


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# An Eastern hero: Biographies of Muhammad in imperial Japan

Mikiya Koyagi 

Department of Middle Eastern Studies, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas, United States of America

Email: [mikiya.koyagi@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:mikiya.koyagi@austin.utexas.edu)

(Received 26 February 2022; revised 21 May 2022; accepted 23 May 2022)

## Abstract

While participating in the discourse of world religions, Japanese biographers published accounts of Muhammad's life in many genres of academic and popular books during the Meiji and Taisho eras (1868–1926). This article unravels how these biographical accounts played a crucial role in facilitating a geographical imaginary of Asia/the East which incorporated both Japan and West Asia. Situated in a radically different context from the Victorian biographers who inspired them, Japanese biographers constantly compared Muhammad to historical figures familiar to them, most notably Buddha and Nichiren, and reinterpreted the life of Muhammad, relying exclusively on European-language sources. In particular, in contrast to another strand of pan-Asianism that stressed peacefulness as an inherent quality of the East, the biographers identified Muhammad's perceived militancy and the miracles he performed as signs of the values shared by Japan and Islamic civilization. Using the person of Muhammad as a concrete piece of evidence, Japanese biographers reimagined an Eastern civilizational space that could stretch from Tokyo to Mecca.

**Keywords:** Pan-Asianism; Islam; Japan; Buddhism; Nichirenism; biography; civilization; world religion

## Introduction

'Mahomet was not a god or an angel but a great reformer, a rare religious leader who transformed society; he was a hero who improved Arabian religions and founded a great empire; he was an Arabian and an Easterner (*tōyōjin*).'<sup>1</sup> So wrote Nukariya Kaiten, a Buddhist priest of the Sōtō Zen school, in his biography of Muhammad entitled *Kaiketsu Mahometto* (Marvellous Mahomet), published in 1905. Nukariya had a long-term interest in the religious traditions of the world. He had studied Confucianism, Christianity, and other schools of Buddhism. In particular, his study of Christianity had culminated in the Japanese translation of Paul Carus's *Buddhism and Its Christian Critics* (1894). He had also visited Siam in 1900 as a member of the Japanese

<sup>1</sup> Kaiten Nukariya, *Kaiketsu Mahometto* (Tokyo: Seiretsudō, 1905), p. 5.

cross-denominational Buddhist mission to receive the relics of Buddha from the Siamese king.<sup>2</sup> Given his interest, it may not have been out of character for Nukariya to expand his interest to Islam, but two aspects of his statement above deserve attention. First, what made him admire Muhammad, a prophet of a religion that he was unlikely to be deeply familiar with? Second, why did he characterize Muhammad as an ‘Easterner’, considering the ambiguous referent of ‘tōyō’, the Japanese word for the East?<sup>3</sup> Although it was a given that East Asia, including Japan, would be part of the East, whether it would include places farther away was often unclear. In fact, it was rather unusual to include Arabia as part of the East in turn-of-the-century Japanese.<sup>4</sup>

Nukariya’s characterization of Muhammad as an ‘Easterner’ reflects late nineteenth-century Japanese intellectuals’ internalization of a particular kind of metageography, a set of ‘spatial structures through which people order their knowledge of the world’.<sup>5</sup> Rooted in the European intellectual tradition, this metageography assumed that Europe and Asia formed two discrete continents, whose dissimilarities stemmed from their fundamental racial and civilizational difference. As this classification gained currency, the last few decades of the nineteenth century witnessed Japanese intellectuals’ increasing attempts to define the meaning of Asia as a civilization, its geographical contours, and Japan’s role in it.<sup>6</sup> Out of such endeavours emerged pan-Asianism, a loose set of ideas that assumed the objective existence of Asia and argued for Asia’s need to achieve solidarity, though the exact form of that solidarity was open to divergent interpretations.<sup>7</sup> Nukariya’s view on Muhammad should be understood in the context of the development of pan-Asianism in imperial Japan.

<sup>2</sup>Richard M. Jaffe, *Seeking Sakyamuni: South Asia in the Formation of Modern Japanese Buddhism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), pp. 198–9; Shunyū Yamauchi, *Zoku Dōgenzen no Kindaika Katei: Nukariya Kaiten no Zengaku to Sono Shisō* (Tokyo: Keiyūsha, 2009), p. 62.

<sup>3</sup>In this article, I will use the term ‘East’ as the translation for tōyō. Also, I will use the term ‘the East’ interchangeably with ‘Asia’ because Japanese writings rarely distinguished the two. Even when they did, the distinction was inconsistent. For example, the prominent pan-Asianist Ōkawa Shūmei sometimes included Islamic West Asia as part of the East, analysing it along with Japan, China, and India. On other occasions, however, he included West Asia geographically in Asia but not in Eastern civilization(s). In this case, he considered the Pamir Mountains as the dividing line between the East and the West. See Akira Usuki, *Ōkawa Shūmei: Isuramu to Tennō no Hazama de* (Tokyo: Seitōsha, 2010), pp. 25 and 190–2.

<sup>4</sup>For example, Ienaga Toyokichi, who led the Japanese mission to Iran in 1899, did not consider West Asians as fellow ‘Easterners’ at all. Having found no commonality between Japan and Iran, he recorded his stay at an Iranian caravanserai in vitriolic terms: ‘instead of having cheerful companions such as Parisians, Muscovites, or Bostonians, I was surrounded by savage Arabs, cruel Turks, and filthy Persians’. See Toyokichi Ienaga, *Nishi Ajia Ryōkōki* (Tokyo: Minyūsha, 1900), pp. 3–4.

<sup>5</sup>Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. ix.

<sup>6</sup>Stefan Tanaka, *Japan’s Orient: Rendering Past into History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>7</sup>For various strands of Japanese pan-Asianism, see Eri Hotta, *Pan-Asianism and Japan’s War, 1931–1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). For pan-Asianisms in different parts of Asia, see Marc Frey and Nicola Spakowski (eds), *Asianisms: Regionalist Interactions and Asian Integration* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2015). Recent scholarship on pan-Asianism rectifies the overwhelming focus on Japan’s case. For India, see Carolien Stolte, ‘Orienting India: Interwar Internationalism in an Asian Inflection, 1917–1937’, PhD thesis, Leiden University, 2013. For the Philippines, see Nicole CuUnjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation: A Global Intellectual History of the Philippine Revolution, 1887–1912* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

Among advocates of Asian solidarity, the dominant idea of Asia centred around East Asia, which was bonded by a shared writing system and Confucianism. Others imagined an Asia that incorporated areas beyond the territorial boundaries of the empire. Most notably, Okakura Tenshin envisioned an Asian civilization with the three cores of Japan, China, and India, connected by their shared heritage, especially that of Buddhism.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Japanese pan-Asianists explored the possibility of aligning with Muslims across Asia to challenge the racialized global hierarchy dominated by the West.<sup>9</sup> Having recognized the strategic significance of the Islamic world for the empire, they promoted academic and popular writings about it through various state-sanctioned institutions.<sup>10</sup> Importantly, this Islamic world as an object of study included its presumed 'heartland' in West Asia, as pan-Asianists often assumed the Islamic world's civilizational coherence, with Mecca as its core.<sup>11</sup> Such pan-Asianist writings frequently emphasized the similarity between Japan and the Islamic world, including the significance of calligraphy, elaborate linguistic expressions of social hierarchy, and hygienic practices.<sup>12</sup> Identifying these similarities functioned to bolster the idea that, despite apparent differences, both Japan and the Islamic world shared vaguely defined Eastern civilizational values. The civilizational geography of Asia was highly malleable, changing its contours situationally as circumstances dictated. It was also highly contested, with multiple ideas of Asia evolving simultaneously in interaction with each other.

In existing scholarship, this surge of Japanese attention to the Islamic world is explained mostly as a response to increased imperial strategic needs, especially when the empire encountered large Muslim populations in Asia following the Manchurian Incident in 1931. This approach illuminates the convergence of Japanese pan-Asianists

<sup>8</sup>Kakuzō Okakura, *The Ideals of the East with Special Reference to the Art of Japan* (London: John Murray, 1903).

