Inside the Arabic Islamic Institute in Tokyo, 15 students of calligraphy raptly practice writing verses from the Qur'an. Yet when the call to prayer is heard, few stir. The instructors and students are Japanese, and only two are Muslims. Here, their calligrapher's pens (qalam in Arabic) are not made of reeds, as is traditional in much of the Islamic world. Nor do they use the brushes (fude) favored by Japanese calligraphers. Their pens are made of bamboo, which is plentiful in Japan.

For centuries, educated Japanese have been taught the traditions of calligraphy beginning in grade school. At the Nitten, the annual arts exhibition in Osaka, calligraphy is important enough to merit its own section. An appreciation of calligraphy is a lifelong interest for many Japanese, and for some, acquiring proficiency at it is a lifelong study. Yet, over the past two decades, a few have quietly put down their fude and picked up a bamboo qalam to try their hand at calligraphy in Arabic, which, they often find, is not as alien as they had thought.

Yukari Takahashi, who owns an elegant Tokyo nightclub, holds up a sheet of Japanese rice paper with embossed floral patterns framing immaculate calligraphy. I ask her why she studies Arabic calligraphy, and, in her limited English, she answers, "Very beautiful." Other practitioners—a retired consul-general, a choreographer and dancer, the head of the Tokyo City Retirement Fund—also mention beauty first when describing their attraction to Arabic calligraphy.
"Beauty is not individual discernment. It's not an individual opinion."

Yasushi Kosugi
Admiration runs in the other direction, too. In 2007, at the most recent international calligraphy competition of the Istanbul-based Research Center for Islamic History, Art and Culture (IRCICA), four Japanese entrants won prizes.

It was a pleasant surprise to see works of a satisfactory or promising level of success coming from a [country] where the tradition of Islamic or Arabic calligraphy is not yet established,” says Ekmeleddin lliiasoglu, secretary general of the Organization of the Islamic Congress. “It is evidence of an emerging interest in and development of this art that is rather unexpected. It gives us pleasure.”

Halit Eren, the director general of IRCICA, expresses his own amazement by turning the tables: “Would it not be a pleasant surprise if an Arab won an award in Japanese calligraphy?”

Al-khatt al-'arb—Arabic calligraphy—comes in several styles and has long been regarded as one of the highest Islamic art forms. In Japanese, the word shodo refers to “the way of writing,” which means the stylized drawing of pictographs in kanji (Japanese script) or kanji (Chinese characters). Thus Japan’s acknowledged master of the art, Fiald Kouichi Honda, calls the Japanese forms and practices of Arabic calligraphy shodo arab—“the way of Arabic writing.”

A 50-minute train ride from the urban whirl of Tokyo, another Japan starts to lay itself out, revealing blue coastline and lush green hills. You arrive in Zushi, where Honda lives with his wife, Mitsuko, a kimono-dyeing artist.

Downstairs is Honda's studio, and on the floor is a work in progress, paper strips of penciled calligraphy lying jumbled atop a large blue background.

“My work is very different from traditional calligraphies,” he says. It consists of an Arabic text surrounded by illumination of geometrical or natural forms, often made on marbled paper, which he calls by its Turkish name, ebru.

“According to my idea, I consider the most suitable design and color to match with the meaning of the words. This [Qur'anic chapter] Surat Ya-Sin praises the greatness of God. I use this very deep, profound blue, ultramarine blues, and there are many lines over these blues like in the depth of the sea or in the middle of the universe. This blue color does not stand for something concrete, but is an image of my expression,” Honda, who in 1999 received an ifaza (diploma) in calligraphy from the Turkish master Hasan Çelebi, vouches for the traditional cursive diwani jali script he’s chosen for the piece. “We don’t break the existing rules. I cannot overcome the traditional shapes.”

When asked about the cultural value behind a Japanese appreciation of Arabic calligraphy, Professor Yasushi Kosugi’s simple reply echoes the calligraphy student’s “Beauty.”

“Because that is the target,” he says, “We have to attain the beauty.”

