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***Islam, Itaewon, Muslims and
Koslims: Inter-cultural Dynamics
in the Muslim Neighborhood of
Seoul***

According to the Seoul Metropolitan Government Center population census website (2011), excluding illegal residents, there are estimated 279,000 foreigners living in Seoul, out of about 10,528,774 in total, making up about 2% of the city’s population. Hosting not just different nationals but also various ethnic and religious population groups, Seoul is becoming more and more of a global metropolis.



1. Seoul and Foreign Communities, from www.naver.com.

Since the mid-1990s, “the space for diasporic foreigners” has increased in number in Seoul as well (Kim 25). Such space includes a street block or several street blocks, or even entire small towns that function as cultural, commercial or even spiritual areas for a particular ethnic or national group. For example, there is the Sorae French Village in Bangbae Dong and the Japanese District in Dongbu Icheon Dong. In Incheon, there exists a huge Chinatown. Other ethnic settlements include a Russian/Central Asian Town in Dongdae-moon and a German community in Hannam-dong. However, despite the existence of several thriving multi-cultural communities in Seoul, the Muslim community is often perceived as strange or even threatening. Rather than existing in a relationship of mutual civil acknowledgement with the host community, the Muslims are seen as suspicious, especially to the Korean residents co-habiting the area (Lee, N 237). Nonetheless, the Itaewon Muslim community has long fostered a niche for a lively Islamic culture: the markets and restaurants and the central mosque are already frequented not only by various foreign Muslim groups—from South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia¹—but also by some native Koreans and even domestic Korean-Muslims—the so-called “Koslims”.

¹ This paper defines the “Middle East” as West Asia.

This paper examines the history of Muslim culture in Korea, analyzing how it came to be situated in the unique urban space of Itaewon and arguing why *inter*-culturalism may prove to be a better strategy than so-called *multi*-culturalism in Korea.

THE HISTORY OF MUSLIMS AND KOREANS

The attention of Korean society and media regarding Muslims spiked after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the U.S. Twin Towers. In a matter of a few months following the attacks, there were more than 50 book titles mentioning “Islam” on Korean bookstores (Jung 6). Sadly but not surprisingly, however, the dominant Muslim image remains limited to the stereotype of the terrorist. Jeon states that the typical representation tends not to be “very friendly or comforting, and the stereotype is so well-defined that there is not much room for individuality beyond it” (99). Furthermore, many Koreans cannot distinguish between the terms “Islam”, “Muslim” and “Arabs”. According to Lee Hee-su, “Islam” includes both the religion and its cultural aspects, in a sense that embraces broader concepts than just specifically religious themes. “Muslims” are “people who believe in Islam as faith”, while the term “Arab” refers to a specific regional ethnic identity. For example, there is Islamic architecture and art, while some people identify themselves as Arabs. But many Koreans are ignorant of the various ethnic varieties of Muslims. In fact, according to Jeon, “Arabs, Muslims and Middle Easterners, despite their differences, are thought to be the same” (99). Jeon further argues that “by making them an anonymous mass or the Other, Korean culture sets itself up as the West” (106). In other words, Edward Said’s observation of disregarding and denuding “another culture, people or geographical region” (108) is prevalent in the Korean reaction to Muslim culture and its people, indeed unreasonably so.

Does Muslim culture deserve such an exoticized reception from Koreans? When Koreans regard Muslims and their culture as an exotic or threatening *Other*, they demonstrate an ignorance of their own history. In fact, there are many historical documents that testify to a number of cultural exchanges between Korea and Muslims, dating from ancient times. Indeed, even before the first white Westerners visited Korea, Muslims had already made contact. Korean and Muslim

cultural and commercial relations date quite far back in history.

Lee Hee-su claims that in the ancient Persian epic anthology “Kush-nameh”, there are accounts of the Shilla dynasty (392). Indeed, in a number of ancient Persian accounts of geography, history and encyclopedia, there are specific references to Shilla. Many scholars have wondered whether Chur-Yong, a historical figure mentioned in “The Tales of Three Kingdoms” might have been Arab because he is said to have arrived in Korea by means of the East Sea route (Lee 392). During the Koryo dynasty, more than one hundred Arab merchants visited the kingdom. Also, some Uighur Muslims from central Asia settled in Korea, and Lee concludes that there was even a mosque in Gaesung during this time (396). Furthermore, an account from the Chosun Dynasty records that King Sejong the Great enjoyed listening to Quaranic chanting (340). Despite their obsession with their “one-blood heritage,” Koreans have been inter-marrying with Arabs for many generations. For example, some family names, including Sol, Jang and Do, indicate Uighur or Arab ancestry.

