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ABDURRESID IBRAHIM AND MEIJI JAPAN: A MUSLIM INTELLECTUAL'S ENCOUNTER WITH NON-WESTERN MODERNIZATION

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Abstract: This study examines the concept of modernization through the perspective of Abdurreshid Ibrahim (1857–1944), a Tatar-Ottoman intellectual, as presented in his travelogue *Alem-i Islam* (The World of Islam) following his 1909 journey to Meiji Japan. The goal of this paper is to elucidate how Ibrahim framed Japan's experience as a model of non-Western modernity that successfully synthesized technological advancement with the preservation of its cultural and moral identity. This research is very important because it provides a crucial non-Western viewpoint in the discourse on modernization theory, challenging the long-held Eurocentric narrative and demonstrating the historical existence of viable alternative paths to progress. The study focuses on analyzing Ibrahim's portrayal of Japan's selective adaptation of Western techniques, exploring his use of Japan as a mirror to critique the stagnation within contemporary Muslim societies, and situating his ideas within the broader intellectual debates on multiple modernities. The methods used in this paper are a close textual analysis of Ibrahim's primary work, *Alem-i Islam*, combined with a historical-contextual approach that links his reflections to wider theoretical discussions on modernization. Finally, the findings of this research demonstrate that Ibrahim perceived Meiji Japan as a powerful counter-argument to the idea that Westernization is synonymous with modernization. His writings reveal a vision of modernity based on strategic synthesis rather than wholesale imitation, thereby contributing significantly to both Islamic intellectual history and the global discourse on pluralistic modernities.

Keywords: Abdurreshid Ibrahim, Japan, Meiji-Era, Non-Western Modernization, Muslim Intellectual History.

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Introduction

Modernization theory is based on the idea of human progress that emerged in the Enlightenment era, with the belief that technological progress would give humanity increasing control over nature.¹ Until the seventeenth century, the concept of modernization referred to developments in secularism and rational thought, aimed at dismantling systems of superstition.² However, after the seventeenth century, the term came to signify reaching the same level as Western nations—particularly achieving parity with the West in terms of technological and scientific advancement.³

From a different perspective, modernization is a multifaceted process. At the intellectual level, it is the tremendous increase in man's knowledge of his environment and the reflection of this increased knowledge in literacy, mass media, and education. Demographically, it is the rapid growth of the urban population versus the rural population. Economically, modernization produces a greater diversity of activities and more complex occupations; the level of professional skill increases significantly; the ratio of capital to labour rises; subsistence farming gives way to market farming; and agriculture itself loses its relative economic importance compared to commercial, industrial, and other non-farm activities. With the emergence of a national market, national capital resources, and other national economic institutions, there is a tendency to expand the geographic scope of economic activity and to centralize such activities at the national level. Over time, the level of economic well-being increases, and inequalities in economic well-being decrease.⁴ At the societal level, modernization increases the economic, military, and political power of society as a whole and encourages its people to be culturally assertive.⁵

On the other hand, the issue of which direction of modernization should proceed is controversial. According to some classical modernization theorists such as Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Daniel Lerner, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel, all societies make a gradual transition from traditional to modern to modernization and similarly experience this process. It is assumed that this transition is completed by the adoption of Western institutions, values, and behaviours. In this context, since the modernization model developed in the West is a historical reality and example, non-Western societies will also go through the same process as the West

¹ Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 16.

² Myron Weiner, *Modernization the dynamics of Growth* (London: Basic Books, 1966), p. 5.

³ Daniel Lerner, "Modernization", in *The International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), Vol. 10, p. 387.

⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (London: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 33-34.

⁵ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), pp. 84-85.

and become copies of Western societies.⁶ In addition, August Comte systematized this with his famous law of three states as follows. During the archaic tribal period, societies were guided by mythologies and legends. Then, in the traditional period, we move to the stage guided by metaphysical rationalism; Finally, positivism/secularism dominates in the modern period. This progress is a necessary process for every society, like the immutable laws of matter. Accordingly, for non-Western societies to reach the Western level of development, they need to put their modernization processes into the same pattern as in Europe.⁷ However, modernization theorists overlook a fundamental limitation: since human societies cannot advance uniformly and simultaneously across all domains, no civilization can become universally superior to others or achieve identical developmental trajectories in every respect.⁸ Each culture emerges from distinct historical processes, rendering every society's experience of modernization inherently unique—it cannot and should not be uniform. Modernization does not require replicating the Western trajectory; there is no singular path to becoming modern. Crucially, adopting Western models is neither obligatory nor universally desirable.⁹ There is no universal modernization process that every society should follow. The modernization experience is a particular one. Every society should modernize itself according to its ways.¹⁰ Due to this critical approach, the non-Western modernization theory emerged, enabling non-Western societies to realize their modernization experiences with their own traditional dynamics.¹¹

In this context, numerous studies have been conducted that reinterpret modernization as a multidimensional process that cannot be confined to the Western experience. For instance, Reinhard Bendix, in *Nation-Building and Citizenship: Studies of Our Changing Social Order*,¹² emphasized that modernization develops through different historical trajectories shaped by local political and cultural dynamics. Building upon such perspectives, S. N. Eisenstadt's edited volume *Multiple Modernities*¹³ reconceptualized modernization as a plural and context-dependent phenomenon, arguing that every civilization generates its own version of modernity according to its historical and

⁶ Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society, Modernizing the Middle East* (New York: Free Press, 1964), p. 136.

