

Japanese - Islamic World Religious - Cultural Interactions: A Historical and Contemporary Perspective

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Abstract

Background: Although the interaction between Japan and the Islamic world has been extensively studied in historical and geopolitical contexts, there are still few consequences for comparative religious studies. In example, despite their similar focus on spiritual development, the relationship between Sufism and Zen Buddhism has not been thoroughly examined.

Objectives: Through the themes of self-discipline, awareness, and transcendence, this research compares Sufi and Zen traditions and looks at Japanese Islamic connections within a civilizational framework.

Methods: This study uses a qualitative comparative methodology based on religion studies, combining phenomenology, comparative hermeneutics, and civilizational analysis. Classical Sufi and Zen texts are examples of primary sources, which are bolstered by secondary historical and theoretical literature. A triadic framework that emphasizes self-discipline, awareness cultivation, and transcendental experience is used to organize the analysis.

Results: The results show that Sufism and Zen share fundamental parallels in their approaches to disciplined practice and experiential transformation, despite little direct historical interaction. But their metaphysical underpinnings are very different; Zen is based on a non-theistic understanding of reality, whereas Sufism is based on a theistic framework.

Conclusion: This study demonstrates that meaningful comparison between Sufism and Zen is possible at the level of practice and experience rather than doctrine. It contributes to comparative religious studies by offering a balanced framework that highlights both convergence and divergence, providing a relevant model for interreligious dialogue in a globalized context.

A. Introduction

Japan's interactions with the Islamic world show a dynamic process influenced by intellectual inquiry, cultural negotiation, and curiosity. Long-held beliefs about cultural isolation are challenged by the engagement between Japan and the Muslim world, despite their geographical distance and different civilizational traditions. Due to these presumptions, Japan was frequently excluded from Islamic intellectual

and cultural exchanges, which obscured the intricate ways that cross-cultural interactions have evolved since the late nineteenth (Erasiah & Pratama, 2024).

Muslim intellectuals, reformers, and tourists who were under pressure from Western colonial dominance were drawn to Japan's swift modernization during the Meiji period. Many saw Japan as a successful example of a non-Western country that maintained its cultural identity while modernizing its military capabilities, educational system, and political institutions (Sabharwal et al., 2021). Through direct contact with Tatar Muslim immigration and diplomatic contacts with the Ottoman Empire, this view promoted early engagement with Islam and intellectual appreciation (Onbasi, 2025). Through these interactions, Islam in the Japanese setting became a lived and observed reality rather than a remote idea.

During this time, pragmatic and intellectual factors influenced Japan's embrace of Islam. In terms of politics and economy, Japan aimed to increase trade and foster diplomatic ties with areas with a majority of Muslims, especially by interacting with the Ottoman Empire and Southeast Asia (Levent, 2020). Concurrently, there was a growing interest in Islam as a moral and social system among Japanese intellectuals. Confucian objectives of social harmony and moral government, as well as Buddhist techniques of self-cultivation and inner discipline, are in accord with Islamic values of social fairness, communal accountability (ummah), and moral discipline (Yew et al., 2021). Islam became relevant and intellectually approachable in Japanese discourse because of these apparent parallels.

Research on the relationship between Japan and Islam has blossomed in a number of disciplines, including comparative philosophy, history, and religious studies. While later Orientalist projects included translations of the Qur'an and other Islamic texts, reflecting both academic engagement and ideological interests, early Japanese thinkers like Okawa Shumei saw Islam as a potential civilizational ally against Western imperialism (Erasiah & Pratama, 2024). From a wider angle, Islamic modernism scholars have emphasized Japan as a crucial model for Muslim reformers, with individuals like Rashid Rida and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani seeing Japan's modernization as evidence that non-Western societies could advance without giving up their religious identities (Hadziq & Muzadi, 2025). While Turkish literature highlights the symbolic significance of Ottoman-Japanese interactions, especially the 1890 Ertuğrul incident, recent studies by Komatsu and Kosugi have placed the Japan-Islam encounter within a global historical framework (Komura, 2025). Despite these advancements, the literature is still primarily concerned with political, sociological, and historical aspects, with less attention paid to more profound philosophical and spiritual aspects. Despite the fact that both traditions place a strong emphasis on discipline, self-transformation, and transcendence, this divide is most noticeable in the few studies that discuss the junction of Sufism and Zen Buddhism.

