

A Grassroots Community Initiative in Ishinomaki City, Japan : Reflecting on a Visit to a Mosque

Zane Ritchie
Josai University

Kaori Hakone
Osaka Jogakuin University

要 旨

東日本大震災は周辺地域に多くの変化をもたらした。震災後十年が経過し、宮城県石巻市在住の外国人数は 1.5 倍になった。結婚のために来日した中国人やフィリピン人が多くを占めた以前とは異なり、震災後は単身で来日する外国人技能実習生が増加した。内訳としてはベトナムやインドネシアなどの出身者が多い。日本人配偶者やその家族、親戚などにサポートを得られる外国人とは違い、職場と寮以外にも、技能実習生が所属することができるコミュニティ作りが急務である。その成功例として、石巻市で会社を設立し、宮城県国際化協会や石巻市の援助を受け、地元住民の賛同を得てイスラム教信者やコミュニティのために 2022 年にモスクを建立したバングラデッシュ出身のソヨド・アブドゥル・ファッタさんに非構造化インタビューをした。本研究は、「石巻モスク」建立のエピソードや役割、並びに外国人コミュニティが日本の社会に投げかける多文化共生の社会実現への示唆を考察したものである。

Introduction

On the afternoon of the 11th of March 2011, the most powerful earthquake ever recorded in Japan, with a magnitude of 9.0, occurred off the coast of the north-eastern part of the country.¹ It was not long before a tsunami formed and raced in toward the coast, smashing into the entire north-eastern seaboard, ravaging entire coastal communities. It was of such vast size and scale, that waves of up to almost 40 metres were recorded in some places.² With at least 15,900 deaths and 2,523 missing, the human toll of the disaster was immense.³ The tsunami also destroyed or severely damaged over a million homes, with 25 trillion yen allocated for reconstruction efforts for the first five years, and 6.5 trillion yen for the second five-year period.⁴ With such untold material and human damage, much of the region would take years to recover. Even today, a number of residents of the disaster-stricken region still rely upon government support and have yet to return to their homes.⁵

A Japanese government report carried out in 2013 ignored the non-Japanese victims of the

disaster.⁶ However there was a large contingent of foreigners living in the affected areas, many of them international students or women married to Japanese men, which is not uncommon in rural areas, due to the rapid population decline.⁷ Indeed, in the weeks and months immediately following, many foreigners in the disaster stricken areas and elsewhere fled Japan and returned to their home countries.⁸ The decision to leave Japan was often exacerbated by an expectation of, "... fatalistic stoicism and focus on a calm recovery at all costs typical of Japanese disaster culture ..." and other social norms regarding how to deal with disasters that may have contributed to many foreigners' decisions to relocate out of the disaster zone.⁹

More than ten years on, although many of devastated communities have returned to their towns and rebuilt their lives, the scars and memories of the disaster have yet to fade. These can not only be observed in the changed landscapes, but also in the shape of the demographics of the communities themselves. Japan has one of the oldest societies on earth, with an average age of 48.6¹⁰ and 28.9% over the age of 65¹¹ which has led to a myriad of social issues including a massive labour shortage, particularly in rural areas.¹²

In 1993, the Japanese government introduced the Technical Intern Training Program¹³, which was designed to bring in workers to work in regions affected by massive demographic changes. Officially, the government initiated the scheme with the purpose, "to transfer skills, technology and knowledge to developing countries, in order to promote human capital and development of the host country whereby workers were invited to Japan to work and live and to eventually transfer the skills to their home countries."¹⁴ It was not long before many regions began to rely on foreign labour as wages continued to stagnate in Japan in line with a falling pool of workers and an increasingly elderly population.¹⁵ In recent years more and more companies have been encouraged to use the scheme to recruit workers, mainly from low-income south-east Asian countries to come to work and live in the regions of Japan in the factories to fulfil low-skilled labour jobs that are essential to the economy.