⁷ Auguste Comte, *The Positive Philosophy*, translated from French by John Harriet Martineau (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 157-159-160-171-178.

⁸ René Guénon, *East and West*, translated from French, by Martin Lings (New York: Sophia Perennis, 2001), p. 12.

⁹ Dominic Sachsenmaier, Jens Riedel, and Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, *Reflections on Multiple Modernities: European, Chinese, and Other Interpretations* (Boston: Brill, 2002), p. 27.

¹⁰ Herf, Jeffrey, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 1-2.

¹¹ Parsons, Talcott, *The Social System* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 29; David Harrison, *The Sociology of Modernization and Development* (London: Routledge Press, 1988), p. 39.

¹² Bendix, Reinhard, *Nation-Building and Citizenship: Studies of Our Changing Social Order* (New York: Routledge, 1996). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315125107>

¹³ Eisenstadt, S.N., "Multiple Modernities," *Daedalus*, Vol. 129, No. 1 (Winter 2000), pp. 1-29. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20027613>.

spiritual foundations. Japan has served as a significant example inspiring these studies; therefore, many scholars have explored the possibility that each civilization can generate its own version of modernity, shaped by its historical and spiritual foundations, through the Japanese experience. In the specific case of Japan, Marius B. Jansen's *The Making of Modern Japan*¹⁴ offers a comprehensive historical account of the Meiji Restoration, showing how Japan harmonized Western science and technology with its own cultural and ethical values to build a non-Western model of progress. Similarly, Carol Gluck's *Japan's Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period*¹⁵ explores how Japan's modern ideology legitimized rapid industrial and institutional transformation while preserving moral cohesion and national identity. Robert N. Bellah, in *Tokugawa Religion: The Values of Pre-Industrial Japan*¹⁶, further challenged Eurocentric assumptions by demonstrating that Japan's modernization was rooted in indigenous moral and religious traditions rather than Western secularism.

As evidenced in the studies mentioned above, modernization is neither a homogeneous nor a one-dimensional process. In this regard, the present study re-examines the concept of modernization through the perspective of *Abdurreshid Ibrahim* (1857–1944), a Tatar-Ottoman scholar who traveled to Meiji Japan in 1909 and documented his observations in his work *Alem-i Islam* (The World of Islam). Ibrahim's reflections articulate a distinctive non-Western vision of progress—one that integrates moral and cultural values with technological advancement, thereby offering an alternative understanding of modernity rooted in synthesis rather than imitation.

The primary objective of this research is to examine how Abdurreshid Ibrahim perceived Japan as a successful example of non-Western modernization—achieving technological, economic, and educational advancement while preserving its cultural identity and moral values—and to highlight how this perception became a compelling counter-argument to the Eurocentric assumption that Westernization is the sole path to progress. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to comparative modernization studies by combining the thoughts of a Muslim intellectual on modernization with the Japanese experience.

Methodologically, this study employs qualitative content analysis and a text-based comparative method. It closely examines *Alem-i Islam* to identify how Ibrahim described Japan's modernization and compares his reflections with established theories of modernization and non-Western development. This interpretive approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how a

¹⁴ Jansen, Marius B., *The Making of Modern Japan* (USA & UK: Harvard University Press, 2000).

¹⁵ Gluck, Carol, *Japan's Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period* (USA: Princeton University Press, 1985), Vol. 1. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1k13b6q>.

¹⁶ Bellah, Robert N., *Tokugawa Religion: The Values of Pre-Industrial Japan* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957). https://archive.org/details/tokugawareligion0000bell_p9z4/page/n5/mode/2up?

Tatar-Ottoman Muslim intellectual conceptualized progress through his encounter with Meiji Japan. The paper proceeds as follows. The first section provides a conceptual framework of modernization and outlines the emergence of non-Western modernization theory. The second section discusses Japan's Meiji-era modernization and its unique synthesis of Western knowledge and indigenous traditions. The third section examines Ibrahim's observations on Japan's educational, industrial, and moral transformation as recorded in his travelogue. Finally, the conclusion highlights how Ibrahim's perspective offers a critical re-interpretation of modernization as a plural and dialogical process rather than a Western monopoly.

Non-Western Modernization

Modernization theory, which is dominant in American sociology, dates back to World War II. It emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, depending on the restructuring and interpretation of the world after World War II. Modernization theory assumes that underdeveloped societies will reach a Western-type level of development by imitating and following developed societies. Additionally, this theory conceptualized development as a gradual transition from tradition to modernity. This transition will be achieved at the economic level by the introduction of the market and foreign investments, at the social level by the adoption of appropriate Western institutions, values, and behaviors, and at the political level by the implementation of parliamentary democracy.¹⁷

Modernization theory was largely shaped by the ideas of Talcott Parsons, one of the most influential figures in mid-20th-century American sociology. Parsons constructed an evolutionary framework based on the model of modern America, positing Western values as the fundamental drivers of societal modernization. According to his functionalist perspective, societies seeking modernization had to follow the path laid out by the United States—the presumed representative of universal and modern values—and adopt its knowledge, institutions, and cultural norms.¹⁸ At this point, it is useful to look at the ideas of leading thinkers of the theory, such as Marion J. Levy, Neil J. Smelser, and Daniel Lerner. Among these thinkers, Marion J. Levy and Neil J. Smelser are students of Parsons, who divided societies into two traditional and modern societies and explained the difference between modern society and non-modern society as follows. In non-modern societies, specialization and interdependence in organizations are low. There is little interest in market and money affairs. The relationship type

¹⁷ Hodgson, Marshall G.S., *Dictionary of Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 155.

