



## A Muslim Intellectual in Korea: *Abdürreşid İbrahim (1857–1944) and Situating Korea in the Pan-Asian World Order*

Muhammed Cihad KUBAT

### Abstract

*Abdürreşid İbrahim, a leading Muslim scholar originally from Russia, embarked on his journey to Japan in 1908 to meet with his contacts from Kokuryūkai (Black Dragon Society). On his way back, he spent around ten days in the Korean Empire. İbrahim, who was convinced of the “barbarism” of the West, found quite a few examples in Korea to build upon his theory of “Eastern civility,” just as he had found during his time in Japan. He met with a range of people, from porters to the Korean Empire’s Interior Minister, and wrote about them in his travelogue titled Âlem-i İslâm [The World of Islam]. This paper argues that İbrahim was particularly sympathetic to Koreans because he saw their position in a world of imperial hierarchies as analogous to that of Muslims in the Russian Empire. In Korea, İbrahim’s anti-Westernism is coupled with his vision of a Pan-Asian world order led by Imperial Japan. Âlem-i İslâm is significant because it is the only account of the Korean Empire’s final years written by a Muslim intellectual.*

**Keywords:** Abdürreşid İbrahim, *Âlem-i İslâm*, Korean Empire, Joseon dynasty, Japanese colonialism, Japanese annexation, anti-Westernism, Pan-Islamism, Tatars, Black Dragon Society

---

I would like to express my thanks to the anonymous reviewers whose careful reading and constructive criticism made this a better article. I am also grateful to the following people for their contributions in different stages of the writing of this paper: Michael J. Pettid, Kenneth Weisbrode, Samuel J. Hirst, and Owen Miller. An earlier version of this study was presented at the 9th World Congress of Korean Studies at the Academy of Korean Studies.

Muhammed Cihad KUBAT is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of History at Bilkent University and a research assistant in the Department of History at İnönü University. E-mail: cihadkubat@gmail.com.

## Introduction

A number of Western travelers visited Korea during the late Joseon dynasty and the Korean Empire period.<sup>1</sup> However, the only Muslim who visited Korea during this period and left extensive documentation is Abdürreşid İbrahim (1857–1944). İbrahim’s travelogue, *Âlem-i İslam ve Japonya’da Intisari İslamiyet* (The World of Islam and the Spread of Islam in Japan)<sup>2</sup> is unique in the sense that it provides the most detailed account of Korea left by a Muslim until the 20th century. As Andre Schmid suggested, most Western travelers visited Korea after an initial stay in Japan and were oftentimes “disposed of Japan’s involvement in Korea” (Schmid 2002, 163). İbrahim was also prone to the idea of Japan’s leadership in Asia, which he thought was the best way for the Asian nations—including Muslims—to rise against the dominance of Western powers. Nevertheless, this did not prevent him from considering Korea as a unique case similar to the Tatars in Russia. The fact that İbrahim himself was a well-known Tatar intellectual who lived in Russia makes his comparison between Koreans and Tatars/Bashkirs much more candid.<sup>3</sup> In Korea, İbrahim was especially interested in the lives of ordinary people. Throughout his sojourn in Korea, İbrahim perceived an innate capacity for greatness in its people.<sup>4</sup>

On September 16, 1908, İbrahim embarked upon his great journey starting from Kazan and traveling through most of East and South Asia. Even though most of İbrahim’s visits to places inside East Asia have been scrutinized carefully, his visit to Korea has not been thoroughly researched.<sup>5</sup> This article focuses on Abdürreşid İbrahim’s ten days spent in Korea,

---

1. For some Western travel accounts during the late Joseon dynasty and Korean Empire, see for example, Vautier and Frandin (1904), Appenzeller (1902), Hamilton (1904), Tayler (1904), Underwood (1908), McKenzie (1908), Ladd (1908), Hamilton, et al. (1910).

2. Afterwards, *Âlem-i İslam*.

3. For İbrahim’s early intellectual activities see Uzun (n.d.).

4. For Koreans’ opinions about their capacity for greatness, see Eckert (2000).

5. For studies on İbrahim’s visit to Japan see Brandenburg (2018), Özbek (1994), and Esenbel (1995). For a detailed account of İbrahim’s visit to China, see Yamazaki (2014). In his book, Hee-Soo Lee (1988) roughly covers İbrahim’s visit to Korea in the larger context of his travels.

drawing mainly on his travelogue, *Âlem-i İslam*, to shed light on Korea's situation just prior to its annexation. İbrahim arrived at Busan port from Japan on June 19, 1909. The following day he reached Seoul and was received by high profile figures such as the Minister of the Interior. However, because İbrahim was especially interested in the daily lives of the native population, he interacted with a variety of ordinary people during his ten days in Korea. İbrahim's ability to converse in Russian and Japanese allowed him to talk directly with Koreans who knew these languages. With monolingual Koreans, he spoke through his Japanese interpreter.

As Cemil Aydın suggested in his book, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought*, wherever İbrahim visited, "he was always focused on the questions of the progress and development of Muslims and other Asians, as well as their despair under colonial rule and the necessity for their unity" (Aydın 2007b, 84). İbrahim's observations of Korea are also in line with the above-mentioned themes. The first major theme concerns Koreans' affinity with the Tatars/Bashkirs. Since İbrahim himself was a Tatar who lived under the dominance of Imperial Russia, observing Koreans slowly subjugated by the Japanese made him quite sympathetic to Koreans. İbrahim's illustration of the affinity between Koreans and Tatars/Bashkirs in *Âlem-i İslam* stems from a sense of collective poverty and oppression. However, İbrahim was a staunch defender of a Pan-Asian world order led by Japan in collaboration with Muslims against the West's dominance. This predisposition caused him to envisage Korea's future under Japan's domination from a positive angle. İbrahim's reflections on Korea allow us to explore Korea's place in Pan-Asian and anti-Western thought at the turn of the 20th century.

