
REFLECTION: Connected or Separated? Transformation of Muslim Student Community in Japanese University under the COVID-19

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Introduction

In February 2020, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on university activities in Japan started to become evident.

In late February 2020, the Japanese government requested that all public elementary schools, junior high schools, and high schools throughout Japan be temporarily closed from March 2 until the spring break². The decision on when to reopen schools was left to the prefectural governments.

Most public and private elementary, junior high, and high schools reopened by mid-May, while schools in some prefectures remained closed until the end of May as the rate of infection did not decrease in their prefectures (MEXT 2020a).

In addition to primary and secondary education, COVID-19 greatly affected university education. When schools were temporarily closed, the university had just finished its winter semester (second semester) and was in the midst of a long vacation; therefore, there was no impact on teaching activities. However, universities were thrown into chaos as short-term study abroad programmes during the spring break were suddenly cancelled. Japanese students on long-term study abroad programmes were forced to return to their home country, and international students staying in Japan had to return to their home countries.

The confusion intensified with the beginning of the new academic year. According to data compiled by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Tech-

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² In all educational institutions, including preschools, kindergartens, elementary, middle and high schools, and universities, the academic year in Japan starts in April and ends the following March.

nology (MEXT), of the 894 higher education institutions including technical colleges (both national and private) that responded to the survey, 772, or more than 85% had either decided to postpone the initiation of on-campus teaching at the start of the new academic year or were considering it (MEXT 2020b).

Due to cancellation of in-person classes, faculty members and lecturers were forced to hastily prepare for online classes. There were instances of university authorities asking faculty to use on-demand lectures instead of live lectures, since the latter required a large amount of data transmission and a fair number of students did not have access to high-speed internet at home or in dormitories³. Consequently, the lecture content and syllabus had to be drastically revised and both students and faculty members voiced concerns about the effectiveness and quality of learning opportunities at the university.

However, by the end of May 2020, lectures, either in-person or online had resumed at 864 institutions, that is, over 80% of the 890 higher education institutions nationwide that responded to the survey by MEXT⁴. Concerning the lecture formats in these institutions, only 27 (3.1%) had resumed face-to-face lectures (all private universities or colleges of technology), 59 (6.8%) used a combination of face-to-face and online lectures, and 778 (90%) were still teaching only online classes (MEXT 2020c).

At the beginning of the new academic year in 2020, national universities formulated their own action guidelines based on the guidelines issued by MEXT. Stringent restrictions were applied to universities in seven prefectures—Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama, Chiba, Osaka, Hyogo, and Fukuoka – where emergency declarations had been issued as of April 2020. These restrictions included shutting down of sports facilities such as playing fields, indoor gyms, and tennis courts. Consequently, intercollegiate exchange games and social gatherings were also cancelled, effectively banning all extracurricular activities by students.

Additionally, there was also a complete ban on informal student gatherings. Cafeterias were closed, and even in some of the open cafeterias, partitions had been placed on tables to prevent students from eating together.

The restrictions imposed as a result of the pandemic led to absence of students or staff at universities. At universities in the Tokyo metropolitan area and other regions

³ Personal correspondence with the lecturers in private universities in Fukuoka prefecture on 20 April 2020.

⁴ The total number of higher education institutions in Japan is 86 national universities, 104 public universities, 828 private universities, and 57 colleges of technology.

where a state of emergency was declared, universities were closed and no one was allowed to enter the campus without special permission.

Thus, by the first half of 2020, most universities in Japan were not holding face-to-face lectures, and student access was greatly restricted, severely reducing their ability to function as universities.

Since then, emergency declarations and equivalent measures (Focused Anti-infection Measures) have been issued intermittently in the Tokyo metropolitan area and major regional cities. University-specific guidelines have been applied in response to these measures, and lectures are conducted online, resulting in continued confusion.

Muslim students, the target population of this paper, were similarly at the mercy of decisions made by their home universities. In addition to the ban on extracurricular activities, they were also asked to refrain from Friday prayers, which are important gatherings for Muslim students, and even from daily prayers that involved multiple people.

Additionally, most notices and information related to COVID-19 issued by universities are not multilingual, and the English version is delivered two to three days after the original Japanese version. This hinders the accurate communication of information not only to Muslim students but also to the international student community.