¹⁸ Parsons, *The Social System*, p. 29; Harrison, David, *The Sociology of Modernization and Development* (London: Routledge Press, 1988), p. 39.

is traditional, and family values are at the forefront. It is possible to provide mutual goods and services between rural and urban areas. In modern societies, specialization and interdependence in organizations are high. The relationship between the market and money is strong. There is weakness in the family structure, and bureaucracy and institutionalization have developed.¹⁹ Another theorist, Smelser, emphasizes that for societies to modernize, profound changes must occur within them. These changes entail: Political realm: Transitioning from simple tribal or village authority to systems comprising elections, political parties, representation, and bureaucratic officials. Educational domain: Decreasing the number of illiterate individuals. Religious sphere: Preferring secular belief systems over tradition and religions. Family sphere: Decreasing the prevalence of extensive kinship units and the weakening of hierarchical systems determined by birth, alongside geographical and societal mobility.²⁰ Moreover, this tendency is even more pronounced in the work of Daniel Lerner (1917–1980), a leading modernization theorist. Lerner posited that non-Western societies undergoing modernization would inevitably replicate the Western trajectory, effectively becoming carbon copies of Western societies. In his framework, the Western model of modernization was not merely one possible path but rather a historical inevitability, presented as both a factual outcome and a normative standard.²¹

Modernization theories have been the target of increasingly intense criticism over recent decades, including from non-Western societies where “modernization” policies have been implemented with often disastrous results and by Western researchers.²² In modernization theories, modernization, in general, is a process in which Western societies are situated as the ideal to which non-Western societies must aspire. Therefore, all modernization theories essentially carry European supremacist ideologies and function to legitimize the uniqueness and privilege of Western societies.²³ However, the West is not the only civilization to follow. What is ordinary and standard need not be Western.²⁴ As a counterargument to these claims, the concept of non-Western modernity has emerged.

The concept of non-Western modernity seeks to realize and ground the modernization experiences of non-Western societies with their own social dynamics. The concept of non-

¹⁹ Levy, Marion J., *Social Patterns and Problems of Modernization in Readings on Social Change*, ed. Wilbert E. Moore & R. Cook, *Readings on Social Change* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1967), pp. 196-201.

²⁰ Appelbaum, Richard P., *Theories of Social Change* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), pp. 33-34; Peter Preston, *Development Theory: An Introduction to the Analysis of Complex Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 175.

²¹ Lerner, Daniel, *The Passing of Traditional Society, Modernizing the Middle East* (New York: Free Press, 1964), p. 136.

²² Luckmann, Thomas, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (New York: MacMillan, 1967), p. 10.

²³ Wagner, Peter, *Modernity as Experience and Interpretation* (United Kingdom: Polity Press 2008), 12-13.

²⁴ Hodgson, Marshall G.S., *Dictionary of Sociology*, p. 18.

Western modernity is an expression that includes the claim of being different from the West and even consciously being an alternative to Western classical modernization.²⁵ In this version, tradition has an important place, and modernization and tradition do not have to reject each other.²⁶ Many sociologists support this idea. For instance, Reinhard Bendix argues that traditional elements can persist within modern social structures.²⁷ Similarly, the American sociologist Robert Neelly Bellah contends that modernization does not require the complete eradication of traditional cultural elements. On the contrary, he suggests that these cultural components can even be beneficial and utilized.²⁸ Another sociologist, Joseph R. Gusfield, further emphasizes that traditional and modern forms do not always conflict. He asserts that tradition and modernity are not mutually exclusive systems and, therefore, modernization processes do not necessarily weaken traditions.²⁹

Another thinker who challenges the idea that non-Western societies can modernize only by abandoning their traditional values and adopting Western models is Barrington Moore. He rejects the notion that modernizing societies inherently follow the same universal path and instead argues for the existence of diverse alternatives to development beyond a singular Western model. According to Moore, claiming that the changes occurring in one society will inevitably occur in another constitutes a historical fallacy. Each nation experiences its own realities within its unique historical conditions, meaning that development must be achieved through its own specific circumstances and institutions.³⁰ The historian Cyril Edwin Black similarly aligns with Moore's perspective, arguing that modernization processes are not uniform across societies. He emphasizes that modernization outcomes vary depending on a society's cultural structure, thereby rejecting the notion of a one-size-fits-all model.³¹ American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington also claims that non-Western societies can modernize with their own dynamics without abandoning their own culture and without completely adopting Western values, institutions, and practices. Thus, we understand that if non-Western societies are to modernize, they can do this by their own methods, not by accepting Western values. Some

²⁵ Wagner, *Modernity as Experience and Interpretation*, pp. 12-13.

²⁶ Daniel Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 3.

²⁷ Harrison, *The Sociology of Modernization and Development*, p. 44; Alparslan Onbasi & Esra Polat Onbasi, "Non-Western Modernization: Modernization Experience in Malaysia During the Era of Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad (1981 – 2003)", *Journal of Islam in Asia*, Vol.12, No.3 (2024), p. 235.

²⁸ Robert N. Bellah, "Religious Aspects of Modernization in Turkey and Japan", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol.64, No.1, (1958), pp. 1-5.

²⁹ Joseph R. Gusfield, "Tradition and Modernity: Misplaced Polarities in the Study of Social Change", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (1967), 355.

³⁰ Harrison, *The Sociology of Modernization and Development*, pp. 49-50.