One of areas in Japan with a rapidly falling population is the Tohoku region, which includes the five prefectures of Akita, Aomori, Iwate, Sendai, Fukushima, and Yamagata. In 1919, there were almost 40,000 foreign workers in the region, up by around 20% year upon year.¹⁶ The foreign community has undergone tumultuous change in structure and composition since the disaster of 2011, with a particularly higher percentage of South-East Asians now living and working in the area.¹⁷

The city of Ishinomaki in Miyagi Prefecture has also had a large influx of technical trainees in recent years, as part of the Technical Intern Training Program. The trainees are recruited mainly from Indonesia, Vietnam and South Asian countries such as Bangladesh and employed

in the fishing industry (including on the boats themselves) and in the numerous canneries and other related industries. Currently, around 1200 of these technical trainees currently reside in the city.¹⁸ Ishinomaki also suffered the biggest damage of any city on the coast, with the tsunami flattening the entire town, almost right up to the central railway station.¹⁹ How does this relatively new non-Japanese community cope with their new surroundings, and what avenues of support are available to them? There are official avenues of support, such as is offered by the government funded Miyagi International Association (MIA) that works to help foreign communities better integrate into society, although they admitted that more needs to be done to integrate them into their communities.²⁰ For the technical trainee community, most of whom are young men, they continue to remain on the fringes of Japanese society, and often lead lonely and isolated existences, with little in the way of support for their daily lives.²¹ As a result, it is natural that they fail to have a sense of belonging or solidarity with the local community. In fact, they are discouraged from integrating into the communities in which they live as the Japanese government continues to pursue a policy of non-integration of foreigners into society.²²

The Visit

On the morning of the 5th of August, 2022, the authors interviewed a representative of MIA about the state of the foreign communities in Miyagi Prefecture, with a particular focus on how they had coped 10 years on from the disaster and what kinds of support systems were in place.²³ It was during the interview that the subject of the changing structure of the foreign community was raised, with the interviewee mentioning that they knew of a mosque²⁴ that had recently been established by Mr. Abdul-Fattah Sayed, a foreign resident of Ishinomaki City. Following the interview, the authors contacted Mr. Sayed to arrange a brief visit.

As the authors approached Ishinomaki along a brand new highway, most if not all traces of the tsunami that had ravaged the coast appeared to have vanished, with a sense of normality having returned to the area. They did however, become acutely aware of the numerous fishing-related factories and infrastructure that now dot the seaboard. And whilst driving around searching for the exact location of the mosque, the authors came upon a large sea wall that blocked out the entire ocean, running for miles along the coast in both directions. This was part of a double dyke that had been constructed right along the coast for hundreds of kilometres in order to mitigate the damage of future tsunamis.²⁵ Then authors came across what was evidently the mosque.

Ishinomaki Mosque is located on the fringe of the city, about ten minutes from the centre by car along the river, just across from the grass dyke area on the edge of the coast. The domed structure stood out in its location in a Japanese industrial-urban landscape, rising up just next



Figure 1: Ishinomaki Mosque. With Sayed and Rick (Photo taken by the authors).

to a couple of residential houses, yet it somehow blended in with its surroundings. The authors immediately went down to the mosque and waited for Sayed to arrive (figure 1).

The interview

Mr. Abdul-Fattah Sayed, a Bangladeshi and a long-term resident of Japan, originally came to the region to help with reconstruction efforts just a few months following the disaster of 2011. Speaking fluent Japanese, he now runs a housing construction company in Ishinomaki. A 30-minute unstructured interview with Mr. Sayed and his son Rick, was carried out on the afternoon of the 5th of August, 2022, at the newly opened Ishinomaki Mosque. The authors chose to carry out an unstructured interview, since the purpose was to build up rapport with the interviewees and encourage them to talk freely about why and how they built the mosque, its purpose and to give their own narrative. It was expected that the interviewees would discuss how they built the Mosque to serve as a place that would strengthen ties among the Muslim community and to promote friendship and exchange with the Japanese community as well as to touch upon the issue of the foreign community with particular emphasis on the technical trainees. It was also surmised that they would discuss possible issues regarding getting local building consent and trouble regarding gaining the

understanding of the local Japanese community before the Mosque was able to be constructed. Finally, it was expected that the interviewees would consider the implications of the Mosque on local municipal policy toward the non-Japanese community and introduce their own ideas on how to better integrate foreigners in the local community.

Interview Analysis

Following brief introductions, Sayed invited the authors into the mosque. He confirmed that the structure of the foreign community in Ishinomaki had transformed in the years following the disaster, with many new arrivals coming from countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia, with a number of them Muslim. Indeed, with the implementation of the Technical Intern Training Program, they now outnumber the original foreign residents of the city. Considering this changing structure of the community, Sayed and his son Rick came up with the idea of constructing a mosque which would act as multi-purpose facility to which the foreign and the local Japanese community are invited to gather and interact with each other in a non-threatening, peaceful environment, regardless of their beliefs or background. As Sayed puts it, “[The] Mosque isn’t just a place of worship, like a temple. It is a place to bring people together Everyone comes together and worships together ... and children can make a noise, and run around and play different generations can come together and do things together ... It is where different generations can interact and bond.”