### **Outline of İbrahim's Journey to Korea**

Abdürreşid İbrahim was one of the foremost Muslim intellectuals of the 20th century. He was also one of the greatest Muslim travelers of all time, setting foot on three continents and traveling constantly throughout his life. In this respect, he can be compared to the famous Muslim traveler Ibn-

Battuta. İbrahim was born in Tobol'sk, a town in Western Siberia, on April 23, 1857 to a Tatar family of Bukharan ancestry (Türkoğlu 1997, 7; Kırımli 1996, 60). After completing his religious studies in both Russia and the Ottoman Empire, he was appointed a *qadı* (judge) in the Russian town of Ufa (Türkoğlu 1997, 12–13). As a Pan-Islamic intellectual, he was critical of the Russian Empire's policies towards Muslim Turks living in Russia. Along with Fatih Kerimi, İsmail Gaspıralı, and Ali Merdan Bey Topçubaşov, he organized the Congress of Russian Muslims. İbrahim was an extremely gifted author who wrote tirelessly throughout his life. However, his activism and opposition to the ruling elite of the Russian Empire did not assist him in achieving his aims. In 1887, İbrahim resigned from his post due to governmental pressure, and left Russia for Istanbul (Türkoğlu 1997, 17–19). İbrahim eventually became an Ottoman citizen but this did not prevent him from traveling. In 1887, İbrahim set out on a journey to Egypt, the Hejaz, Palestine, Italy, Austria, France, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Western Russia, Caucasia, Transoxiana, West Turkestan, East Turkestan, and the Yedisu region in Siberian, returning to his hometown in Tobol'sk after a long journey of three years. İbrahim covered some 43.653 km in the course of his three-year journey (Türkoğlu 1997, 22). After his return to his hometown, he first travelled to Japan at the end of 1900, though we do not know why or for what purpose. Based upon later evidence, it is very probable that during this period he established a link with the Kokuryūkai (Black Dragon Society)<sup>6</sup> and befriended some of its members. According to Selçuk Esenbel, İbrahim became a close friend of the Japanese military attaché Colonel Akashi Motojiro (Esenbel 2004, 1148). During the period 1902–1903, İbrahim went to Japan again and supported anti-Russian propaganda. Following the Russian ambassador's request to Japanese authorities, İbrahim was asked to leave Japan (Rorlich [1986] 2017, 236). After his return to Russia, İbrahim organized Muslim Congresses to discuss

---

6. Kokuryūkai (Black Dragon Society) was founded in 1901 by Uchida Ryōhei. It was mainly concerned with the Japanese expansion on the Asian continent. Due to its members' close ties with high-level government officials, the Society evolved into one of the most important ultranationalist groups in pre-World War II Japan. For more on Kokuryūkai, see Saaler (2014).



**Figure 1.** Abdürreşid İbrahim's road to Japan

Source: Author's illustration based on *Âlem-i İslam*.

pressing issues facing Muslims and to make pleas for unity. With the Russian Revolution of 1905, İbrahim felt the atmosphere was no longer suitable for him to continue his mission in Russia and he decided to set out on further travels. This journey, which commenced on September 16, 1908, is well documented due to his later travelogue *Âlem-i İslam*. İbrahim departed from Turkestan, traveling through Siberia to reach Mongolia, China, Russia, and finally Japan.

After its triumph in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), Japan saw its reputation around the world improve significantly (Aydın 2007a, 218). Japan's victory was also positively received by Muslims around the world. The Ottoman press praised Japan's victory, and this event has often been viewed as a significant moment in the anti-Western revival in the Ottoman Empire. The Young Turks were fascinated by Japan's reformation and they often imagined an Ottoman Empire as powerful in the Near East as Japan

was in Asia.<sup>7</sup> İbrahim was also among those impressed by Japan's recent accomplishments. İbrahim saw in Japan a potential leader of the world, and a country that could lead Muslims, on the condition that it converted to Islam. He was mainly concerned with the reform of Muslim culture so as to return it to the ideal model of Islam, embracing a modernity that was compatible with Islamic values (Esenbel 2004, 1151). In Japan, İbrahim seems to have found a model for Muslims to modernize without having to abandon their traditional values since, after all, Japan was doing just that and proving successful. For their part, the Japanese authorities saw in İbrahim a potential leader of Muslims given the popularity he already enjoyed among many.

İbrahim's first interaction with Koreans in his travelogue *Âlem-i İslam* comes in Vladivostok. There, İbrahim expresses his anti-Western sentiments when he observes many impoverished Koreans waiting for work: "There are many Koreans in Vladivostok; only Allah knows how many. This human mass is indeed in need of compassion. Alas! 'civilized people' pity dogs but not their fellow man" (İbrahim 2003, 1:252). İbrahim's anti-Westernism stems directly from his own experience in Russia as a member of a minority. As a Pan-Islamist intellectual, he was concerned for the future of Muslims in a rapidly Westernizing world. İbrahim was convinced that Western civilization was not interested in using its power to benefit all humanity. Rather, it was content with eliminating other cultures in pursuit of its own objectives. Therefore, non-Westerners had to react quickly and collectively to balance and eventually supersede the West (Ayдын 2007b, 87). As will be discussed in further detail below, İbrahim's anti-Western sentiments and his ethnicity as a Tatar became major factors in his assessment of Koreans.

### **Miserable Koreans in Vladivostok and İbrahim's Anti-Westernism**

Increasing European hegemony in parts of Asia forced non-European intellectuals to reconsider their place in the world. In the process of doing

---

7. For more on the Young Turks' imagining of Japan, see Worringer (2014).

this, most of them were strongly influenced by Eurocentric ideas and the concept of modernity as defined by Europeans. From the late 1880s onwards, Muslim Pan-Islamist intellectuals and Japanese supporters of Pan-Asianism experimented with rivaling discourses that had the potential to challenge the existing Eurocentric idea of modernity. According to Cemil Aydın, this process caused a “revolt against the West” among the supporters of Pan-Islamism and Pan-Asianism (Aydın 2006, 204). Vladimir Tikhonov’s research has demonstrated that Pan-Asianism ideology clearly influenced some Korean intellectuals in the early 1880s, and the idea of European threat “resonated so well with Korea’s own concerns about European...expansion” (Tikhonov 2002, 228). Abdürreşid İbrahim, as a well-known Pan-Islamist intellectual, was at the forefront in the creation of a rival discourse to Eurocentric modernity. One of the main pillars of this discourse was an anti-Western sentiment that challenged the idea of Western superiority and created a non-Western universalism, if you will. Therefore, İbrahim’s observations in Vladivostok should be seen by taking into account the West, represented by Russia, and the non-West, represented by Koreans living under the hegemony of the Russian Empire.