We’re sitting in a lounge at Kyoto.
Irr. Kosugi’s opinion, in “extent, depths and energies,” Arabic and East Asian calligraphies are the two greatest historic writing traditions of human history.

Every two weeks, Koichi Yamaoka, who is Honda’s partner in the Japan Arab Calligraphy Association (JACA), takes a shinkansen bullet train from Yokohama 600 kilometers (375 mi) west to the historic heartland of Japan—the cities of Kyoto, Osaka and Kobe—where he teaches Arabic calligraphy classes. As the train whizzes along, Yamaoka says, “People don’t know about Islam. They only know Muslim people can marry four wives; they don’t eat pork... Only superficial knowledge. So when I teach Arabic calligraphy, I explain the background of the culture.”

Yamaoka spent four years in Saudi Arabia in the early 1980s. A decade later, he started learning Arabic calligraphy. Recently, he took early retirement from his company to help JACA. “I decided to make some business with this Arabic calligraphy in Japan. I think I can do something.”

In Kyoto, which for a thousand years was the seat of Japan’s imperial court, his advertisement reads, “Welcome to the World of Islam.”

The Nihon Musurinu Kyokai, or Japan Muslim Association (JMA), estimates there are 7,000 to 10,000 Japanese Muslims—just a tiny fraction of the country’s population of 150 million. (Another 30,000 non-Japanese Muslims also live in the country.) This small community originated during World War II, after some 50 Japanese soldiers embraced Islam while serving in such countries as Singapore and Malaysia. Their numbers grew in the 1970s as Japanese companies sent staff to Arab countries and some students in Japan began to study Arabic to try for a chance at a better job. Many found “a way of life to their future,” says Khalid M. Higuchi, the honorary chairman of the JMA.

It is not so great a leap for Japanese to choose Islam, he suggests. “We are punctual, clean and very honest,” he says. “Japanese behavior is Islamic behavior. I behave as a Japanese in the same way I do in Islamic life.”
The Second Master

A generation younger than Honda and of a different philosophy, Nobuko Sagawa is Japan's second certified master of Arabic calligraphy. With Honda now in his 60’s, Sagawa represents a different school of shodo ‘arabi for the future.

At university, Sagawa studied fine arts and became interested in the letters of the Arabic language. That led her to Damascus and to her teacher, Mohamed Al Dawi, who gave her “a feeling of something different in the line even though it's the same shape, even though it's the same balance, even though it’s the same curve.”

Sagawa's style is what she calls “a collaboration” among combinations of Japanese scripts (kana), Chinese characters (kanji) and Arabic. True to her Syrian training, she uses a reed rather than a bamboo qalam for the Arabic, and she uses a fude for the kana and kanji. She prefers Arabic poetry or phrases to sacred Qur'anic texts, and she chooses the kanji to “harmonize” with the meaning of the Arabic.

To her, whether Japanese or Arabic, “Sho is sho”—writing is writing.

Abu Calligraphy. First Thursdays. Time 2:45 to 4:45. Fee 4200 yen per month. "Two classes."

Today, only three women are here, as they have been for the last year and a half. They share a delicious matcha roll—a green-tea cake—as they do their calligraphy and talk about their art, their lives and their children.

"We try to match the feeling of Arabic calligraphy," says Manami Ali Syed. She says they are all dedicated to "building the pillar of Arabic calligraphy, Arabic culture, Arabic calligraphy and Arabic language."

At Yamaoka’s class in Osaka, I’m surprised to see Chieko Kinoshita, a woman I had seen in a Tokyo class just a few days before. She’s again unalteringly drawing the madd lengthened stroke in the middle of the Fathah, the opening verse of the Qur’an, time after time. I’m surprised to learn she is an office clerk from Hiroshima, which is some 850 kilometers (530 mi) and five hours’ journey from Tokyo. To come to Osaka today, she’s traveled 350 kilometers (215 mi). She is, Yamaoka says, "a very dedicated student."

