

Diversity of Islamic NGOs: A Preliminary Report

NEJIMA Susumu¹

Abstract

Faith-based NGOs among the Muslims are expanding their fields of activities, and anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists have recently started research on these NGOs. This is a preliminary report of the international workshop in which various aspects of the Islamic NGOs were discussed.

1 Purpose of the Workshop

A workshop entitled "Diversity of Islamic NGOs" was held on 10 and 11 October 2009, in the second campus of Toyo University. It was a joint program of Faculty of Regional Development Studies, Toyo University and NIHU Islamic Area Studies.

The purpose of the workshop was to understand Islamic NGOs in their diversity. Muslims all over the world run hundreds of thousands of NGOs (a NGO can loosely be defined as non-governmental, non-profit making, voluntary, and philanthropic organization. see Shigetomi 2002:6, 7). Our focus is on faith-based NGOs among Muslims. Their missions and activities are based on Islamic concepts, discourses, and institutions. For example, a major British Muslim relief agency Islamic Relief quotes the following verse from the Quran in their website, to demonstrate their identity and mission of alleviating the poverty and suffering of the world's poorest people.

"Whoever saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of all mankind" [5:32]

Islamic NGOs are active in the various fields such as social welfare, education, health services, and disaster relief. They are also engaged with contemporary issues of gender, environmental protection, and inter-religious/civilizational dialogue. Anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists have recently started paying attention to the faith-based NGOs in the Muslim world. Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan

¹Regional Development Studies, Toyo University, Japan

(2003), Clark (2004), and Harmsen (2008) provide in-depth analysis of the subject. Nejima (2002a) offers the case study of Aga Khan Development Network and the Ismaili community in the northern Pakistan. Historically, Muslims have made efforts to institutionalize *zakat*, *sadaqa* and *waqf* for establishing and maintaining numerous orphanages, schools, and hospitals. Therefore, recent historical studies of the Islamic charity are the source of insight as well (Sabra 2000, Singer 2008).

2 AKDN and Hamdard

In this part, I would like to explain how I started to conceptualize the Islamic NGOs through my own field research.

2-1 Aga Khan Development Network

It was the activities of Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) in the Northern Areas of Pakistan that impressed me in 1993-1995. As one of the villagers half jokingly said, they had “the second government” which was more efficient than the first one (the Government of Pakistan). AKDN NGOs were supporting village life in almost all the fields. Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, established in 1982, encourages the villagers to organize their own VOs (Village Organisations for men, and WO or Women Organisations for women) for helping themselves in such activities as irrigation, road construction, agriculture, livestock, forestry, and food supply. Aga Khan Education Services is in charge of education, and managing Schools. Aga Khan Health Services maintains clinics and organizes women volunteers for safe childbirth. Aga Khan Building and Planning Services is in charge of construction of clinics and schools. Under the instruction from AKBPS, villagers voluntarily offer their own resources and labor.

AKDN looked quite efficient and devoting. The impression did not change until the end of my stay. Though original research purpose was to study about the agro-pastoral way of life in the high mountains of Karakorum-Hinduksh, I could not ignore the presence of AKDN and voluntarism they extract from the villagers. AKDN became absolutely essential for the villagers’ life by the early 1990s. It was also impressive how Islam works in development. Although AKDN is non-denominational development agency, “Aga Khan” is none other than the 49th Imam of the Ismailis. He is the founder and chairman of the NGOs vigorously working in the northern Pakistan. Most villagers are Ismailis or “spiritual children” of Aga Khan IV, and participate to

the development programs authorized by the Imam.

Thus, the title of Imam (*imamat*), the highest institution of the Shia Islam, was the key to understand what I had seen in the northern Pakistan. This is my first encounter with an Islamic NGO.

