

**IMAGINING JAPANESE AS A MUSLIM:  
THE NARRATIVE OF NON-OPPOSITIONAL RELATIONS  
BETWEEN JAPANESE CULTURE AND ISLAMIC VALUES  
WITHIN MULIYATUN N.'S "AKATSUKI"**

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**Abstract**

Within the so many positive images of Japan produced and reproduced in Indonesia, there seems to be a convention to portray the relationship between Japanese culture and Islamic values as an oppositional one. This is evident in the depiction of the clash between the two in various stories of the Japanese Military Occupation Period in Indonesia, as well as in Indonesian Islamic literary works until the 2000s. However, through her Islamic-romantic novel "Akatsuki" (2009, 2012, 2017) Muliyatun N., by creating a story that entirely takes place in Japan and with all Japanese characters, depicts Japanese culture and Islamic values relations as non-oppositional and non-confrontational. This paper first describes the depiction of Japanese culture-Islamic values relations within "Akatsuki". Furthermore, by considering contexts lingering the production of the novel, it analyzes how the "Akatsuki" marks the shift in Indonesian Muslim's perception towards Japan in the decade of 2010s. My argument is that this shift is in line with the trends of creating a global and successful image of Muslims through literary works, and the recent development of the relationship between Japan and Islamic world.

**Keywords:** "Akatsuki", Japanese culture-Islamic values relations, Muliyatun N.

**Introduction**

Around 70% of Indonesians believe that Japan contributes to a positive impact in the world, as said by a poll by BBC World Service Global Poll in 2014 (BBC, 2014). Though the definition of "positive influence" was not explained in detail, but the result of the poll shows how Indonesian people in general percept Japanese, or see Japanese people as superior or as a role model. Previous researches related to Japanese image in Indonesia illustrates that Japan is considered a role model by Indonesian people as a "developed country who still preserves its tradition" (see Wibawarta and Yovani, 2012; Hariyadi, 2013; Pratama, 2015; Anggraeni, Pratama, dan Effendi, 2015; Pratama, 2016; Anggraeni dan Pratama, 2017; Pratama: 2017; Ningrum, Waluyo, Winarni, 2017). Japan has been successful in creating admiration for its position as an "Eastern" country that can be a rival of "The West". In other words, according to the binary opposition between "The East" and "The West", Japan is often placed as a balancer, as a "developed country who still preserves its tradition".

Nevertheless, with its long history between the two countries, though the positive image still dominates, there are also negative images about Japan amongst Indonesian people. The major negative image is of Japan as the colonialist built from the collective memory of Indonesian people during the Japanese occupation. Sunu Wasono (2007) notes how in literature works on the Japanese occupation published after the Indonesian Independence War, Japan is portrayed as “vicious” and causing “misery and suffering”. Similarly, Hun (2006) finds how in several Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s works, Japan (or Japanese troops) have been portrayed as the cause of disasters for Indonesian people. Negative imaging towards Japan during the Japanese occupation is not only rooted from the memory of the cruelty of the Japanese military. It is also the result of how the occupation brought the sense of disruption to the Indonesian people’s religious life, especially to Muslims in Indonesia at that time. For example, portrayals of how K.H. Zainal Mustafa (1899-1944) refuses to perform *seikeirei* (an action of bowing towards the east, where the Japanese emperor is) who he believes is an action conflicting with Islamic values is a tale retold to this day in Indonesian schools as a religious-heroic act. A similar story about K.H. Hasyim Asyari (1875-1947), one of the founders of Nahdhatul Ulama, an Islamic organization with the largest member in Indonesia, who fought Japanese military to protect his religious beliefs is also popular among Indonesian. The story of K.H. Hasyim Asyari is made into the movie “*Sang Kiai*” released in 2013 (Priyanto, 2013).