One of the first things İbrahim noticed upon reaching Vladivostok was the quantity of Koreans living there and Russians’ seeming indifference to them. The port city Vladivostok (meaning ‘power of the East’) was established by the Russians in late 1860. Korean immigration to Russia officially began with the signing of the Treaty of Beijing, but some Koreans had already moved to Primorskaya oblast when it was under the control of the Qing Dynasty (Suh 2001, 65). İbrahim observed those who would later be called *Goryeo saram*. He suggests that “since compassion is in the nature of the Eastern,” he very much pitied the state of Koreans. It was Korean porters that interested İbrahim the most. Since they were more or less everywhere in large quantities doing the hard labor, he felt compassionate for them: “in front of every hotel, there are at least five Koreans waiting day and night,” and he adds, “but [the Korean] cannot be near the door because the bellboy will not allow it, therefore, he stands still all the day” (İbrahim 2003, 1:253). İbrahim suggests that most of the Korean porters were hungry and at the mercy of their clients. Since Koreans could not communicate in



Russian, they could not bargain as well. He gave 10 *kapik*<sup>8</sup> to a Korean porter who carried his belongings from the Vladivostok station to the Krimski Hotel and “the poor fellow could not believe it and kept gazing at my face and then the money” (İbrahim 2003, 1:253). This instance clearly shows that Korean porters were paid relatively lowly by other customers. İbrahim then asserts that if there was a need to record the state of Koreans in Vladivostok, he could write a novel that would bring tears to the reader’s eyes. He adds how he felt pity for Koreans and could not dismiss them from his thoughts the entire time he was in Vladivostok. Later, İbrahim provides the reader a dialogue he had with a Korean porter who could speak a little Russian:

- Why are there so many [Korean] porters [here]?  
Korean, after wiping away his tears:
- Have you ever seen a nation in the world so unfortunate as ours? What can we do but be porters? This punishment is even marginal for a nation that did not appreciate the value of sovereignty. We handed over our country to foreigners and chose this disgrace. May Allah curse the ones who caused it.
- ...
- Are there any wealthy among you?
- Though there are some in our homeland, there are none here and there cannot be. Since we do not know the language, we cannot be useful. The ones who know the language among us are seduced by drunkenness, therefore, they are inefficient. (İbrahim 2003, 1:254)

According to *Âlem-i İslam*, there was much poverty among Koreans in Vladivostok. They were having trouble landing jobs since they did not possess the relevant linguistic skills. İbrahim inquires whether it is better to live in Korea or not. The porter immediately answers that living conditions in Korea are worse than in Vladivostok due to famine and missionaries. “Missionaries take your life to make you Christian,” and the porter adds “if you do not accept their offer, they will not give you alcohol” (İbrahim 2003, 1:254). İbrahim then asks whether Koreans convert to Christianity in large

---

8. A percentage of a Russian ruble.



numbers. The porter posits that most poor Koreans convert to Christianity because they have no other choice, and many become Christian for the sake of a bottle of alcohol. İbrahim later asks the porter, “Given that you [Koreans] convert to Christianity, send your children to [Christian] schools...at least they [your children] will be able to escape from this state of being” (İbrahim 2003, 1:254). This question reveals the pity İbrahim felt toward Koreans and how he tried to find a way out for them. He must have known the simple fact that if Korean children went to Christian schools, they would most probably become faithful Christians, but it seems İbrahim sincerely wanted Koreans to live an upright life. The porter’s answer to this suggestion exposes the hopelessness of Koreans: “I don’t know, there is nothing but death for us” (İbrahim 2003, 1:255). In his travelogue, İbrahim points out that this answer moves him. Therefore, he decides to visit the Korean neighborhood of Vladivostok with the porter. According to his account, they went to a neighborhood outside of Vladivostok city center and found “poultry houses” built with mud in “weird” shapes. He characterizes the Korean dwellings as poultry houses because they were unlike the other homes in Vladivostok in terms of quality. İbrahim suggests that there were seven to ten inhabitants to every such poultry house, which had no windows but only a chimney. According to him, an hour spent in one of these houses would make a human “mentally dead.” When he enters one of the houses, İbrahim asks whether the police and government officials are aware how Koreans in the neighborhood live. One elderly Korean man answers, “Would the ones leading lives of pleasure know about the lives of the tormented?” (İbrahim 2003, 1:255).

After witnessing the poverty and despair in the Korean village, İbrahim was reminded of human beings’ brutality towards their own. İbrahim considered that discrimination towards non-Westerners in Western society was inherent. Therefore, the situation of Koreans as non-Westerners living under the domination of a Western power was natural. He expresses his anti-Western sentiments regarding Koreans’ situation in Vladivostok by providing the example of animal rights protection groups. According to İbrahim, the West forms such groups with claims of humanity, but on the other hand, they show no mercy for their fellow human beings, in this case,

Koreans (İbrahim 2003, 1:255). Here, İbrahim tries to expose the supposed hypocrisy of the West by giving the example of Koreans living in Vladivostok. İbrahim certainly believes that the state of Koreans in Vladivostok was the fault of the West, here represented by Russia, and he felt compassionate towards them perhaps because he, as a Tatar living in Russia, was also suffering from the West's oppression. While Pan-Islamists living roughly in the same period as İbrahim, such as Muhammad Barkatullah (1864–1927), focused primarily on anti-colonial nationalism and global Muslim networks, İbrahim tried to strengthen the front against the West by allying with the supporters of Pan-Asianism.<sup>9</sup> This approach makes him a unique Muslim intellectual in terms of his approach to world affairs and the future of Islam.