<sup>9</sup>Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>10</sup>For Japanese knowledge production about the Islamic world, see Usuki, *Ōkawa Shūmei*; Junya Shinohe, 'Ahumado Aruga Bunpachirō: Nihon ni Okeru Isuramu Hōgaku no Senkusha to Shite', *Shūkyō Kenkyū* vol. 78, no. 2, 2004, pp. 301–23; Nobuo Misawa, 'The First Japanese Muslim, Shōtarō Noda', *Annual of Japan Association for Middle East Studies* vol. 22, no. 1, 2007, pp. 85–109. For studies that focus on state-affiliated institutions as sites of knowledge production about Islam and the Islamic world, see Masashi Haneda, *Isuramu Sekai no Sōzō* (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 2005), pp. 234–43; Mitsuo Kawamura, 'Senzen Nihon no Isuramu, Chūtō Kenkyū Shōshi: Shōwa 10 Nendai wo Chūshin ni', *Nihon Chūtō Gakkai Nenpō (AJAMES)* vol. 2, 1987, pp. 409–39; Kōji Ōsawa, 'Shōwa Zenki ni Okeru Isuramu Kenkyū: Kaikyōken Kenkyūjo to Ōkubo Kōji', *Shūkyō Kenkyū (Journal of Religious Studies)* vol. 78, no. 2, 2004, pp. 493–516; and Akira Usuki, 'Senzen Nihon no Kaikyō Mondai: Kaikyōken Kenkyūjo wo Chūshin ni Shite', in *'Teikoku' Nihon no Gakuchi. Vol. 3: Tōyōgaku no Jiba*, (ed.) Mio Kishimoto (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2006), pp. 215–51.

<sup>11</sup>I use the geographical term 'West Asia' in this article mainly because the term 'Middle East' had not yet become a common term to refer to that region. Terms such as the 'Near East' (*kindō*) and the 'Middle East' (*chūkindō*) began to appear occasionally in the 1920s, but their definitions remained highly unstable. For the birth of the concept of 'the Middle East', see Michael E. Bonine, Abbas Amanat and Michael Ezekiel Gasper (eds), *Is There a Middle East? The Evolution of a Geopolitical Concept* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), especially Part I.

<sup>12</sup>For example, see Akio Kasama, *Sabaku no Kuni: Perushia, Arabia, Toruko Henreki* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1935), p. 19; Dai Nihon Kaikyō Kyōkai, *Kaikyō Saiko no Ōkoku Yemen Koku Ōji tonō Danwa* (Tokyo: Dai Nihon Kaikyō Kyōkai, 1939), p. 13; and Ippei Tanaka, 'Shina Kaikyō Mondai no Shōrai to Kōkoku Shintō', *Nihon Oyobi Nihonjin* no. 795 (1920), p. 10.

and itinerant Muslim revolutionaries who flocked to Japan to cultivate transnational networks in their struggles against European imperialism. It particularly explains the increased Japanese state involvement in strengthening ties with Muslim countries during the 1930s.<sup>13</sup> Critiquing this body of scholarship's oversight of imperial Japanese fascination with Islam, Hans Martin Krämer has argued for the existence of 'genuine religious interest' in Japanese understandings of Islam by examining Japanese translators of the Qur'an.<sup>14</sup> I concur with Krämer's point about the importance of considering religion, especially the symbiotic relationship between religion and Japanese pan-Asianism. Religion was central to Japan's geographical imaginary of Asia. It equipped Asian civilization with a universal mission to humanity as the bastion of spirituality that the materialistic West had presumably lost, which in turn strengthened Japanese pan-Asianists' claims for their nation's universal mission of saving Asia from the West.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Nukariya's career before *Kaiketsu Mahometto*, as well as his increasing interest in 'world religions' that would be 'free from the shackles of race and nation' after *Kaiketsu Mahometto*, indicate that Japanese interest in Islam developed at a specific historical juncture of the early twentieth century; it was a time when the 'comparative science of religion' had laid the ground for the discourse on 'world religions'.<sup>16</sup> The rise of Japanese writings about Islam took place against this background of the discourse on world religions.

With this in mind, I approach what constituted 'religion' differently from Krämer. Despite his intention not to 'presuppose a specific analytic concept of religion',

<sup>13</sup>Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia*; Selçuk Esenbel, 'Japan's Global Claim to Asia and the World of Islam: Transnational Nationalism and World Power, 1900–1945', *American Historical Review* vol. 109, no. 4, 2004, pp. 1140–70; and S. Esenbel, 'A Transnational History of Revolution and Nationalism: Encounters between Japanese Asianists, the Turkish Revolution, and the World of Islam', *New Perspectives on Turkey* vol. 35, 2006, pp. 37–63; Ulrich Brandenburg, 'Imagining an Islamic Japan: Pan-Asianism's Encounter with Muslim Mission', *Japan Forum*, 2018, pp. 1–24; Nile Green, 'Forgotten Futures: Indian Muslims in the Trans-Islamic Turn to Japan', *Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 72, no. 3, 2013, pp. 611–31, and N. Green, 'Shared Infrastructures, Informational Asymmetries: Persian and Indians in Japan, c. 1890–1930', *Journal of Global History* vol. 8, no. 3, 2013, pp. 414–35. For a selective list of Japanese scholarship, see Hisao Komatsu, *Ibrahim, Nihon heno Tabi: Roshia, Osuman Teikoku, Nihon* (Tokyo: Nomizu Shobō, 2008), Tsutomu Sakamoto (ed.), *Nicchū Sensō to Isuramu: Manmō, Ajia Chiiki ni Okeru Tōchi, Kaijū Seisaku* (Tokyo: Keio University Press, 2008), and Sinan Levent, *Nihon no 'Chūo Eurasia' Seisaku: Turan Shugi Undō to Isuramu Seisaku* (Tokyo: Sairyūsha, 2019). For an account that places Chinese Muslims at the centre, see Kelly A. Hammond, *China's Muslims and Japan's Empire: Centering Islam in World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

<sup>14</sup>Hans Martin Krämer, 'Pan-Asianism's Religious Undercurrents: The Reception of Islam and Translation of the Qur'an in Twentieth-Century Japan', *Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 73, no. 3, 2014, pp. 619–40.

<sup>15</sup>For the relationship between pan-Asianism and universalism, see Prasenjit Duara, 'The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism', *Journal of World History* vol. 12, no. 1, 2001, pp. 99–130. For the construction of Japanese Buddhism through inter-Asian interactions, see Jaffe, *Seeking Sakyamuni*.

<sup>16</sup>Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 22; Steven Kemper, *Rescued from the Nation: Anagarika Dharmapala and the Buddhist World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 13; Samee Siddiqui, 'Parallel Lives or Interconnected Histories? Anagarika Dharmapala and Muhammad Barkatullah's "World Religioning" in Japan', *Modern Asian Studies* vol. 56, no. 4, 2022, pp. 1329–52. doi:10.1017/S0026749X21000330. For Nukariya's search for world religions, see Kaiten Nukariya, *Uchū Bikan* (Tokyo: Bunsendō, 1910), p. 144.

Krämer's approach privileges the studies of Islam that revolved around the textual analysis of the scripture (mostly in translation).<sup>17</sup> It is important to note, however, that early Japanese writings about Islam and the Islamic world were remarkably devoid of detailed references to the Qur'an. Instead, most of them narrated the history of Islamic civilization, particularly the life of Muhammad, as exemplified by the pan-Asianist ideologue Ōkawa Shūmei's early interest in writing a biography of Muhammad.<sup>18</sup> In fact, while only one Japanese translation of the English translation of the Qur'an existed at the end of the Taisho period (1912–26), at least six book-length biographies of Muhammad (excluding translated texts) and at least seven biographical collections that included a chapter on Muhammad had been published in Japanese.<sup>19</sup> In addition, numerous popular world history books concisely discussed the life of Muhammad. Islam was introduced to Japan primarily through the person of Muhammad.