The narration of conflict between Japanese culture and Islamic values is not only in the texts set during the Japanese occupation, but also in texts set in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ajib Rosidi in his book “*Orang dan Bambu Jepang*” (Rosidi, 2003), for example, tells his story as a *gaijin* (foreigner) for 22 years in Japan. Amongst his fascination towards Japan, there are also stories of his difficulties as a Muslim in Japan in completing his daily religious obligations. Japan is portrayed as a country that is not accommodative, though not discriminative, towards Muslim. In terms of religiosity, from Islam’s monotheistic point of view, Japanese culture and religion is often portrayed as something confusing. In his biographic novel “*Cahaya di Tirai Sakura*” (Kusuma, 2017), Riza Perdana Kusuma expresses his surprise when he discovers that many Japanese people “perform rituals from several religions”, such as Shinto (for birth ceremony), Buddha (for death ceremony), and Christian (for wedding ceremony). This certainly is hard to be understood from the religious framework believed by Muslims in general.

The emphasis on the basic differences between Islamic values and Japanese culture is not exclusive to Indonesian Muslim. From the Japanese side, the understanding that Japanese culture and Islamic values do not derive from the same root are widespread. Thus, efforts to provide rooms for dialogue between the two values have been made. The Japan Foundation Jakarta in 2006, for example, held a series of public lecture on “*The Harmony of Japanese Traditional Values and Islamic Values*” and “*Islamic Perspective and Japanese Society*”. During the opening of the public lecture, the General Director of The Japan Foundation Jakarta, Ando Kazuo, expresses his uncertainty on how to find the harmony between Japanese culture and Islamic values through the following statement:

“... I was wondering: is it true that there are meeting between Islamic teaching and the values practiced by Japanese in their social and political environment? And I also

wonder: what is the impact of such meeting to the relationship between Indonesia and Japan? Is this meeting will be an important factor for the effort of enhancing the understanding between our two nations? (Ando, 2006)

The statement above indicates that there is a general opinion from the Japanese, at least at that time, that Japanese culture and Islamic values are two different things that face difficulties in finding its meeting point. These difficulties initiate efforts by The Japan Foundation Jakarta to bring the two together.

The various narrations existed in highlighting the difference between Japanese culture with Islamic values brings another dimension on the construction of the image of Japan in Indonesia. On one side, Japan is portrayed as a figure who is close and admired for its ability to bridge the “East” and the “West”. On the other side, from its religiosity, Japan is seen as a figure who is difficult to comprehend and even in some cases are depicted as a threat, especially towards Islamic values.

However, the paradoxical image of Japan in the view of Indonesian Muslim, between the image of fascination object and the image of religious threat, seems to be experiencing some shifts in the works of Muliyatun N, an Indonesian novelist who has published several works with Islamic themes set in Japan. Her works up until 2017 are two novels, “*Akatsuki*” (2009, 2012, 2017), “*Hankachi*” (2013), and one short-story compilation “*Gadis Tomboi itu Adikku*” (2017) (meaning “That Boyish Girl Is My Sister). Amongst Muliyatun N.’s work, “*Akatsuki*” is the most received piece. The novel was first published in 2009 and have been reprinted (with revision) in 2012 and 2017. An interesting point in Muliyatun’s works worth noting is that there is no depiction of conflict between Islamic values and Japanese culture, unlike what has been narrated in previous novels in the same genre. “*Akatsuki*” challenges the oppositional relation between Islamic values and Japanese culture.

This research will first discuss the characteristics of relation narration between Islamic values and Japanese culture in “*Akatsuki*” in the 2017 revised edition. Afterwards, the discussion will continue with the efforts to contextualize “*Akatsuki*” with the various contexts surrounding it. More specifically, this paper will discuss how these relation depictions reflect the relationship between the Islamic world and Japan especially in the 2010s decade. Through textual and contextual analysis of “*Akatsuki*”, I intend to offer insights on how the development of the relationship between Muslim communities, especially in Indonesia, with Japanese people have contributed significantly towards Japanese image in the opinions of Indonesian Muslim.