Despite these historical and cultural exchanges, the majority of research to date has concentrated on diplomatic, social, or economic aspects, largely ignoring deeper philosophical and spiritual aspects (Acar, 2025). In instance, despite the fact that both Islamic and Japanese mystical traditions include extensive frameworks for comprehending self-transformation, discipline, and transcendence, comparative studies of these traditions are still scarce. This disparity emphasizes the need for a more integrative strategy that links philosophical investigation with historical experiences.

In this regard, a particularly intriguing but little-studied aspect is the comparison of Zen Buddhism and Islamic mysticism (Sufism). This contrast is important since both traditions emphasize self-transformation, the growth of awareness, and the goal of transcendence despite having differing theological and cultural underpinnings (Yazaki, 2024). Zen Buddhism stresses non-dual consciousness attained via meditation practice, whereas Sufism is based on a monotheistic framework centered on divine revelation. Their comparison is analytically useful because of this contrast, which enables a greater comprehension of the similarities and differences in spiritual thought.

This essay aims to clarify humanity's common pursuit of transcendence by contrasting Sufi spiritual practices and Zen meditation and examining their intellectual underpinnings. This study bases its analysis on three themes: self-discipline, the growth of consciousness, and the experience of transcendence. It draws on primary texts from notable individuals like Rumi, Ibn 'Arabi, and al-Ghazali, as well as Zen masters like Dogen and Hakuin (Yazaki, 2024).

The dearth of integrative research connecting historical relations between Islam and Japan with comparative analysis at the level of philosophical and spiritual traditions is addressed in this work. Thus, this study looks

at the similarities and differences between Sufi and Zen traditions' perspectives on transcendence, consciousness, and self-transformation. This article's distinctiveness is its integrative approach, which provides a more comprehensive framework for comprehending international religious discourse by bridging the encounter of civilizations with a methodical comparative analysis of Sufi and Zen mysticism.

In the end, this study advances both the discipline of comparative religion and current interfaith dialogue. Examining the conversation between Sufism and Zen provides a form of engagement that highlights both differences and common human concerns in a world growing more divided and globalized. In addition to advancing academic knowledge, this strategy promotes larger initiatives for pluralism, respect for one another, and fruitful cross-cultural communication (Ramli et al., 2023). Thus, in order to contribute to the advancement of interdisciplinary and cross-civilizational studies, the author carried out the study "**Japanese-Islamic World Religious and Cultural Interactions: A Historical and Contemporary Perspective.**"

B. Methods

This research uses a qualitative comparative methodology based on comparative philosophy, religious studies, and cultural history. This study views Japan-Islam relations as a continuous process impacted by cross-cultural encounters rather than as discrete developments, drawing on civilization analysis as expressed by (Komura, 2025). Because it offers a macro-level viewpoint for comprehending how intellectual and spiritual traditions like Sufism and Zen Buddhism emerge, interact, and are reinterpreted across cultural boundaries, this civilizational framework is extremely pertinent to this subject. This book examines Sufism and Zen as results of an interconnected civilizational conversation, going beyond textual comparison by placing them in this larger context.

Both primary and secondary sources provided the data used in this investigation. Classical works from the Zen and Sufi traditions, as well as historical documents pertaining to the early Muslim presence in Japan, are examples of primary sources. Al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyāʿ ʿUlūm al -Dīn*, Rūmī's *Mathnawī*, and Ibn ʿArabī's *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* are important Sufi writings; Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*, *kōan* collections like *Mumonkan* and the *Blue Cliff Record*, and Hakuin's teachings are examples of Zen sources. Three interconnected levels of interpretation are applied to these sources: (1) historical context to comprehend the socio-cultural circumstances in which these texts originated; (2) conceptual content to pinpoint the primary philosophical and spiritual concepts; and (3) the experiential dimension to investigate how these concepts manifest in actual religious practice. The study is placed within pre-existing scholarly frameworks and given a historiographical context through the use of secondary sources.

In terms of methodology, this study uses a comparative hermeneutic framework that combines comparative philosophy, phenomenological interpretation, and textual analysis. Phenomenology complements hermeneutics by emphasizing the lived experiences portrayed in texts and activities. Hermeneutics is used to interpret texts within their historical and linguistic settings. In this way, phenomenology guides hermeneutical interpretation by highlighting the ways in which ideas like *fanān* and *satori* are reflections of transforming experiencing states rather than just doctrinal creations.