As mentioned earlier, mass prayers on Fridays, which denote the most important aspect of their daily worship, as well as *Iftar*, the first light meal taken after sunset that works to strengthen the bonds between Muslim students during the fasting month, were banned. As a result, they were deprived of the only opportunity to meet other Muslim students and their families on campus.

Academic research on the Muslim community in Japan is limited. Much of it has focused on the demographic trends and social integration of Muslim immigrants in Japan (Onishi and Shigematsu 2003; Kojima 2006; Onishi 2008; Sakurai 2008; Biygautane 2015; Sugibayashi and Samsoo 2017; Yamashita 2021). For example, studies by Tanada Hirofumi, a leading scholar of Muslim community studies in Japan, focus on the social activities of Muslims as minorities in the Japanese society, the education of Muslim children, and the identities of naturalised Muslims. Based on careful field research, these studies are extremely beneficial for understanding the actual living conditions of Muslims living in Japan (Tanada 2010, 2015, 2019).

There are limited studies focusing on Muslim university students. Kinoshita focuses on Muslim students in Japanese universities and clarifies how Muslim students solve

the difficulties of their daily lives using students' personal networks (Kinoshita 2019). Other studies focus on the difficulties of Muslim students in Japanese universities based on the survey results from the perspective of social psychology (Nakano et al. 2013; Nakano and Tanaka 2019). There is also a unique study based on an experiment that discusses the mental representation that different facial expressions of Muslim men give to Japanese people (Moriya 2021). Other recent research discusses surveillance against Muslims in Japan as part of the state's counter-terrorism efforts (Takahashi 2018). These studies are very valuable in understanding the actual situation of Muslims living in Japan as minorities.

Needless to say, there are not only Muslim students but also students of various faiths and religious backgrounds studying in Japanese universities. As for Christians, there are 6,480 Catholic, Protestant, and other churches and related institutions in Japan (MEXT 2020d). There are both Catholic and Protestant churches in the vicinity of the university where this author works, and Christian international students use these churches. However, Islam is lumped into the category of 'other religions' in Japan's statistical surveys on religions. According to a survey by Okai and Tanada, a leading authority on Muslim studies in Japan, there were only 80 mosques in Japan as of 2014 (Okai and Tanada 2014). It is clear from these figures that Muslim international students cannot easily access mosques unless they live nearby, making it difficult for them to use facilities outside the university in terms of their religious activities. This paper will focus on Muslim international students as a minority, while the religious practices and activities of Christian international students will be investigated on another occasion.

This paper focuses on the Muslim international student community at Kyushu University, a national Japanese university. Through this, the authors attempt to answer questions such as how Muslim international students work to maintain their connections with each other during the pandemic and the subsequent ban on gatherings and what methods they use for communication when face-to-face communication is not possible. By adopting the perspective of participant observation and interviews, this paper seeks to clarify the transformation of the Muslim international student community in the era of the pandemic. This is an experimental attempt but has been depicted ethnographically from their narratives and dialogue.

The survey was conducted among the Muslim international student community at the university where the author works, between April 2020 and July 2021. As mentioned above, the state of emergency and focused anti-infection measures were issued intermittently during this period; therefore, face-to-face interviews were conducted during the period when these restrictions were relaxed. In addition, informants were asked to state their preferences in advance, and if they wished, interviews

were conducted using online meeting tools such as Zoom. The information obtained from the interviews was stripped of identifying information such as the names of individuals to ensure anonymity, since the survey was conducted at the university where the author worked. The author and the informants are the researcher and the international students, respectively, both belonging to the same institution, and the purpose of stripping identifying information is to avoid the risk of conflict of interest. Subjects were informed that the content of the interviews, conversations, and indirect conversations such as email and dialogues would be used only for academic purposes, such as writing and citing in research papers and academic presentations. The dialogues and interviews between the author and informants were conducted in English, Arabic, or Indonesian, based on the informants' first language or the language they shared with the author. When quoting dialogue between the author and an informant, the informant's name is initialled. In this paper, the author will quote directly from the dialogues he had with informants in interviews and personal exchanges.