2-2. Hamdard Foundation

After completing the dissertation about the Ismaili community and AKDN in 1999 (Nejima 2002a), I came to think of the possibility of the Islamic NGOs in the context of Pakistan. It was again AKDN that provided valuable material (AKDN 2000). Entitled *Philanthropy in Pakistan: A Report of The Initiative on Indigenous Philanthropy*, the report explains Quranic contexts of charitable giving, profiles of indigenous NGOs, and individual and corporate giving. In particular, profiles of NGOs such as Anjuman-i-Himayat-i Islam, Edhi Welfare Trust, and Hamdard Foundation gave me a broader perspective. These NGOs use *zakat* and/or *waqf* for the welfare activities. Though *zakat* is one of the five pillars of Islam, and is often juxtaposed to prayer (*salat*) in Quran, it has not been given due description (Singer 2008: 24).

Waqf or charitable endowment is another important means of Islamic giving. The earliest recorded *waqf* in the subcontinent dated from the twelfth century. One of the Ghurid sultans set aside the revenue of a single village to support a mosque in Multan (Kozlowski 1985:22). Kozlowski continues that almost every ruler had a favorite shrine and these received support in the form of *waqfs*. The Mughal emperor Akbar established generous endowments for Shaikh Salim's shrine (Kozlowski 1985:23). A few *waqifs* offered civic patronage of the sort familiar to India's British rulers. They spent money on building an iron bridge, constructing a dispensary, and providing electrical and water systems (Kozlowski 1985:68).

Hamdard Foundation has applied a traditional *waqf* to modern socio-economic conditions. Hakim Abdul Majeed opened a small drugstore named Hamdard Dawakhana in Delhi in 1906. His title *hakim* means that his occupation is to compound traditional prescription according to the Islamic medicine. While the contemporary *hakims* were content with their family business and held the traditional knowledge exclusively, Hakim Abdul Majeed dreamed of promotion of the Islamic medicine into modern industry. When he passed away in 1922, his two sons were left to succeed the father's ideal. In India, Hakim Abdul Hameed enlarged his father's business. In Pakistan, younger brother Hakim Muhammad Saeed cultivated the new market. Hamdard India and Pakistan have grown as leading Islamic pharmaceutical

companies in the both countries.

Since 2000 I have visited Hamdard four times (twice in Karachi and twice in Dehli). What makes them quite unique is that the companies are designated as *waqf*, and net profit is used for social welfare. In 1948, Hamdard Dawakhana (India) was converted into a *waqf*. In 1953, Hakim Muhammad Saeed followed his brother's decision. In Pakistan, he has vigorously established medical and socio-cultural institutions from the income of *waqf*; in 1958, Al-Majeed College of Eastern Medicine was established. In 1964 Hamdard Foundation was established. Hakim Muhammad Saeed also started academic journals called Quarterly Hamdard Medicus and Hamdard Islamicus in 1977 and 78 respectively. Construction of Maidnat al-Hikmah, which includes Hamdard University, started in 1983 (Nejima 2005).

I have obtained first-hand data of the two NGOs. Each one of them has established a private university in Karachi, as the spearhead for reconstruction of the Islamic civilization. For the Ismailis, Aga Khan University is the contemporary Al Azhar, which was founded by the Fatimid dynasty as the center of Islamic learning. The library of the Hamdard University is named Bait al-Hikmah after the famous library and translation institute in the Abbassid dynasty.

I also came to know that these NGOs were not isolated phenomenon. In fact, Dr. Nakamura Mitsuo, who had done fieldwork of Muhammadiyah as early as in the 1970's, demonstrates how deeply the social activities based on Islam are taken root into the Muslim life.

“When I started participatory observation of the local people's ordinary life, I found that many people were engaged with the social service which is in their own word *amal* or good deed. Based on the firm religious belief that good deeds in this life (*dunya*) guarantee the salvation in the next world (*akhirah*), they sincerely discipline themselves, save money, and pay obligatory *zakat*. Furthermore, they pay voluntary *sadaqa*, donate *waqf* and engaged with social service” (Nakamura 2004:11).