Sayed bemoaned that compared to many members of the foreign community who had successfully interacted with their local Japanese counterparts before the disaster, the technical interns had little chance of getting to know their Japanese neighbours, since on weekdays they worked for the entire day before returning to their dormitories to retire for the evening, thoroughly beat after a long day’s work. On weekends, the trainees still had to wash their laundry and clean their rooms, after having toiled away for an entire week in one of the various factories located around the city. It is little wonder that the trainees had almost no chance to interact with the local or get involved in their neighbourhoods in any meaningful way. Another motivation for constructing the Mosque was that before its construction, the local Muslim community had to travel for up to 60 kilometres to a mosque in Sendai City, which was very taxing on the workers, with the entire day spent on the occasion.

Designing and building a mosque was no simple formality. From the beginning, they realised that it was going to take a lot of work to win the trust of the Japanese community and city authorities before permission to build would be granted. So they began by negotiating with the local community to break down some of the misunderstandings and misconceptions toward Islam. Sayed lamented about what he perceived as a general lack of understanding of Islam in Japan, emphasising how in his experience, Japanese people tend to have a negative

impression of the religion.²⁶ He insisted, “Islam is a peaceful religion, seeking peace. They are not terrorists, and their values don’t match with the image people have. There are many reasons for this, including politics, and the way they are viewed by the international community.” He certainly had his work cut out to convince the local community and authorities of his peaceful mission, and so began the process of negotiation:

“... we worked with the community to break down the barriers, and invited members of the Japanese community to festivals, and taught them about Islam and tried to break down the barriers. From around 2017, we have been working with the local community, and have articles appearing in the local newspapers, and people gradually became more accepting.²⁷ We had to work slowly to build up trust in the community.”

Sayed mentioned that over time the locals gradually became more accepting of the concept of having a mosque in their community, and after much hard work communicating his plan, he was finally able to overcome much of the locals’ mistrust and suspicion toward Islam.²⁸ In the end there opposition to its construction. This was surprising, since it was assumed by the authors that there would have been a lot of friction with the locals in getting permission to build a mosque in their community. One of the reasons that the Mosque was welcomed by the Japanese community was no doubt that Sayed had lived in the community for many years, spoke fluent Japanese, and had taken the time to convince the locals and local authorities of the value of it to their community. The construction of the structure was a team effort that involved not only members of the Muslim community, but also foreign trainees and the wider Japanese citizenry itself, including Sayed’s Japanese construction workers — a truly collaborative grassroots effort that had invigorated the neighbourhood. Regarding having constructed it right on the coast in the path of a future tsunami, Sayed said that he was unconcerned, for according to the Koran, “after a place suffers a great deal of damage, it will become very peaceful.” He was also of the firm belief that the neighbourhood was an ideal place for his family and friends to live.

There is little doubt that Ishinomaki mosque has the potential to become an important pillar of the foreign community, especially for Muslims, as it encourages them to stay in the city and make their home. Indeed, before its construction, many of the technical interns in the area tended to move out once their initial contracts expired, since they felt isolated and unintegrated into Japanese society, lacking a sense of belonging. It is unfortunate that companies spend time and money training and up-skilling these workers, but they often end up leaving the area because their cultural needs are not met or recognised.

Before arriving in Japan, although the foreign trainees learn Japanese to a certain extent, they are further trained and indoctrinated in the culture of their Japanese workplaces upon arrival.

However, ultimately they are non-Japanese and have their own values and traditions that remain precious to them in their new country of residence. Sayed emphasised that it is very important for the Muslim community to maintain their own identity and culture:

“Until recently, Muslim brothers who are technical intern trainees in Ishinomaki had no place to gather, so despite the company exerting effort to train and nurture them, they still tend to move to another bigger city once their contracts ended. No matter how much they prepare to work in Japan and learn about the culture, they still live by the culture they were born and raised in.”

Friday is an important day for prayer in Islamic culture, and is different at Ishinomaki Mosque. Each Friday, up to thirty-five members of the local Ishinomaki Muslim community come to the Mosque to take part in this important religious ritual. According to Sayed, “It is a special time when people can receive blessings from God. Everyone comes together and worships together.”

Sayed and his son have bigger plans afoot for the Mosque, well beyond its current iteration. He emphasised that it is a temporary structure that they are planning to expand it in scale and scope into a grand four-storey building, with views of the sea. It will include a library of books from a variety of sources. “... we will have not just Islamic books but different books. All religions are welcome, Judaism, Buddhism, etc. I want to stock books from many different religions and cultures.” They also plan to add other facilities such as a, “... halal café, to further introduce the local people to Muslim culture, values and education.” Sayed emphasised that the project is an ongoing concern: “It’s like a long process.”