Religious practices on campus: Kyushu University Muslim Student Association (KUMSA) and the Friday congregational prayer before COVID-19

As mentioned in the previous section, religious practices of Muslim students on campus are important acts of fostering ties that transcend nationality. I believe that we can clarify how religious practice functions when we focus not only on the practice itself, but also on the mutual interactions that take place before and after the practice, that is, when people gather in groups to greet, talk, and converse with each other. In this section, we focus on the case of Friday congregational prayers by Muslim students to examine how COVID-19 impacted them.

Prayer (*salāt*) is one of the five pillars of Islam. The Friday noon congregational prayer (*salāt al-jumu'a*), the second prayer in a day, is commonly known as Friday prayer and is recommended to be performed in groups of men based on the *al-Qur'ān*⁵. In a general Friday congregational prayer, people follow the Imam, who leads the prayer. Unlike the noon prayers on the other days of the week, Friday prayer is preceded by a sermon by the Imam, followed by a congregational prayer. After the prayers, each person goes back to work or, in countries and regions where Friday is a holiday goes straight home.

⁵ It is mentioned in Chapter 62 *al-Jumu'a*. The number of prayers per day differs among school of law (*madhhab*).

Friday prayer among the Muslim students on the university campus follows the general manner of the prayer. The prayer is mainly operated by the Kyushu University Muslim Student Association (KUMSA). KUMSA was founded in 1998 with the increase in the number of Muslim students at the university to spread the proper knowledge of Islam and provide services for its members (KUMSA n.d.)⁶. It is important to mention KUMSA before discussing Friday prayer because knowing about this organisation helps to better understand the activities of Muslim students on university campuses.

KUMSA is an organisation parallel to the International Student Association, which aims to unite all international students, and the other student organisations, which are organised by students from the same home country. KUMSA focuses mainly on issues related to Islam. Thus, many students participate in the activities of the organisation in overlapping ways. In other words, they could be members of the international student association, the Egyptian student association, and KUMSA simultaneously.

KUMSA has a wide range of activities. As stated in their organisational vision, they support Muslim international students and their families, while, before COVID-19, they were also working to make themselves known to non-Muslim students, especially Japanese students and people living in campus neighbourhoods.

KUMSA's particular focus was to dispel the stereotypical and monolithic images of Muslims. During the month of Ramadan in the Islamic calendar, all adult men and women who are in good health should fast, and KUMSA holds a large *Iftar* event on campus during one day of the month.

The event is open to Japanese students, non-Muslim international students, their advisers, and senior and junior students in their labs. The venue is a multi-purpose hall adjacent to the cafeteria every year, where invited students and faculty members enjoy end-of-refreshments while conversing with Muslim students. During the dialogue with the representative of KUMSA⁷:

The author: 'What is the purpose of Iftar?'

A: 'Through the Iftar event, we hope that people will deepen their understanding of Islam and Muslims by having a small celebration of the end of the fast in a large group, regardless of religion.'

⁶ The website is no longer being updated. Currently, the main source of information and exchanges is on the Facebook page.

⁷ Interview with the representative of KUMSA on 18 April 2020.

The author: ‘Any religions?’

A: ‘Yes, any. Buddhist, Christian...any religion is OK.’

KUMSA also played a leading role in negotiating with the university to secure a Friday congregational prayer location on campus. Many of the Muslim students enrolled in the university where the author works are graduate students in the fields of science, engineering, and agriculture.

Since the graduate school buildings are located close by, KUMSA searched for a place to hold a collective prayer in or near these buildings.

Purification (*wudū*) is necessary before each prayer. Specifically, this is the act of washing one’s hands, rinsing one’s mouth, and purifying one’s body with water, including the head, arms, parts of the legs, face, and hair. The same purification is necessary for a congregational prayer. On campus, the number of Muslim students attending prayers was large. In the past, some Muslim students used washbasins in restrooms for purification, but there were many complaints from other non-Muslim students and cleaners that the washbasins, surrounding areas, and floors were soaked with water, making them slippery and dangerous. This led KUMSA to issue a notice to Muslim students not to use washbasins for purification. This event triggered the need to secure a water source that could be used for purification and a place for congregational prayers officially recognised by the university.