³¹ Cyril Edwin Black, *Dynamics of Modernization* (New York: Harper,1966), pp. 47-48.

countries have tried this method and succeeded. For example, Japan is a modern, economically developed country without accepting Western values.³²

Meiji Period Modernization

From the fifteenth to mid-nineteenth century, the government in Japan was in the hands of the Tokugawa dynasty's shogunate. After witnessing the pretended superiority of Jesuit missionaries in the sixteenth century and the intrigues of European colonial scouts, the shoguns deliberately closed Japan to the outside world. In this context, customs were established, and international commercial activities were strictly recorded, regulated, and limited. Also, the construction of ships capable of deep-sea voyages was prohibited. Thus, Japan's relationship with the West was limited only to the commercial activities of a small group of Dutch and Portuguese traders with special concessions. Under this *Sakoku* (isolation) policy, the only way to absorb knowledge from the West, especially scientific knowledge, was through Dutch books and products.³³ Japan maintained its policy of isolation well into the 19th century, effectively limiting Western influence. However, this isolation became increasingly untenable as European and American imperial powers expanded their presence across Asia in pursuit of economic and geopolitical dominance. Western nations sought to exploit the continent's vast natural resources and commercial potential, and Japan's strategic location—positioned along critical maritime trade routes, serving as a potential intermediary for commerce with China, and containing substantial coal reserves vital for steamship refuelling—drew heightened foreign attention.³⁴

In 1853, Commodore Matthew C. Perry of the United States Navy led a squadron of four warships—two steamships and two sailing vessels—into Edo Bay (modern-day Tokyo Bay). This display of naval power compelled Japan to end its long-standing policy of seclusion, ultimately forcing the Tokugawa shogunate to open its ports to American merchant ships under the threat of military coercion.³⁵ Thus, on 31 March 1854, the Treaty of Kanagawa was signed, which met the main United States demands; this agreement set a precedent, prompting Japan to conclude similar commercial treaties with Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Russia in rapid succession.³⁶ Hereby, the foreign states established a series of foreign trade privileges in various ports. These privileges imposed on Japan implied the obvious weakness of the Japanese

³² Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, pp. 96,115,182,195.

³³ Kenichi Ohno, *The History of Japanese Economic Development* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 35–40.

³⁴ Marius B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 64.

³⁵ Samuel Eliot Morison, "Old Bruin" *Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1967), pp. 324–325.

³⁶ Andresen, Curtis, *A Short History of Japan: From Samurai to Sony* (Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2002), p. 75.

government in the face of Western technology.³⁷ This perceived backwardness and deliberate humiliation brought the need for reform to the fore, and a group of Samurai disgruntled by these negative developments ended the Tokugawa Dynasty in a bloody coup at the beginning of 1868. These reformist samurai united under the authority of Emperor Meiji (1812-1912) and took the first steps toward modern Japan.³⁸

The Meiji period was characterized by the persistent grievance that the Western concessions deprived Japan of full independence and limited its own burgeoning trade possibilities, now that it was open to the world. The government launched an extraordinary diplomatic mission to reconsider these unequal agreements. Under the chairmanship of Iwakura Tomomi (1825-1883), this delegation consisted of ministers, scientists, and students.³⁹ The main objectives of the Iwakura Delegation were to achieve recognition of the new Imperial regime in the West, to initiate the renegotiation of unequal agreements with Western powers, and to observe the West's political, economic, commercial, and technological achievements. The most important of these goals was to identify how Western societies had achieved their financial, commercial, and technological successes. The delegation wanted to learn how these achievements were achieved and set a new roadmap for Japan.⁴⁰ In line with its objectives, the Iwakura Mission departed from Yokohama Port in December 1871 and visited twelve countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and the Netherlands.⁴¹ Mission members observed all institutions and practices, from schools and factories to parliaments. The economic power of modern industry and the social power of the educated citizens and subjects of the Western nation-states impressed the mission members profoundly.⁴² They compared and analyzed their collected information to determine which country was the most advanced and distinguished in each area. For example, they made separate assessments for each category, assessing which nation had the best education system, which was superior in naval power, and which was excellent in military power. Based on this intelligence, the government would decide which country to follow in each specific area of development.⁴³

³⁷ Jansen, Marius B., *The Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 227-228.

³⁸ Webb, Herschel, *An Introduction to Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 20.

³⁹ Togo, Kazuhiko, *Japan's Foreign Policy, 1945-2003* (Boston: Brill, 2005), pp. 3-4; Kunitake, Kume, *Japan Rising the Iwakura Embassy to the USA and Europe 1871-1873*, edited by Chushichi Tsuzuki R. Jules & Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. xv.

⁴⁰ Olive Checkland, *Britain's Encounter with Meiji Japan, 1868-1912*, (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 109; Mohamad Firdaus Mansor Majdin, "Meiji Japan's Pursuit of a Modern Nation state: An Interpretation", *Asian Journal of Research in Education and Social Sciences*, Vol. 4, No.1, (2022), pp. 188-189.

⁴¹ Kazuhiko Togo, *Japan's Foreign Policy, 1945-2003*, p. xv.

⁴² Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 73.

⁴³ Michio Morishima, *Why has Japan 'succeeded'? Western Technology and the Japanese Ethos* (Cambridge: Cambridge press, 1982), p. 50.