The nature of ultimate reality (divine unity in Sufism and non-duality in Zen), the structure of the self (the ego, annihilation, and emptiness), and modes of knowledge (revealed knowledge, intuitive insight, and direct realization) are some of the metaphysical and epistemological issues that are the focus of this comparative philosophical analysis. This study uses Izutsu's (1983) semantic technique to find structural correspondences between important concepts while accounting for their different doctrinal settings.

A triadic framework comprising (1) self-discipline, (2) awareness growth, and (3) transcendental experience serves as the foundation for this analysis. The lack of systematic comparative analysis at the level of spiritual practice and experience was noted as a research gap in the literature, which is why this framework was selected. This research is able to go beyond descriptive comparisons in favor of a more analytical and integrated grasp of both traditions by structuring the study around these topics.

Lastly, in order to engage each tradition within its particular context while upholding analytical rigor, this study employs a critical empathy methodological approach. In actuality, this entails avoiding the imposition of external categories that can skew each tradition's internal logic and verifying interpretations against

reputable academic studies to make sure they are accurate. Simultaneously, comparative analysis is carried out using well-defined thematic categories, guaranteeing the identification of similarities and differences without forcing equivalency. This study can contribute to interfaith studies while reducing the possibility of misunderstanding thanks to its balanced methodology.

C. Results and Discussion

Comparative Analysis

Interactions between Japan and the Islamic world can be viewed as a larger process of civilizational connection that has influenced intellectual and spiritual exchange rather than just as a sequence of historical occurrences. In spite of their different metaphysical frameworks, this study contends that these interactions made it possible to compare Sufism and Zen Buddhism, especially under common themes of self-discipline, awareness, and transcendence.

i. Historical Foundations of Encounter

The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw a turning point in Japanese-Islamic ties. Because of its fast industrialization during the Meiji period, which coincided with the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Muslim observers viewed Japan as an example of non-Western modernization that preserved cultural identity (Onbasi, 2025). One of the most important symbolic incidents was the tragic drowning of the Ottoman frigate *Ertuğrul* off the coast of Wakayama in 1890, which produced a powerful story of humanitarian solidarity and enduring cultural memory (Bozok & Dersler, 2024).

Beyond symbols, intellectual interactions were enabled by individuals like Abdürreşid İbrahim, whose 1909 tour to Japan helped establish early Muslim groups and introduce Islamic thinking (Kubat, 2022). These exchanges show how civilizational contact encompassed religious and intellectual exchange in addition to diplomacy.

Japan's interactions with Islam also acquired strategic significance throughout the interwar years. In addition to reflecting geopolitical aspirations, policies intended to engage Muslim populations in Asia often referred to as *Kaikyō Seisaku* also made it possible for Islam to become institutionalized in Japan, as seen by the founding of the Tokyo Mosque in 1938 (Levent, 2020). Even though this kind of interaction was only partially helpful, it nevertheless promoted intellectual exchanges and cultural transmission that are still important for comprehending Japan-Islam ties.

ii. From Historical Contact to Spiritual Comparison

While historical interactions provided the structural foundation, they also opened a conceptual space for comparative reflection. Beyond political and economic relations, Japan-Islam encounters raised broader questions about how different civilizations conceptualize selfhood, knowledge, and ultimate reality. In this context, the comparison between Sufism and Zen Buddhism emerges not from direct historical transmission but from a shared engagement with fundamental human concerns regarding self-transformation and transcendence (Yazaki, 2024).

iii. Discipline of the Self

In addition to providing the structural framework, historical interactions created a conceptual space that allowed for comparative analysis. Japan-Islam interactions created more general problems about how other civilizations understand selfhood, knowledge, and ultimate truth in addition to political and economic ties. In this view, the similarity between Zen Buddhism and Sufism arises from a shared engagement with basic human concerns about transcendence and self-transformation rather than from direct historical transmission (Smith, 2024).