### **Portrayals of Islam-Japan Relations Up Until the 2000s**

To discuss how the narration built in the novel “*Akatsuki*” is significantly different from previous Japanese themed Islamic works, we need to first see the tendencies of narration of the relations between the Islamic values and Japanese culture (and also the Muslim community and Japanese society) up until the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For instance, a novel by Helvy Tiana Rosa titled “*Akira: Muslim Watashi wa*” (Akira: I am a Muslim) (Rosa, 2000) can be used as a comparison. This novel becomes a proper comparison for “*Akatsuki*” for its similarities on

the use of Japanese elements (characters and setting) to build the story. “*Akira: Muslim Watashi wa*” follows the story of Akira, a Japanese student who converts to Islam after studying in the Faculty of Letters, University of Indonesia, in his efforts to spread Islamic belief (*da’wah*) in Japan. The main conflict of this novel focuses on the contradictions of Islamic values held by Akira and the culture and religion practiced by his family and the Japanese people around him.

Contrast to the positioning of Japan as a balancer in the binary opposition between “The East” and “The West” familiar to Indonesians, though not set during the occupation era, “*Akira: Muslim Watashi wa*” inherits the oppositional relation narration between Islam-Japan similar to Japanese occupation themed literature works. The narration in “*Akira: Muslim Watashi wa*” is built primarily on the binary opposition between Muslim and the unbelievers. Therefore, it is not a surprise that Japanese culture is depicted as an antithesis towards Islamic values. Through the portrayal of contradictions between Islamic values and Japanese culture, Rosa positions the two beliefs or culture in an oppositional relationship, causing it harder to accommodate the two.

The construction of oppositional narration between Islamic values and Japanese culture on one side reflects the perception of the Muslim community in Indonesia, on how Japan is a “non-Muslim” country. However, the existence of that narration cannot be hastily interpreted as an act by Indonesian Muslim to oppose Japanese culture. The conflict built in “*Akira: Muslim Watashi wa*” is between Akira (a Japanese) and the Japanese society surrounding him. This means that the conflict is between Japanese Muslim and Japanese non-Muslim. Such conflict construction avoids the “clash of civilizations” between Japanese society and the Muslim society. It is also worth noting that in the same decade “*Akira: Muslim Watashi wa*” was published, there are many works by Indonesian Muslim, both fiction and non-fiction, depicting their experiences in living in the “dream country” called Japan (for instance Agus et al., 2008; Muto et al., 2009). This indicates that the oppositional narration between Islamic values and Japanese culture does not necessarily substitute the fascination narration towards Japan widely spread in Indonesia. The existence of both narrations creates a complex image towards Japan in the eyes of Indonesian Muslim.

The comprehension that there are two narratives at play on how Japan is perceived amongst the Islamic community in Indonesia that seems contradictive to each other, is important in understanding the complexity of the narrative of the relations between Islamic values and Japanese culture in “*Akatsuki*”. The presence of the two narratives illustrates how in the end, Japan never lost its place as a country that is viewed positively, and superiorly, by the Indonesian society.

### **The Relations between Islam-Japan in the “Akatsuki” Novel**

“*Akatsuki*” is an Islamic-romantic novel. It is romantic in the sense that the main theme depicts the love journey of the main character, a young Japanese woman named Mayumi. It can also be categorized as an Islamic work (or “Islamic literature”) for its strong emphasize on Islamic messages. In general, this novel depicts the story of the character Mayumi who is highly interested in Satoshi, a young Japanese man who later on is revealed to be a Muslim. Her interest in Satoshi led Mayumi to learn more about Islam.

Mayumi's life story in "Akatsuki" is a depiction of the interaction journey between Japanese culture and Islamic values. If we summarize her story, the interaction journey can be divided into three stages. The first is Mayumi's earliest interaction with Islamic values. The second is when Mayumi becomes more familiar and gradually accepts Islamic values as an alternative way of life. The third is when Mayumi decides to convert into Islam and devotes her life according to Islamic values. We can see from these three stages that the character of Mayumi experiences shifts from a person who is positioned as a representation of Japanese culture, to a character who represents Islamic values in the heart of the Japanese society. Details of the depiction of Mayumi's journey in each of the stages of her interaction with Islamic values are explained below.