### **Koreans and their Affinity with Tatars/Bashkirs**

On November 17, 1908, Abdürreşid İbrahim departed Vladivostok for Japan aboard the Japanese vessel *Hozan Maru* (İbrahim 2003, 1:267). After living in Japan for about seven months, he decided to return home via Korea. His route back was as follows: Korea, China, Singapore, India, the Hejaz, Mecca, Medina, and Beirut. It took twelve to thirteen hours to reach Busan from Shimonoseki due to a storm in the East Sea, and he reached Busan port at 8 o'clock in the morning on June 19, 1909 (İbrahim 2003, 2:16). It should be noted that during his time in Japan, İbrahim made significant progress in materializing his vision of an alliance between Pan-Islamism and Pan-Asianism. In Japan, he was received by high-ranking officials such as Itō Hirobumi, the first prime minister of Japan, Ōkuma Shigenobu, foreign minister and later prime minister, and Marshal Ōyama Iwao, among others. İbrahim, along with several prominent Japanese Pan-Asianists such as Uchida Ryohei, Toyama Mitsuru, and Inukai Tsuyoshi, founded Ajia Gi Kai (Association for the Defense of Asia) to formalize and increase Muslim contacts with the Japanese (Ayдын 2006, 83). During his seven-month

---

9. For Muhammad Barkatullah's intellectual trajectory, see Siddiqui (2019).



**Figure 2.** Abdürreşid İbrahim’s route in Korea

Source: Author’s illustration based on *Âlem-i İslam*.

sojourn in Japan, İbrahim embraced Pan-Asianism and Japan’s leadership in Asia to some extent, while privately hoping for Japan’s conversion to Islam in the near future. His primary reason for leaving Japan was to return to İstanbul and obtain the caliph’s approval to build a mosque in Tokyo that the Pan-Asianists had commissioned. Therefore, İbrahim’s point of view in Korea was highly affected by the predispositions formed during his time in Japan.

One of İbrahim’s first impressions of Koreans was that they were similar to Ural Bashkirs, a Turkic ethnic group indigenous to Bashkiria. İbrahim characterizes his first impressions of Koreans as follows, “When you see Koreans, you are reminded of Ural Bashkirs.” And he adds “Koreans from all walks of life are completely similar with Ural Bashkirs, their dress and facial features are especially alike” (İbrahim 2003, 2:16). Here, İbrahim makes a significant comparison between Koreans and Bashkirs. Later, he

also compares Koreans with Tatars. Bashkirs and Tatars are Muslim Turkic ethnic groups that at the time lived under the domination of Imperial Russia. Korea, on the other hand, was being rapidly dominated by the Japanese. Therefore, İbrahim was particularly sympathetic to Koreans because he saw their position in a world of imperial hierarchies as analogous to that of Muslims in the Russian Empire.

İbrahim explains to the reader his surprise when he first came across a Korean boatman. For a moment, he hesitated, wondering whether a Bashkir might have come to Korea to work in that business. His admiration for Koreans begins when he takes a landing boat at Busan harbor from the Japanese vessel that brought him from Shimonoseki. Arriving on the shore, he gives half a *yen* (6 *kuruş*<sup>10</sup>) to the Korean boatman, who then vanishes off somewhere. Indifferent to this, İbrahim then continues on his way to the train station.. Since he had some time before his train was to depart, İbrahim took something to eat at a Japanese guesthouse in Busan. Just as he steps outside the guesthouse, a Korean gives him four *kuruş*, and İbrahim asks, “What is this money for?” The Korean answers, “You gave the boatman half a *yen*, this is your change.” İbrahim then expresses his admiration:

This is innate civility. Take a look at the East, which is labeled as uncivilized and barbarian by Western people. To begin with, it is an insignificant amount of money and it took 20 minutes to come here [and find me] from the shore. Who would search you out and find you? But Eastern civility sees one’s rightful due from a different angle. The poor boatman perceived me as a stranger who was ignorant of his tariff and so saw it fit to find me and give me my change. (İbrahim 2003, 2:17)

İbrahim certainly found much to admire in the situation and thought of it as an example of one of the many things Westerners did not appreciate about Eastern culture. İbrahim then asks the boatman why he did not ask him to wait at the shore. The boatman answers, “I thought I would be able to get the change from the shop and catch you” and adds, “when I could not find you,

---

10. İbrahim provides the amount in Ottoman currency to put it in a context the reader could understand.

I regretted it.” Afterward, the boatman apologizes to İbrahim. İbrahim notes that he questioned himself about his own behavior after observing the boatman’s manners since in Korea he was perceived as a European due to his appearance (İbrahim 2003, 2:17–18). Throughout his travelogue, İbrahim asserts his indisposition at being perceived as a European in East Asia when he considered himself a member of Eastern civilization.

In *Âlem-i İslam*, İbrahim starts off describing Busan as a natural trading port. One of the first things he notices is that while the city’s population was mainly composed of Koreans, the administrative positions were, by contrast, occupied heavily by the Japanese. He also notes that the buildings that catch one’s attention were the Japanese government buildings. On the other hand, the homes of Koreans were of very low quality, İbrahim calling them “huts.” As Hong Soon Kwon has pointed out, by 1907, “the building of Japanese urban areas was completed” in Busan, making it not so different from any other Japanese city (Kwon 2008, 2). However, since Japanese quarters occupied the city center, Korean residents were pushed out of the urbanized modernity that the Japanese had created and formed their residential areas outside the city center (Kwon 2008, 32). In other words, Busan became a dual city, in which people lived different lives based on their race.<sup>11</sup> As an inquisitive intellectual, İbrahim specifically goes to the Korean section of Busan to better understand how the Koreans live. According to his travelogue, he visited several Korean houses in Busan, but one aspect about them made him curious: there were no women in sight. In one house he visits, he asks the Koreans the whereabouts of the women: “They told me that just like in our Islamic tradition, women’s quarters were separate and foreigners were not allowed to visit them,” and he adds, “women also wear hijab” (İbrahim 2003, 2:18). What Koreans described to İbrahim has to do with the Confucian tradition of having inner rooms, called *anjae* or *anbang*. The inner rooms meant as the functional space of the headwoman of a family (Jeon 2016, 41). It seems that since the time İbrahim spent in Korea was rather limited, he was unable to observe the complexity of the intellectual tradition of Confucianism and the heterogeneity of women’s

---

11. For scholarship on Korean dual cities see C. Park (2008), Kim (2013), and Y. Lee (2020).

lives in Korea (Kim and Pettid 2011, 1–4). Michael J. Pettid has argued that during the late Joseon era, women were an integral part of the household economy, and their economic roles gave them significant rights and autonomy within the household (Pettid 2011, 41). Therefore, they certainly were not confined to the inner rooms. What İbrahim refers to as hijab, the traditional veil worn by Muslim women, is *nae-oe seugae*, the institutionalized headdresses of Korean women during the Joseon dynasty. This Confucian term indicates that a distinction was made between the domestic (*nae*) sphere of women and the public (*oe*) sphere of men, while *seugae* means headdress or veil (Deuchler 1995, 230). *Nae-oe seugae* was a product of Neo-Confucian social control that aimed to confine women's lives to the domestic sphere (Cho 2017, 565). Throughout his travelogue, İbrahim could not grasp the ideology behind women's place in Korean society and its Confucian roots. Therefore, he contented himself with comparisons to what he knew best.