During the Japanese colonial period, some Muslims showed concern for the plight of Korea. The Russian Turk Abdullah sid Ibrahim visited Korea in 1909 and wrote a thirty-page account of Chosun’s struggles under Japanese imperial rule. Furthermore, there was a Muslim Turkish commercial settlement during this period that existed until just before the Korean War. There was also the immense support and sacrifice from the Turkish military during the Korean War itself.

In 1976, the first mosque (“masjid”) was built in Korea in Itaewon, after the Korean government gifted the state land for the building of the masjid amidst the increase of construction-related contracts and trade developments between Korean companies and certain countries in West Asia.

KOSLIMS IN KOREA

According to Lee Hee-su, in 2010, there were about 45,000 Muslim residents in Korea and 100,000 temporary residents such as laborers, international students and businessmen. All together, the Muslim population now totals over 140,000 individuals. Instead of neglecting or

ignoring them, many scholars agree that it is time to take greater notice of the Muslims in Korea. Others note that if Korean society continues to ignore or neglect its Islamic community, there is the potential for social unrest.

Contrary to the general misconception, most Muslims in Korea hail from Southeast and Central Asia. Their national origins include such nations as Indonesia, Malaysia, Uzbekistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh. In contrast, there are far fewer Muslims from West Asia, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Libya. There are also “a growing number of Muslim brides and bridegrooms settling in Korea which would eventually create Muslim families in growing Korean multicultural societies” (308). Cho Kim defines “Koslims” as “1.5 and second generation Muslims living in Korea” (308), using the term to include religious and cultural concepts as well.

However, despite their growing numbers, Korean society’s reception of Muslims and Koslims has been far from hospitable. The Korean cultural gaze towards the Muslims is very limited: there is a gaping lack of public programs for them (Ji 57). Hwang also observes that Korean society is apathetic or inattentive to the Muslims in Korea and harbors prejudice against them (Ji 77), pointing out that there seems to exist “social distance”. Also, there is a lack of consideration towards Muslims who wish to continue their way of life in Korea. When a Muslim woman wears a headscarf or *hijab*, it is inevitable that passersby in the streets stare at her rather pointedly.

Media portrayals of Muslims are dominantly biased and ignorant, ranging from the blatant stereotypes of terrorists and crude-oil billionaires, with no acknowledgement of the Southeast or Central Asian Muslims. Comedy shows and advertisements appropriate such stereotypes. In May 2011, when the *Hangyora* newspaper started to publish a series of cultural introductory articles regarding the Koslims in their “Hagyora In” section, many of its readers—who are considered to be liberals who support minority causes—responded negatively. In an epilogue-style commentary, the editor noted how many Koreans feared that gender rights and democracy could be threatened by the growing number of Koslims. Also, in a survey conducted in 2012 using college students, Korean Protestants showed the most negativity towards the Koslims, while

Korean Catholics were the most open-minded.

Ahn Jung-kook's research sheds light on the difficulties faced by the Koslims. For families, the cultural inflexibility at school poses the most discomfort in their everyday lives. While dress code conflicts can be worked out after discussions with school authorities, school food poses a threat when the food being served is not prepared in the required halal² style or when it includes pork (44). Although the proper meats can be bought from halal super markets, it is somewhat questionable whether the schools will accommodate the needs of only a few Koslim students. For working Koslims, the group pressure to consume alcohol is a major challenge, while most Korean work places do not accommodate five prayer breaks during working hours.

The discomfort in continuing a religious life is also one of the most emphasized negative aspects of living in Korea, even though many try to adapt to Korean ways by practicing a flexible dress code (Ji 77). While many Koreans may picture full chadors and turbans as Muslim attire, most Muslims in Korea wear only strict traditional attire during important religious occasions. A simple head scarf is worn by Muslim women most of the time.

In Europe, the reception of Muslims has turned hostile. This is particularly true of European attitudes towards attire. The most notable example has come from President Sarkozy's administration in France where wearing hijab is now forbidden in public offices and educational institutions. The Netherlands, Germany and the United Kingdom have all become less accommodating as well. However, such treatment only alienates, pushing Muslims into isolated "ghetto" societies where animosity and hostility may brew and could result in violent conflicts in the future (Ji 72). Korea could learn from these case studies and avoid possible future conflict from existing local Muslim communities by becoming more flexible with Muslim culture. Alienating and practicing cultural inflexibility may result in Koslims and Muslims retreating to their communities and widen the cultural distance.