This article examines Japanese biographies of Muhammad published in the Meiji and Taisho periods (1868–1926), the latter coinciding with the years during which pan-Asianism 'emerged in mainstream public discourse'.<sup>20</sup> In his study of Japanese-Middle Eastern encounters, Hideaki Sugita notes that the Scottish biographer Thomas Carlyle's biography of Muhammad influenced Japanese accounts of Muhammad.<sup>21</sup> I generally agree with this assessment. However, as David Amigoni argues, Carlyle's legacy was 'portable', meaning that it was constantly appropriated in multiple ways depending on cultural contexts.<sup>22</sup> Considering that the context in which Japanese biographers interpreted Muhammad's life was significantly different from Carlyle's context of Victorian Britain, it would be reasonable to investigate how Japanese biographers gave new meanings to Muhammad, even if they relied heavily on Carlyle.

This article raises two principal points. First, Japanese production of knowledge about Islam was not limited to scholarly writings by prominent intellectuals such as Ōkawa Shūmei. Nor was it limited to writings by Japanese converts. Biographical accounts of Muhammad, which appeared in various genres of academic and popular books, played a critical role in producing a cultural environment in which Islam was no longer an entirely foreign, unfamiliar religion to the Japanese public. Significantly, many of the biographical accounts were published before 1931, when the imperial state adopted its Islam policy (*kaikyō seisaku*) and made various attempts at promoting Japanese-Muslim alliances. Second, although situated within the global discourse of world religions at the time, the ethos of universalization had the effect of constructing a particular geographical imaginary of the East that connected Japan and

<sup>17</sup>Krämer, 'Pan-Asianism's Religious Undercurrents', p. 120, footnote 1.

<sup>18</sup>Usuki, *Ōkawa Shūmei*, p. 104.

<sup>19</sup>For the first Japanese translation of the Qur'an, published in 1920, see Krämer, 'Pan-Asianism's Religious Undercurrents', p. 621.

<sup>20</sup>Torsten Weber, *Embracing 'Asia' in China and Japan: Asianism Discourse and the Contest for Hegemony, 1912–1933* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. xii.

<sup>21</sup>Hideaki Sugita, *Nihonjin no Chūtō Hakken: Gyaku Enkinhō no Naka no Hikaku Bunkashi* (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1995), pp. 149–51.

<sup>22</sup>David Amigoni, *Victorian Biography: Intellectuals and the Ordering of Discourse* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 41. See also Juliette Atkinson, *Victorian Biography Reconsidered: A Study of Nineteenth-Century 'Hidden' Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 7–9. For a similar point about divergent portraits of a subject of biographical writing (even when the sources are the same), see Kecia Ali, *The Lives of Muhammad* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 232.

West Asia. The person of Muhammad served as a piece of evidence that concretized this geographical imaginary, as imagining Asia required more than a set of abstract ideals.<sup>23</sup> By comparing Muhammad with other historical figures, Japanese biographers re-signified Muhammad as an Eastern hero. In so doing, they subtly constructed an alternative Asian civilizational space that could potentially stretch from Tokyo to Mecca, even though they were fully aware of the vast differences between the two places.

### Hero-worship in Meiji Japan

Although they had accumulated knowledge of world geography through key texts translated from Dutch by the mid-nineteenth century, the Japanese had extremely limited information on Islam and its Prophet before the opening of trading ports in 1853.<sup>24</sup> The opening of the ports, the Meiji Restoration, and the subsequent rapid modernization policies under the new government were accompanied by the translation of thousands of texts from European languages into Japanese during the second half of the nineteenth century. This translation boom made a small number of texts about Muhammad available in Japanese. They included world history books, which typically devoted a concise chapter to the life of Muhammad and the expansion of Islamic empires, culminating in the Islamic conquest of Iberia as the first European-Islamic encounter.<sup>25</sup> In addition, Christian polemics that vilified Muhammad as a violent and lustful imposter were translated, as exemplified by Humphrey Prideaux's 1697 book, *Life of Mahomet* (translated in 1876) and William Plumer's 1840 book, *The Bible True, and Infidelity Wicked* (translated in 1885).<sup>26</sup> Despite their awareness of the potential biases of polemical texts, early Meiji reformers often accepted their fundamental assumption about the inferiority of Islam. Hayashi Tadasu, the translator of Prideaux's text, contended that the Islamic God lacked qualities such as justice and love that the Jewish God and the Christian God possessed. Interpreting this as proof that Islam was a degenerated form of the Abrahamic religions, he ultimately concluded, 'Time has come to abolish Islam (*kaikyō*)'.<sup>27</sup> This negative perception extended to Muhammad, who 'should be pitied as he could not resist lust' and 'was inferior to Buddha, not to mention Christ, in his character'.<sup>28</sup> In many Japanese writings of the late nineteenth century, Muhammad was by no means a fellow Easterner; he was seen as uncivilized, which

<sup>23</sup>For the importance of material culture in providing evidence of Buddhism as an Indian, pan-Asian, or world religion, see Jaffe, *Seeking Sakyamuni*, pp. 152–3. For representations of Asia in film, see Michael Baskett, *The Attractive Empire: Transnational Film Culture in Imperial Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008). For the production of Asia through commodification in contemporary Singapore, see Leong Yew, *Asianism and the Politics of Regional Consciousness in Singapore* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>24</sup>Sugita, *Nihonjin no Chūtō Hakken*, pp. 53–100.

<sup>25</sup>William Francis Collier, *Seiyō Ekichiroku: Dai Ni kan*, (trans.) Magoshirō Kawazu (Tokyo: Chishinkan, 1870, pp. 16–25; in Volume 2 he discusses the rise of Islam up to the conquest of Iberia. See also Peter Parley, *Bankoku Rekishi*, (trans.) Yūrinkan (Tokyo: Yūrinkan, 1888), pp. 83–6.

<sup>26</sup>Humphrey Prideaux, *Mahometto Den*, (trans.) Tadasu Hayashi (Tokyo: Meikyōsha, 1876), and William Plumer, *Seikyōben*, (trans.) Takenobu Kikuchi (Tokyo: Keiseisha, 1885).

<sup>27</sup>Sugita, *Nihonjin no Chūtō Hakken*, p. 148.

<sup>28</sup>Kyū Matsumoto, *Mahometto Genkōroku: Ijin Kenkyū. Vol. 39* (Tokyo: Naigai Shuppan Kyōkai, 1908), p. 3.

was presumably why Islam spread in uncivilized regions but not in Euro-America, and witnessed only limited success in semi-civilized China and India.<sup>29</sup>

Most importantly, the Japanese eagerly published translations of biographies, especially collections of short biographical accounts. The most popular among them was *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, a collection of lectures by Carlyle. Attempting to write universal human history through the lives of great men, he discussed Muhammad along with figures such as the Nordic deity Odin, Dante, Shakespeare, Luther, Napoleon, and Cromwell. In his analysis, Carlyle explicitly departed from polemical texts such as Prideaux's which viewed Muhammad as a sinful false prophet.<sup>30</sup> Instead, he emphasized Muhammad's sincerity, characterizing him as a 'rough self-helping man in the wilderness'.<sup>31</sup> Seeing Muhammad as a barbaric yet truthful prophet who lived a tumultuous life surrounded by conflicts that were brought upon him, Carlyle insisted on the need to understand Muhammad's life in that context.<sup>32</sup>

Carlyle is crucial to understand changing perceptions of Muhammad in imperial Japan. Illustrating the biographer's popularity, Carlyle's work was published by two different translators in 1893 and 1898 respectively, with the latter being reprinted a decade later.<sup>33</sup> Prominent Meiji intellectuals frequently referred to Carlyle. While Natsume Sōseki left an account of his multiple visits to Carlyle's House in London during his sojourn in England in 1901, Nitobe Inazō, who also visited Carlyle's House in London, read *Sartor Resartus* more than 30 times and gave numerous lectures about him.<sup>34</sup> Yoshioka Setsuji, a young writer whose untimely death inspired his friends to self-publish a collection of his diaries, recorded his excitement upon reading Carlyle's lecture on Muhammad. He wrote:

Muhammad raised his voice alone in the desert; his voice resonated widely and culminated in the rise of the Saracen Empire, shaking the European powers out of fear...Muhammad did not receive education. Oh, I have received school education for more than a decade, and what have I gained? Let me express myself candidly. Over a decade of school life has made me adept at lying and faking my intelligence.<sup>35</sup>

With the popularity of Carlylean biographical writing, the image of Muhammad as a self-made empire builder began to emerge and came to coexist alongside the older

<sup>29</sup>Zanka Togawa, *Sekai Sandai Shūkyō* (Tokyo: Hakubunkan, 1895), p. 254.

<sup>30</sup>Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1872), pp. 75–6. See also Sugita, *Nihonjin no Chūtō Hakken*, pp. 149–50.

<sup>31</sup>Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, p. 83.

<sup>32</sup>For Carlyle's discussion of Muhammad, see Ali, *The Lives of Muhammad*, especially Chapter 2: A True Prophet.

<sup>33</sup>Toomas Kaarairu, *Eiyū Suhairon*, (trans) Ishida Yōichirō and Ōya Yasohachirō (Tokyo: Maruzen, 1893). Another translation appeared in 1898 and was reprinted by another publisher in 1909. See Thomas Carlyle, *Eiyūron*, (trans.) Doi Rinkichi (Tokyo: Shunyōdō, 1898; Tokyo: Okazakiya, 1909).

<sup>34</sup>Soseki Natsume, 'Karairu Hakubutsukan', in *Natsume Soseki Zenshu. Vol. 2* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1953); Masaie Matsumura, 'Sōseki Natsume and Carlyle's House', *Kobe College Studies* vol. 23, no. 1, 1976, pp. 1–13.

<sup>35</sup>Setsuji Yoshioka, *Reinetsu Shū* (Tsurumaki Erijirō, 1907), pp. 5–12.

perception of him as a violent, lustful leader of an inferior religion that had derived from translations of polemical texts.

The popularity of biography as a literary genre was not limited to translated texts. Inspired by the Euro-American trend, Japanese authors began to compile their own biographical collections and produced many success stories of prominent men (*rishshiden*) as models to emulate.<sup>36</sup> These Japanese biographical collections often covered historical figures that were unknown in Euro-American biographical collections. For example, the seven Meiji- and Taisho-era biographical collections that included a chapter on Muhammad also discussed figures such as: Moses, Jesus, Luther, Buddha, Zoroaster, Confucius, Laozi, Mencius, Kūkai, Shinran, Nichiren, Hirata Atsutane, Adam Smith, Marx, Nietzsche, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Du Fu, Li Bai, Washington, Lincoln, Julius Caesar, Napoleon, Bismarck, Alexander the Great, Mehmet ali, Osman Pasha, Cyrus the Great, Qin Shi Huang, Xiang Yu, Zhuge Liang, Emperor Jimmu, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Saigō Takamori.<sup>37</sup>

This long list of historical figures is noteworthy for two reasons. First, it illustrates that Muhammad was introduced to a Japanese audience along with other great men, often without a clear distinction between religious, literary, political, and military figures. To the audience, who had little prior knowledge of Muhammad, the Prophet was as frequently juxtaposed with Jesus and Buddha as with Li Bai, Bismarck, and Napoleon. To some extent, in the eyes of the Japanese audience, this contextualization of Muhammad among prominent historical figures normalized his military career, one of the thorniest issues in European-language publications on Muhammad. This exposure was very different from the experience of the Euro-American audience, who possessed prior knowledge of Muhammad that had been constructed through centuries of polemical comparisons between Muhammad and Jesus. For the Euro-American audience, the comparison of Muhammad with Buddha and great men in various realms added a new layer to pre-existing perceptions of Muhammad.<sup>38</sup>

Second, having recognized the almost exclusively European list of Carlyle's great men, despite his aspiration to present universal human history through their lives, Japanese biographers attempted to universalize the list of great men. This universalizing attempt operated on two levels. On one level, it meant the transformation of East Asian religious, literary, military, and political figures into world-class heroes to assert the position of East Asia within the hierarchy of civilizations. In fact, in Kamata Tengai's *Sekai Hyakketsuden* (One Hundred Great Men of the World), published in 1914,

<sup>36</sup>Marvin Marcus, 'Mori Ōgai and Biography as a Literary Genre in Japan', *Biography* vol. 8, no. 3, 1985, p. 213.

<sup>37</sup>For the seven biographical collections that included a chapter on Muhammad, see Saburō Kitamura, *Sekai Hyakketsuden. Vols 1-12* (Tokyo: Hakubunkan, 1891); Tengai Kamata, *Sekai Hyakketsuden* (Tokyo: Kenschōsha, 1914); Tanrei Hara, *Ijin to Shuyō* (Tokyo: Hōbundō, 1917); Kōjō Kurihara, *Shinjin to Majin* (Tokyo: Shiu Shuppan, 1919); Keitan Daigo, *Ijin no Kōseki Shirabe* (Tokyo: Nishōdō Shoten, 1921); Koyata Ehara and Inosuke Nakanishi, *Jinseiron Jūni Kō* (Tokyo: Etsuzandō, 1925); Kiyoharu Noma, *Seiken Iketsu Monogatari* (Tokyo: Dainihon Yūbenkai Kodansha, 1928). Uchimura Kanzō also published, in English, a collection of biographies of prominent historical figures. His goal was to introduce 'Japanese national characters' to an American audience. Kanzō Uchimura, *Japan and the Japanese* (Tokyo: Minyūsha, 1895). The book was reprinted in 1908 as *Representative Men of Japan*.

<sup>38</sup>Comparing Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad became increasingly common in the twentieth century. Ali, *The Lives of Muhammad*, pp. 203-8.



43 were Japanese, while 15 were Chinese.<sup>39</sup> On another level, the list included historical figures from all across the 'East'. Aside from Mehmet ali of Egypt and Cyrus the Great of the Achaemenid empire, the inclusion of Osman Pasha in two of the seven biographical collections is particularly noteworthy.<sup>40</sup> Osman Pasha was an Ottoman military figure known for his role in both the Crimean (1853–6) and the Russo-Turkish (1877–8) wars. In addition to the fact that he was widely admired in the Ottoman empire as a war hero, it was also relevant that the two wars were fought against the Russian empire, Japan's most serious threat at the time. The inclusion of Osman Pasha, a relatively obscure figure to the Japanese audience when compared to others in the collections, subtly indicates the emerging awareness that Japan and the Ottoman empire had a shared struggle against a common enemy. In other words, while attempting to universalize the list of great men, biographers developed one that made sense in the specific political context of turn-of-the-century Japan.

Japan was transforming itself into an empire at the turn of the century. Following a few decades of modernization, its two consecutive military victories in the Sino-Japanese (1894–5) and the Russo-Japanese (1904–5) wars elevated its position in Northeast Asia, transforming it into a rising empire with colonial possessions. Internationally, the Russo-Japanese War ushered in the global moment of 1905, when Asian nationalists celebrated Japan's victory as evidence of the possibility of progress for non-white, non-Christian peoples.<sup>41</sup> This global moment was significant in the emergence of what Eri Hotta has called 'anti-imperialist imperialism' in Japan.<sup>42</sup> Until the collapse of the empire in 1945, Japanese pan-Asianists frequently cited this moment of enthusiasm to legitimize Japan's mission to liberate Asia from Euro-American imperialism.

