The Japan Center for Middle Eastern Studies: Direct Japan-Middle East Cultural Exchange Takes Place in Beirut

By Steve Tamari

Since its establishment in 2006, the Japan Center for Middle East Studies in Beirut has worked to facilitate cultural and educational exchange between Japan and the Middle East. Toward this end, the center strives to promote joint research projects and international symposia; to coordinate academic exchange programs for researchers and students; and to facilitate the work of Japanese graduate students in the region. The Center is a joint project of the Institute for the Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa (ILCAA) and the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS). Currently the JaCMES is supported by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology of Japan. The director is Prof. Hidemitsu Kuroki of TUFS. The Center is located in downtown Beirut (2nd Floor, Azariyeh Building (Lazarists Center) A2-1; Bashura, Emir Bashir St, Central District, Beirut, Lebanon; Phone/fax +961-1-975851).

I was fortunate to be present at a recent gathering which was an impressive demonstration of the work of the center.

On February 20, 2009, the Japan Center for Middle East Studies (JaCMES) sponsored the fourth in a lecture series in Beirut. The theme of the evening was “Without a Stopover for Transit: Direct Exchange between Arabic and Japanese Literatures” and included lectures by a Japanese scholar of Arabic literature and a Syrian translator and student of Japanese literature and culture. A delightful evening ensured. In contrast to the political and economic barriers that often inhibit our knowledge of one another’s spiritual, historical, and literary inheritance, this encounter demonstrated the potential for a non-stop, visa-free, nothing-to-declare cultural exchange.

Prof. Hidemitsu Kuroki, JaCMES director and a distinguished scholar of Ottoman Aleppo, opened the proceedings with a warm welcome. The first lecture was presented by Prof. Mari Oka, a leading Japanese scholar of modern Arabic literature and a professor at Kyoto University. She is the principal Japanese translator of the works of Ghassan Kanafani. Her lecture was titled “What Can Novels Do? The Significance of Reading Arabic Novels in Japan during Times of Death” and she delivered in a virtually flawless Arabic much to appreciation of those in attendance. Prof. Oka took her audience on an autobiographical search for the meaning of art and literature—especially for translator who is even further removed from the reality he or she studies—in a world of such pain and suffering as that endured by Palestinians. Her answer came in the works of modern Arab novelists, particularly Ghassan Kanafani. She concludes that reading modern Arabic literature and translating it into Japanese has allowed her to approach the lives of others as though they were our own. “Through reading novels, strange lands and unfamiliar people soon become part of our own intimate world. Reading novels changes our relationship with the world, which itself might be a small but significant step towards changing the world itself.”
Prof. Oka’s first person account of the quest for meaning across language and literature dovetailed with a presentation by Syrian poet Dr. Muhammad Oudaimah titled “Introduction to Japanese Faiths through Kojiki”. Dr. Oudaimah is a poet and translator living in Japan. He teaches Arabic and Arabic literature at several universities including the University of Tokyo. In addition to many volumes of his own poems and anthologies of other modern Arab poets, he has devoted considerable effort to translating Japanese literature and—by extension—Japanese culture into Arabic.

Dr. Oudaimah’s lecture focused on the narrative structure of the Kojiki creation myth and how it compares with the Qur’anic and Biblical creation stories. In a short conversation following the lecture, Dr. Oudaimah expanded on the intersection of Arabic and Japanese literatures and cultures with his own life. When asked how he ended up devoting so much of his life to explaining Japan to Arabic readers, he said that like most of the events in his life—especially his life as poet—it was by accident and that serendipitous effect has been a poet’s windfall. He says that Arab audiences know little if anything about Japan, other than its economic and technological prowess. Furthermore, he considers Japanese cultural as essentially non-Western whereas the overwhelming influence of Greek philosophy on Judeo-Christian-Muslim cultural means that Arab cultural shares much more with its European neighbors than with Japan. Concludes Oudaimah, “Comparing Japan with the West is not simply part of an exercise in cultural transmission, but it is part of my effort to understand myself as an Arab in Japan.”

As so, as the evening began with the journey of a Japanese scholar toward self-discovery in Arabic literature, it closed with a parallel experience for a Syrian Arab poet searching for his own sense of self in Japan. This was non-stop, transit-free cross cultural interaction at its best!

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