Sayed described what was for him the biggest issue facing Muslims in Japan: the difference in burial customs between Islam (and many Christians) and Japanese. In Japan the dead are cremated, but for Muslims it is imperative that they bury their dead. So in the case of a Muslim losing a family member in Ishinomaki, it would be necessary for them to arrange to bury their loved one according to Islamic tradition, which would mean undertaking the process outside of the prefecture, or to accompany the body to their home country at considerable personal expense. In Islamic culture, burying the dead is an inexpensive communal task, to which the family, relations and the community all contribute. Rather than money, it is a question of where to bury the body. And in Miyagi Prefecture, Sayed emphasised that he would like the prefectural government to come up with a solution:

“Four years ago a member of our community died in a boating accident, and it was difficult and the community came together to donate money to the family These are issues and it would be good for Japanese people to better understand our situation. It

would be good to work together to solve these issues with the Japanese, but sometimes they are like this is Japan, so it is the way it is, and things don't really change.”

Finally, Sayed touched upon the idea of diversification, saying that just because a foreigner comes to Japan, it does not mean that they should assimilate into the culture and do everything the way Japanese people do. He strongly emphasised the importance of maintaining one's identity and being provided with an opportunity to be able to gather and interact with those of the same culture.

Conclusion

In recent years, the structure of the foreign population of Japan has undergone a transformation, particularly in the regions, largely due to an increase in participants on the Technical Intern Training Program. Although the scheme was not originally intended to recruit participants to mitigate a shortage of manual workers, it was often used as a cheap source of labour. A policy of non-integration of these foreigners into Japanese society means that they are sometimes isolated and segregated, lacking the support they require to fully function within society in a meaningful and dignified manner. Where support systems are in place, they tend to be rather ad-hoc and limited. Since these interns are not readily encouraged to get involved with their local communities, they tend to rely on local grassroots initiatives for any additional support. Ishinomaki City, located on the coast of Miyagi Prefecture in the Tohoku region, is one example of a regional city that has seen a large increase in foreign residents in recent years, especially since the devastating earthquake and tsunami of 2011. Ishinomaki Mosque is an example of a grassroots initiative that was created to promote better relations and exchange between foreign residents and the locals. Starting off as an idea by Mr. Abdul-Fattah Sayed, it was finally established in July 2022 after several years of hard work winning acceptance from the local authorities and the Japanese community. It is intended not only as a place of worship but also a space that encourages the local foreign and Japanese communities to come together to celebrate one another's cultures, and to break down many of the misunderstandings and biases on both sides. The building also fills a void within the Muslim community, which has specific religious needs and offers them a unique hub for them to come together in solidarity and to preserve their identities and culture. Finally, the authors encourage authorities to develop policies to better integrate foreigners into Japanese society and promote cooperation and mutual understanding so they may eventually be accepted by and valued as part of the community in which they live.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 Japan Meteorological Agency; n.d., https://www.jma.go.jp/jma/en/2011_Earthquake/Information_on_2011_Earthquake.html
- 2 This is referring to Onagawa Town, where Ritchie visited in 2014. Miyazawa. H. Nihonkeizai shimbun, kodai no biyoin wo osotta 17m cho no tsunami, miyagi ken onagawacho, April 5th, 2011; https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXNASFK05015_V00C11A_400000/
- 3 National Policy Agency of Japan, 2022; <https://www.npa.go.jp/news/other/earthquake2011/pdf/higaijyoukyou.pdf>
- 4 Reconstruction Agency, n.d., <https://www.reconstruction.go.jp/english/>
- 5 Even today, there are more than 42,000 displaced people who are receiving support from the government with many of them still having not returned to their affected towns and cities. Refer to Reconstruction Agency, Fukko no genjo no joken to torikumi; 2021. https://www.reconstruction.go.jp/topics/main-cat1/sub-cat1-1/202210_genjoutorikumi.pdf
- 6 This is not because the number of foreigners affected was minimal. Rather, it is because there is a major gap in the Japanese government's understanding of the situation. The Japanese government has created various social systems without regard to the approximately 2,000,000 foreigners living in Japan. With the exception of the immigration and residency management systems for foreign nationals, the various Japanese systems have been operated without facing the reality that foreign nationals live in Japanese society. Refer to: Gaikikyo gaikokujin hisaisha shien purojekutto; n.d., <http://gaikikyo.jp/shinsai/cn17/pg167.html>
- 7 Le Bail, Hélène. "Cross-border marriages as a side door for paid and unpaid migrant workers: the case of marriage migration between China and Japan." *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 2 (2017) : 226-243.
- 8 Cadwell, Patrick. "Foreign Residents' Experiences of the Flyjin Phenomenon in the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake." In *Crisis and Disaster in Japan and New Zealand*, pp. 59-78. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore, 2019. The phenomenon of foreigners fleeing Japan immediately following the disaster became known as furai (fly) jin, or fleeing (foreign) people, a play on the Japanese colloquial gai-jin (formally gaikokujin) which means foreigner in Japanese. Macmillan, Singapore.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 World Population Review, 2022; <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/median-age>
- 11 Cabinet Office, 2022; https://www8.cao.go.jp/kourei/whitepaper/w-2022/gaiyou/04pdf_indexg.html
- 12 D'Ambrogio, E. 2020: *Japan's ageing society*. European Parliamentary Research Service Briefing. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/659419/EPRS_BRI_\(2020\)_659419_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/659419/EPRS_BRI_(2020)_659419_EN.pdf)
- 13 For an outline of the Program, refer to Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare, n.d., https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/seisakunitsuite/bunya/koyou_roudou/jinzaikaihatsu/global_cooperation/ (in Japanese). In recent years it has become criticised due to many issues such as long working hours and poor working environments. Japanese labour laws are supposed to be applied to foreign trainees, but many employers are not following them. The Mainichi Shimbun, *Editorial: Japan's foreign intern*