Japanese production of knowledge about Muhammad took place in this context. During the first few decades of the twentieth century, original biographical accounts of varying lengths appeared in books on world history and comparative religion, including illustrated books for children and school textbooks.<sup>43</sup> Within little more than

<sup>39</sup>Kamata, *Sekai Hyakketsuden*. Notes in the margin of the digitized copy of the book available at the National Diet Library's Digital Collections indicate that readers were not necessarily satisfied, despite the ample representation of Japanese figures. In the notes, a reader makes complaints disguised as questions, berating the author for not including historical figures from the royal family such as Emperor Meiji, Emperor Nintoku, and Prince Shotoku. For the notes, see page 9: <https://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/951869>, [accessed 2 December 2022].

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 160–2; Kitamura, *Sekai Hyakketsuden*. Vol. 6, pp. 247–57.

<sup>41</sup>Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism*, especially Chapter 4: The Global Moment of the Russo-Japanese War.

<sup>42</sup>Hotta, *Pan-Asianism and Japan's War*, pp. 112–3.

<sup>43</sup>For books on world history, see Shigeki Nishimura, *Bankokushiryaku* (n.p., 1873); Kiichi Kaga, *Eiri Bankoku Rekishi: Yōnen Zensho* (Tokyo: Hakubunkan, 1894); Asajirō Honda, *Shintai Seiyō Rekishi Kyōkasho* (Tokyo: Kaisēdō, 1899); Waseda University Press (ed.), *Tsūzoku Sekai Zenshi*. Vol. 6 (Tokyo: Waseda University Press, 1916); Nihon Dōwa Gakuin, *Dōwa no Seiyō Rekishi* (Tokyo: Chūō Shuppansha, 1925). For books on comparative religion, see Goro Takahashi, *Shōkyō Binran* (Tokyo: Jūjiya, 1881); Zanka (Yasuie) Togawa, *Sekai Sandai Shūkyō* (Tokyo: Hakubunkan, 1895); Enryō Inoue, *Hikaku Shūkyō gaku* (Tokyo: Tetsugakukan, 1899); Dai Nihon Bunmei Kyōkai, *Sekai no Shūkyō* (Tokyo: Dai Nihon Bunmei Kyōkai, 1910); Genchi Katō, *Shūkyō gaku Gaisetsu* (Tokyo: Hakubundō, 1921); Idea Shoin, *Jidō Toshokan Sōsho*. Vol. 15 (Tokyo: Idea Shoin, 1925).

half a century since the opening of trading ports, accounts of Muhammad's life were introduced to both young and adult readers in Japan.

Japanese biographers, be they scholars of comparative religion, Eastern history, or Roman history, often noted the need to rectify the misconceptions of Muhammad spread by European-language scholarship. For example, in the long introductory section of his biography of Muhammad, Sakamoto Reishū (Ken'ichi) acknowledged that Japanese knowledge of Muhammad and Islam came from European, not directly from Arabic, sources. He went on to present a history of Muhammad's representations in Europe, including Dante's *Inferno*, in which Muhammad was punished in Hell, and Prideaux, to demonstrate the biases of 'European knowledge' of Islam, problematizing Japanese writers' exclusive reliance on it.<sup>44</sup> As the Japanese empire strove to free itself from the European-dominated global hierarchy politically, Japanese biographers of Muhammad tried to overcome the biases in Euro-American sources, freeing themselves from the European-dominated global flow of information. The question was how they could achieve that goal.

### Recasting Muhammad

Rapid change in Japan at the turn of the century was reflected in the evolving images of Muhammad in Nukariya Kaiten's two books, *Kaiketsu Mahometto* and *Uchū Bikan* (The Spectacle of the Universe), published in 1905 and 1910 respectively. The timing of the two books' publication is crucial. Nukariya wrote *Kaiketsu Mahometto* in the midst of the Russo-Japanese War. As such, it recorded his views just before the global moment of 1905. The context of *Uchū Bikan* was slightly different; Nukariya completed it as Japan incorporated Korea into the rising empire. Having gained a foothold in Manchuria after defeating Russia, nationalist confidence in Japan's mission to save Asia had become more pervasive by 1910, if not officially adopted as the imperial state agenda.

The two books had different goals. Nukariya explained his motivation for writing *Kaiketsu Mahometto* in the following way: 'among the three major religions of the world, Buddhism and Christianity have already come to Japan, but Islam (*kaikyō*) has not'.<sup>45</sup> He continued that the time was ripe to 'understand and respect the teaching of Islam and its founder with our Buddhist fairness and tolerance'.<sup>46</sup> Explicitly inspired by Carlyle, he wrote *Kaiketsu Mahometto* as a biography of the Prophet of Islam, hoping to free himself from the biases of Euro-American accounts as much as possible. Nukariya hoped to overcome Eurocentrism in *Uchū Bikan* as well, as indicated by his constant comparisons between various traditions, including Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Confucianism, in addition to Christianity and Islam.<sup>47</sup> But his main purpose in the book was not so much to understand any particular religion. Rather, he hoped to explore what 'religion' means, asking larger questions such as what God is, how religion and ethics relate, and how universal religions emerged in human history. Again, the surge of interest in Islam in turn-of-the-century Japan took place against the backdrop of the global discourse of world religions.

<sup>44</sup>Ken'ichi Sakamoto, *Muhameddo Den* (Tokyo: Sekai Bunko Kankōkai, 1923), pp. 4–9.

<sup>45</sup>Nukariya, *Kaiketsu Mahometto*, p. i.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. iii.

<sup>47</sup>Nukariya, *Uchū Bikan*, p. 144.

In *Kaiketsu Mahometto*, Nukariya consistently emphasized the uniqueness of Muhammad's mission. He contends that it would be misguided to understand Muhammad only as a religious figure in the manner of Buddha and Christ. Instead, Muhammad was 'a religious figure, a messenger, a leader, a general, and a statesman',<sup>48</sup> therefore, it would be pointless to judge him based on present-day European values. One needed to compare him to his contemporaries in the historical context of seventh-century Arabia.<sup>49</sup> Despite this argument, however, Nukariya was ambivalent about Muhammad's legacy. While praising Muhammad's actions before the Hijrah in 622 (the Muslim migration from Mecca to Medina that led to the establishment of the first community of believers), he denounced the post-Hijrah actions of Muhammad, attributing the corruption to the Prophet's transformation into a politico-military leader. Ultimately, contending that Muhammad had begun to use coercion to spread Islam and relied on the sword rather than the holy scripture, Nukariya concluded that oppression replaced the tolerance that had characterized Islam before the Hijrah, arrogance replaced humility, and contamination replaced sacrosanctity.<sup>50</sup>

Nukariya's biography was indicative of the larger dilemma of imperial Japanese writings on Islam and West Asia. While biographers desired to free themselves from biases against Muhammad, which they believed were deeply embedded in European-language accounts, the lack of strong institutional frameworks to train Japanese specialists of Middle Eastern languages left them with no choice but to rely on those European-language accounts.<sup>51</sup> In fact, Nukariya's account, similar to another account of Muhammad's life by the prominent scholar of religion Katō Genchi, closely followed the British author Reginald Bosworth Smith's *Mohammed and Mohammedanism*.<sup>52</sup> Smith contrasted Muhammad in the Meccan and Medinan periods, and asserted, 'The doctrine of toleration gradually becomes one of extermination; persecuted no longer, he becomes a persecutor himself; with the Koran in one hand, the scimitar in the other, he goes forth to offer the nations the threefold alternative of conversion, tribute, death.'<sup>53</sup> In this reading, Muhammad is presented a sincere 'religious and moral reformer' who was corrupted by his own military success and lost his way.<sup>54</sup> Despite their critical attitude towards Euro-American scholarship, Japanese biographers like Nukariya often repeated the indictment found in their sources.

By the time Nukariya wrote *Uchū Bikan*, however, his view had evolved. Similar to *Kaiketsu Mahometto*, *Uchū Bikan* emphasized Muhammad's multiple roles, arguing that unlike Buddha and Christ, who 'remained merely religious teachers, which allowed them to be as idealistic as they wanted', Muhammad, who became a statesman and

<sup>48</sup>Nukariya, *Kaiketsu Mahometto*, p. i.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 189–90.

