

In the Shadows of the Atomic Holocaust – Japan’s War-Time Memories

Introduction

It has often been pointed out how the actual ending of the war, the horrific bombing of the two cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, together with the subsequent American occupation of Japan, allowed Japan to take on the role of victims of World War II rather than the role of the principal aggressors. Unlike Germany, Japan has been reluctant to face up to and apologize for its misdeeds during the war. Lisa Yoneyama, for example, writes in her analysis of the memorialization of Hiroshima that “Hiroshima memories have been predicated on the grave obfuscation of the prewar Japanese Empire, its colonial practices, and their consequences,” (Yoneyama 1999, 3) and subsequently links this to what has, by progressive critics in Japan, often been referred to as ‘A-bomb nationalism’. My focus today will be first of all on how memories of Hiroshima have shaped, and been shaped by, modern Japan, and second on the many stories that seem to have been repressed or held back in the shadows of this monstrous event.

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Memorialization

The literature of Hiroshima is often coupled with a national memorialization of Hiroshima as a site for the commemoration of world peace. In this process, there are important aspects of the ‘big picture’ that remain hidden. As Ian Buruma points out in a comparison of the notion of ‘guilt’ in Germany and Japan, Japan never experienced any clear break with the pre-war regime. Whereas “Germany lost its Nazi leaders,” writes Buruma, “Japan lost only its admirals and generals” (Buruma 2002, 63). The American occupational forces in Japan decided to keep the Emperor as the symbol of the state and of the unity of the people, and as a result quite effectively blocked any possibility for the nation to take full responsibility for its war-time aggression. Sure, many of its military leaders were convicted and executed, but as long as the Emperor remained in place (albeit with his powers reduced, as he was forced to publicly renounce his god-like status), the nation’s sense of taking responsibility for its actions was somehow pulverized. Japan has never unequivocally owned up to its crimes committed during its many years of aggression towards its neighboring countries, and the results of this can still be seen today, including the recent reactions seen in China to the Spielberg film *Geisha*, and other similar incidents.

The ‘forgotten’ stories

Since the 1980s, however, there has been a marked increase in the number of testimonial accounts being produced, both orally and in writing. Organizations have been formed to promote testimonial accounts, through public lectures, and through ‘witness tours’ of Hiroshima for school classes. The general public also seems more interested in war testimonies in general, not just testimonies from Hiroshima. This fact can be seen from the enormous response newspapers such as the *Asahi Shinbun* received when they invited readers to submit their own war-time stories: more than 4200 contributions were sent in, and the series, initially planned for only a few months, was extended several times and ultimately lasted for well over a year (Buchholtz 1998, 10).

There are many possible reasons behind this very marked increase in both production and interest in people’s war-time testimonies. On the one hand is the growing global interest in nuclear disarmament, the focus on nuclear disarmament talks, and the spread of anti-nuclear protests worldwide. As such, the Pope’s visit to Hiroshima in 1981 also contributed to this focus. Furthermore, the textbook controversy in the 1980s about the representation of Japan’s war crimes in school textbooks sparked a public debate on the representation of war in Japan, perhaps inspiring more people to stand up and tell their stories. Another important factor is the age of the witnesses themselves. By this time most were of retirement age, and many had become grandparents. While the birth of a new generation perhaps inspired many to start speaking of their experiences for the first time, they were also of an age where the social stigma related to being an a-bomb victim had lost its hold. They were, after all, no longer on the marriage market, and most had stopped working as well.

‘The association for narrating’

One of the associations that appeared in the 1980s was the *Kataru Kai*, which literally means ‘the association for narrating’. The association’s founding philosophy is for its members to convey their experiences orally to future generations. Their testimonies, the association claims in an introductory leaflet, stand “as proof of our determination to engage in testimonial practices, a responsibility of those who survived” (Yoneyama, 103). Through its choice of words, the association makes a clear shift away from previous testimonies of suffering. First of all, the association avoids the use of the term *hibakusha*, the term most often used to identify survivors of the a-bomb. *Hibakusha* quite literally means “a person who suffered the atomic bomb,” thus making it difficult for the subject to see her/himself as anything but a victim. The association instead speaks of *ikinokotta mono*, meaning ‘those still alive’ i.e. the survivors. This gives their role a different focus, as Yoneyama points out, a focus that stresses how “one could have been a part of, but was in fact decisively severed from the collectivity of the dead” (Yoneyama, 103).

With this broader focus, it became possible for survivors to find a setting in which to tell their stories, where the sole focus was not their victimization. This allowed for a broader range of stories. One witness who found her place within this organization was Numata Suzuko. Numata’s testimonial account focuses not only on her personal experiences of the a-bomb, in which she lost a leg (she has also been operated several times for cancer), but rather she tries to put her story into a larger picture by

focusing on the many things she did not know at the time of the bombing. In other words, Numata incorporates, retrospectively, knowledge about the historical circumstances for the dropping of the bomb. For example, recalling the way in which she as a young girl blindly supported the war, and believed the war propaganda she was subject to, she says “In those days, [the soldiers were] objects of our romantic admiration. And we paraded with lanterns in our hand, celebrating ‘Nanjing surrendered!’ ‘Singapore surrendered!’ Did we ever imagine that such horrible things [as massacres and tortures] were happening behind those scenes?” (quoted in Yoneyama, 121) