

# In Her Words: A New Translation of the Quran into Japanese

Fuga Kimura in conversation with Kyoko Nishida



Kyoko Nishida, the Director of the Tokyo Camii Institute, an independent research institute on Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, and a professional translator, recently published a translation of the Quran in Japanese as the second Muslim woman to do so, with the help of Turkish, Syrian and Japanese Muslim scholars who live and work in Japan. Her new book *Quran: Japanese Comprehension* is published by Tokyo Camii Publishing, a branch of Camii Diyanet, an official Turkish religious institute situated in Tokyo. Fuga Kimura interviewed Nishida for IQAS, discussing motivations for new translations, the challenges involved and the differences among Quranic translations, as well as the rich history of Quran receptions in Japan. Nishida also spoke of her struggles to maintain intellectual independence as a professional translator working under a religious institution.

**Keywords:** Japan, Quran translation, Quran reception, challenges in professional translations, interpretation in translation, interview

**FUGA KIMURA:** *Let us talk about the newly published Quran: Japanese Comprehension, with you as chief translator, in June 2022. So far, many Japanese translations of the Quran have been published, and even in recent years there have been many attempts to translate the Quran into Japanese.<sup>1</sup> In such a rich environment of translations, could you tell us about the purpose and intention of publishing your new translation?*

**KYOKO NISHIDA:** First, our project started from very practical reasons. Tokyo Camii is the biggest mosque in Japan and conducts collective prayers every week, plus twice a year at *Eid* [the festive days at the end of the fasting month of Ramadan]. Every sermon in those prayers needs quotations from the Quran.

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We felt that we could no longer keep relying on translations that we had not interpreted ourselves. In addition to this aim as a group and/or as a religious institution, each member of our translation committee had their own thoughts. For example, Ahmad Almansour from Syria emphasised that all other Japanese translations are influenced by Wahhabism and that we need different translations that are not under this influence. Whether this is true or not, we all understood that we wanted a new interpretation that we could consider as non-partisan.

FUGA KIMURA: *I have the impression that many of the previous Japanese translations were so focused on showing the original connotations of Arabic that it was difficult to grasp the meaning and context when reading the text in the Japanese language only. On the other hand, with your new translation, I got the impression that the translation is not a rigid word-for-word translation but a kind of “independent work of literature” itself that is easy to read and enjoyable in Japanese alone without any knowledge of Arabic. What has been your approach and/or point of improvement?*

KYOKO NISHIDA: Among the previous Japanese translations of the Quran, first of all, the Japanese language that Toshihiko Izutsu used in his translation [1993]<sup>2</sup> was very classical and sometimes far too sublime and solemn.<sup>3</sup> Because of his popularity, this translation is still well-read by Japanese, but we felt we needed new Japanese language expressions to understand the content and spirit of the Quran. The *Koran*<sup>4</sup> of Chuko Classics, by Katsuji Fujimoto, Osamu Ikeda and Kousai Ban, published from Chuoukoron-Shinsha, uses the word *Kami* [神] – which is used in Shintoism to indicate God – instead of the transliteration of *Allah*. Added to that, they conform the names of the prophets to the Japanese Biblical convention (Moses, not Musa, Jesus not Isa, etc.)<sup>5</sup> and render the vocabulary sketchy and broad rather than providing too granular translations. As a result, their translation is very smooth and natural, as if the Quran was written in Japanese originally. I can feel the maturity of the translators. We respect this later effort, but we transliterated the name of *Allah* as *Allāh* [アッラー]

1 About the number of Quran translations in Japan see Okawa 2018.

2 Toshihiko Izutsu is the most well-known Japanese Muslim scholar and has been working on comparative religious studies between Islam and other religions, especially in the field of philosophy and Sufism.