To her, "Just the letters themselves are beautiful. Some kind of art. Maybe art is the most important part."

Yamaoka adds that it’s often difficult for students to put their motivations into words. “It’s quite difficult to explain the meaning of the life, of the fun, of the hobby. Some people have their history; some do not. Some just have feeling.”
Far Honda, it was a feeling that came slowly. When he graduated from Tokyo University of Foreign Studies in 1969, he says, "I made up my mind never to open an Arabic book again. I hated the Arabic language; I hated the professors. They only taught grammar; reading Arabic novels was impossible!"

But five years into his first job, Honda's reluctant skills earned him a post in Saudi Arabia. There, the difference between colloquial Arabic and the classical, written Arabic of his studies stumped him. But he had both curiosity and perseverance on his side.

"Every day I would go to the suq [the market] and communicate with the local people. 'Please, what is this?' I registered all the words in katakana, Japanese letters. I believe my teachers in the true sense were ordinary citizens, like drivers, clerks, instead of Tokyo University of Foreign Studies."

Honda soon was so proficient that he was selected to lead a mineral-resources survey team run by the Saudi Ministry of Petroleum.

The next three years he spent almost entirely in the desert, where his companions were largely Bedouins. "I became sensitive to the changes in nature.

"When I looked at the desert area, the Rub al-Khali [the Empty Quarter] in the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, I was amazed at the beauty of the movement of the desert, the natural flow of sand dunes, like living beings. I looked at my feet. A beautiful print made by the movement of the wind like a fingerprint. I thought they were very similar to the movement of Arabic calligraphy; Arabic letters. So when I came back, the vivid memory remained in my brain, especially the beautiful landscapes of the desert. 'The beauty of the sand dunes and the calligraphy combined together in myself'."

Soon after returning, in 1979, Honda embraced Islam and took the Muslim name Fuad ("Heart"). He taught Arabic, and he taught himself Arabic calligraphy. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, he emerged onto the world calligraphy scene.

In the studio of Taisho Eguchi, a master calligrapher and a judge at the Nitten, Yamaoka wields a knife to fashion a bamboo galam on the spot from the handle of a fude. Eguchi goes over to jars and jars of fude and picks out one made of mongoose hair. He bow ever so slightly to Yamaoka.

Eguchi is the product of a long chain of masters and schools of calligraphy. He has been a student of shodo for 60 years, and I have come to his studio in Osaka to better understand the "shodo" part of shodo "arabi."

But Eguchi has never seen Arabic calligraphy. Yamaoka kindly offers to demonstrate it. Eguchi, dressed in a modest gray cardigan, laughs at my very presence. "I've been to America before and I visited some cemeteries. On the stone, there's only printing, not handwriting. So I think American, European people haven't much interest in 'the line'."

He explains his critique: "I think the wabi sabi is inside the line. When somebody writes the line, the line shows the man himself." (Part sensibility and part esthetic, the concept of wabi sabi is central to the Japanese understanding of beauty. It defies simple translation: "Transience," "simplicity," "ambiguity," "imperfection" and even "entropy" all touch its meaning.)

Eguchi realizes it's better to show than to tell. Yamaoka grabs a piece of thick glossy white paper, and Eguchi takes a long piece of washi paper.

In terms of their choices of paper, the Arabic and the Asian calligraphers seem to have changed places over the millennia. Originally, papyrus was used in the Middle East; its rough surface did not lend itself to the precision of calligraphy. It was only with the invention in China of polished paper that Muslim calligraphers were able to perfect the smooth flow of the lines in cursive scripts. But Eguchi's washi paper is rough, its fibers visible on the surface, much like papyrus. It drinks in the ink unevenly, giving his kanji variable textures.

Eguchi dips his fude—one dip—into the ash-black ink. He angles over the table and, in a controlled flurry, moves top to bottom: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight strokes, in order, of kanji. Then he writes his signature in smaller characters, using the same brush. It is all over in 10 seconds. (A serious work, he says, like the one in the Nitten, can take up to four minutes.)