From Busan, İbrahim takes a train and arrives at a small town he calls "Gizan." Lee Hee-Soo posits this to be a small town near today's Gyeongju city (H. Lee 1988, 249). İbrahim asks the Japanese station official whether he might stay in Gizan for a day. The official gives the green light but warns him that he may not find a suitable place to sleep. İbrahim asks why, and the official answers: "You can stay in a Korean's house, but it would be dirty" (İbrahim 2003, 2:18–19). İbrahim says that since he plans to only stay one night, this will not be a problem. While İbrahim is depositing his belongings at the station, the officer in charge suggests he also deposit his money there: "There will not be any problem, but just in case." He adds, "Koreans are drunk today, in fact they are drunk every day!" (İbrahim 2003, 2:19). He then informs İbrahim that it is a festival day and so there are many Koreans on the roads. Just as İbrahim is departing the station, the station officer suggests he stay in a Japanese house, but that if he is curious he can stay in a Korean one. İbrahim asserts his wish to pass the night in a Korean's house. The officer then warns İbrahim not to cross into the women's quarters of the house.

İbrahim describes what he witnesses in Gizan starting with the festival where most of the people have gathered. Near the festival field, İbrahim sees

both the Korean and the Japanese flags. In the center of the crowd there is a Korean wrestling match (*ssireum*). İbrahim comments that the wrestling is nearly the same as that of the Ural Baskhirs since it is based on contestants wearing a belt and trying to wrap around the opponent's waist and thigh (İbrahim 2003, 2:20). The festival İbrahim observed was *Dano*, a local folk festival that falls on the 5th day of the 5th lunar month. In fact, the festival is celebrated from the 3rd to the 7th day of the 5th month (Lin 2018, 204). However, if we convert İbrahim's day of arrival in the small town to the lunar calendar, it is the 2nd day of the 5th month, which calls into doubt the date he provides the reader. He then suggests that "the Koreans always wear a white gown which is what our Tatars call *ceylan*" and adds "only if they had our Tatar *calpac* on their heads, this place would be Tataristan" (İbrahim 2003, 2:20). İbrahim likened the Koreans wearing white *hanbok* to his consanguineous brothers, the Tatars. Only the *gat*, the traditional hat worn by Korean men, was different, according to him. Inferring from their white clothes, İbrahim argues simplicity to be in the nature of Koreans. He was indeed right. *Sobak* 素朴, which literally means simplicity, has been a cornerstone of the Korean philosophy of living to this day.<sup>12</sup> Koreans have long sought out simplicity in their art, architecture, pottery, dress, literature, cinema, and so forth.<sup>13</sup> He adds that Korean women's dress is similar to that of Tatar women and the existence the *seki* (a room used in the summer) was also the same in both cultures. In addition, İbrahim believes that the making of *darasun*,<sup>14</sup> an alcoholic drink made from milk, was the same in both Tatar and Korean cultures. He is most probably comparing *darasun* with *makkeolli*, a Korean alcoholic beverage made from rice. However, he does note that there is no connection between the two cultures in terms of language. İbrahim was focusing solely on the similarities between words and did not know Korean, thus he assumed there was no linguistic relationship

12. The author wishes to thank David Shuster for introducing this concept in his course titled "North Korean Society and Culture" at Ewha Womans University.

13. For the emphasis on simplicity in Korean art, see Ahn and Chang (2014); in Korean dress, see Kwon and Lee (2015).

14. Hyunhee Park points out that Mongols also used a variation of this word: *sayin darasun*, which means "good wine" (H. Park 2021, 61).



between the two. On the contrary, however, there are some similarities between Korean and Turkic languages (Choi 1996, 28–30). Here, we see a stark difference between İbrahim's points of comparison regarding Japanese and Koreans. Even though İbrahim is quite inclined to the Japanese and their culture, his comparisons are mainly regarding the Japanese culture and its compatibility with Islam. However, when it comes to Koreans, he compares them with his fellow Tatars and does not shy from praising them in a different manner. This stems from an understanding of a collective past experience. After all, Koreans and Tatars were both living under the domination of a foreign power. This perception made him quite sympathetic towards Koreans.

After watching *ssireum*, the Korean folk wrestling, for about two hours, İbrahim takes two elderly Koreans with him and starts exploring the little town. He visits several houses but “could not find a clean house.” While İbrahim is visiting a village, the sun begins to set, and he has to spend the night in a Korean village home. It was not a pleasant experience due to the “dirtiness” of the dwelling and the smoke from the fire used to heat the house. What's more, “both husband and wife were drunk and fought the whole night,” therefore he “sacrificed a night's sleep, and...snuck off with the daylight” (İbrahim 2003, 2:21).

### **Situating Korea in the Pan-Asian World Order**

On the night of June 20, Abdürreşid İbrahim arrived in Seoul. He recalls that the station was lighted by electricity (İbrahim 2003, 2:22). He then starts describing Seoul by suggesting that it is a walled town and that there is also a “castle” within the walled city for the king. By castle here he most probably refers to the royal palace. Other than these, he claims there is nothing of particular of note. He is surprised by the fact that there is not a single house with more than one floor and compares the quality of Seoul to the villages in Russia. He certainly thinks that he came across a village-like place, and he does not appreciate it. Here, we can easily discern one of his prejudices, and İbrahim makes no attempt to learn more about the details of traditional