After returning to Japan in September 1873, the mission members synthesized their observations and analyses from the West into a comprehensive report to launch Japan's modernization. The Japanese government published this report as a five-volume book, which sheds light on the development path of the Japanese administration and people.⁴⁴ This encyclopedia, entitled "*The Iwakura Embassy, 1871-73: A True Account of the Ambassador Extraordinary & Plenipotentiary's Journey of Observation Through the United States of America and Europe*", was one of the cornerstones of Japanese modernization. According to the mission report, Japan needed reforms to catch up with Western states and, therefore, it should emulate Western civilization's technological and commercial power. However, while taking the West as an example, it should never break away from its own essence and culture.⁴⁵

For the Iwakura Delegation, the most pressing need for Japan's modernization was to increase the country's exports. According to their research, the volume of exported goods was so small that it did not meet latent foreign demand, but the transport of goods was unsafe, and a regular presence in foreign markets for Japanese wares had not yet been established. Moreover, transportation within Japan itself was also very weak; the delegates noted that the transportation cost of a few kilometres in Japan was higher than the transportation cost of thousands of kilometres in the United States. Thus, it was underlined that an important pillar of Japan's modernization should be the expansion and development of the railway network.⁴⁶ So, the first railway track was formally opened in 1872 (Yokohama–Shinbashi in Tokyo), and the length of the track increased from about 120 kilometres in 1881 to 3300 in 1895 and 5000 by the turn of the century.⁴⁷ Undoubtedly, the construction of railway networks marked a significant shift in reducing the country's dependence on imports and fostering a focus on domestic production.⁴⁸ For instance, Japan, which had previously relied on foreign nations to meet all its military needs—ranging from warships and firearms to uniforms—underwent a complete transformation after 1900. Although Japan continued to depend primarily on Britain for naval training and warship production (and on Germany for officer training), basic military necessities such as firearms and uniforms were largely supplied through local manufacturing. Furthermore, the establishment of Western-style factories spurred the growth of the silk and cotton industries, and by 1914, silk alone accounted for nearly one-third of Japan's total exports.

⁴⁴ F.G. Notehelfer, et. al., "An Extraordinary Odyssey: The Iwakura Embassy Translated", *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 59, No. 1, (2004), p. 84.

⁴⁵ Kenichi Ohno, 44.

⁴⁶ F. G. Notehelfer, et al., "An Extraordinary Odyssey: . . .," p. 95.

⁴⁷ Curtis Andressen, *A Short History of Japan: From Samurai to Sony*, (Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2002), 90.

⁴⁸ Yukhici Fukuzawa, *An Outline of Theory of Civilization*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 253.

This shift not only underscored the nation's industrial advancement but also exemplified a strategic move toward self-sufficiency, reducing reliance on external suppliers while stimulating key sectors of the economy.⁴⁹

At this juncture, it is essential to underscore that the adoption of Western technology in Japan did not entail a wholesale abandonment of traditional Edo-period production methods. Rather, these indigenous practices were selectively adapted and strategically integrated into the emerging modern industrial economy. For instance, traditional techniques were modified to facilitate the processing of shorter-staple Japanese cotton, and artisans incorporated mechanical tools in ways that enhanced, rather than replaced, their established craftsmanship. This case serves as a critical illustration of Japan's distinctive approach to modernization—one characterized not by passive imitation of the West, but by a dynamic and pragmatic synthesis of foreign innovation with indigenous tradition.⁵⁰ Another key case is the iron and steel industry, which saw a nuanced balance between Western technical imports and local innovation. For example, the Yawata Steel Works, established in 1901 with German assistance, was based on Western metallurgical practices. However, once operational, Japanese engineers rapidly localized operations, adapted production techniques to available domestic raw materials, and gradually replaced foreign technicians with trained Japanese workers.⁵¹ This localization process did not reject Western methods, but strategically reinterpreted them within the context of Japanese economic, labor, and resource conditions.

One of the most important modernization policies was undoubtedly the reforms implemented in the field of education. In this context, when examining the educational reforms of the Meiji period, it becomes clear that the primary objective was to elevate Japan to the same level as modern Western nations. However, an important distinction is made here. The aim is not to adopt the philosophy, traditions, and culture of the West, but to attain the technological developments such as steamships, locomotives, telegraph, printing, and postal systems that enabled the West to become a modern state. This pragmatic approach reflected Japan's determination to strengthen its industrial and military capabilities without wholesale cultural assimilation.⁵²

⁴⁹ Janet Hunter, *The Emergence of Modern Japan* (Australia: Horwitz Publications, 1977), pp. 159, 161, 366.

⁵⁰ Kenichi Ohno, *Economic Development of Japan* (Japan: Yuhikaku Publishing, 2006), p. 54.

⁵¹ Kazuhiro Yoshida, "Skills and Technological Development in the Early Stage of Industrialization Implications from Japanese Experiences in the Meiji Era", *Journal of International Cooperation in Education*, Vol.13, No.2 (2010), pp. 40-43.

⁵² Louis Allen, *Japan: The Years of Triumph: From Feudal Isolation to Pacific Empire* (United State: American Heritage Press, 1971), p. 20.