Yukari Takahashi owns an elegant Tokyo nightclub and studies calligraphy with Yamaoka.

"Shodo is mainly about the atmosphere of the design."

Taisho Eguchi
Yamaoka sits down and dips his bamboo qalam. He fixes his hand on the paper, aligning the bottom of it and the flat of the angled nib on the paper, and starts writing. Slowly. Deliberately. One can hear the nib scratching the paper. It could be a bird chirping in the distance. Even with small strokes, he goes back and dips the qalam for more ink. It ends not with a flourish but with a thoughtful punctuation mark.

For the first time in Eguchi’s life, he sees a 1300-year-old kanchi (Chinese poem) and a 1400-year-old surah from the Qur’an side by side. Even to the untrained eye, the two pieces of calligraphy trigger emotions from contentment to joy to awe.

Eguchi, however, maintains that “shodo is not art,” and that “ninety-five percent of the importance is in the space between the letters. Five percent is the ability to read the kanchi. Shodo is mainly about the atmosphere of the design.”

When I ask professor Yasushi Kosugi about this, he maintains that the growth of shodo ‘arabi is evidence of cultural affinity.

“Japan has been taking from world civilization for at least 2000 years,” he says.

“We cut the pen by our own hand out of bamboo, which is very highly esteemed as a plant in this country for traditional art,” says Kosugi. “I think that immediately corresponds to the value of the

Taisho Eguchi, master of traditional Japanese calligraphy, demonstrates the rapid, flowing motions of Japanese calligraphy with a fude, or brush. Above: In his studio, Honda displays some of the large, colorful calligraphic works that have won him worldwide recognition. In the 1980’s, he spent three years leading mineral surveys in the deserts of Saudi Arabia, and when he returned to Japan, he says, “The beauty of the sand dunes and the calligraphy combined together in myself.”
The Bamboo Pen

A Japanese shodo ‘arabi calligrapher writes with a qalam, or pen, made from a bamboo stem rather than the reed traditionally used by calligraphers in the Middle East. Master Fud Koushi Honda cuts the stems by the hundreds in the mountains, and, at home, he dries them in the sun.

“We have lots of bamboo. I am very happy,” says Honda.

Under a staircase, in his “bamboo cellar,” he picks through several boxes, the sticks rattling. “One year old. Two years old. It takes three years to dry, and when bamboo is ready, I make a pen.”

On a weathered brown piece of bamboo, he cuts out a nib like a duck’s beak, at an angle. Then he cuts longitudinal grooves behind it so the ink won’t run off so quickly—this is the “Honda style” innovation for the Japanese bamboo qalam.

“An Iranian calligrapher gave me reed from the Tigris river,” says Honda, coming up with the pen from inside a box. “It doesn’t have the width of bamboo. It’s very thin, very difficult to grasp and very fragile.”

He eyes another pen, lovingly. “Ten years old,” he says. “Very hard, like iron. It became too short from sharpening it every day, but I couldn’t throw it away. I joined it to a new one, a young one. I like this pen so much.”

In using the pen, he explains, “It is essential that the movement of the stroke should be natural and sharp. The nib of the pen should be solid enough not to wear, and its edge should remain as sharp as a knife, so that the calligrapher can write the thinnest line, like a hair.

“I think the most important factor for obtaining beauty in Arabic calligraphy is the variation in line width. This is achieved by turning the edge of the nib to the required angle while at the same time floating the lower edge of the nib off the paper slightly. This technique is very difficult; it seems impossible for the beginner. I think it takes about 20 years to master such a technique.”

I ask Honda whether the pen is an extension of himself, of the calligrapher. He places it even higher.

“According to the Qur’an, God gave the qalam as an agent of wisdom,” Honda explains. “It’s the symbol of all human knowledge.”