Though using different frameworks, Zen and Sufism both describe the self-transformation as a necessary condition for spiritual realization. In Sufism, the annihilation of the ego (*fanāʿ*) is the ultimate result of the purifying of the *nafs* by systematic practices like *dhikr*, fasting, and spiritual guidance (*al-Ghazālī*; Chittick). In contrast, Zen places a strong emphasis on using *kōan* to break dualistic thinking and achieve direct

realization (satori) through disciplined meditation (zazen) (Dōgen; Suzuki). Although the theological orientations of both practices are different Zen is focused on non-dual awareness, while Sufism is based on a relationship with a personal God they are similar in that they emphasize the need for disciplined practice in addition to intellectual knowledge.

iv. Cultivation of Awareness

The development of awareness is a second area of convergence. The core of Sufi practice is remembering God, which cultivates an ongoing sense of divine presence that alters perception and moral orientation (Nikmah, 2024). Zen, on the other hand, emphasizes the realization of emptiness (śūnyatā) (Dōgen) and cultivates consciousness through mindfulness and direct involvement with the present moment. Despite these distinctions, both traditions emphasize immediacy and present while rejecting distraction and mental fragmentation. But in Sufism, awareness is relational and theistic, but in Zen, it is non-dual and non-theistic.

v. Transcendence: Love and Emptiness

Their conception of transcendence shows the biggest difference. Sufism emphasizes a close contact with the Divine by describing transcendence in terms of divine love, where the seeker experiences fanāūge (annihilation) and baqāe (subsistence in God) (Rūmī; Ibn ‘Arabī). In contrast, Zen places a strong emphasis on the realization of emptiness, where the interconnectedness of reality is revealed through the disintegration of ego (Munir, 2024).

According to comparative research, these ideas fanāūge and Śūnyatā may be structurally similar ego dissolution processes, but they are nonetheless rooted in essentially distinct metaphysical vistas (Wang, 2025). This contrast emphasizes how crucial it is to avoid reductive equivalency while still identifying significant similarities.

vi. Comparative Implications

The comparison of Zen and Sufism shows that although the two traditions have structural parallels in experience and practice, their philosophical and theological underpinnings are nevertheless different. This lends credence to a middle-of-the-road perspective in comparative mysticism that recognizes the importance of cultural and ideological backgrounds as well as the universal qualities of spiritual experience.

The analysis also emphasizes how crucial critical empathy is to comparative research. The inquiry explores places of resonance while seeing each tradition as internally cohesive rather than collapsing distinctions. By doing this, it advances a more sophisticated vision of interreligious communication in which diversity is seen as a tool for introspection rather than a barrier.

Discussion and implication

The comparison of Sufism and Zen Buddhism and the earlier investigation of Japanese-Islamic interactions have wider implications for religious studies, intercultural relations, and current international debate. Three interconnected dimensions can be used to understand these implications: comparative mysticism, diplomacy and soft power, and identity development.

a. Identity Formation and Religious Adaptation

The Japanese-Islamic interaction serves as an example of how religious identity is dynamic in cross-cultural settings. Religious identity frequently manifests as a negotiated and context-dependent phenomenon rather than a straightforward process of conversion or assimilation. Research on Muslim communities in Japan indicates that immigrants and converts negotiate between Islamic customs and pre-existing cultural frameworks, occasionally maintaining aspects like communal harmony or respect for ancestors while embracing Islamic ideas (Azfar et al., 2025).

But it's crucial to refrain from making too many generalizations. There is little systematic anthropological data showing continuous patterns of syncretism, and the degree to which cultural aspects are merged varies

greatly among individuals and societies. This implies that rather than being based on generalizations, the idea of "fluid identity" should be carefully considered and supported by empirical research.

b. Diplomacy, Economy, and Soft Power

Understanding the connection between religion and foreign relations is also significantly impacted by Japan's interactions with the Islamic world. While some interpretations place a strong emphasis on mutual understanding and cultural tolerance, it's equally critical to acknowledge the practical aspects of this connection. Due to its reliance on Middle Eastern energy supplies, Japan has maintained diplomatic and commercial ties with the region's nations, including long-term oil agreements and participation in bilateral forums (Matsuda & Kozhanov, 2023).

At the same time, mutual understanding at the social level has been facilitated by cultural diplomacy, including academic exchanges, Islamic studies programs at Japanese universities, and events focused around organizations like the Tokyo Camii (Masduki, 2023). These illustrations imply that religious and cultural involvement functions in tandem with geopolitical and economic objectives rather than separately from them.