An examination of Japan's educational modernization policies reveals that, although Western countries inspired the initial measures, they encountered local resistance, which subsequently redirected and reshaped these policies in a different trajectory.⁵³ The 1872 Educational Reform marked a significant turning point in Japan's modernization efforts, with the country initially adopting the French educational system as its primary model. This framework emphasized a secular, Western-style education aimed at developing scientific and technical knowledge.⁵⁴ However, this reform proved unsuitable for Japanese conditions, leading to the adoption of elements from the American model and the subsequent implementation of the Prussian system.⁵⁵ The educational policies of the 1870s, however, effectively marginalized indigenous national values. However, policymakers soon recognized the necessity of balancing modernization with cultural preservation. In this context, Confucian ethics and Shinto teachings were systematically integrated into the curriculum, creating a unique synthesis of Eastern and Western pedagogical approaches.⁵⁶ In this context, after 1872, resistance to Westernization intertwined with the search for a uniquely Japanese approach to modernization. After nearly two decades of experimentation, this search culminated in the promulgation of the Imperial Educational Edict of 1890, which concluded this formative phase. The Edict ushered in a period of stability for modern Japanese education, and Japan subsequently embarked on a unique path toward modernization.⁵⁷

As a result, by combining Western knowledge with traditional values, Japan created an educational paradigm that supported both industrial success and nation-building goals. This strategic approach not only facilitated Japan's rapid rise as a global power but also established an enduring template for how societies can selectively adapt foreign models while maintaining their cultural distinctiveness.

As illustrated in the examples above, the Iwakura Mission closely observed industrial developments in the West and played a pivotal role in guiding Japan's radical modernization process. However, their approach was not one of uncritical admiration; rather, it was characterized by a discerning and evaluative perspective. The mission understood that, regardless of the West's advancements, what proved effective in Western societies would not

⁵³ Donald H. Shively, *Tradition and Modernization in Japanese Culture in The Early Meiji Transformation of Education*, by Michio Nagai (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 35.

⁵⁴ Kenneth G. Henshall, *A History of Japan from Stone Age to Super Power* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 84-86.

⁵⁵ Donald H. Shively, *Tradition and Modernization in Japanese Culture*..., pp. 37-38.

⁵⁶ Carol Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 96-105.

⁵⁷ Donald H. Shively, *Tradition and Modernization in Japanese Culture*..., p. 44.

necessarily yield the same outcomes in Japan. Consequently, during the Meiji era, modernization reforms were implemented not through blind imitation but through the careful adaptation of Western models following Japan's internal dynamics and cultural traditions. In this context, the Japanese embraced what they called a “*wakon yōsai*” (harmonious solution) a developmental philosophy that sought to synthesize the “Japanese spirit” with “Western knowledge.”⁵⁸ This conceptual framework became the foundation for a wide-ranging and coordinated reform movement, encompassing education, military organization, industrial development, commercial regulation, and the improvement of logistical infrastructure. Through this synthesis, Japan embarked on a transformative path of modernization, marked by both pragmatism and cultural continuity.⁵⁹ This synthesis, created and implemented by Japan, has been very successful. In a time that can be considered short for states, such as forty years, Japan, its region, has even become one of the world's most important powers.⁶⁰

In contrast to many non-Western states that adopted Western institutions and cultural models either for survival or by choice, Japan followed a distinctive path. Since the Meiji era (1868–1912), Japan drew on external influences for change and growth, but it did so through a process of selective adaptation rather than wholesale adoption. Foreign ideas and systems were not implemented in their original forms; instead, they were modified to suit domestic needs and socio-cultural conditions. This pragmatic approach to modernization was deeply intertwined with the distinctive characteristics of the Japanese people. The Japanese demonstrated extraordinary discipline and collective commitment during the postwar period. By working six days a week, saving approximately 20% of their income, and dedicating their evenings to scientific and educational advancement, they rapidly elevated their national prosperity. In 1950, Japan's national income stood at approximately 10 billion USD. Within just a few decades, emerging from the devastation and famine of 1945, the country transformed itself into the world's third-largest economy by the 1970s. Japan's remarkable growth, which recorded the fastest rate of development in modern history, can be attributed to its ability to apply technological innovation and the productive capacities of modernization to everyday life. Strategic policy frameworks encouraged domestic investment and industrial productivity. By 1974, Japan had broken global records in economic performance, increasing its national income

⁵⁸ Curtis Andressen, p. 87; Li Narangoa, Japan's Modernization: The Iwakura Mission to Scandinavia in 1873, “*KONTUR: Culture, History, Politics - Tidsskrift for Kulturstudier*” (2000), p. 18.

⁵⁹ Michio Morishima, Why has Japan Succeeded?, Western Technology and the Japanese Ethos, (Cambridge: Cambridge press, 1982), 32; Wm. Theodore de Bary, *East Asian Civilizations: A Dialogue in Five Stages*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 80-89.

⁶⁰ Gordon, Andrew, *A Modern History of Japan: ...*, p. 94.

fortyfold to 400 billion USD.⁶¹ This success story exemplifies a model of modernization that combined external influences with internal discipline and long-term vision—one rooted not in imitation, but in innovation and cultural continuity.