3 For example, he uses solemn and classical Japanese expressions like 天と地の間にあって賦役する雲 [*ten to chi no aida ni atte hueki suru kumo*] which connotes “cloud as free labour” for “*al-ssahāb al-musakhkhara bayna al-samā’ wa al-ard’*” (Quran 2: 164). See Toshihiko Izutsu: *Koran*. Volume 1. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1957, p. 40. Moreover, he adopts わしら [*washira*], which is usually used for old gentlemen, for the first personal plural of Allah (Izutsu 1957: 41).

4 Katsuji Fujimoto / Osamu Ikeda / Ban Kousai: *Koran*. Volume 1. Tokyo: Chuoukoron-Shinsha, 2014, p. 3.

5 For example, they transcribe Abraham as *Aburahamu* (アブラハム) using Japanese katakana, Moses as *Mōse* (モーセ) and Jesus as *Ies* (イエス), in the Judeo-Christian Bible; see Fujimoto et al. 2014: 26. See also Mita 1972: 570.

using Japanese katakana and transcribed the names of prophets from Arabic to make Japanese readers familiar with the original sounds.<sup>6</sup>

Another example is Shumei Okawa's translation [1957], which is beautiful and elaborate with a pseudo-classical style, rendering his Japanese expressions enjoyable for silent reading but not useful for reading aloud. He is so famous – as a unique Pan-Asianist and one of the first generations of Japanese scholars in comparative religious studies – that his old translation still attracts Japanese readers. However, he is not a specialist in the Arabic language or Islamic studies, as he admitted himself, because he relied on Chinese, English, French and German translations for his own translation.<sup>7</sup>

As for myself, I am not a researcher, scholar or an imam, but just a professional translator with a background mainly in the fields of industry, IT and a little in pharmaceuticals. Therefore, this was almost the first time for me to work on religious scripture.<sup>8</sup> As a Muslim who works as a translator in the mosque, I decided to aim for the Quran as quoted for *khutba* [sermons] and for the language to be practical and functional – easy to quote, easy to read, easy to understand – for any occasion, not only during *khutba*, but also, for example, at general lectures or beginners' classes, as well as for children's events in the mosque. Thus, it is important not to “disturb” the reader with unfamiliar terms that are not used in daily life, or with the overly classical expressions used until now in the previous translations mentioned above. Just as the operation of a machine requires a manual, so too does the life of a human being require a manual [the Quran]. Have you ever heard the expression “The Quran is the manual for life”? In the past, this was popular among some Muslim missionaries in Japan. I tried to translate the Quran to make it easy for Japanese, both Muslims and non-Muslims, to access it as a life manual.

Once this strategy was decided, we could talk about detailed and specific tactics. In the Quran, for example, the same phrase appears repeatedly across chapters. In such passages, I was persistent in ensuring that the translation of such phrases was uniform across different places so that the reader would easily notice such a repetition of phrases in the Quran. In addition to this effort, the word “He”, which evokes a particular gender, is not used to refer to Allah. Instead of that word, we adopted the Japanese word *Kano-okata* [かのお方], which has no gender. In addition, since the overwhelming majority of Muslims in the Japanese-speaking world do not speak Japanese as their first or second language, there is no choice but to include them in the target audience. There is the slang expression KISS [“Keep It Short and Simple”], and I tried to follow this rule for such readers. Added to that, I also avoided idiomatic expressions

6 We transcribe Abraham as *Ibrāhīm* [イブラーヒーーム], Moses as *Mūsā* [ムーサー] and Jesus as *Īsā* [イーサー], following the Arabic names in the Quran (Nishida 2022, p. 828).

7 Okawa 2009: 16

8 In the past, Kyoko Nishida has translated the work of Jalal al-Din al-Rumi (see Yeniterzi 2006).

that are difficult to understand unless you are very familiar with the Japanese language.