<sup>51</sup>This dilemma continued to define Japanese scholarship on Islam until the end of the Second World War. See Cemil Aydin, 'Overcoming Eurocentrism? Japan's Islamic Studies during the Era of the Greater East Asia War (1937–45)', in *The Islamic Middle East and Japan: Perceptions, Aspirations, and the Birth of Intra-Asian Modernity*, (ed.) Renee Worringer (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2007), pp. 137–62.

<sup>52</sup>R. Bosworth Smith, *Mohammed and Mohammedanism: Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institution of Great Britain in February and March, 1874* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1874). For Kato's account, see Kato, *Shūkyō gaku Gaisetsu*, pp. 139–42.

<sup>53</sup>Smith, *Mohammed and Mohammedanism*, p. 89.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 90–2.

a legislator, needed to ‘preach in accordance with the maturity of his nation’.<sup>55</sup> Then he goes further than he did in *Kaiketsu Mahometto*, arguing that, unlike Muhammad’s teachings which were adequate for his contemporaries, the teachings of Buddha and Christ were ‘inadequate for their times’. They could afford to deliver idealistic, unrealistic teachings precisely because they were mere religious leaders without the political influence to implement their teachings in real life.<sup>56</sup> In contrast, Muhammad successfully fulfilled his great mission of ‘unifying the tribes and founding a nation’, by preaching in ways that would make sense to seventh-century Arabs.<sup>57</sup> In other words, as nationalist sentiment surged following Japan’s victory over Russia in 1905, Nukariya reinterpreted Muhammad’s primary mission as the empowerment of the Arab ‘nation’, bringing tangible changes to fragmented tribal societies. This interpretive shift allowed him to view the Medinan period not as a deviation but as the fulfilment of Muhammad’s vision, as it was in the Medinan period that Muhammad established and expanded the community of believers. In turn, Buddha and Christ were recast as unsuccessful social reformers who could not rectify inequality in their lifetimes because they did not have the power to transform societies. It was only Muhammad who succeeded in achieving equality among believers, greatly contributing to improving society.<sup>58</sup>

Importantly, according to Nukariya, Muhammad’s teachings were highly applicable in the twentieth century. He wrote: ‘Nations cannot last even one day in this barbaric era of the twentieth century if they turn the other when slapped on the right cheek. We cannot be naïve and say “If Russia takes Korea, then give them Hokkaido as well.”’<sup>59</sup> By oddly inserting this comment on contemporary politics in an otherwise highly abstract book on the meaning of religion, he collapsed the temporal and spatial distance between seventh-century Arabia and twentieth-century Japan. When the Russian empire continued to pose a threat to Japan’s imperial interests in Northeast Asia, the rising empire of Japan needed the courage of Muhammad, his willingness to fight back when attacked, not the Christian naivete of turning the other cheek.

Similar to Nukariya, in a biography entitled *Mahometto no Sensō Shugi* (Mahomet’s Militarism), Ikemoto Hannosuke valorized Muhammad as a reformer who effectively transformed society. Seemingly inspired by Carlyle, Ikemoto proclaimed, ‘I love Cromwell, I love Napoleon, I love Luther, and I love Thor.’ He also stated, ‘I do not like Christ. I do not like peaceful God. I do not like women. I love men. I do not like civilization. I love barbarity.’<sup>60</sup> Also similar to Nukariya, Ikemoto found a striking resemblance between twentieth-century Japan and seventh-century Arabia, ‘a society that is entering an era of progress from that of stagnation’.<sup>61</sup> He called such societies in transition ‘warring societies’ because change would necessarily generate conflicts, confusion, and chaos, manifesting themselves in various social ills. Discussing such social ills in turn-of-the-century Japan, he specifically lamented the rising popularity

<sup>55</sup>Nukariya, *Uchū Bikan*, p. 308.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 312.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 308.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 314–6.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 312. The same argument is repeated in Dai Nihon Bunmei Kyōkai, *Sekai no Shūkyō*, pp. 238–9.

<sup>60</sup>Hannosuke Ikemoto, *Mahometto no Sensō Shugi* (Tokyo: Shūnzanbō, 1903), p. iii.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, p. v.

of 'effeminate novels', most probably referring to a genre called the 'domestic novel' (*katei shōsetsu*), which targeted a female audience with an emphasis on the romance and morality of the female protagonist.<sup>62</sup> To counter the harmful influence of such 'effeminate novels', his goal was to introduce the heroic, manly lives of strong-willed figures who had a significant historical impact.<sup>63</sup> Muhammad was a perfect example of a hero who thrived in a warring society through his courageous iconoclasm. In short, Ikemoto did not reject Euro-American scholarship's trope of Muhammad as violent. Rather, he reinterpreted bellicosity as a positive quality to emulate.<sup>64</sup>

*Mahometto no Sensō Shugi* was not Ikemoto's first foray into biographical writing. He had published a biographical collection of Japanese warlords as well as a book-length biography of Nichiren, a thirteenth-century Japanese Buddhist priest, entitled *Eiyū-sō Nichiren* (The Heroic Priest Nichiren).<sup>65</sup> Nichiren was the founder of the Nichiren School of Japanese Buddhism, one of a dozen new schools that emerged in response to the social unrest characterized by the famines and revolts of the thirteenth century. To varying degrees, these new schools criticized the esotericism of old Buddhist schools that found many followers among the political and religious elites. Instead, they emphasized teachings that ordinary people could practise without difficulty. Nichiren was at the forefront of attacks on the old clerical establishment that appeared incapable of solving urgent social issues, but his criticism extended to other new schools. He particularly targeted the Pure Land School (*jōdo-shū*), the most popular among the new schools, initiated by Honen and consolidated as the True Pure Land School (*jōdo-shinshū*) by his disciple Shinran, one of the figures Ikemoto explicitly disapproved of, considering him an ineffective, effeminate pacifist. Nichiren and his followers faced severe persecutions, including Nichiren's exile to remote islands, because of their fierce criticisms of other schools. The willingness to stand up for what he believed in was precisely why Ikemoto found in Nichiren a true social reformer in thirteenth-century Japan, another warring society similar to seventh-century Arabia and twentieth-century Japan.

Ikemoto wrote biographies when Nichirenism (*Nichiren Shugi*) was gaining momentum. Coined by the movement's leading figure Tanaka Chigaku in 1901, Nichirenism was a Buddhist political movement that reinterpreted Nichiren as a role model for the Japanese national spirit, and aspired to world unification through the Lotus Sutra, the primary scripture of the Nichiren School.<sup>66</sup> The movement is often associated with

<sup>62</sup>For domestic novel, see Ken Ito, *An Age of Melodrama: Family, Gender, and Social Hierarchy in the Turn-of-the-Century Japanese Novel* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), and Kathryn Ragsdale, 'Marriage, the Newspaper Business, and the Nation-State: Ideology in the Late Meiji Serialized Katei Shōsetsu', *Journal of Japanese Studies* vol. 24, no. 2, 1998, pp. 229–55.

<sup>63</sup>Ikemoto, *Mahometto no Sensō Shugi*, p. v.

<sup>64</sup>Sakamoto Reishū (Ken'ichi) makes a similar argument. He rhetorically asks, 'How could we not see Mahomet as an unrivaled great man? With the message of Allah in his left hand, he is respected as a founder (of Islam); with a sword in his right hand, he achieved great military success; he is included in one of the one hundred heroes.' Reishū Sakamoto, *Mahometto* (Tokyo: Hakubunkan, 1899), p. 2.

<sup>65</sup>Hannosuke Ikemoto, *Eiyū-sō Nichiren* (Tokyo: Shinseisha, 1903).

<sup>66</sup>For definitions of Nichirenism, see Eiichi Otani, *Kindai Nihon no Nichiren Shugi Undō* (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 2001), p. 15, and Gerald Iguchi, 'Nichirenism as Modernism: Imperialism, Fascism, and Buddhism in Modern Japan', PhD thesis, University of California, San Diego, 2006, pp. 18–19.