- program should be overhauled to protect human rights*; August 5, 2022; <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20220805/p2a/00m/0op/015000c>
- 14 Tohoku Bureau of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2022; *Economic Overview of the Tohoku Region*; https://www.tohoku.meti.go.jp/s_kokusai/pdf/en2020.pdf
- 15 D'Ambrogio, E.
- 16 Tohoku Bureau of Economy, Trade and Industry.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 In 2020, there were 385 Vietnamese; 109 Burmese; 136 Indonesians; all have increased dramatically in recent years. In 2021, the city started classifying them by nationality, rather than, "Other". There are a total of 1205 non-Japanese residents in the city. In 2010 there were just 98 Vietnamese and 246 Indonesians in all of Miyagi Prefecture. See: Miyagi Prefectural Government, 2021. *Shuukei kekka no gainen*; https://www.pref.miyagi.jp/documents/35813/gaiyou_1.pdf
- 19 Ritchie visited Ishinomaki for the first time in 2013 as part of a trip to the devastated coastal regions to examine the state of the foreign communities there. At the time, one of the biggest foreign communities was the Filipino women who were married to local Japanese men, or who worked in local bars of the city. Ritchie remembers the entire city having been reduced to a pile of rubble, right up to the railway station. The tsunami had swept in and gained momentum as it entered the river channel which had increased its ferocity and as a result it ravaged most of the town as it swept inland.
- 20 In a recent interview with a representative of MIA, it was explained that there is a lot of work being carried out to help better integrate non-Japanese communities on the coast of the Miyagi into the local communities, but more could be done, especially regarding the need to better prepare them for how to cope in the event of a major natural disaster. Now one of the biggest issues is the language problem and lack of communication and coordination with the technical trainees or integration into their community. There is a feeling that they are somewhat isolated out on the coast and there should be more support programs put into place.
- 21 Organisation for Technical Intern Training, 2021; <https://www.otit.go.jp/files/user/toukei/211001-00.pdf>
- 22 Mukae, R., Kikuchi, A., Shibuya, S., Morris, J., Iwamoto, H., & Kamiyoshi, U., 2022. *Open Borders, Open Society? Immigration and Social Integration in Japan*. Verlag Barbara Budrich.
- 23 The interview with MIA will be discussed and analysed in a separate paper.
- 24 In 2021 there were 110 mosques in Japan, according to The Economist: The Economist, January 7, 2021; *The number of Muslims in Japan is Growing Fast.*; <https://www.economist.com/asia/2021/01/07/the-number-of-Muslims-in-japan-is-growing-fast>
- 25 According to the Asahi Shimbun, many local residents of the city have become quite critical of the seawall in recent years and waves of the scale of 2011 are expected to overwhelm it. Refer to: The Asahi Shimbun, March 15, 2021; *Residents lose coastal vistas to fortress-like tsunami walls*; <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14245498>
- 26 The Mainichi, November 29, 2019; *No. of Muslims, mosques on the rise in Japan amid some misconceptions, prejudice*; <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20191128/p2a/00m/0fe/014000c>
- 27 The reaction to the opening of the Mosque by the Japanese press has been extremely positive and several articles have appeared. In Japanese, please refer to: Kodomo Shimbun. Shukan Kaho Pyon

