The Legacy of the War and the World of Islam in Japanese Pan-Asian Discourse: Wakabayashi Han’s *Kaikyō Sekai to Nihon*

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After the Russo-Japanese War, Muslims had celebrated the Japanese victory as that of the oppressed against the Western imperialists. The victory inspired many Muslims to see Japan as a new form of modernity suitable to Islamic civilization.¹ The Japanese response to this worldwide enthusiasm from the Muslim world was as a political and economic actor: to incorporate the nationalist and revolutionary dynamics of Islamic peoples into a joint revolt against the West as part of Japan’s imperial destiny.² During the Meiji era (1868–1912), Japanese Pan-Asianists pioneered contacts with Muslim political activists primarily in a joint effort to work for Asian emancipation against Russia and Britain. For the Meiji “patriotic activists,” Japan and the world of Islam were to be cultivated in the form of an overseas policy of alliance and cultivation, *kaikyō seisaku*, a term that was invented to mean Islam policy, that would serve the Japanese empire. However, in so far as the official Meiji governing elite was concerned, Islam policy was not a dominant issue. Hence Islam policy remained as the subject of desire among a set of informal and unofficial contacts between Asianist-oriented Japanese and some Muslim figures that they had met during the Meiji era.

However, after the Manchurian invasion of 1931, Japanese-Muslim relations became important for the Asianist orientation of the Japanese Army in Manchuria, and later for Baron Hiranuma’s Asianist foreign policy during the Showa era. The objectives were multifaceted but in general the Islam-oriented Japanese political and military circles saw Islam policy, *kaikyō seisaku*, the popular term, to mean developing pro-Japanese net-
works in the Western colonial empires, establishing anti-Communist fronts, or countering Chinese anti-Japanese nationalism; in other words to find friends among Japan’s enemies and help Japan’s global claim to see Asia as a world power. Militarily, the objective was to cultivate local collaborative contacts in such strategically significant areas as the Soviet border, North China, and South East Asia where there were predominant Muslim populations. Economically, Japanese business also developed a new commercial interest in the Islamic word in the Near East, with the decline in the political and economic domination of the British and French colonial empires in the region, that was flooded with the phenomenal increase of cheap Japanese exports to Muslim markets.3

Wakabayashi Han’s well-known work titled kaikyō sekai to nihon (The World of Islam and Japan), that was published first in 1937 and quickly went through numerous reprints, was representative of this intellectual and political rapprochement between the global claim of Japanese Pan-Asianism to emancipate Asian peoples from Western oppression and the Muslim political agenda of nationalism and Pan Islamic awakening. Ókawa Shūmei, who was a major figure in Wakabayashi’s political and intellectual circle, the main intellectual figure of Pan-Asianism in Showa Japan, the “mastermind of Japanese fascism” in the Tokyo trials, justified Japan’s mission to liberate Asia from Western colonialism by war if necessary, saw Islam as the means.4 Given his immersion in German philosophy and Indian thought, Ókawa’s theoretical scholarly discussions of the topic of Islam presented a perceptive critique of the prevailing Orientalist discourse in Western views of Islam. As one of the major figures, who became the intellectual mentor of the militarist Asianist actors of the day, Ókawa’s views set the terms of the political agenda for the construction of modern Japan.5

Like Ókawa, Wakabayashi’s work was also representative of this 1930s interaction between the two militant political currents. However, compared to Ókawa’s work, it was more of an informed and well-written public-relations book bent on creating a favorable image of the Muslim world for the Japanese public. However, like the publications of Ókawa, Wakabayashi’s book also advocated a strong political agenda of this 1930s Japanese Pan-Asianist argument why Japan should ally with Muslim agendas for Asian emancipation. Unlike the Meiji Pan-Asianists whose motive appears to have been more to ally with the anti-imperialist forces of Muslim activists against Western empires, in this 1930s argument, Wakabayashi’s vision is much more imperialist with an immediate agenda as he clearly states on numerous occasions in the introduction of Japan’s need “to use Islam as the instrument to govern Asia.”6

The author, Wakabayashi Han, whose name is sometimes read as Nakaba or Nakabe also remains as an enigmatic figure of prewar Islam-oriented activities of Japan. The little that we know about his career is that he was an Islam expert of the Showa era who worked during the 1930s in forming direct contacts between the Japanese and Muslims in the Near East and Asia. He appears to be one of the many experts and