As can be seen, Japan's modernization process, which began during the Meiji era, significantly accelerated in the aftermath of World War II. Driven by the ambition to catch up with—and eventually surpass—Europe and the United States, Japan aimed to become a major economic and cultural power. This vision was particularly intensified in the postwar period, as the country shifted its focus from imperial expansion to economic development. Although Japan's attempt to establish a European-style colonial empire in Asia during the early 20th century ultimately failed with its defeat in World War II, the postwar era marked a profound transformation. Japan redefined its global role not through territorial conquest, but through rapid industrialization, technological advancement, and economic resilience. This transition enabled Japan to emerge as a leading economic power in Asia. As a result, Japan became a model of successful non-Western modernization and economic development for other Asian nations, particularly Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. These countries viewed Japan not only as an example of how to modernize without abandoning cultural identity but also as a strategic partner in regional development. Japan's experience thus contributed significantly to reshaping development paradigms in postcolonial Asia, offering an alternative to Western-centric models of modernization.⁶²

Abdurreshid Ibrahim's Perspective on Japanese Modernization

Abdurreshid Ibrahim, a prominent Tatar-Ottoman intellectual, was born on 23 April 1857 in Tara, a small town in the Tomsk Province of Western Siberia. He was raised in a religious and intellectually active household, though his early life was marked by material hardship and political constraints. His mother, Afife, of Bashkir descent, served as an instructor for female students in a local madrasa, while his father, Ömer, was involved in religious and communal affairs. The premature loss of both parents compelled Ibrahim to continue his education independently, studying in various madrasas across Siberia and the Volga region. These formative experiences played a significant role in shaping his intellectual journey.⁶³ Motivated

⁶¹ Chalmers A. Johnson, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle: The Growth of Industrial Policy, 1925-1975* (United State: Stanford University Press, 1982), pp. 6-8.

⁶² Hisao Furukawa, "Meiji Japan's Encounter with Modernization", *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 33, No.3, (1995), 234; Nakaruma Katsumi, "The Modernization of Japan", *Keio Economic Studies*, Vol. 5, (1968), p. 36.

⁶³ Abdurresit İbrahim, *Tercüme-i Halim Ya Ki Başıma Gelenler*, edited by İsmail Türkoğlu (İstanbul: Mac Media, 2017), pp. 5-15.

by both intellectual curiosity and a deep concern for the condition of Muslim communities under imperial domination, Ibrahim gradually came to the conviction that he needed to observe the broader world firsthand. He believed that the future of Muslims in Russia and beyond could not be secured solely through local reform efforts but required an understanding of global political dynamics and encounters with societies that had successfully navigated the pressures of Western imperialism. This conviction prompted him to embark on a major journey in 1908, which would take him across South and East Asia. His travels first led him to India, where he observed the struggles of Muslim communities under British colonial rule. He then proceeded to China, engaging with local Muslim networks and familiarizing himself with their social and political circumstances. The culmination of his journey, however, was Japan—a country that had retained its independence while undergoing rapid modernization. For Ibrahim, Japan represented a living example of how a non-Western nation could adopt modern institutions without succumbing to colonial domination.⁶⁴ After arriving there, he toured various cities and spent approximately seven months in Tokyo, departing on 19 June 1909 to continue his journey to Korea. During this period, he traveled to various parts of Japan, gaining detailed insights into the daily lives and intellectual world of the Japanese people.⁶⁵

From the moment Ibrahim set foot in Japan, what immediately struck him was the refined character of the Japanese people: they were civilized, polite, respectful, and placed great importance on cleanliness. At the same time, he was impressed by the fact that Japan had attained the status of a modern and developed state comparable to those of Europe. For example, his first stop, the city of Yokohama, appeared to him as one of the clearest signs of Japan's progress toward becoming a modern nation. He observed that the city not only possessed a vast transportation network but also accommodated numerous shops, workshops, and factories, thereby creating a broad sphere of employment. Later, in Tokyo, he was deeply impressed by the double-track railway system, the wide avenues, the uninterrupted flow of electric trams encircling the city, and the regular train services that passed every ten minutes. What astonished him even more was that such development was not confined to the major urban centers. During his stay in Japan, Ibrahim frequently visited villages and carefully observed daily life there, noting that rural areas, too, reflected the spirit of modernization. One of the first places he visited was the village of *Maybara*. He remarked on its narrow streets reminiscent of traditional Eastern alleys, the wooden houses built side by side, and—most surprising of all—the presence

⁶⁴ Abdurresit İbrahim, *Alem-i İslam ve Japonya'da İslam'ın yayılması 1*, edited by Ertuğrul Özalp (İstanbul:İşaret Yayınları, 2003).

⁶⁵ İsmail Türkoğlu, *Sibiryalı Meşhur Seyyah Abdürreşid İbrahim* (Ankara: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2009), pp. 40-42.

of a telephone in such a small settlement. Furthermore, the existence of a post office, a telegraph office, and a school in the village clearly demonstrated that Japan's modernization extended well beyond its cities and had also penetrated the countryside.⁶⁶ Another village he visited was *Hodokaya*. Although it was a relatively small settlement, the village contained three factories, two schools, and a library. In addition, a local newspaper titled *Nici Hokoyaka* was published there every week. Such features, Ibrahim observed, reflected how even the Japanese countryside embodied the dynamism of modernization and the diffusion of modern institutions.⁶⁷

As is well known, one of the most significant elements of modernization is education. For this reason, during his stay in Japan, İbrahim developed a deep interest in the Japanese educational system and sought to understand its fundamental dynamics. What particularly caught his attention was not only the transfer of knowledge and its successful adoption by the Japanese, but also the preservation of traditional values alongside this process. He described Japan as a country that had managed to embrace Western knowledge while at the same time safeguarding its traditional structure.⁶⁸ He observed that primary education in Japan was compulsory, and responsibility for a child's schooling rested not only with the parents or guardians but also with the local police authorities assigned to each neighbourhood. Children were admitted to school at the age of five; however, during the first year, no formal lessons were taught. Instead, pupils were gradually accustomed to the school environment through play, with formal instruction beginning at the age of six. From the first grade onward, physical education was compulsory and regulated by specific laws. In addition to regular schools, Japan also provided institutions for disadvantaged groups, such as schools for the blind and the deaf.⁶⁹ Equally striking to Ibrahim was the emphasis placed on preserving the Japanese language within the education system. Science textbooks were written entirely in Japanese, and translations from foreign languages were generally not accepted for school use. Instead, original works were authored in Japanese, and even newly introduced inventions were given Japanese names—for instance, *Yūbin* for postal services, *Shashin* for photography, and indigenous terms for the telegraph and telephone.⁷⁰ During his visits, İbrahim also toured several higher education institutions, including state universities, where he observed departments such as chemistry,

⁶⁶ Abdurresit İbrahim, *Alem-i İslam ve Japonya'da İslam'ın yayılması 1*, pp. 274,280,284,290,293.