Korean houses. The next day İbrahim visits the Minister of the Interior. At this time, the Minister of the Interior of the Korean Empire was Bak Jesun (Sunjong sillok [Annals of Sunjong], 2/2/27). İbrahim informs the reader that he had previously met the Minister while he was in Japan, where the Minister gave him his card. İbrahim describes Bak Jesun as a “very good man.” During their meeting, Bak Jesun “mentioned their [Koreans] miserable situation” and “expressed his sorrow and regret” (İbrahim 2003, 2:23). According to another minister<sup>15</sup> at the meeting, the Korean king was a “reckless” man who did not mind Japanese occupation. As reported by the other minister in the meeting, the king would say, “The people are better off with Japanese governance than with ours.” On the other hand, “the crown prince would cry a lot, even the [palace] ladies would cry” (İbrahim 2003, 2:23). İbrahim then relates how, “even though it was difficult to ask,” he inquired whether Korea could be governed as an independent nation in the future. Bak Jesun replies:

There is nothing to govern. Today, the Japanese ask for two-thirds of the country, but the [Korean] people have experienced some freedom since they [the Japanese] came here. Yes, the Japanese will be cruel, and they will treat them [Koreans] as enemies, but the people will still want the Japanese. Because the Japanese made people’s livelihoods easier, constructed roads and various ships, they cleaned and lighted the cities. When the people see this, they will certainly choose them over our government. We will inevitably accept this sooner or later. (İbrahim 2003, 2:24)

İbrahim’s discussion with the ministers provides us exceptional information about the thinking process of some of the high-ranking officials at the Korean court. It should also be noted that since Bak Jesun met with İbrahim in Japan, he most certainly was aware of İbrahim’s Kokuryūkai (Black Dragon Society) connections. One may argue that the words he spoke to İbrahim were not a reflection of his sincere thoughts, yet there were most

---

15. İbrahim provides no details about this minister other than his rank.

probably people who thought in this way. It is curious to note that the Ministers were criticizing Sunjong for his lack of national consciousness while praising the Crown Prince Uimin. Since these two ministers were siding with the crown prince, there is little doubt that they were dissatisfied with Sunjong's governance. İbrahim later asks to leave, and at the end of their meeting the Minister mentions how other Arabs had come to Korea more or less a thousand years previous. The first Korean accounts of contact with Muslims date back to the Goryeo period (Baker 2006, 26). Therefore, Bak Jesun was probably referring to these accounts. İbrahim finally shares his assessment of Korea's situation: "The poor Koreans are dead and a funeral will be held for them" (İbrahim 2003, 2:25).

İbrahim provides his readers a separate section on Korean women and his engaging conversation with an elderly, supposedly Confucian, gentleman he met while wandering about Seoul. He asks the gentleman why Korean women veil themselves. The gentleman answers that veiling is in the nature of things, and the weak should always keep away from the strong. According to this gentleman, since men are always cruel, unless women veil themselves, they will be oppressed by men. İbrahim suggests that were people educated in manners, there would be no invasion of women's rights. The Confucian gentlemen answers:

Your Europeans all have good manners. When they come to the East, the first thing they look for is to ravish our women. If the oppressed [woman] attempts to defend herself even a little, they will apply to their embassy, and their ambassadors never shy from helping. Today they trample on our nation's honor. We have become weak and unable to defend [the women]... However, there is honor under the veil, therefore, the veil is in human nature. (İbrahim 2003, 2:26–27)

From the above dialogue, one may assume that this old gentleman is a believer in Neo-Confucianism. İbrahim, however, rejects the gentleman's claim about the Europeans: "One may complain about the bad manners of Europeans...but it seems to me an exaggeration to assert that all Europeans are dishonest people" (İbrahim 2003, 2:27). This may seem like a

contradiction in İbrahim, who himself has anti-Western sentiments, to defend Europeans against someone from the East, but it indeed provides us some glimpses of his thinking process. After hearing İbrahim's remarks, the old gentleman rages and argues that all the women İbrahim can see outside without a veil are the ones who have been raped by Europeans. İbrahim then tells the reader that, having a fondness for the old gentleman, he asked for his name. The old gentleman informs him that his name is Konsi Yama. This is obviously a Japanese name. Perhaps the old Korean gentleman gave his Japanese name because he was speaking in Japanese, or perhaps he feared İbrahim's Japanese interpreter. Through his Japanese interpreter, İbrahim hesitantly asks Konsi Yama about Korea's future. Yama answers that Korea is a part of Japan, but "the ones who murdered our nation's soul are the Christians" (İbrahim 2003, 2:27). Yama then asserts that Koreans only think about their lives in the present. The responsibility for the nation's future is down to the Japanese. İbrahim replies that if Koreans have the will to protect their nation, they can in the end live as Koreans even though a foreign power occupies their country. Afterward, he offers his consanguineous brother Tatars as an example by mentioning that they have been under the control of Russians for more than 400 years, yet have still managed to uphold their nationhood (İbrahim 2003, 2:28). Here it is evident that İbrahim empathizes with the Koreans and so offers a potential solution to their problem. On the other hand, İbrahim's answer is very curious since he did not suggest that Koreans follow the Japanese. On the contrary, he seems to suggest passive insubordination, just like what the Tatars had been doing for centuries under Russian rule. Passages such as this in *Âlem-i İslam* prove that İbrahim was not an agent of the Japanese Empire but a mere sympathizer.

İbrahim calls missionaries "incorrigible insects" who are most active in Korea. He then links them with Korean's drinking culture. According to him, Koreans were regressing morally due to alcohol, "the mother of all evils" (İbrahim 2003, 2:34). İbrahim reports that in former times Koreans did not lie, and if they did they were disinherited by their families, but that in recent years lying has become common practice among Koreans. According to his sources, prostitution was almost nonexistent on the Korean

Peninsula in the past but had begun to develop there over the past ten years. On the other hand, İbrahim warns his readers that he could not verify the authenticity of such accounts since he does not know Korean and has passed only a very short time there. He summarizes his view on Korea thus: “I traveled across Korea for about a week, but could see no hope for its future” and adds, “most probably there will not be a sovereign Korea within a couple of years” (İbrahim 2003, 2:34–35). Just as İbrahim predicted, Japan eventually annexed Korea on August 22, 1910. According to İbrahim, there is only one silver lining in this for Koreans: “the Japanese are the most suitable, the most merciful and the closest to Koreans” (İbrahim 2003, 2:35). Here İbrahim discloses his own opinion about what would be best for Korea’s future and he situates Korea in the Pan-Asian world order under the dominance of Japan. İbrahim sincerely believes that this would be the best outcome for Koreans, with whom he greatly sympathizes. He is confident that the Japanese would not treat Koreans in the same manner as Russians treat Tatars. Since the Koreans and Japanese were part of the same non-Western group who demonstrated “Eastern civility,” İbrahim hopes that they will get along well. It seems that this superficial imagining of Korean-Japanese cooperation for the future was partially infused by İbrahim’s Japanese friends and assistants in Korea who helped him during his stay. İbrahim himself expresses his disappointment at not finding a Russian-speaking Korean with whom to explore the different political views among Koreans. He openly expresses his suspicion of the information given him by his Japanese assistants. Still, he was saddened that he could not verify much of the information due to the linguistic barriers between him and the Koreans.