A request was submitted to the university by KUMSA to provide a place for congregational prayers, and discussions were held with the administrative department that manages the university facilities. KUMSA had to produce a significant amount of material and paperwork to convince the university administrative staff that a place for congregational prayer was necessary. It took a great deal of time and effort to get an official response from the university. Although they were not able to get a private room or hall, it was finally decided that the wide aisle in the faculty of engineering buildings could be used for congregational prayers and that new washbasins for purification would be installed in the outdoor space next to the aisle.

This official provision of a place for prayer by the university has led to a large number of Muslim students coming to Friday congregational prayers. Not only students of science, engineering, and agriculture, but also graduate students of humanities and social sciences, and Muslim students who have their laboratory in other research buildings or in distant places on the campus and usually practise their prayer by themselves began to gather in the engineering building on Fridays for the congregational prayer.

The availability of space for congregational prayers has given many Muslim students on campus the opportunity to meet at least once a week on Fridays. A Muslim graduate student explained the significance of participating in Friday's congregational prayer during the dialogue with the author as follows⁸:

The author: 'What does it mean to you to attend a Friday prayer?'

M: 'You know, this university has many Muslim students from Asia and the Middle East, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Egypt. The sermons during the Friday prayers are delivered by people from each country in turn, and I think it is inspiring and I learn a lot from them because I can hear many interesting stories every time. And I can meet Muslim students studying at different faculties. Besides, it is very important for us to worship together.'

The author: 'Is it better to worship with many than with few?'

M: 'Absolutely, yes! Sensei⁹, you know what I mean.'

The author: 'Yeah, exactly.'

As mentioned above, based on the author's participant observation and the narratives of Muslim students, KUMSA's activities before the COVID-19 pandemic promoted mutual understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims in the university. Furthermore, it is evident that the activities of KUMSA helped to strengthen the bonds of Muslim students regardless of their country or origin.

Religious practices on campus: Friday congregational prayer and struggle of KUMSA during COVID-19

In the early stages of COVID-19's impact on student life in Japan, around March 2020, the university issued a notice to KUMSA prohibiting the use of the aisles in the engineering building, not only for Friday congregational prayers, but also for regular prayers.

When KUMSA initially asked about the possibility of continuing collective worship on Fridays, the university authorities responded that there were no rules prohibiting or discouraging congregational prayers on Fridays, and that individuals should take

⁸ Interview with the graduate students on 4 August 2021.

⁹ Japanese word meaning 'teacher'. It is used not only to refer to school teachers, but also to address professors.

infection prevention measures at their own discretion, such as wearing masks and sanitising their hands and fingers, if they were to gather for congregational prayers. Therefore, KUMSA posted on Facebook for students to wear masks when they gathered in the aisle of the Engineering building for Friday prayer (KUMSA 2020). The next day, however, the situation changed: the university authorities forbade KUMSA to hold daily prayers using the aisle other than Friday prayers as a group, and decided to close the aisle of the engineering building. The closure of the place in the engineering building was essentially indefinite, pending an update from the university authorities (KUMSA 2020).

This decision was applied not only to KUMSA, but also to the athletic department and other student clubs. All facilities related to extracurricular activities were closed, including the playground, swimming pool, baseball field, as well as the instrumental performance rooms where the brass band and music clubs held practice. Although communication with the university authorities is done in English, there was no inconvenience or miscommunication. They thought the notification from the university authority was unavoidable.

However, many Muslim students were unhappy with this decision of the university. This was because the month of Ramadan was about to begin in late April 2020. As mentioned earlier, Muslim students feel proud to invite non-Muslim students and faculty advisers to hold Iftar during the month of Ramadan. In addition, spending the month of Ramadan in a foreign country, where the seasons and environment are very different, is a struggle for research and study. To overcome this situation, Muslim students had a strong desire to gather with other students as much as possible to perform daily prayers during the month of Ramadan.