As a result, Japan-Islam ties should be viewed as intricate exchanges including the intersections of strategic, economic, and cultural elements rather than just as manifestations of cultural respect. This viewpoint acknowledges the positive potential of interreligious partnerships without idealizing them.

c. Implications for Comparative Mysticism

The comparison of Zen Buddhism with Sufism adds to the current discussions in the study of mysticism, especially between constructivist and perennialist viewpoints. While contemporary researchers like Steven Katz (1978) contended that mystical experiences are always influenced by cultural and linguistic frameworks, classical scholars like William James (1902) and Aldous Huxley (1945) highlighted the universality of mystical experience.

A mediating stance is supported by the study's findings. On the one hand, there may be common patterns in the development of spiritual experience due to the structural parallels between Sufi and Zen practices, especially in the areas of discipline, awareness, and transcendence. However, similar experiences are understood within different metaphysical frameworks, as seen by the disparities in theological orientation, such as the stress on emptiness in Zen and the significance of divine love in Sufism (Wang, 2025).

This dual realization emphasizes the significance of comparative methods that neither isolate traditions as completely incommensurable nor reduce differences to universal sameness. Rather, it emphasizes the need of what could be called "critical comparison," which acknowledges both divergence and convergence.

d. Interreligious Dialogue and Its Limits

The finding has ramifications for interfaith communication in a globalized setting as well. The analogy between Zen and Sufism implies that discussions can be based on common existential issues like the nature of the self and the quest for transcendence. But it's also critical to recognize the limitations of this kind of conversation.

For instance, Zen's non-theistic attitude is very different from Sufism's theistic framework, which is based on a transcendent and personal God. In the name of harmony, these disparities should not be ignored because they are difficult to reconcile. Rather, meaningful conversation necessitates both the examination of common issues and the recognition of these differences (Henning & Henning, 2022).

Furthermore, detractors can contend that true cultural connection was not as important in past Japan-Islam interactions as geopolitical concerns. This criticism is true to the extent that certain policies, including Japan's interactions with Muslim populations during the interwar period, were partially strategic. Even practical connections can have unforeseen cultural and spiritual repercussions, as evidenced by the places they provided for intellectual and religious debate.

e. Broader Cultural and Ethical Implications

The comparative ideas from Sufism and Zen have wider cultural and ethical significance outside of scholarly discourse. Both faiths place a strong emphasis on self-transformation as the basis for moral behavior. While Zen teachings emphasize non-attachment and compassion (*karuṇā*) as manifestations of awakened awareness (Dōgen), Sufism frequently links the cultivation of divine love to compassion and service to others (Yazaki, 2024).

These viewpoints provide different frameworks for dealing with modern issues including consumerism, social disintegration, and the ecological disaster. But it's crucial to approach these kinds of applications thoughtfully, understanding that translating spiritual ideas into contemporary settings necessitates careful interpretation rather than outright appropriation.

D. Conclusion

Through the themes of self-discipline, awareness, and transcendence, this study has investigated the similarities between Sufism and Zen Buddhism as well as the interaction between Japan and the Islamic world within a civilizational framework. It shows that a structured analytical framework can be used to solve the main research difficulty, which is the restricted systematic comparison between Sufism and Zen at the level of spiritual practice and experience. The results demonstrate that both traditions diverge in their metaphysical interpretations of ultimate reality but converge in their emphasis on disciplined self-transformation and experiential knowledge while having different theological underpinnings. Therefore, meaningful comparison is accomplished through common existential concerns rooted in behavior rather than theological equivalency.

This study's primary contribution is the development of a fair comparative methodology that avoids both strict cultural isolation and reductive universalism by fusing comparative mysticism with civilizational analysis. In practical terms, this paradigm provides a model for interreligious communication that prioritizes analytical rigor and critical empathy, which is especially pertinent in pluralistic and globalized society. By investigating other cross-traditional mystical encounters or conducting ethnographic surveys of practitioners, future study may expand this methodology. In the end, this study confirms that, when properly grounded, comparative religious inquiry can reveal both the diversity and the shared profundity of human spiritual experience.

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F. Author Contribution Statement

IAS designed the investigation, created the theoretical framework, and oversaw the manuscript's drafting. MAI helped with methodology design, data collection, and literature review. Data analysis, result interpretation, and paper critical revision fell under the purview of DIA. The final draft of the work has been reviewed and approved by all authors.

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