At this point, one may wonder why İbrahim, as a Muslim intellectual, did not try to learn more about the religious life of Koreans, or perhaps even try to convert some Koreans to Islam. The answer seems to be relatively straightforward. As was mentioned earlier, İbrahim was on his way to İstanbul in order to obtain the caliph’s approval for a mosque to be built in Tokyo. In the Japan section of *Âlem-i İslam*, İbrahim argues that the Japanese were naturally prone to Islam and he was quite confident that the Japanese would eventually find the embodiment of the truth that is Islam

(İbrahim 2003, 1:487–488). Even before he left Japan, some Pan-Asianist Japanese converted to Islam. Therefore, since the Japanese had already begun to convert to Islam, İbrahim must have thought that Koreans under the domination of Japan would follow suit in the near future. All in all, İbrahim's account provides us a unique vision of Korea's future.

## Conclusion

Abdürreşid İbrahim's first interaction with Koreans was in Vladivostok en route to Japan. There, he took a particular interest in Korean porters due to their miserable conditions. While inquiring about a Korean porter's livelihood, he learned about the problems facing Koreans in Vladivostok, and decided to see the neighborhood where Koreans were living. In the Korean neighborhood, he witnessed poverty and despair, which led him to showcase his anti-Western sentiments. As a well-known Muslim intellectual who contested the Eurocentric idea of modernity, İbrahim tried to form a non-West based modernity. He used anti-Westernism as a tool to forge an alliance between Pan-Islamism and Pan-Asianism in order to strengthen the front against Western domination, especially in Asia. This vision sets him apart from most other Pan-Islamist intellectuals of his era.

When İbrahim arrived in Korea, he posited the significant similarities between Koreans and Ural Bashkirs/Tatars. The nature of this comparison was regarding the hegemony of another ethnic group, represented by Russians and the Japanese who dominated the Tatars/Bashkirs and Koreans, respectively. Throughout *Âlem-i İslam*, İbrahim seems to be particularly sympathetic to Koreans because he saw their position in a world of imperial hierarchies as analogous to that of Muslims (Tatars/Bashkirs) in the Russian Empire. He soon found examples to build upon his theory of Eastern civility in Korea as well. The boatman who followed him to the Japanese guesthouse in order to deliver him his change moved him quite a bit. The more İbrahim learned about the Korean way of life, the more attached to Koreans he became.

In the final part of *Âlem-i İslam*'s Korea section, İbrahim considers

Korea's place in the Pan-Asian world order. Through his conversations with both high-level and ordinary Koreans, İbrahim gained an impression of hopelessness regarding Korea's future. Since İbrahim himself was a Tatar living under Russian domination, he tried to encourage Koreans by providing examples of how Tatars coped with the issue. He mainly advised Koreans not to lose their national consciousness, which he considered one of the main tenets of passive insubordination. İbrahim situated Korea under the domination of Japan in his vision of a Pan-Asian world order. The main reason for this was the aforementioned impression of hopelessness, as well as İbrahim's hope that non-Westerners might form a united front against the West's domination. In *Âlem-i İslam*'s Korea-related section, we observe anti-Westernism coupled with Pan-Asianism led by Imperial Japan. According to İbrahim's vision, it seems Korea's role was to follow in the footsteps of Japan.