In addition, since all extracurricular activities in the university were banned, not only Iftar events, but also Taraweeh prayers (*salāt al-tarāwīh*), a spontaneous prayer held after the fifth daily prayer in the month of Ramadan, which many Muslim students perform every year with others, could not be held. Many Muslim students were disappointed with this decision. One Muslim student mentioned¹⁰:

I: ‘Taraweeh prayers are very sacred prayers that we do during the month of Ramadan. It is really wonderful that Muslims from different countries come together to share fasting and praying together. I wish they had let me do Taraweeh because I would have worn a mask and I promised to leave right after the service.’

The author: “‘Them” means the university?’

¹⁰ Based on interview with Muslim student on 20 April 2020.

I: 'Yes, the admin man we talk to.'

The author: 'Well, it's a difficult problem. I understand the importance of it, but I can't tell you that it's okay to do Taraweeh...'

I: 'I know, sensei. It's OK.'

Thus, Muslim students were frustrated by the fact that they could no longer conduct Iftar and Taraweeh prayers, which are two of the largest and most important events in the KUMSA annual calendar. However, KUMSA made various appeals on Facebook and continued lobbying with university authorities to continue its activities to support Muslim students.

One example of this is the securing of a new place of congregational prayer on campus. As mentioned, there was only one university-approved place of congregational prayer on the campus where the author works. However, some Muslim students whose faculty buildings were far away from the engineering building and who wanted to have an authorised place for congregational prayers near their faculty voiced their opinion. Thus, KUMSA started to negotiate with the university authority to approve another place for the prayer on the campus, especially in the faculties of social science and humanities. This new place of prayer, which KUMSA members call East Masjid, differs from the existing aisle of the engineering building¹¹, which was used only by men, in that there is also a partitioned and separate space for women so that they can also join and perform congregational prayer collectively¹².

Another example of KUMSA's activities for Muslim students was planning street demonstrations against airstrikes on Palestine. In late May, after the second Ramadan month under COVID-19 and the end of Eid, KUMSA organised a march to show solidarity with Palestine against Israeli airstrikes on Palestine.

The march was a large-scale demonstration that went along the main street in the centre of Fukuoka City and ended at the U.S. Consulate. It was a peaceful demonstration that was reported to and approved by the security authorities and the police in advance. Muslim students, their families, and children marched down the main street with placards and chants. This march was the first mass activity to be conduc-

¹¹ Since the Engineering building is located on the west side of the campus, Muslim students have been calling it West Masjid since the East Masjid was prepared. Certainly, the masjid was not actually built, and Muslim students call it Masjid as a place for people to gather, not merely a place of congregational prayer.

¹² The new place of prayer was approved by the university in July 2020, but as of August 2021, the time of writing this paper, it has never been approved for use.

ted as KUMSA during COVID-19. Even though the march was held outdoors, great care was taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19, and participants were informed that they must wear masks, disinfect their hands, and disperse promptly after the march.

When the march was originally planned, the final point of the march was to be in front of the U.S. Consulate, but the police authorities informed them that they were forced to change the final point to the entrance gate of the park adjacent to the Consulate.

What is more noteworthy is that not only Muslim students but also non-Muslim students and citizens participated in this march. The marchers, regardless of religion, raised their voices for the Palestinian people to lead a healthy and peaceful life. According to the KUMSA representative during our dialogue¹³:

The author: 'Was the bombing of Palestine a hot topic among your friends?'

A: 'Yeah, very much. The current situation in Palestine could not be overlooked. As fellow Muslims, we wondered what we could do to help. And then as a result, we planned a peaceful march to protest the airstrikes and to express our hope that a peaceful life would return to Palestine.'

The author: 'I see. I am sure it was a lot of preparation.'

A: 'We had to get permission from the police, and there were many things we didn't know. But the members of KUMSA helped me.'

As discussed above, during COVID-19, Muslim students were not allowed to conduct congregational prayers or even other organisational activities of KUMSA. As one Muslim student mentioned, his request to be allowed to perform Taraweeh prayers during the month of Ramadan did not go through, and the university's unified COVID-19 policy regarded religious activities as general activities like athletic activities and prohibited them. However, to support Muslim international students, which is the origin of its activities as KUMSA, they made efforts to secure a new place of prayer on campus and planned and organised a Palestine peace march to express their ties as Muslims. Thus, Muslim international students are struggling to manage to continue their activities due to the restrictions imposed as a result of COVID-19.