Puresu; July 31, 2021; *Anata no tonari no gaikoujin. Mosuku kensetsu tabunka kyosei e*; <https://www.kahoku.co.jp/special/kodomo/img/2022kodomo-img/20220731-01.pdf>; OR, KHB Higashi Nihon Hoso., July 6, 2022; *Isuramu kyoto no yoridokoro ni miyagi/ishinomaki shi no mosuku ga kansei*; <https://www.khb-tv.co.jp/news/14662575>, Kahoku Shimpō; *Isuramu Bunka no Koryu Kyoten ni Reihaijo "Mosuku" ga Kansei, Ishinomaki Chiho Hatsu*; July 21, 2022, <https://kahoku.news/articles/20220721khn000018.html>, for example.

- 28 Sayed failed to mention it in the interview, but the authors also learned that he received a lot of help from the community, including Indonesian Muslim women who are married to Japanese locals. They convinced the Japanese community of the viability of Sayed and his son's plan to build a mosque and that Islam were not a scary, radical violent religion. Asahi Shinbun Digital, May 5th, 2022; *Ishinomaki no Suisankakajo no soba ni "Mosque" Ijuushita Shacho ga Shitta, Machi no Genjitsu*; https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASQ546SV7Q4VUNHB00N.html?iref=ogimage_rek

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Appendix 1

Below is a partial transcript of the unstructured interview carried out with Abdul-Fattah Sayed and his son Rick, on the 5th of August 2022 at the Ishinomaki Mosque, Ishinomaki City, Miyagi Prefecture.

Interviewers: Ritchie and Hakone.

Duration: 37 minutes.

Ritchie: Here we are in Ishinomaki. A mosque in Ishinomaki. What's the name of your mosque?

Sayed: Ishinomaki Mosque. It's an Islamic cultural centre and part of it is a mosque.

Ritchie: Right. Can we come in? Shall we take our shoes off? [Remove shoes]

Rick: Usually we take our shoes off outside, but it's raining, we take them off here, just next to the entrance by the door.

Hakone: Who painted it?

Rick: Me, my dad and mum. It's based upon a Turkish mosque.

Hakone: Yes, the colour. When did you start building it?

Rick: I started it in March last year and opened this mosque in July this year. We had a very tight schedule.

Sayed: We completed everything now. I haven't finished all of it yet. I still have to finish the water and install the electricity.

Ritchie: What is the purpose of the Mosque?

Sayed: A mosque isn't just a place of worship, like a temple. It is a place to bring people together. If you get married, you can use it for ceremonies.

Ritchie: So, it's like a community centre?

Hakone: Is it different from a temple?

Sayed: Yes, it's a community centre. And it is not really a place where you come to worship god like in a temple. But on Friday, people come together for prayer in the mosque as a community. It is a special time when people can receive blessings from god. Everyone comes together and worships together. People can connect with God at work or while driving.

Ritchie: Why did you decide to make this mosque?

Sayed: There was no mosque in Ishinomaki. And now in Ishinomaki numbers of muslims have increased, and we have people from Indonesia, Malaysia, and many are working here.

Ritchie: So numbers have increased. Many are living in Sendai, and there is a mosque in Sendai and people have to travel to Sendai.

Ritchie: Approximately how many muslims are there in Ishinomaki?

Sayed: There are around 100 here as foreign trainees, and then there are us who have been

here for longer, around 40-50. In the past, we had to travel all the way to Sendai, and leave early, and get back late. And at times of Ramadan, it was difficult, we all had to get together and go to Sendai. And in Ishinomaki there was no place to gather.

Hakone: You approached the city?

Sayed: Yes, I talked to the city, and asked if they could do something.

Ritchie: When you approached the city about this mosque, did the city give you permission to build it immediately? Were they apprehensive or against your idea? And how about the surrounding community? Did you have any issues?

Sayed: The thing is that the community looks upon Muslims as been terrorists or has images of them as jihadist. Islam is a peaceful religion, seeking peace. They are not terrorists, and their values don't match with the image people have. There are many reasons for this, including politics, and the way they are viewed by the international community. All religions and societies have been connected since the start. We all die, no matter one's religion. We have to return to where we came from and face God. God is watching us. In general, people don't have trust in religions anymore and don't tend to be religious anymore. In a way, they have lost respect for religion and each other. In this way, crimes may increase, and society feels uneasy about many issues.