Viewed in this light, the Islamic mosque and the Muslim community in Itaewon plays a special

² Halal-style meats are prepared by draining the blood from the animal completely before preparing it for consumption.

role in conditioning a new organization of cultural networks and territoriality in Seoul's urban space (Song 136). Lee No-mi explains that the Muslim settlement in Itaewon is "a segmentation of urban space formed by reiteration of the 'pluralism' of race and the 'commonness' of Islam" (262). Lee emphasizes that it is inevitable for such urban space to initiate a new cultural solidarity and break away from the boundary of prejudice and conflict by attempting to fulfill the dream of inter-culturalism and move toward "coexistence" (262).

THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN ITAEWON: CULTURAL ISSUES AND RECEPTION



An uphill street in Itaewon lined with commercial establishments leads to the masjid, the mosque. Halal bakeries, restaurants and grocery stores present themselves to the visitors of the area, offering opportunities for consumption. By consuming Muslim food in the vicinity of the Islamic mosque, a Korean could break down his or her cultural picket fences.

As food is often an ambassador in cross-cultural interaction, the popularity of Muslim food can

be viewed as a positive first step here as well. Song points out that many Koreans who frequent Itaewon restaurants search for an “authentic” taste because they interpret “exotic food experiences” as positive (126). However, Korean consumers may still lack discernment: dishes from two or three different countries may be considered to be “Muslim”, rather than Pakistani or Turkish or Lebanese. However, the restaurant owners themselves often demonstrate an ambiguous stance, by catering to this ignorance. For example, a Turkish restaurant boasting authentic Turkish dishes is actually owned and operated by an Indonesian Muslim family. In another Muslim restaurant, alongside the dishes, there are various alcoholic beverages ranging from beer to wine for sale.

The Islam mosque in Itaewon plays an important role not only in providing a place of worship for Muslims but also in facilitating an exchange of communication for Koreans interested in Islam (Lee N. 242). The entrance to the mosque depicts a famous quote from the Quran written in Korean. The original Arabic script is found on the facing wall once one passes through the mosque’s archway. This strategic order of display shows that Muslims are not trying to establish an exclusivity regarding their settlement in Itaewon. It is rather by excluding Korean translation entirely that such a view might be taken. Korean visitors who wish to tour the mosque are left to their own devices, provided they respect the hours for prayer and avoid entering the forbidden areas.

However, the Korean residents of Itaewon have demonstrated a quite negative attitude to their local Muslim community. According to Lee Heesu, the Korean residents see the Muslim community as an economic rival and even as a foreign colonizer that has breached the stability of the space (qtd., in Lee N, 253). For Korean residents the Muslim co-residents are just “Arabs”; it appears needless for the Korean residents to specify nationality or ethnicity (Lee N, 253). In other words, the Korean residents feel economically threatened, and this threat influences the prejudice that the Muslim residents are not so much neighbors as foreign invaders. It is curious then that these same Korean residents fail to be alarmed by the sprouting of other foreign commercial rivals such as Italian restaurants, French fusion restaurants, Thai restaurants and Mexican eateries in the area. While non-Muslim businesses are readily accepted, Muslim

businesses are viewed with disfavor. Ironically, quite a few successful Muslim food restaurants are owned by Korean owners, as evidenced in case of Taj Mahal, owned by a Mr. Suh (Song 119).

In 2017, there are plans to launch a new real estate development, the “2017 Hannam New Town Development Plan.” This plan raises the possibility of conflict. According to Lee No-mi, while the Korean residents expect the Muslim residents to vacate the area and thereby recover their financial stability through this development, the Muslim residents feels threatened by the prospect of having to relocate to some other urban space (254). With the only mosque in Seoul located in Itaewon, this is seen as a rather dire threat by the Muslim settlers.

What is needed here is a form of “multicultural literacy”. Seoul, as Kim suggests, should be recognized as an urban space for “hegemonic accommodation/reception” and a space for compromise of various cultural differences (45). Itaewon ought to play a special role in this conception. In other words, the blurring of cultural borderlines and the “extension of cultural reception abilities” might be achieved, with the district of Itaewon at the helm.

The Muslim community in Itaewon currently represents an open urban space for inter-cultural communication between Muslims and non-Muslim Koreans. However, there are many challenges and compromises that need to be worked out between the two groups. The Muslim community in Itaewon represents a precious space for the resolution of the type of conflict stemming from cultural misunderstanding and prejudice that is becoming so prevalent in Europe. By alienating the Muslims who are already resident there, many European countries are digging themselves further into the hole of miscommunication and hostility. By rejecting other cultures, a host culture cannot hope to achieve stability, especially when the other culture is already rooted in the local geographies. One cannot simply—and inanely—cut off cultural existence. Nor should one ignore its very existence. Whether Koreans wish it or not, Muslim culture has a secure place in Korean history and is firmly rooted in contemporary Korean life.

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