FUGA KIMURA: *I would like to talk with you about your translations and annotations of the Sura al-Kahf [chapter 18 of the Quran], which is recommended for Muslims to read every Friday, as well as the Juz Amma [the last part of the Quran, which is divided into 30 parts], which Muslims try to memorize at the first stage of their religious lives. There were abundant annotations [in your translation], but is there any special reason that the sources of these annotations were not specified? For example, the expression “according to one commentator” without specifying the name of the commentator is conspicuous, especially the part in the Sura al-Kahf where Moses is interpreted as a symbol of “external knowledge” whereas al-Khaḍir, whom Moses followed, is interpreted as a symbol of “internal knowledge”.<sup>9</sup> Is this interpretation your own or do you have any source for this interpretation? Adding to that, in Note 2 on p. 588, Ibn ‘Āshūr [d. 1973], an Ottoman Tunis scholar,<sup>10</sup> is quoted in the explanation of the grammar. Why was this interpreter selected? So, if the content of the commentary is not your original, what led you to choose those sources for your translation of the commentary? Could you provide us with information on the sources you referred to in particular for commentaries or notes in your translation?*

KYOKO NISHIDA: The reference for our translation here is the English translation of the Turkish scholar Nurettin Uznoğlu [published in 2013]. When the idea of doing a Quran translation first came up in 2006–2007, Ensari Yenitürk, the former Imam of Tokyo Camii, initially pushed for the English translation by Muhammad Asad of 1992 to be the key source text, arguing that “if you are going to translate the Quran, the commentaries are more important than the text” – and I agreed with him. I negotiated with the persons managing the copyrights of Asad’s translation, who imposed various conditions, one of which was that the Quran in Arabic must also be included. As per our perception, a popularisation of a Quran translation in Japan is dependent on a Japanese-only version, for which Asad did not give his consent. Thus, I decided to use the translation of Nurettin Uznoğlu, which I found in Konya [Turkey] in 2013 – a fresh translation with rich annotations and many interpretations, which cannot be found in previous Japanese translations. Some of the annotations are similar

9 Moses, the monotheistic prophet who is most often referred to in the Quran, asked permission to follow al-Khaḍir, who seemed to have more knowledge than Moses. Al-Khaḍir gave one condition to permit this. That condition was not to ask anything about al-Khaḍir’s behaviour while Moses was following him. Moses could not keep this rule because of al-Khaḍir’s seemingly brutal behaviour, such as killing a seemingly innocent child and drilling a hole in the bottom of a ship. Al-Khaḍir accused Moses of breaking his promise and began to reveal the hidden wisdom of his behaviour (for more details see chapter 18 of the Quran).

10 One of the major figures in the Islamic modernist movement of the 1970s–1980s.

to those of Yusuf Ali [1953], which Ryoichi Mita also mainly relied on. I assume that Nurettin Uznoğlu was referring to Yusuf Ali because of their generational proximity and their citation of the same classical references for interpretation. Furthermore, for me his translation of the original text was also good and challenging, for example, when he translated the term “Muslim” as “those who surrendered (to God)” instead of choosing a transliteration of “Muslim”. Finally, the fact that Timothy Winter<sup>11</sup> had produced a reprint of the original edition of Uznoğlu’s translation assured us of the trustworthiness of this translation. We decided to keep Uznoğlu’s English annotations as they were. Sometimes, however, when we compared his English with the original Arabic, we decided not to adopt some of his English translations in favour of the original Arabic .

