

School Lunch and Muslimness: A Case Study in Higashihiroshima City, Japan

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This study examines barriers to sustaining the Muslimness of Muslim migrants in Japan, focusing on school lunch at public primary schools in Higashihiroshima city. The discussion of school meals has shifted the welfare of citizens to the human rights of those living in a multicultural society. It has also polarized the issues of whether to preserve the origin country's culture and whether to accept different cultures within the global context of multiculturalism. Although achieving a multicultural society requires merging these two ideologies, neither Europe nor Japan has been able to effectively deal with school meals in matters related to religion. To consider this religious complication in a non-Islamic country, Japan, we conceptualize "Muslimness" as a norm that Muslims in Japan created and developed their sense of "being Muslim" with information collected and interpreted through Japan, through their country of origin, and through the global community. Data comprise interviews from eight Muslim households and two primary school teachers from different schools in Higashihiroshima city. The city is located in Hiroshima prefecture and is transitioning toward multiculturalism as the development of universities and industrial areas has encouraged foreign population growth. The results can categorize four school lunch options for Muslim students: (1) bringing their own lunches every day, (2) eating school lunch and removing non-halal ingredients/dish(es), (3) eating school lunch and bringing their own lunches depending on the menu, and (4) eating school lunch as offered. Our informants protect their Muslimness by bringing lunch boxes instead of eating school meals that are served porc and non-halal meat almost daily. Barriers to sustaining Muslimness might emerge due to the effort of making lunch boxes every day and demonstrating different circumstances from their classmates who eat school lunch. This study suggests that establishing a school lunch system that meets the needs of Muslim minorities would be a significant step toward realizing a high quality of education and "learning continuity," which is a Japan International Cooperation Agency vision for education cooperation in Japan.