¹³ Based on an interview conducted on 4 August 2021.

Communication among Muslim Students during the COVID-19 pandemic

In the previous section, the author discussed the activities of Muslim students during COVID-19 in the case of congregational prayer and KUMSA activities. In this section, we will discuss how Muslim students, as individuals, view living in a foreign country under COVID-19 and what kind of dialogue they have with other Muslim students.

Since March 2020, congregational prayers have been banned, and there are no KUMSA-sponsored events on campus. Furthermore, to prevent students from eating in groups, plastic partitions have been installed on cafeteria tables, and pop-up notices have been placed to prohibit conversation while eating and to remind students to wear masks immediately after eating. These over-zealous reminders create a cramped situation for all students.

As mentioned in the introduction, elementary and junior high schools were closed, which continued to be a challenge for Muslim students staying with their families in Japan. A Muslim student living with his wife and two elementary school-going children described the current situation as follows:

Even during school vacations, my wife would take care of my children so that I could do my research activities. However, my wife's Japanese is not very good, so she did not want to go out with the two children when I was not around, and the children were so energetic that we sometimes received complaints from their neighbours. My wife was stressed out, my children were also stressed out, and I knew it, so I could not concentrate much while I was at the university, and I began to feel the need to go home early and take care of my children¹⁴.

As he described above, there were students who were themselves stressed by the stress felt by their wives and children. Muslim students staying with their wives and children volunteered to teach children the Qur'an and basic Islamic education on how to grow up as a good Muslim as part of KUMSA's activities. However, since public places such as community halls have been closed and the local government has called for refraining from holding activities where multiple people gather indoors again, there is no place to hold these study sessions, and the families of Muslim students have lost their relationships and interactions with each other.

¹⁴ Based on an online survey and additional interview with a Muslim student. Interview was conducted on 4 August 2021.

Because of the lack of family interaction among Muslim students, especially women with children, whether they are housewives or attending graduate school like their husbands, they feel that they have no one to talk to and no one close to whom they can turn for advice. One student, who has three children, two in elementary school and one in preschool, and is enrolled in a doctoral programme in the same field as her husband, mentioned:

It was so hard that I don't remember anything during the time the elementary school was closed. Now that both the elementary and nursery schools are open, I do not have to think about taking care of the children and feeding them during the day. However, if I have any questions about child care or what I need at the elementary school, there is no one I can easily ask. I have been living in Japan for more than three years now, and for the past one year, I had just got acquainted with Muslim families, but no family that I can call friends¹⁵.

When a new Muslim family arrives in Japan, KUMSA takes the lead in organising an exchange event to connect the family with Muslim families already living in Japan. However, as shown in the woman's narrative above, under COVID-19, no family events are held, and relationships with surrounding Muslim families are only established to the extent that they know each other's faces or know of each other's existence. As a result, there is no one to whom one can ask about trivial matters of daily life without hesitation.

Meanwhile, the responses to the dialogue of Muslim students who came to Japan alone without their families can be roughly divided into two aspects.

A male graduate student who came to Japan in 2015 and has lived in Japan for more than six years said that his life had not undergone any significant changes worth mentioning before or after COVID-19. He went back and forth between his laboratory and home, and came to the university on weekends where he conducted experiments. All the events conducted by the Fukuoka Mosque are now online, and although there is a time difference, he is happy to be able to listen to live lectures by prominent Islamic intellectuals from around the world. However, he points out that since he is not at the venue where the lectures are held, it is 'just like watching the news on TV'.

In the past, he casually invited other single Muslim students to eat out or gather at someone's house for dinner. However, even among Muslim students, people have

¹⁵ Based on an online survey conducted during 8 August to 13 August 2021.

different attitudes toward COVID-19, so he feels that he can no longer casually ask others as he has in the past.

Instead, he frequently exchanges text messages with students from their home country, but it is only a superficial conversation of greetings. He describes that if they went out together often, they would probably have a good conversation over text message, but since they have not actually met, they do not have much to talk about.