Ritchie: You are talking about the foreigners in Ishinomaki? Or the Japanese?

Sayed: The Japanese side. And we worked with the community to break down the barriers, and invited members of the Japanese community to festivals, and taught them about Islam and tried to break down some the barriers, from around 2017, we have been working with the local community, and have articles appearing in the local newspapers, and people gradually became more accepting. We had to work slowly to build up trust in the community.

Ritchie: Yes, it would have been a gradual process of gaining trust.

Sayed: Yes, it was gradual. And for foreigners, they come to Japan and work extremely hard, but struggle at first to be accepted by the Japanese community.

[Rick prepared cushions for the interviewees and laid them on the floor and everyone sat in a circle, taking in the atmosphere of the mosque].

Sayed: The foreign trainees come to work for three years in Ishinomaki and have nowhere to gather, so they go elsewhere after their contract expires. It is a pity that companies spend time and money training them, and up-skilling them, but they leave because the City doesn't consider their culture and needs. Of course, the foreign trainees learn Japanese to a certain extent and are trained by their companies they work for, or they study a little about Japan before they come to Japan, but in the end the culture they are born with stays within them, and they need a place to gather and connect to their religion and relax, which will enable them to start the next day at work in a calm state.

Ritchie: How long did it take you both to make this Mosque? Did you work with Japanese companies to make it?

Sayed: The foreign community helped make it in their own time, and during their weekends

and time off they came and helped contribute to building it.

Ritchie: So, this was built by the local community, for the community. And, did any Japanese companies help?

Sayed: Yes, my Japanese employees helped build it too. I run a construction firm, building housing. So I run my own housing construction firm.

Ritchie: And how long have you been in Ishinomaki?

Sayed: Since the Tohoku disaster.

Ritchie: Did you come out here to help with the rebuild?

Sayed: I came out two months after the disaster to help with the rebuild.

Ritchie: I was here just a couple of years after the disaster, when the city was still a pile of rubble. And I remember at that time, the largest foreign community was probably Filipino, and probably a few Chinese, and a lot of them were married to Japanese men. So, how has that changed?

Sayed: It has probably changed, but when I arrived there were no big foreign communities.

Ritchie: Yes, because a lot of them were gone. But up until the disaster there were a lot of foreigners, mostly women, with Japanese spouses, or Filipinos working in pubs. But that has changed, so there are more foreigners up here working in the fishing industry in particular, right?

Sayed: That's right.

Ritchie: So most of them are not Muslim, right? From Myanmar, Vietnamese, and Indonesia. So, of those workers, how many of them are living around here?

Sayed: So in Ishinomaki the total number of foreign trainees is around 1,300.

Ritchie: And of those, you have around 80-100 muslims. So it is getting very diverse. And what is the Japanese population of Ishinomaki?

Sayed: Around 100,000.

Ritchie: OK, that is quite a sizable number. Do you know of any issues they may have in the community?

Rick: Before Covid, Ishinomaki used to arrange festivals for the foreign community. I think that's why we started seeing more Islam influence, and I have also seen Vietnamese and other countries showing their cultures in various festivals. I think this is where things started.

Ritchie: And you got the idea for the mosque?

Sayed: Exactly.

Ritchie: You guys did a really nice job of this mosque. And how many people are visiting this mosque? You mentioned it was mainly on Friday, when you have the Friday prayer. How many people are coming?

Rick: It kind of depends. Today [a friday] we saw five people come over. And last week we had twenty people. Usually we give thirty or thirty-five.

Ritchie: OK, and how do you see this going in the future?

Rick: This is a temporary structure and we are planning on expanding it into a bigger space.

We are going to add a library, where we are not only able to study religion but also study other things. It's like a long process.

Hakone: Are there any issues or problems?

Sayed: Not really. Everything is positive.

Ritchie: So you don't have any issues with xenophobia, or any other issues like that?

Sayed: No, nothing like that. They have been very welcoming.

Rick: I have seen Japanese come and peak.

Ritchie: I have lived in Japan a long time, and we might think Japanese are quite xenophobic at times, such as we hear in the media, etc., but I find once you discuss things with them, they are quite welcoming. And you establish a relationship with them which is really nice, in my opinion. I have never had any issues either.

Hakone: It is taking one step at a time, and getting to know people.

Ritchie: I think you went about it the right way, because you worked with them on their terms, which is really good, I think.

Rick: It might have been a very different story ten year back. It was a very slow process. It was a very different situation.

Ritchie: So regarding the process of coming up with the idea for the mosque, how many years was that?

