
likely the parents are to acquiesce in the
loss of Japanese as an academic language.
More attention should be focused on the
possibility that the loss of Japanese as an
academic language could trigger chronic
semilingualism. I intend to conduct a
follow-up study to examine how living
locations and the structure of the family
changes for these families, and how the
children’s identities are formed as a result
of these changes.

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