### **The First Stage of Interaction: Islam as a Generator for Curiosity**

At the beginning of the story, Mayumi is portrayed as a typical cheerful Japanese senior high school student which is typical of female characters in a *shojo manga* (Japanese girl comic book). She is portrayed as having an unrequited love towards an attractive young man named Satoshi who often acts cold and does things that are considered uncommon. Mayumi then finds out that Satoshi's unusual behaviors are related to his identity as a follower of the Islamic religion. From there, Mayumi has her first experience seeing and interacting directly with followers of Islam, the religion that up to that point she thinks of as "the religion of the Arabs". As mentioned before, Mayumi's early interactions with Islamic values was generated by her interest in Satoshi. The dialogue below between Mayumi and Satoshi after Mayumi sees him perform *shalat* (prayers) depicts Mayumi's early interaction with Islamic values.

*"Um, what exactly did you just do?" I repeated my question, then continue to shake my own head. "Yeah, yeah I know you answered, but it still doesn't make any sense to me. Could you explain?"*

*"Shalat, it's a way to worship Allah."*

*What else is this nonsense? It's making me more confused. I think the wrinkles on my forehead just multiplied.*

*"I'm a Muslim." He said again.*

*Hearing Satoshi say it, it really took me by surprise. We stayed quiet during our walk. Only our footsteps could be heard.*

*"Isn't that, the religion of Arabs?" I asked after finding my voice again.*

*"Islam is a universal religion. A religion for every person in every era." Satoshi explained.*

*I didn't know what to say, but I was triggered to find out more.*

(*"Akatsuki"*, page 26, translated from bahasa Indonesia by the author.)

The citation above portrays the surprise in Mayumi, who at this point acts as a representation of the Japanese society, towards Satoshi's conducts which unexplainable from the perspective of

Japanese culture. It is worth noting that her surprise did not lead to negative reactions. The differences and new knowledge towards Islamic values felt by Mayumi, instead of positioned as a cause of conflict, is in fact depicted as a generator for curiosity towards Islam which is reflected as the first-person narrator stated “I was triggered to find out more.”

In this first stage, Satoshi’s identity as a part of the Japanese society adds to Mayumi’s complexity in her interactions with Islamic values. As a Japanese himself, Satoshi’s dual identity (as part of the Japanese society, as well as a Muslim) can be seen as a crucial element for Mayumi’s character in entering the second stage in her interaction with Islamic values. Satoshi’s Japanese identity acts as a neutralizer for the alienated sense towards Islamic values he carries, so that Mayumi’s introduction to Islam in the following steps are almost without any meaningful obstacles.

### **The Second Stage of Interaction: Islam as an Alternative Way of Life**

Mayumi’s introduction leading to her curiosity in Islamic teachings started with her interest in Satoshi and becomes more intense after the appearance of a new character, Ayame, who happens to be Satoshi’s older sister. Ayame plays the role as the guidance who explains and answers Mayumi’s wonder on Islamic teachings, such as *shalat*, *hijab*, the concepts of *halal* and *haram*, even the concept of God. Ayame’s explanation on Islamic teachings is done through a logical approach. The explanations given to Mayumi constantly fulfill her curiosity, and there are never any follow up questions triggered by unsatisfying answers. The character of Ayame plays a large role in building an understanding that Islamic teaching is based on logic and is in line with human being’s life destiny.

Though the character of Ayame plays a large role in shaping Mayumi’s understanding of Islam, she is not the only reason Mayumi sees Islam as an alternative way of life. There are two conflicts that urged Mayumi to learn more on Islam. The first is a family problem faced by Mayumi (when Shun, her adoptive older brother, told her about his feelings for her, and her adoptive father politely asked her to leave the house). The second is the internal conflicts caused by her doubt on the various rituals in Japanese culture, such as attending rituals in the Shinto temple (*jinja*) during New Year’s Day (*hatsumoude*). These conflicts create doubts inside her that later on leads to her need for the figure of God, and is fulfilled by the Islamic knowledge she receives from Ayame.