Founded in 1912, Muhammadiyah is the second largest Islamic organization in Indonesia. Putting emphasis on education, Muhammadiyah has more than 5000 schools in the country today. *The Islamic Voluntary Sector in Southeast Asia* (Ariff 1991) and *Islam and Civil Society in Southeast Asia* (Nakamura et. al 2001) offer more general picture of the issue from the region. More recently, Clark (2004) provides information on “Islamic Social Institutions” from the Middle East. While

examining on the selected institutions such as Islamic medical clinics in Egypt, the Islamic Center Charity Society in Jordan, and the Islah Charitable Society in Yemen, she points out that these are just some of “many non governmental or private institutions aimed at addressing the socioeconomic needs of its society within, at least theoretically, a stated Islamic framework” (Clark 2004:2). The number of Islamic voluntary associations is 2,457 out of a total of 12,832 voluntary associations in Egypt (Clark 2004:12). Another study arguably gives even higher proportion. In the 1960s, Islamic NGOs accounted for 17.3 percent of the total NGOs, and by the end of the 1980s, they accounted for 34 percent in Egypt (Shukr 2005:154).

3 Presentations of the Workshop

The five pillars of Islam or essential duty for believers include *zakat* (almsgiving) to the poor. Islamic history also demonstrates the importance of charitable endowment of *waqf*, which maintained social welfare such as educational and medical services. Islam is known to put emphasis on the equity and social justice in the believers’ community or *ummah*. With the emphasis on the voluntarism and philanthropy, we can say that the Islamic ideals and institutions can be quite relevant to, and overlapping with the ideals of the contemporary NGOs working in the field of the social development.

“Diversity of Islamic NGOs” was planned to reflect and elaborate the current interest in the Islamic NGOs in the academia. Participants submitted data and interpretations based on his/her own field research. Since Islam is the second biggest religion in the world in terms of population, attention was paid for covering geographical varieties. Presentation titles and participants are as follows.

“Introduction: Diversity of Islamic NGOs” Nejima Susumu

“International Islamic NGOs in Cambodia: An Overview” Omar Farouk Bajunid

“Islamic NGOs on Environmental Problems in Indonesia” Aoki Takenobu

“Historical Sociology of Islamic Higher Education: Religious Knowledge (*Ilm*) and Ethics (*qurba*) in *Nizamiya*” Akutsu Masayuki

“Islam, the West, Local Traditions and Gender” Egbert Harmsen

“Caregiving Volunteer Activities in Kahrizak Center in Iran” Hosoya Sachiko

“Civil Society, Islamic NGOs in Turkey and their both Nation-wide and Global Initiatives: The Case of the Gülen Movement” Ihsan Yilmaz

“Islamic Women’s Advocacy in Turkey: The Case of the Capital City Women’s Platform” Sawae Fumiko

Nejima presented the first paper in order to clarify a comparative point of view for Islamic NGOs. We will discuss the problems of definition and terms later. As a case study, Nejima introduced AKDN in Pakistan, and Hamdard Foundations in Pakistan and India, as mentioned above.

Cambodia, a country with approximately 700,000 Muslims, is the research field of Omar Farouk. With Muslim minority communities spreading all over the kingdom, several International Islamic NGOs such as International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO) and Muslim Aid are working there. A brief sketch of local NGOs run by Muslims was also given.

Aoki dealt with Muslim efforts for environmental issues in Indonesia. He demonstrated that Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), two largest Islamic NGOs in the country are providing reinterpretations of Islamic ideas in order to tackle environmental problems. In the grass-roots level, eco-pesantrens play vital roles for the problems. They are Islamic boarding schools which offer Quranic interpretations from ecological point of view.

As a historian, Akutsu demonstrated how *ilm* (knowledge) was maintained by *waqf*, and commitment to *ilm* was interpreted as *qurba* (pious deed) in Islamic history. To understand the continuity and contemporary reinterpretation of Islamic ideals, study of Islamic charity in the past offers valuable insight.