⁶⁷ Onur Akan, Abdürreşid İbrahim'e göre Japonya'da modernizm ve İslam, Unpublished M.A Thesis, Karadeniz Teknik Üniversitesi, (2017), p. 75.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 82.

⁶⁹ Abdurresit İbrahim, *Alem-i İslam ve Japonya'da İslam'ın yayılması 1*, pp. 325-326, and 438.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 324.

anatomy, autopsy studies, and hospital facilities. Particularly remarkable to him was the practical training in forensic medicine and the advanced instruments available in the autopsy laboratories. He also visited *Shōgaku Kako*, a girls' school dedicated to preserving national morality, which took as its guiding principle the maxim attributed to Genghis Khan: "A country is conquered by arms, but preserved by economy."⁷¹ Another aspect that impressed Ibrahim was the devotion and sacrifice of Japanese elites for the sake of education. He noted, for example, that Marshal *Oyama*, one of Japan's most prominent figures, voluntarily assumed the directorship of a school as a means of serving his nation. Similarly, he admired the philanthropic dedication of a man named Tanaka, who had for six or seven years gathered orphans under his care, donated his entire house for their use, and chosen instead to live with his wife in a modest hut. For Ibrahim, such examples demonstrated how deeply education was embedded not only in Japan's state policy but also in the moral commitment of its people.⁷²

One of the most significant indicators of modernization is scientific and technological progress. For this reason, during his stay in Japan, Ibrahim carefully examined scientific and technological innovations and their reflections on social life. According to his observations, the Japanese had reached the capability to produce many items with their own means, such as machines, leather made from fish skin, machines for extracting fish oil, and firearms. In Ibrahim's view, Japan's exports had far exceeded its imports. He argued that if Japan maintained this stability, it would become a self-sufficient country, no longer dependent on foreign powers.⁷³ In this context, Ibrahim places particular emphasis on Yokohama, one of Japan's modern commercial centers. Possessing one of the earliest ports opened to trade with Europe, Yokohama, in his account, appears as a miniature model of modern Japanese society. The city's population exceeded 200,000; its rivers, canals, and bridges provided extensive means of transportation, while a tramline ensured uninterrupted access from one end of the city to the other. Along the streets stood shops, stores, factories, and art workshops; telephone booths were present on every corner, and, notably, Ibrahim observed that there was no unemployment in the city. For him, Yokohama became the place where he could observe the Japanese people most closely and examine in depth the tangible manifestations of modernization.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 465-467.

⁷² Ibid., pp. 501-503.

⁷³ Ibid., 372-373.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 284-285.

As seen above, Ibrahim's observations directly correspond to the success of industrialization and modernization policies implemented during the Meiji period. Therefore, his insights were not limited to individual impressions but rather reflected Japan's deliberate state-led initiatives in economic, technological, and educational modernization. In this respect, Ibrahim's evaluations of Japan reveal how an Ottoman intellectual observing from the outside recognized the extent to which the country successfully achieved its goal of "self-sufficiency" through both industry and education.

Conclusion

Abdurreshid Ibrahim's journey to Japan offers a unique perspective on how modernization could be imagined outside the West. His observations show that Japan had achieved a remarkable balance: adopting modern institutions, technologies, and educational systems while simultaneously preserving cultural identity and moral foundations. For Ibrahim, this was not merely evidence of Japan's success, but also a lesson for Muslim societies struggling under colonial domination and internal stagnation. As this study has demonstrated, Ibrahim paid particular attention to education, technology, and commerce as the pillars of Japan's transformation. The compulsory and inclusive educational system, the localization of scientific knowledge into the Japanese language, the devotion of elites to public service, and the spread of schools even in small villages—all illustrated for him that progress must be rooted in both state policy and societal commitment. Likewise, his observations of technological innovation and expanding trade, especially in cities like Yokohama, revealed a country steadily moving toward economic self-sufficiency. Yet Ibrahim's reflections were not simply descriptive. They were prescriptive in the sense that Japan became a "mirror" through which he assessed the condition of Muslim societies. This perspective contributes to a more nuanced understanding of modernization as a plural process. Japan's example, as filtered through Ibrahim's account, undermines the Eurocentric assumption that modernization equals Westernization. Instead, it points toward the possibility of multiple modernities—paths shaped by selective borrowing, creative adaptation, and cultural continuity. Ibrahim's narrative therefore, not only illuminates Meiji Japan but also enriches Islamic intellectual history, showing how global encounters redefined what it meant to be modern. In conclusion, Ibrahim's encounter with Japan reveals modernization as a dialogical and contested process—one in which societies actively negotiate between external models and internal values. His reflections remind us that the question of how to modernize has never had a single answer, but many. For Muslim reformers of his time, Japan represented not only a success story but also an invitation to reimagine their own futures.

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