Japanese imperialism because it developed in tandem with the rise of the Japanese empire, gaining popularity particularly during the first two decades of the twentieth century. In fact, Nichirenists eventually conflated Nichiren's logic of Japan's mission to save China and India from irreligion (the decline of Buddhism) in the thirteenth century with Japan's mission to save Asia from Western imperialism in the twentieth century.<sup>67</sup> With followers such as Ishiwara Kanji and Kita Ikki, prominent military and intellectual figures of Japan's pre-1945 nationalism, the movement evolved, eventually converging with Japan's expansionist pan-Asianism. At the same time, however, Tanaka engaged in a religious dialogue with the Sinhalese Buddhist reformer Anagarika Dharmapala during the latter's visit to Japan in 1902, by which time he had already acquired fame in the Theosophist circle.<sup>68</sup> Combined with its dream of world unification through spirituality, the movement simultaneously intersected with expansionist pan-Asianism and the discourse of universal world religions at the turn of the century.

Given this genealogy of Nichirenism, it is not surprising that Tanaka compared the Nichiren School with Islam. Specifically, celebrating the 'aggressiveness' of Nichiren Buddhism, he asserted that it was the Lotus Sutra, not the Qur'an, that was comparable to a sword.<sup>69</sup> Thus, when Ikemoto expressed his deep respect for both Nichiren and Muhammad as militant resistance fighters in the preface of *Eiyū-sō Nichiren*, he was echoing Tanaka's assessment.<sup>70</sup> In fact, in *Mahometto no Sensō Shugi*, Ikemoto constantly drew parallels between the seventh-century Arabia of Muhammad and the thirteenth-century Japan of Nichiren, exemplified by his drawing parallels between Muhammad's proclamation, 'I am the Messenger of God' and Nichiren shouting, 'I am an ascetic of the Lotus Sutra.'<sup>71</sup> For him, both men symbolized courageous resistance against the corrupt religious establishment from positions of weakness, prompting him to compare the aggressiveness of 'Muhammad's language' to end pre-Islamic Arabian religions' idol worship with that of Nichiren's language to end the corruption of the Buddhist establishment.<sup>72</sup> It is important to note that Ikemoto appears completely oblivious to the theological problem of attributing the Qur'anic language to Muhammad. Rather than interpreting it as a sign of his 'ignorance', however, we should understand it as a consequence of the peculiar circumstances in which Muhammad was introduced to Japan. For him, Muhammad's life deserved attention not because of his role as a Messenger of God, but because of his qualities as a great man. Muhammad was characterized by his perseverance in the face of persecutions, leading to the establishment of a new movement that brought forth tangible social change during a period of crisis. In turn, his movement created an empire that eventually conquered part of Europe. Twentieth-century Japan needed another great man like Muhammad as a particular strand of Japanese nationalists began to embrace Japan's leadership role in the Asian revolt against Euro-American imperialism.

<sup>67</sup>Iguchi, 'Nichirenism as Modernism', p. 27.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., pp. 72–96.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>70</sup>Ikemoto, *Eiyū-sō Nichiren*, p. 6.

<sup>71</sup>Ikemoto, *Mahometto no Sensō Shugi*, p. 37.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., pp. 16, 24 and 25.

## Miracles of Muhammad

Japanese biographies departed from their counterparts in European languages in another significant way. While Carlyle rejected supernaturalism in religion, Japanese biographers, especially non-academic ones, often incorporated various miracles that were attributed to Muhammad. For example, Carlyle's account provides no description of the birth of Muhammad and simply states that he was born into the family of Hashem of the Quraysh tribe.<sup>73</sup> In contrast, Japanese biographies typically go into detail of the various miracles that occurred at the moment of Muhammad's birth. The details of the miracles were not always the same, but they included incidents that took place when Muhammad was born: light illuminated the entire city of Mecca; the Persian palace was partially destroyed; the fire at the Zoroastrian temple was extinguished; the Sawa Lake dried up; the Tigris River overflowed.<sup>74</sup>

Another popularly repeated miracle sheds light on how Japanese biographers reframed Muhammad as an 'Eastern' religious figure. Amply illustrated, including an image of Muhammad and a camel on its front cover, Sakamoto Reishū's biography of Muhammad contains an illustration that features the moment of the Prophet's birth, with the newborn standing up with his right hand seemingly pointing to heaven. The main text describes the scene, noting that the newborn kneeled down, pointed to heaven, and proclaimed, 'God is great. There is no god but God, and I am his messenger.' Following this description, Sakamoto points out the similarity of this miracle to another miracle that is popularly attributed to Buddha at birth, in which he walked seven steps and proclaimed, 'In heaven and on earth, I am the only sublime one.'<sup>75</sup>

Despite this episode's resemblance to the Qur'anic account of Jesus's birth and Shi'i accounts of the *mahdi*'s birth, Islamic accounts are unlikely sources used by Japanese biographers. They did not read Arabic or any other Middle Eastern languages to be able to access them. A more probable explanation is that the story came from accounts in European languages. Sakamoto was a prolific historian who wrote on a broad range of topics, including the Roman empire, and he relied heavily on scholarship in European languages. The list of his publications includes a translation of the eighteenth-century English historian Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which extensively discussed the life of Muhammad and inspired Carlyle's account of Muhammad.<sup>76</sup> In writing the biography of Muhammad, Sakamoto extensively used European-language scholarship of the time, including Gibbon, Bosworth Smith, and Aloys Sprenger. The miracle account he introduced appeared in the American author Washington Irving's 1850 biography of Muhammad, *Mahomet and His Successors*.<sup>77</sup> Although Sakamoto did not specify the source, the miracle account is likely to have been based on nineteenth-century European accounts such as Irving's.

<sup>73</sup>Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, p. 59.

<sup>74</sup>For miracles at the moment of Muhammad's birth, see Sakamoto, *Mahometto*, pp. 12–14; Matsumoto, *Mahometto Genkōroku*, p. 4; Waseda University Press (ed.), *Tsūzoku Sekai Zenshi*. Vol. 6, p. 499; Kichiro Yoshimura, *Yasei Mahometto* (Tokyo: Raito sha, 1922), p. 8; Sōsen Endō, *Sekai Ijin Monogatari: Jidō Toshokan Sōsho*. Vol. 15 (Tokyo: Idea Shoin, 1925), p. 132.

<sup>75</sup>Reishū Sakamoto, *Mahometto* (Tokyo: Hakubun-kan, 1899), p. 14.

<sup>76</sup>Sugita, *Nihonjin no Chūtō Hakken*, p. 149.

<sup>77</sup>Washington Irving, *Mahomet and His Successors* (New York and London: The Co-operative Publication Society, 1850), p. 36.

My main purpose, however, in introducing this miracle is not to trace exactly where it originated. Rather, what is remarkable is the fact that this obscure miracle, which was rarely attributed to Muhammad in other languages, became a standard account of Muhammad's birth in early twentieth-century Japanese biographies. As Kecia Ali points out, miracle stories often travel across religious traditions as a way of legitimizing the unfamiliar in prevailing terms.<sup>78</sup> In this case, the circulation of Muhammad's miracle at birth indicates how Japanese authors, for whom the life of Buddha was the primary reference point, incorporated this story into a standard repertoire to narrate Muhammad's birth precisely because it sounded familiar, and thus made sense as the kind of miracles that religious figures would perform. But it was not just Muhammad who was legitimized through the attribution of a miracle story associated with Buddha. Rather, by attributing Buddha's birth miracle to Muhammad, Japanese biographies of Muhammad reconfigured him as an Eastern religious figure whose life was similar to that of Buddha. Similarities like this were some of the many ways in which the connectedness of Eastern civilization from Japan to West Asia was subtly reinforced, bringing West Asia into the orbit of Japanese leadership.