The second interaction between Mayumi and Islamic values are arranged through the opposition construction between Japanese tradition and Islamic teachings. However, these opposition construction does not create any effect other than the internal conflict. This being said, in line with the first stage of narration, though there is an awareness that there are parts that cannot be negotiated between Islamic teachings and Japanese culture, these parts do not become a major problem in “*Akatsuki*”.

### **The Third Stage of Interaction: Total Submission to Islam**

The final interaction between Mayumi and Islamic values is when Mayumi decides to formally convert into the Islam religion. Mayumi's transformation into a Muslim woman starts in the chapter titled "*Umarekawaru*" (translated into "Reborn" by the author). The title of the chapter indicates how the character of Mayumi is as if she is "reborn" through her decision to fully devote herself into Islam. The naming of the chapter also implies the new hopes brought by the new identity of the main character.

Since entering the narration of the third stage, the portrayal of Mayumi also experiences changes. If at the beginning of the story the character of Mayumi is portrayed as such of a character out of a *shoujo manga* (*manga* with a target audience of young women in their adolescent years, usually with the portrayal of a cheerful female character who tends to need protection, usually from a male character), in the third stage she is narrated as an ideal Muslim woman often portrayed in Islamic literature. Her characteristic as a true and ideal Muslim woman is not only portrayed through her efforts in fulfilling her religion duties, but also through her attempts in spreading the Islamic teachings by introducing the religion to people around her.

The interesting part of Mayumi's portrayal of transformation into a true Muslim woman is that there are no oppositions from non-Muslim characters around her on her decision to change her beliefs. Though Mayumi's transformation brings many changes, such as in the clothes she now wears, to her way of thinking, those changes are not positioned as a source of conflict among her family, friends, and overall Japanese society around her.

### **The Portrayals of Japan: From "Unbelievers" to "Non-Muslim"**

In many Islamic discourses, including inside Al Quran itself, there are often depictions of two identity categories in contrast to each other, which are "Muslim" and "unbelievers" (see Muqtada, 2017) These categorizations are set out from the notion whether there is faith in Allah (God) as a "Muslim" who are faithful, and "unbelievers" to refer to those who are not.

In the previous part, it was discussed that in many literary works, the focus on the contradictions between "Muslim" and "unbelievers" as the source of conflict continues to be produced. One of them is in "*Akira: Muslim Watashi wa*" (2000) novel by Helvy Tiana Rosa. The similarities between "*Akira: Muslim Watashi wa*" and "*Akatsuki*" is that other than they are both set in Japan, they both position Japanese as a Muslim. In "*Akira: Muslim Watashi wa*", the main conflict revolves around the main male character, Akira, in his attempts to maintain his Islamic faith in a Japanese society that tends to be antipathy, or even express their disagreement explicitly. "*Akira: Muslim Watashi wa*" is an example of how the construction of a binary opposition between "Muslim" and "unbelievers" is maximized as the main conflict of the narration. Those construction of the binary opposition between "Muslim" and "unbelievers" (non-Muslim Japanese people) are depicted as two oppositional sides. There are only two category options on these narrations, either "Muslim" or "unbelievers", without any other category to bridge them.

Contrary to “*Akira: Muslim Watashi wa*”, “*Akatsuki*” has a distinctive characteristic which is the absence of emphasis on oppositional relation between “Muslim” and “unbelievers”. As discussed before, in the third stage of her interaction with Islamic values, Mayumi interacts directly with Islamic teachings. Though there seem to be some differences between Islamic values and Japanese culture, the condition is not portrayed as a source of conflict. Therefore, by applying the *semiotic square* a la Greimas and Rastier (see Hébert, 2011), it can be defined that the relationship between the Muslim characters with characters around them is not oppositional (as in “Muslim” and “unbelievers”, but more as a contradictive relationship (as in “smart” and “not smart”, not “smart” and “stupid”), which is simply between “Muslim” and “non-Muslim”.