As for other commentaries and annotations in our translation, I consulted several dictionaries and some articles. The phrase “according to one commentator” is taken directly from Nurettin Uznoğlu’s work. After the rough translation was completed, some of my Syrian and Japanese colleagues added some additional commentaries and annotations. As for Ibn ‘Āshūr, the name and interpretation in the Quranic verse 36, chapter 83, were added at the suggestion of Hani Abdelhadi and Megumi Kenjo, who are young Japanese Muslims scholars, because of Ibn ‘Āshūr’s great interest in bridging the classical Islamic worldview with modernity. Other than that, for example, Ahmad Almansour, a Syrian scholar, conducted an in-depth study of what the time of *Fajr* [the name of chapter 89 of the Quran, meaning “dawn”] actually is. Other Japanese translations often refer to it as “dawn”, but technically it should be a little before the time called “dawn”, so we have added “before dawn” plus an explanatory note. In places where words refer to physical body parts used to describe the attributes of Allah, we added a note that these are only expressions of attributes and do not mean that Allah actually has “hands” or “arms”. A famous Japanese imam, Maeno Naoki, offered various suggestions on our translation choices throughout the text. For example, as for the Arabic word *mash* in verse 33 of chapter 38, which is traditionally translated as “slay”, we decided to go back to the original meaning of the Arabic word and replaced it with “stroke” by unanimous consent. Besides that, we were not sure what to do about *kāfir*, since the translation “unbeliever” is not correct, but we finally settled on “one who rejects [the truth]” [(*shinri wo*) *kobamu mono*, p. 1109]. There are various other such passages, too, though it would be too much to list them all. In some of them, I added more details to the original commentary of Uznoğlu and some are completely new entries.

Allow me some more examples to address your enquiries: In verse 1 of chapter 4, I translated *nafsin wāhida* as “one soul”. According to the traditional interpretation, it seems to be translated as one person – referring to Adam

11 Professor at the Faculty of Divinity, Cambridge University/UK, well known as Shaykh ‘Abd al-Ḥakīm Murād, Dean of Cambridge Muslim College.

– but Nurettin Uznoğlu translated it as “single soul”, which I followed, but I also indicated in an explanatory note the alternative interpretation (“one person”) as one of the possibilities. The Arabic term *nafsīn wāḥida* appears here and there, but for all of these verses it seems possible and suitable to translate it as “one soul” except for verse 28 of chapter 31. Then there is the Arabic term *ḥūrun ‘īnun* in verse 22, chapter 56. One Turkish colleague, who conducted a separate proofreading to that of our committee, argued with me that “it is a problem that your translation of *ḥūrun‘īnun* as ‘beautiful one with wonderful eyes’ differs from the interpretation of the Turkish Diyanet [the Turkish Ministry of Religious Affairs], which uses ‘white-skinned virgin’”. However, in this case I protested that the Diyanet’s translation was rather a mistranslation and pushed through with our translation as “beautiful one with wonderful eyes”.

Finally, as for the commentary on Moses and al-Khaḍir in the *Sura al-Kahf* based on Uznoğlu’s interpretation, while no specific source is indicated in his commentary, I found that Muhammad Asad’s *The Message of The Quran* uses the book of al-Bayḍāwī [1319]<sup>12</sup> as the source of the commentary. So, you see, we used a wide range of sources from classical to modern and from east to west and tried to include as many discussions as possible while selecting the best choice of translation for our purpose, the daily use by new Muslim converts in Japan.

FUGA KIMURA: *You highlighted the need for a new Japanese translation of the Quran given that previous translations were mostly done by old, male academicians and were no longer deemed suitable for contemporary and easily accessible daily use by Muslims as well as for those without a command of Arabic. You struggled at times to keep your own freedom and independence as a translator when selecting specific wordings or terms if they sometimes did not match the official interpretation of the Turkish Diyanet, which funded the publication of your new translation. Because your new translation does not aim for academic use, sometimes it might lack information, references for commentaries and notes on the Quran. However, through our conversation, I have learned that you tried to refer not only to classical sources but also to modern Quran interpretations, like the works of Ibn ‘Ashūr, Muhammad Asad and Sayyid Hossein Nasr. This effort of yours makes your new translation responsive to contemporary theological and social issues. I thank you for your cooperation, Kyoko Nishida.*

12 Al-Bayḍāwī offers, in his commentary on verse 60, a purely allegorical explanation: “[...] the two seas represent the two sources or streams of knowledge. The one obtainable through the observation and intellectual coordination of outward phenomena (‘ilm al-zāḥir), and the other through the intuitive, mystic insight (‘ilm al-bāṭin) the meeting of which is the real goal of Moses’ quest” (Asad 2012: 537).

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