## Conclusion

Until 1945, Japanese writings about Islam continued to repeat themes explored in late-Meiji biographies of Muhammad, such as a shared Eastern culture and the suitability of Islam in Japan due to its perceived warlike nature. Aruga Ahmad Bunpachirō, who converted from Christianity to Islam in Bombay, promoted Japan's mass conversion to Islam by arguing that the 'militaristic spirit' of Islam was identical with 'Yamato Damashii' (Japanese Spirit).<sup>79</sup> He continued that, because of its valorization of militarism, Islam was the 'most appropriate foreign religion for our nation'.<sup>80</sup> Tanaka Nur Ippei, who converted to Islam in China, likened Muhammad's jihad to Nichiren's holy war in the name of Buddhism, while criticizing Christ for futilely preaching love without acknowledging duty (*giri*) as the basis of love.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, he likened Muhammad, with a sword in his right hand and the Qur'an in his left, to Fudō Myō-ō, a wrathful deity in various schools of Japanese Buddhism.<sup>82</sup> For Hara Masao, a non-Muslim scholar of Shinto, the sword of Muhammad encapsulated Islam's superiority over Christianity, because it was necessary to tackle moral corruption in Arabia and protect followers from violence. Thus, he concludes that Christianity understands God narrowly as loving, but 'God in Islam is generous and loving while simultaneously showing strictness. He does not advocate non-resistance, a point our nation should pay attention to'.<sup>83</sup> In short, similar to the ways in which Christianity was Hellenized by believers of racial science, Islam was Orientalized in imperial Japan as

<sup>78</sup> Ali, *The Lives of Muhammad*, p. 42.

<sup>79</sup> For Aruga, see Fujio Komura, *Nihon Isramushi* (Tokyo: Nihon Islam Yūkō Renmei, 1988), pp. 151–66, and Shinohe, 'Ahumado Aruga Bunpachirō'.

<sup>80</sup> Aruga Ahmad, *Sei Muhammad Shōden* (Tokyo: Nihon Isuramukyō Fukyō Honbu, 1935), pp. 7 and 57.

<sup>81</sup> Ippei Tanaka, 'Isureamu to Dai Ajia Shugi', in *Tanaka Ippei. Vol. 3: Nihonron/Nihon Musurimu kara Mita Shintō* (Tokyo: Takushoku University Press, 2003), p. 37.

<sup>82</sup> 'Takamagahara Zakki', in *ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>83</sup> Masao Hara, *Nihon Seishin to Kaikyō* (Tokyo: Seibikaku, 1941), pp. 66 and 70.



assumed racial-civilizational differences increasingly demarcated the boundaries of the world.<sup>84</sup>

Torsten Weber has detailed how the idea of Asia that centred around East Asia emerged outside official political discourse in late Meiji Japan, gained currency throughout the Taisho years, and was ultimately sucked into the empire's official propaganda in the 1930s.<sup>85</sup> The Tokyo-to-Mecca vision of Asia underwent a similar process, as illustrated by the increasing frequency and specificity of the statements that affirmed this vision. By 1931, when the imperial state intensified its involvement in promoting Japan's ties with Muslim countries, Islam was no longer an entirely unknown religion. In fact, considering the emerging depictions of Muhammad during the first decade of the twentieth century, even the itinerant Muslim revolutionaries who flocked to Japan in the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War did not encounter a blank slate. Instead of trying to forge transnational alliances with disinterested audiences, they met with Japanese pan-Asianists who had just begun to discover Muhammad through an ongoing recasting of him as an Eastern hero.

The emergence of new perceptions of Muhammad does not mean that a total paradigm shift occurred to valorize the perceived truculence of the Prophet and recast him as an Eastern hero. Well into the 1920s, some biographical accounts continued to depict Muhammad disdainfully, as a violent and lustful barbarian. For example, in a chapter entitled *Mahometto no Tsurugi* (Mahomet's Sword) in a children's book, a god of a black stone (presumably referring to the Ka'bah) instigated Muhammad to spread his violent message, and he threatens others: 'Hey, you! Receive the Koran from Allah, or take this!' while holding a sword in his right hand and the Qur'an in his left.<sup>86</sup> The persistence of such depictions illustrates that Japanese biographies of Muhammad did not constitute a 'seamless field' with ideological coherence.<sup>87</sup> Diverging visions regarding the geographical contours of the East and Japan's role in it gave rise to the simultaneous development of conflicting images of Muhammad.

The emphasis on Muhammad's militancy as a positive quality that he shared with the Japanese illustrates the heterogeneity of pan-Asianism. It was markedly different from the Asia envisioned by figures such as Okakura Tenshin and Rabindranath Tagore, who identified inherent peacefulness as one of its defining features.<sup>88</sup> Similar to Okakura, who discovered Asia through the study of art, Japanese pan-Asianists at the turn of the century reimagined Asia through the study of the person of Muhammad. For them, biographies of Muhammad provided concrete evidence of shared values between Japan and West Asia, making the amorphous idea of Asia tangible and appealing.

It is important to stress that most arguments that linked Japan and West Asia did not ignore the differences between Japanese traditions and Islam. They clearly

<sup>84</sup>Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, especially discussions regarding Ernest Renan in Chapter 5: Philology and the Discovery of a Fissure in the European Past.

<sup>85</sup>Weber, *Embracing 'Asia' in China and Japan*, p. 70.

<sup>86</sup>Nihon Dōwa Gakuin, *Dōwa no Seiyō Rekishi*, pp. 200–6. For a similarly negative depiction of Muhammad from the 1920s, see Daigo, *Ijin no Koseki Shirabe*, pp. 64–6.

<sup>87</sup>For a similar argument for Victorian biographies, see Amigoni, *Victorian Biography*, pp. 2–3.

<sup>88</sup>For Okakura and Tagore, see Rustom Bharucha, *Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

recognized the existence of differences, just like Okakura Tenshin stressed the oneness of Asia while simultaneously acknowledging the different historical trajectories in Japan, China, and India.<sup>89</sup> In fact, they often assumed a hierarchical relationship between Japan and West Asia. The hierarchy is clearly illustrated in Kimura Takatarō, a controversial prewar scholar known for his conspiratorial views. Insisting that the militancy of Muhammad was identical to the divine spirit of Yamato Takeru, a mytho-historical figure who consolidated imperial rule in Japan, he argued that Muhammad, along with Buddha and Jesus, was an alternative form of Yamato Takeru. According to him, because Yamato Takeru was the original form, Japan had a duty to unite and harmonize world religions.<sup>90</sup> Thus, in essence, the Japanese mytho-historical figure absorbed founders of 'world religions', giving Japan the divine mission of spiritually rejuvenating the world. Such hierarchization, rooted in the assumption of Japan's particularity, made the geographical imaginary of Asia from Tokyo to Mecca attractive to some pan-Asianists. As they repeated the claim of Japan's shared civilizational values with West Asia after 1931, the Tokyo-to-Mecca vision of Asia became an alternative, if not the most prevalent, strand of pan-Asianism.

**Acknowledgements.** Research for this article was supported by the University of Texas at Austin's Center for East Asian Studies Faculty Grant and the Social Science Research Council's Transregional Research: InterAsian Contexts and Connections New Paradigms Grant in conjunction with the University of Richmond. I would like to thank Mimi Hanaoka for organizing the SSRC workshop. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers of *Modern Asian Studies*, Kenji Kuroda, Kieko Obuse, and the audiences in my lectures held at the Center for East Asian Studies and the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas at Austin for their helpful comments and questions.

**Competing interests.** None.

<sup>89</sup>Okakura, *The Ideals of the East*, p. 1.

<sup>90</sup>Takatarō Kimura, *Nihon Taiko Shōshi: Nihon no Shimei Sekai no Tōitsu* (Tokyo: Kimura Takatarō: 1913), pp. 82–3. For conspiracy theories and pseudo-histories in modern Japan, see Minoru Ozawa (ed.), *Kindai Nihon no Gishi Gensetsu* (Tokyo: Bensei Shuppan, 2017).

**Cite this article:** Koyagi, Mikiya. 2023. 'An Eastern hero: Biographies of Muhammad in imperial Japan'. *Modern Asian Studies* 57(3), pp. 693–710. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000300>