

06. A Tatar's Tree: Narrating the Centenary of a Forest

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This essay presents forgotten experiences of members of diasporas in Japan from the 1930s to the present as seen through different voices directed at a tree in the forest of Meiji shrine (Meiji Jingū).

Meiji shrine, constructed as a major state shrine in 1920, was dedicated to the spirits of Emperor Meiji and Empress Shōken. In 2020, the year of the Tokyo Olympics, the shrine will celebrate the centennial anniversary of its founding. One of my research aims for the year to come is writing a hundred year history of the Meiji shrine. As a student of comparative culture, I aim to trace its history from the perspectives of outsiders / strangers who passed through the shrine forest between 1920 and the present.

As De Certeau suggests, writing history is making history. The most challenging questions for me now are how to hear with greater clarity the voices of the past and of the stranger, as well as how to represent those voices in historical writing. It is in this context that I need to adopt pirate's view of world history. Thus, in this research project I have sought to examine the practice of historical writing itself.

Today, the Meiji shrine forest looks natural, but it is actually man-made. It consists of approximately 100,000 trees of 365 different species, which were donated by people from all parts of Japan when the shrine was established (Fig. 1).

According to shrine documents, there were also exceptional trees planted even after the shrine's founding in 1920. The Tatars' tree is a case in point. It was planted by the principal and students of the Tokyo Muslim School on 5th July 1937. *Tōkyō Asahi Shinbun* reported that the memorial planting was carried out by Turk-Tatar children whose parents were refugees from the Soviet Union (Fig. 2). Who were these refugees?

When the Soviet Union began to rule in 1917, groups of Tatars emigrated from the Kazan region to Japan. They first arrived in 1921, and the number of Tatar immigrants reached a peak of around 500 persons in the late 1930s.

The Tatar community in Tokyo evolved further when Muhammed Abdulhay Kurban Ali arrived in Japan in 1924. As a pan-Islam activist, Kurban Ali had fought on the side of the white movement in the Russian Civil War, and after his exile he devoted himself to setting up Muslim organizations in Tokyo. In 1929, Kulban Ali established the Tokyo Muslim school

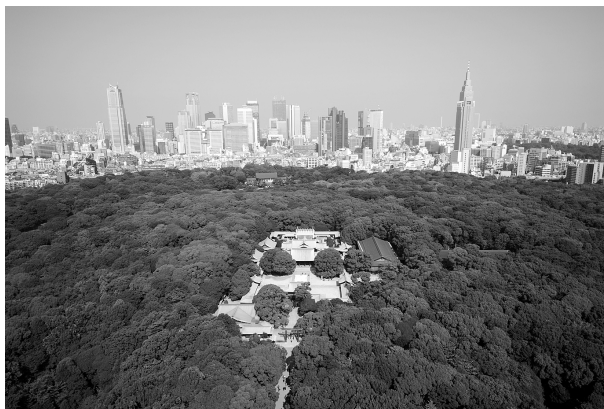


Fig. 1 Meiji shrine today (Meiji Shrine Archives).

in Shinokubo, which was later moved to Yoyogi Uehara. He also set about raising money for the creation of the first mosque in Tokyo. The construction started in 1935 and was completed in 1938. The mosque was built next to the Muslim school in Yoyogi Uehara, and it exists today as the Tokyo Cami.

It was Kurban Ali who led a group of Muslim students to the Meiji shrine for the memorial planting in 1937. The event was held to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the school's founding. Kurban Ali seemed to have been at the height of his powers when he visited the shrine; however, less than one year later he had to leave Japan without celebrating the completion of Tokyo Mosque. What happened to him?

In a letter to the Meiji shrine, Kurban Ali expressed his gratitude to Japanese supporters for the assistance they offered to the Muslim School. Those Japanese who financially helped Kurban Ali's activities were famous pan-Asianists such as Toyama Mitsuru and Inukai Tsuyoshi. From an anti-Communist perspective, Toyama and his companions considered it important that Muslims become their allies.

The Turk-Tatar community in Tokyo was never uniform. Kurban Ali's assertive leadership often provoked antipathy among refugees, and led to bitter struggles for power. It was in this context that the Marco Polo Bridge incident occurred on 7th July 1937, which then escalated into all-out war between China and Japan. The Japanese government regarded Kurban Ali as a serious problem because he caused disunity among the Muslim community. In May 1938, he was arrested and finally in June was forced out of Japan.

It is striking that the Marco Polo Bridge incident caused a sudden change in Kurban Ali's life, just two days after his visit to the Meiji Shrine.

In my research, I turned to the contemporary voice of a stranger, namely a second-generation Turk-Tatar living in Tokyo. He confronted me with his own question of identity: "I am not a Turk-Tatar, nor a Turk. I am a Tatar." Here, however, due to space limitations, I cannot discuss this in detail.

To conclude, the writing of history is the making of history. All I can do now is constantly ask and answer my own question: "What do I really fabricate when I make history?"



Fig. 2 Memorial planting at Meiji shrine by the principal and students of the Tokyo Muslim School on 5th July 1937 (*Tōkyō asahi shinbun*, 5 July 1937)