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Islamic World / General
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Islamic Area Studies Project

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture commissioned this area study entitled Islamic Area Studies to collect information and create a computerized information system in order to better our understanding of the Islamic world. Beginning in April 1997, it will continue for five years, until the spring of 2002. Herein, I would like to explain the aims, content and basic plan of action of the project and express my hope that many people will participate actively in it.

Research Aims

This project aims to create a new field which we call 'Islamic Area Studies'. Its specific objectives are threefold.

(a) Development of new methods in Islamic Area Studies

The term 'Islamic World' is often used to refer only to the regions of the Middle East; however, we know well that Islam as a religion and a civilization has spread beyond the Middle East to Central and Southeast Asia in the East and the Balkans and Africa in the West. Furthermore, Muslims now form important social groups within contemporary Western societies, as well as in China and Japan. This means that regions with close ties to Islam now encompass the world.

When examining communities where Muslims reside, we find both symbiotic relationships with other peoples and serious problems, such as ethnic strife, interregional conflict, population explosion, and destruction of the environment. For example, Muslims are today deeply involved in the Bosnian conflict, the civil war in Afghanistan, 'the new ethnic question' in the European Union, and the struggle for human rights in the United States. Therefore, we may say that social, political and economic trends in the Islamic world will definitely determine the development of world

civilization in the twenty-first century, making it necessary for non-Muslim peoples to take positive steps towards the better understanding of Islamic history, ideas and contemporary situation.

(b) Development of a computerized information system suitable for Islamic Area Studies

Up until now, Islamic Studies have not always made sufficient use of computers, chiefly because of the many character systems involved and because there was little connection between this kind of research and the applicable technical fields. This Project plans to continue the development of databases in languages which use non-Roman characters such as Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Malay and develop methods to apply computer technology to Area Studies.

(c) Assisting Young Researchers

In recent times the rapid development of Islamic Studies in Japan has been quite remarkable, however on a global scale the shortage of researchers and accumulated research is undeniable. Considering the importance of the Islamic world will have in the twenty-first century, I feel it is necessary to do all we can to assist the next generation of young researchers and support their participation in an international network.

Basic Plan of Implementation

As mentioned before, the areas covered by Islamic Area Studies are not limited to the Middle East and should be flexibly deter-

mined based on the character of the themes studied. Although we must remember that there are many ways to view Area Studies, it is generally agreed that it is the synthesis of the results of basic research in various disciplines such as Political Science, Economics, Social Studies, Anthropology, History, Geography, Religious Studies, Literature, Linguistics, International Relations, and Urban Engineering.

While realizing that one of the objectives of Area Studies is the understanding of the contemporary world, I believe that it is better to initially conduct research within the various disciplines and then synthesize them. The notion that the deciphering of one scroll of ancient writing is closely connected to the understanding of the civilization of the area is important. What is demanded of the six research units, of the thirteen smaller groups under them, and of the Project as a whole is the active effort to synthesize research from various disciplines.

Research conducted in this project is open to researchers and specialists both in Japan and all over the world. Each group is made up of five or six members (rotating every few years), but the research will not be carried out by these members alone. The group members are responsible for bringing in researchers other than group members, especially younger researchers to participate in the planning and conducting of research. We are hoping that those with an interest in this project will actively plan, conduct and present the results of their research.

We have the Islamic Area Studies newsletter which is published in both Japanese and English. In the sphere of international conferences and workshops, we recently organized a conference on the 'Slave Elites in the Middle East and Africa: A Comparative Study' at the Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo, in October 1998. Details of forthcoming workshops and conferences can be found elsewhere in this newsletter.

The success of this project will be closely tied to having a wide range of researchers and specialists freely participate in the project. We hope that those interested will frequently contact the Project Management Unit, the main research units and the research groups by e-mail, fax, letters and so on. The purpose of the Islamic Area Studies Project is, with the cooperation of many researchers from both within the Project and outside of it, to create a substantive body of knowledge for the understanding of the Islamic world. ◆

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