Sayed: I decided in 2018 and came up with the idea to establish the mosque.

Ritchie: That is amazing.

Sayed: The mosque is part of Islamic religion and culture so first I made an office and then we made the mosque. This one is just temporary, and I thought we would open it temporarily, and I am working in construction, so I have a lot of experience, and so when I made it, I thought it was simple, but it is quite beautiful.

Ritchie: Yes, it is lovely.

Sayed: This is one part, and I designed everything and the construction.

Ritchie: I have been to mosques in Sharjah and Dubai, and this is really nice. It compares well.

Sayed: When I make a four storey one, it will be more beautiful.

Hakone: There is also a big mosque in Shibuya that is worth visiting.

Ritchie: That's Amazing. Was it easy to get the land in order to build this?

Sayed: I bought it with my own money.

Ritchie: Was it cheaper because of that sea retaining wall? And what is the purpose of the wall?

Rick: I think it is to stop the tsunami.

Sayed: The sea wall is to stop the tsunami, and there is a double barrier. The middle one part is the industrial zone and so people are not allowed to live there. And in the middle is a park.

Ritchie: You have a very bad view from your mosque [a view of the sea wall] [laughter].

Sayed: According to the Koran, after a big damage, it will be a very peaceful place. And so this is a good place for a four storey mosque and we will be able to see the sea from it. We

are planning to make a halal cafe and restaurant too, and a library in which we will have not just islamic books but different books. All religions are welcome, Judaism, Buddhism, etc. I want to stock books from many different religions and cultures. [shows a Koran written in simplified Japanese]. And this one is a Japanese version, we just got it recently. It is really easy to understand. Before, the Koran was quite difficult to understand, but this is a simple version. The Koran is a record of history. And even Japanese can understand this. The translator of this simple version of the Koran came to the opening ceremony of the mosque.

Hakone: It is written as [Kuruaan], but not [Kôran].

Sayed: Yes, there are many ways to say that in Japanese. It is a present for you [presents to Hakone].

Hakone: It's so easy to understand.

Sayed: Yes, it describes everything in simple easy wording.

Hakone: So, people are not just coming to pray, they come to gather.

Sayed: Yes, it's a gathering place, and children can make a noise, and run around and play.

Hakone: Everybody can use it to get to know one another.

Ritchie: It's about strengthening the community ties.

Sayed: Yes, different generations can come together and do things together, or then go to the sea together.

Ritchie: And when did this officially open?

Rick: It officially opened on 2nd July.

Ritchie: Yes, so it was very recent then. Are you planning to have any big events here and to build a bridge with the Japanese community?

Rick: We are still working on it, and we are still pitching it and letting people know what we are doing.

Ritchie: This is a really nice space, and a good start before you build your grand mosque [laughter].

Hakone: How are the Miyagi Prefectural Government helping you?

Sayed: They are offering us a little support in that they are open for discussion regarding the Mosque. But we have yet to sit down and discuss things in detail. But there is more of an international movement now, and more people are moving out this way, and there are more international marriages and other influences, and as children of international marriages increase, non-Japanese looking citizens are increasing. One of the issues though is that Islamic and Catholic folk are not permitted to cremate the dead and that is not possible in Miyagi. It is possible in other areas such as Ishikawa prefecture or Hokkaido. So, at the moment, regarding death, it is necessary for the family to take the body to their homeland for burial, or outside of the prefecture. So it is a difficult situation and it costs a lot of money. Actually, when it comes to funerals, in Islamic culture, they don't take a lot of money, since the community takes responsibility for the death, it's natural for them to get involved in the process. So it's not an issue of money, but an issue of having a place to bury the dead. This is

an issue we will be facing in the community in Miyagi, and it would be good for them to work with us on this matter.

Hakone: We have this mosque now, so the community will slowly become more tolerant and accepting of Muslims.

Sayed: Four years ago a member of our community died in a boating accident, and it was difficult and the community came together to donate money to the family.

Hakone: Japanese people are not aware of these issues for sure.

Sayed: These are issues and it would be good for Japanese people to better understand our situation. It would be good to work together to solve these issues with the Japanese, but sometimes they are like this is Japan, so it is the way it is, and things don't really change. But we have the Halal restaurant coming so it will break down some of the barriers too, but for now we have the mosque, as a first step. And, we have many communities around now, for example, Vietnamese, Indonesian community, the Pakistani and Bangladeshi community and there are some small shops in town. After Covid, we will be starting some cultural events and small festivals [to bring the community together].

Ritchie: Well, we are running out of time. It was a pleasure to talk with you today.