---

**REFERENCES**

- “Abdürreşid İbrahim’s Road to Japan.” <https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?hl=en&mid=1DAArEL6B0dlXrxkzRY4kRsxPGwBNXW4q&ll=56.42600229736357%2C72.21640617187501&z=6> (accessed March 10, 2021).
- “Abdürreşid İbrahim’s Route in Korea.” <https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=1MH8AZVyBj4LXmhtSW4wak6sR8MCKdd5y&ll=39.18864047560933%2C127.47197043124999&z=6> (accessed March 10, 2021).
- Ahn, Ui Jong, and Hyun Soo Chang. 2014. “Baekje jogak-ui mihak sasang” (Aesthetics of a Piece of Baekje History). *Hanguk gicho johyeonghak yeongu* (Journal of Basic Design & Art) 15.1: 335–343.
- Appenzeller, Henry Gerhard. 1902. *Sketch of Korea Mission*. New York: Methodist Episcopal Church.
- Aydın, Cemil (Cemil Aydın). 2006. “Beyond Civilization: Pan-Islamism, Pan-Asianism and the Revolt against the West.” *Journal of Modern European History* 4.2: 204–223.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2007a. “A Global Anti-Western Moment? The Russo-Japanese War, Decolonization, and Asian Modernity.” In *Competing Visions of World Order: Global Moments and Movements, 1880s–1930s*, edited by Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier, 213–236. New York: Springer.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2007b. *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Baker, Don. 2006. “Islam Struggles for a Toehold in Korea.” *Harvard Asia Quarterly* 10.1: 25–30.
- Brandenburg, Ulrich. 2018. “The Multiple Publics of a Transnational Activist: Abdürreşid İbrahim, Pan-Asianism, and the Creation of Islam in Japan.” *Die Welt Des Islams* 58.2: 143–172.
- Cho, Seunghye. 2017. “The Ideology of Korean Women’s Headdresses during the Chosön Dynasty.” *Fashion Theory* 21.5: 553–571.
- Choi, Han-woo. 1996. “A Comparative Study of Korean and Turkic.” *International Journal of Central Asian Studies* 1: 2–31.
- Deuchler, Martina. 1995. *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology*. Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center.
- Eckert, Carter. 2000. “Korea’s Transition to Modernity: A Will to Greatness.” In *Historical Perspectives on Contemporary East Asia*, edited by Merle Goldman and Andrew Gordon, 119–154. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Esenbel, Selçuk. 1995. “İslâm Dünyasında Japonya İmgesi: Abdürreşid İbrahim ve Geç Meiji Dönemi Japonları” (The Image of Japan in the Islamic World: Abdürreşid İbrahim and the Japanese of the Late Meiji Period). *Toplumsal Tarih* 19: 18–28.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2004. “Japan’s Global Claim to Asia and the World of Islam: Transnational Nationalism and World Power, 1900–1945.” *The American Historical Review* 109.4: 1140–1170.
- Hamilton, Angus. 1904. *Korea*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons.
- \_\_\_\_\_, et al. 1910. *Korea: Its History, Its People and Its Commerce*. Boston and Tokyo: J. B. Millet Company.
- İbrahim, Abdürreşid. 2003. *Âlem-i İslâm ve Japonya’da İslâmiyet’in Yayılması* (The World of Islam and the Spread of Islam in Japan). 2 vols. İstanbul: İşaret Yayınları.
- Jeon, BongHee. 2016. *A Cultural History of the Korean House*. Seongnam: Academy of Korean Studies Press.
- Kim, Michael. 2013. “The Colonial Public Sphere and the Discursive Mechanism of Mindö.” In *Mass Dictatorship and Modernity*, edited by Michael Kim, et al., 178–202. London: Springer.
- Kim, Youngmin, and Michael J. Pettid. 2011. *Women and Confucianism in Chosön Korea: New Perspectives*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Kırımlı, Hakan. 1996. *National Movements and National Identity among the Crimean Tatars (1905–1916)*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill.
- Kwon, Hong Soon. 2008. “Formation of the Modern City of Busan: Focusing on the Space and Culture of the Japanese Settlement in Busan before 1910.” *Korea Journal* 48.3: 41–76.
- Kwon, Yoo Jin, and Yhe-Young Lee. 2015. “Traditional Aesthetic Characteristics Traced in South Korean Contemporary Fashion Practice.” *Fashion Practice* 7.2: 153–174.
- Ladd, George Trumbell. 1908. *In Korea with Marquis Ito*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons.
- Lee, Hee-Soo. 1988. *İslâm ve Türk Kültürünün Uzak Doğu’ya Yayılması: Kore’de İslâmiyet’in Yayılması ve Kültürel Tesirleri* (The Spread of Islam and Turkish Culture in the Far East: The Spread of Islam in Korea and its Cultural Effects). Ankara: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı.
- Lee, Yeonkyung. 2020. “Taipei and Seoul’s Modern Urbanization under Japanese Colonial Rule: A Comparative Study from the Present-Day Context.” *Sustainability* 12.11: 4772.
- Lin, Yinghua. 2018. “Gangneung danoje-wa jungguk danojeol-e daehan bigyo

- yeongu: Yuneseuko deungjae wijuro” (A Study on the Comparison between Gangneung Danoje and the Dragon Boat Festival in China: Based on the UNESCO Listing). *Journal of China Studies* 21.1: 203–221.
- McKenzie, Fred Arthur. 1908. *The Tragedy of Korea*. New York: E.P. Dutton.
- Özbek, Nadir. 1994. *Abdürreşid İbrahim (1857–1944): The Life and Thought of a Muslim Activist*. Istanbul: Boğaziçi University.
- Park, Chan Seung. 2008. “Colonial Modernity and the Making of Mokpo as a Dual City.” *Korea Journal* 48.3: 104–132.
- Park, Hyunhee. 2021. *Soju: A Global History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pettid, Michael J. 2011. “Working Women in Choson Korea: An Exploration of Women’s Economic Activities in a Patriarchal Society.” *Journal of Global Initiatives: Policy, Pedagogy, Perspective* 5.2: 24–44.
- Rorlich, Azade-Ayse. [1986] 2017. *The Volga Tatars: A Profile in National Resilience*. Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution.
- Saaler, Sven. 2014. “The Kokuryūkai (Black Dragon Society) and the Rise of Nationalism, Pan-Asianism, and Militarism in Japan, 1901–1925.” *International Journal of Asian Studies* 11.2: 125–160.
- Schmid, Andre. 2002. *Korea Between Empires, 1895–1919*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Siddiqui, Samee. 2019. “Coupled Internationalisms: Charting Muhammad Barkatullah’s Anti-Colonialism and Pan-Islamism.” *ReOrient* 5.1: 25–46.
- Suh, Daesook. 2001. *Hanguk-gwa reosia gwangye pyeongga-wa jeonmang* (Evaluation and Prospects of Russia-Korea Relations). Seoul: Gyeongnam daehakgyo geukdong munje yeonguso.
- “Sunjong sillok (Annals of Sunjong).” <https://sillok.history.go.kr> (accessed August 15, 2022).
- Taylor, Constance. 1904. *Koreans at Home: The Impressions of a Scotswoman*. London: Cassell & Co.
- Tikhonov, Vladimir. 2002. “Korea’s First Encounters with Pan-Asianism Ideology in the Early 1880s.” *Review of Korean Studies* 5.2: 195–232.
- Türkoğlu, İsmail. 1997. *Sibiryalı Meşhur Seyyah Abdürreşid İbrahim* (Famous Siberian Traveler Abdürreşid İbrahim). Ankara: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı.
- Underwood, Lillias Horton. 1908. *Fifteen Years among the Top-knots, or, Life in Korea*. Texas: American Tract Society.
- Uzun, Mustafa İsmet. “Abdürreşid İbrahim.” In *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi* (TDV Encyclopedia of Islam). <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/abdurreşid-İbrahim> (accessed July 5, 2021).

- Vautier, Claire, and Hippolyte Frandin. 1904. *En Corée* (In Korea). Paris: C. Delagrave.
- Worringer, Renée. 2014. *Ottomans Imagining Japan: East, Middle East, and Non-Western Modernity at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Yamazaki, Noriko. 2014. “Abdürreşid İbrahim’s Journey to China: Muslim Communities in the Late Qing as Seen by a Russian-Tatar Intellectual.” *Central Asian Survey* 33.3: 405–420.