A Muslim student whose family was planning to come to Japan as soon as the 2020 academic year started was facing difficulties in his personal life as there was no prospect of his family coming to Japan, and the situation of COVID-19 in his home country showed no signs of improvement. He describes himself as 'being alone in Japan'¹⁶. He was looking forward to the arrival of his family, but had no idea when they would be able to come to Japan. He has been trying to have frequent conversations via videocall with his family, but the internet connection in his home country is poor, and the calls often freeze up. In the beginning, he tried to call back several times, but sometimes he could only hear his family voice, and with the time difference, it seemed difficult to keep the conversation going. He added during our dialogue that¹⁷:

N: 'If I can see the goal, I can work hard until then, but maybe I won't be able to see my family even when I am in the final year of my doctoral programme. I don't know.'

The author: 'Do you feel anxious?'

N: 'Yes. All I could do was feel anxious. I would feel better if I could pray with other Muslim students or have dinner with them afterwards, but I cannot do that right now.'

The author: 'Do you ever hang out with your friends?'

N: 'Of course, going out to eat is not prohibited in any way, but I am afraid that just because there are a few foreigners in the group, people might over-react.'

The author: 'Like...people say something bad to you?'

¹⁶ Based on a personal correspondence on 8 August 2021.

¹⁷ Based on a personal correspondence 19 September 2020.

N: 'It is not that people will say anything directly or act in a discriminatory manner to me, but I feel very nervous when I go to the supermarket alone or wherever I go.'

What we can point out from the narratives of these Muslim students who have come to Japan alone is that during COVID-19, direct communication opportunities have decreased, and indirect communication has also become extremely difficult.

In this section, we discussed how Muslim students engage in individual dialogue. This study focused on students who were accompanied by their families, those who raised their children while pursuing research, and those who came to Japan without their families. What they all have in common is that their relationships with each other are becoming weaker. Face-to-face communication has decreased, and personal distance has widened. In other words, as face-to-face communication has decreased, so does non-face-to-face communication, such as texting and video calls.

Conclusion

In this paper, the author discussed how Muslim international students in Japan maintain their connections with each other during the COVID-19 pandemic where face-to-face gatherings are no longer possible.

Prior to the pandemic, KUMSA, a mutual support organisation for international students who adhere to the religion of Islam, took the lead in promoting the well-being of Muslim students by providing support for their daily lives and organising exchange events with non-Muslim students, faculty members, and neighbours. In addition, the acquisition of a congregational prayer space approved by the university authorities had created an opportunity for Muslim students to meet at least once a week on Friday prayers, albeit only for men. The Friday prayers not only enabled congregational prayers, but also served as a place to strengthen the bonds and ties of Muslim students.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has stalled most activities organised by KUMSA. The university authorities closed the corridors for mass prayers and banned mass Friday prayers in accordance with the university rules and regulations, without giving any special treatment to any religious activity. In addition, KUMSA was advised to cancel its activities and events on campus as well, so that Iftar and Taraweeh prayers in the month of Ramadan could not be held. With these bonding activities among Muslim students no longer possible, KUMSA seemed to have ceased to function as a mutual aid organisation.

On the other hand, KUMSA aimed to maintain bonds among Muslim students even in situations where there were more things that could not be achieved. Securing a new congregational prayer space in the eastern area of the campus was a big step forward, as was the creation of a women's prayer space, even though it was unclear when a congregational prayer would resume.

Furthermore, the planning of a peaceful march against the Israeli airstrikes on Palestine was made possible by the outdoor location of the activity. The expression of solidarity with Palestine had the effect of creating a bond that transcended national and regional boundaries as Muslims.

No matter how much effort KUMSA put in as an organisation, dialogue on a personal level was extremely difficult. Relationships between families and individuals have become tenuous, and dialogue among Muslim students has become minimal and superficial.

In this study, we focus on dialogue exchanged by Muslim students. The author conducted dialogues with Muslim students through interviews and participant observations. However, most of them were online, and there were very few opportunities to have face-to-face conversations with them. One year after the survey began, a variant of the COVID-19 pandemic began in Japan, and the number of people who became infected increased even after completing vaccinations. At the time of writing, a state of emergency has been declared, and the situation continues to be unpredictable.

Through this research, it has become clear that direct dialogue is extremely important and essential to the lives of the Muslim international student community, and that online and non-face-to-face dialogue are no substitute for direct dialogue.

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