Through the portrayal of contradictive relation between “Muslim” and “non-Muslim”, “*Akatsuki*” evades the positioning of non-Muslim Japanese people as “unbelievers”. The “Non-Muslim” Japanese society including friends and families of Mayumi, are only depicted as a different entity from “Muslim”, but does not oppose her as often associated with people who fall into the category of “unbelievers”.

### **The Message of *Da’wah* Wrapped in Japanese Popular Culture**

As in numerous Japanese themed literatures, “*Akatsuki*” also applies the same formula by accentuating Japanese elements such as the use of simple Japanese phrases, the mentioning of several locations in Japan, references to Japanese popular culture, and the narration typically used in *shojo manga* (see Pratama, 2015; Anggraeni dan Pratama, 2017; Wahidati, Kharismawati, & Mahendra, 2018). On the elements of the usage of Japanese language, “*Akatsuki*” displays several greetings such as “*ohayou*” (“good morning”), “*itte kimasu*” (“I’m going”), “*oyasumi*” (“good night”), and several others. Furthermore, the novel also displays Japanese phrases familiar in Indonesia through popular media, such as “*atarimae yo*” (“of course”) or “*majide?*” (“really?”). There are also words referred to Japanese culture such as “*jinja*” (Shinto temple), “*yukata*” (a traditional Japanese clothing). The appearance of these expressions in Japanese are always followed by its translation or explanation in Indonesian given in the footnote.

Other than Japanese language, elements of Japan are also emphasized through mentions of various names of locations in Japan, including Tokyo, Kobe, and Sapporo. The mentions of places are often followed by descriptions of the unique characteristics of each place. The existence of description of phrases and places in Japan acts as a guide for readers who are not familiar with Japan.

Elements of Japan are also seen through citations of Japanese song lyrics mentioned throughout “*Akatsuki*”. A total of six lyric citations are shown, all taken from Japanese animation (*anime*) songs. On each lyric citation, there is a footnote of its translations to Indonesian, information of the singer, and the title of the *anime* it is from. The existence of these song lyrics indicates the familiarity and preference of Muliyatun as the author with Japanese popular culture that came in waves in Indonesia in the 1990s. A similar trend is also seen in other Japanese themed literature by other authors who use references from Japanese popular culture (see Anggraeni and Pratama: 2017).



The appearance of Japanese language and cultural elements in the “*Akatsuki*” novel can be seen as a unique phenomenon, since these elements are used to arrange Islamic narrations with the intentions of *da’wah* (efforts to spread Islamic values). The use of popular Japanese language and cultural elements in the “*Akatsuki*” novel also implicitly support the making of a neutral relation (non-oppositional and non-confrontative) between Japanese culture and Islamic values.

### **Contextualization of “Akatsuki”**

“*Akatsuki*” marks the shift of perception of Indonesian Muslim towards Japan and its culture. The unique characteristic of “*Akatsuki*” is the depiction of neutral relationship (non-confrontative) between Islamic values and Japanese culture. This is done by still maintaining the main theme of *da’wah*. In order to explain this shift of perception, there is a need to review the contexts spread throughout the novel. In this part I intend to discuss trends of Indonesian Islamic literature, as well as the relationship between Japan and the Islamic world, especially Indonesia, in the 2010s.

From its genre, “*Akatsuki*” is a novel that can be categorized as part of the “Islamic literature” which gained its popularity from the 2000s. The term “Islamic literature” has a very diverse meaning, but here, “Islamic literature”, as Supriadi (2011) states, is simply defined as a work of literature “with traces of Islamic values”. If we see works in this genre, we can find that there is a trend that many “Islamic literature” in Indonesia attempts to construct the image of Muslim as a part of the global society who also gain success in this temporal-worldly life. One of the elements to construct the image of a successful “global Muslim” is through the portrayal of a Muslim as an integral part of a developed country. The portrayal of such images is somewhat a template for mainstream “Islamic literature” such as seperti “*Ayat-ayat Cinta*” (El Shirazy, 2004), “*Negeri 5 Menara*” (Fuadi, 2009), and “*99 Cahaya di Langit Eropa*” (Rais and Almahendra, 2011). These stories depict Indonesian Muslims who later on acclaims success in a developed country, while maintaining their Islamic identity. In other words, these narrative formulas focus on Muslim’s success in entering a global community. In these stories, Muslims are portrayed as an external element of a developed country, but eventually find their way as part of the respected integral of the country.