Top: Grooves cut into a broad nib increase the amount of ink the nib can hold, explains Honda. “In the tradition of Arabic calligraphy, the calligrapher has to make his pen himself, unlike the tradition of Japanese or Chinese calligraphy in which calligraphers can easily obtain brushes by buying them from a stationery shop. This means the beauty of Arabic calligraphy depends largely upon how well the calligrapher can make his pens.” Left: Fude (brushes) for sale.
reed pen in Arabic calligraphy... [Shodo 'arabi] is something that can be achieved only by Japanese. Because I see the amalgamation of what is ultimately Japanese—the pursuit of beauty—with that kind of Arab calligraphy.

"I believe that explains why the lady from Hiroshima comes so far, twice a month, to her lesson. In earlier days, in the Tang era, we used to send students to China from this tiny island in pursuit of beauty. The beauty itself is truth."

The Web site of one of Japan's leading politicians features a pair of dancing robots. They're dancing to Arab music.

"They are very cute, right?" says Yuriko Koike, who served as Japan's environment minister from 2004 to 2006 and defense minister in 2007. She currently directs public relations for the Liberal Democratic party, and some believe she could one day become Japan's first female prime minister.

"I try to keep people's eyes on the Middle East, because the area is so essential to Japan."

In her office, the Arabic word shams ("sun") is splashed on a large framed canvas.

"I just pick up my old brush and ink and write my favorite words in Arabic. That's all. I don't care whether the words can be read or not, because it's art. I am just in love with the Arabic letters, and I have no time to learn the old classical rules of calligraphy. I'm just enjoying it for myself. It's my hobby."

Koike's father, an oil trader, sparked her fascination with the Middle East with souvenirs from his travels. Koike went on to study at the American University in Cairo, and she still uses Arabic when she attends international conferences related to the Middle East and when she is interviewed on Arabic-language television.
Koike only started practicing calligraphy after returning to Japan from Egypt and working as a television newscaster. "As a TV-caster, as a politician, I'm always requested to write something or sign an autograph, and I felt that an ordinary autograph by me in Japanese is not interesting. So I invented," she says. It is common, she adds, for Japanese not only to sign a name in an autograph but to add some favorite word or letter.

"This is the way," she says, tapping on a typical autograph pad with the words salam and shams written on it. "I started using [these] Arabic letters rather than writing Chinese kanjis. People love it. This is my style."

She delicately opens a wooden box and unwraps an object within. When she travels abroad on state business, she says, "I bring my own souvenir. When I went to the United States to Arlington [National] Cemetery, everybody who visits there officially is asked to bring some typical souvenir." (American soldiers, including many who fought Japan in World War II, are buried in Arlington National Cemetery.)

Out of the box comes a gorgeous ceramic bowl, handmade by an artist friend. On it, drawn in Koike's hand, the Arabic calligraphy reads "salaam salaam"— "peace peace.

"Japanese minister of defense, with Arabic calligraphy on china, and on the bowl saying 'peace.' It's something, right?"

Koike makes it a point to applaud Honda. "He is inventing some new horizons."

About her own work, Koike says, "Because the brush is Chinese, the letters are Arabic, the ink is Japanese and I'm Japanese, it's a fusion of three cultures."

Like her student colleagues, each shodo 'arabi calligrapher brings two of the world's great calligraphic cultures a bit closer."

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Rub' al-Khall: JF 10
"Shodo Arabi"
"Shodo 'Arabi"
Written by Sheldon Chad
Photographed by Michael Yamashita

Japan is home to one of the world's great traditions of calligraphy, and in Japanese shodo means "the way of writing." In recent years, a few Japanese calligraphers have tried their hand at Arabic, creating what master calligrapher Fuad Kouichi Honda calls shodo 'arabi—"the way of Arabic writing."

The Life of Omar ibn Said
Written by Jonathan Curiel
Photographs courtesy of Derrick Beard

About one in five African slaves brought to the New World between 1500 and the mid-19th century was Muslim. Of them, only Omar ibn Said is known to have written a brief autobiography in Arabic. Remarkable for their humble eloquence and generosity of spirit, Said's handwritten pages live in the memory of Fayetteville, North Carolina.

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