Harmsen has just published his Ph.D thesis, a voluminous anthropological study on Muslim NGOs in Jordan. In this workshop, he discussed on the discourse and practices of Al Afaf Society. This NGO belongs to the mainstream of Jordanian Islamist movement, and is specialized in marriage and gender issues (This is the second paper collected in this special issue).

Kahrizak Center in Tehran is Iran’s biggest private institution devoting for care of the disabled and elderly. Hosoya shed light on women volunteers working there as bathing assistants. Through interpretation of the narratives of the women volunteers, Hosoya discussed the Islamic aspects of voluntary activities.

Yilmaz introduced the Gülen Movement. Fethullah Gülen is a Turkish Muslim scholar and he has influenced many business people to establish charitable organizations, hospitals, and schools. Originating in Turkey, the movement has now spread in over 110 different countries. Interfaith and intercultural dialogue is an

important part of the Gülen Movement (This is the third paper collected in this special issue).

The Final presentation was also from Turkey. Sawae discussed on Islamic women's advocacy in the country. The case was taken from the Capital City Women's Platform (CCWP) in Ankara. Sawae argues that the CCWP's Islamic advocacy is not to produce an alternative to the Western modern. Rather its main target is the religious conservatives and their understanding of Islam.

4 Concluding Remarks

Through the two-day discussions, participants could grasp the diversity of Islamic NGOs. We have further discussed the fundamental concepts promoting such philanthropic endeavors among the Muslims. Inspired by Quran and hadith, discourses are usually created around basic concepts of *qurba* for *thwab* (pious deed for reward from God), and *fi sabil li-llah* (to be on the path of Allah, for the sake of God).

Igarashi (2008) categorized the motivations of *waqfs* arranged by Amir Qijmas (d892/1487), Governor of Damascus in the Mamluk period. Through the survey of archives preserved in Cairo, Igarashi listed 58 *waqfs* related to Qijimas. It seems that motivations of the Governor were various; maintenance of his property for his own family, preparation for further religious merit after his death, and promotion of public interest in his territory of governorship. These charitable endowments were, however, based on one common ideal of *qurba* for *thwab*.

Today, Islamic philanthropy often takes the shape of NGO. Meanwhile, the basic ideals remain the same and are reinterpreted according to the given contexts. Efforts to *qurba* are practiced as *zakat*, *sadaqa*, and *waqf*. Hamdard Foundations in India and Pakistan build schools and hospitals out of *waqf* income. Women volunteers in Kahrizak Center regard that bathing assistance is also deed of *zakat*.

What are the cases in the relatively new fields such as environment and gender? Aoki says NU and Muhammadiyah are both eagerly working to face environmental challenges through *dakwah* (efforts to improve thought and behavior in accordance with ideal Islamic standards). He also pays attention to the grassroots activities. In some cases, villagers use *waqf* lands for afforestation, and women's study group of Quran tackle household waste management. Sawae reports that the women's advocacy group seeking for "Islamically just gender" came to appreciate their activity in terms of *sevap* (deriving from *thwab* mentioned above). In Turkey, it is widely accepted that

sevap can be earned from any acts intended for the sake of Allah.

Through these case studies, we can understand that Muslims are expanding their field of activities while reflecting upon Quran and Islamic ideals. These interactions between religious concepts and NGO activities shall be researched more intensively and carefully. It is also important to study the interactions in the local context. A verse of Quran or hadith can be found as relevant to a certain circumstance and reinterpreted for reflection of the activities. Meanwhile, Muslims dealing with the same issue in a different context may find other verses for the source of inspiration.

Finally, I would like to mention the problem of terminology. Some participants expressed concern about “Islamic”, which evokes the images of terrorism and oppression of democracy. Indeed, Islamic voluntary activities are often restricted and oppressed with the pretexts of anti-terrorism and protection of democracy. They prefer “Muslim NGO” to “Islamic NGO” . This may cause another problem, since NGOs run by Muslims are not necessarily motivated by faith. In any case, our subject of research is faith-based NGOs among Muslims. We need more cases and discussions for comprehensive definition of terminology and theoretical framework.

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