From the perspective of narrative formula of Muslim as an integral part of the developed country, “*Akatsuki*” seems to create an alternative narrative formula by constructing a narration that completely uses Japanese elements. All the characters in the story are Japanese, as well as the locations of the story. This narrative formula in one side may raise questions especially concerning its accuracy in illustrating the conditions of Japanese society. The data released by the Agency of Cultural Affairs (2015) states that in 2011 there are 110 thousand Muslim in Japan, and the number is dominated by immigrants. This data indicates that though there are a small amount of native Japanese people who are Muslim, in general, Islam and Muslim people are not considered as an integral part of Japanese people. Islam and Muslim are a foreign element entering Japan and tries to survive amongst the Japanese society. This is what is portrayed in “*Akira: Muslim Watashi wa*”. Though the characters portrayed in the story are

Japanese, but the religion chosen by the main character, Akira, is told to be learned through his interactions with Indonesian Muslim during his study in Indonesia. Here, “Akatsuki” appears to be in contrast and is worthy to be discussed further. In “Akatsuki”, all the Muslim characters introduced are Japanese. If we take the character of Mayumi, for example, we can see that the Islamic values that she devotes to is also introduced by fellow Japanese characters (Satoshi and Ayame).

The portrayal of the growth and development of Islamic in Japan through native Japanese people marks the development of the narrative formula of “global Muslim” previously starting to gain popularity and reproduced massively in Indonesia. Japan seems to be a perfect place to start this new version of “global Muslim” narrative since the existence of perception that Japan is a secular and neutral country. Mulyatun, the author of “Akatsuki”, through our correspondences shares her personal research that concludes that Japan is a country that currently is open to Muslim. It is indicated from the ease to perform daily *shalat* (prayer) in public spaces, obtain *halal* food, and its people who are considered not discriminative towards Muslim.

This positive perception towards the relationship of the Islamic world and Japan is not the only factor of why Japan is chosen as the set for “Akatsuki”. Mulyatun is a part of the generation who grew up with the wave of Japanese popular culture entering Indonesia since the 1990s. Mulyatun does not hide the fact that the choice of Japan as the setting of her story is of her interest in the country and its culture. In other words, her decision to create a Japanese themed story is also motivated by personal reference of the author who has the interest and familiarity with Japanese culture. This finding is in line with the previous study that there are many Japanese themed fictional works that are created from the sense of closeness with the culture (see Anggraeni dan Pratama: 2017, Anggraeni, Pratama, and Effendi: 2015). Those preference appears due to the positive image created through the intensive contact with Japanese popular culture circulating in Indonesia. Mulyatun’s familiarity with Japanese popular culture can be seen through the citations of *anime* song lyrics in her “Akatsuki” novel. Furthermore, the narration style in that novel also seems to be highly influenced by the narration style in *anime/manga*.

The globally acclaimed Japanese popular culture has play undoubtedly significant role in the constructing Japan’s positive image, especially among young people, just as it is in Indonesia. Japan is considered as the country of dream. Therefore, creating narration that is filled with Islamic values that completely applies Japanese elements such as in the “Akatsuki” might give us clue about how Indonesian Muslim imagine the spread of Islamic teaching in Japan, the country of dream.

The second contextualization I would like to discuss is about trends on Japan-Islamic world relations especially in the 2010s. Several writings that portray the stories of experience of Indonesian Muslim living in Japan before the 2000s shows how Japan is a country who does not act as if it anti Islam but there are not many essential facilities to accommodate Muslim either. As stated earlier Ajib Rosidi (2003), for example, illustrates how in the 1980s there were not many places that provides space to perform Friday *shalat* (Friday prayers for men). The same troubles were in accessing *halal* food. However, nowadays it shows that the difficulties experienced by Muslim living or visiting Japan is slowly starting to find their solution, especially

starting in the 2010. This is also due to the Japanese government who actively offers programs to attract Muslim tourist to visit Japan. For example, the *Cool Japan Initiative* initiated by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry in 2013 contributes to the Japan Halal Food Project di Indonesia (METI: 2014). Furthermore, the Japan National Tourism Organization launched its website, JAPAN Welcome Guide for Muslim Visitors (<https://muslimguide.jnto.go.jp>) providing information on hotels, facilities, and even culinary choices suited for Muslim travelers. International airports such as Narita Airport and Kansai International Airport also provides special rooms for Muslim travelers to be used as praying rooms.

The information on the availability of these Muslim friendly facilities in Japan are also spread widely in Indonesian media. The “*Halal Travel*” program in Trans7 TV Channel and the “*Muslim Travelers*” in NET TV Channel are noted to have broadcasted information on these Muslim friendly facilities. Similarly are major national newspapers in Indonesia such as Kompas, Tempo, Republika, which covers the stories. These broadcasts play a huge role in spreading the image of Japan in 2010 as a country who is accommodative to Muslim travelers, by maintaining its identity as a “non-Muslim” country.

As mentioned in the previous part, Muliyatun N. has the impression that Japan has become a Muslim friendly country. This impression is from her research from various sources that she conducted for her novel “*Akatsuki*”. The impression of Japan that is accommodative towards Muslim is a refreshing news to Muslim, especially in Indonesia, who have pre-admiration opinions towards Japanese culture and society that have been built through their interactions with Japanese popular culture. Therefore, “*Akatsuki*” is a perfect meeting point between the positive image of Japan widely spread in Indonesia as the “dream country”, with the current relation of Japan and the Islamic world. “*Akatsuki*” is the narration of Islam in the country of dream, Japan.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of narrative constructions and the use of Japanese cultural elements, including popular culture, in Muliyatun N.'s "*Akatsuki*" show that this novel describes the relationship between Islamic values with Japanese culture not as a confrontational nor oppositional one. Both are narrated as two values/culture that can coexist neutrally in Japan, a country that is generally perceived not to have the same cultural roots as the Islamic world. This narrative of neutral relationship is different from the narrative on other works of "Islamic literature", such as "*Akira: Muslim Watashi wa*" by Helvy Tiana Rosa (2000) which highlighted the clash between Japanese culture and Islamic values as the main point of the story. Thus, it is fair to say that "*Akatsuki*" marks the shift in the Muslim worldview to the relationship between Islamic values and Japanese culture in the decade of 2010s. Japanese culture, although not necessarily transformed into a culture that is considered substantially compatible with Islamic values, is no longer described as a culture that contains the potential threat to Islamic values.

The shift in the view towards Japanese culture among Indonesian Muslims, as represented by the novel "*Akatsuki*", in my argument reflects the current conditions of the relationship between Japan and the Islamic world. On the one hand, from the Muslims side, there

is a sense of urgency to raise the image of Islam as a globally accepted religion, including in Japan. The establishment of this positive images important not for non-Muslims, but for Muslims themselves. Such images will serve as an encouragement for Muslims to strengthen their faith in the midst of globalization.

On the other hand, from the Japanese point of view, establishing a harmonious relationship with the Islamic world become more and more relevant. One of the reasons is because of the huge market potential that exists in countries with large Muslim populations, such as Indonesia and Malaysia. The decade of 2010s witnesses how Japan has become very active in capturing the attention of the Muslim market, for example through the promotion of "halal tourism" and the provision of facilities aimed at facilitating Muslims to fulfill their religious obligations during their time in Japan.

These two contexts eventually formed a new perception of Japanese cultural relations with Islamic values among Indonesian Muslims, namely a neutral relationship. This image adds to the existing established positive image of Japan in Indonesia, as a "developed country that maintains its tradition". Given the recent developments in how Japanese culture has been portrayed as a culture that able to construct neutral and non-confrontative interactions with Islamic values, I argue that the positive image of Japan in Indonesia seems to have grown more and more positive in the decade of 2010.

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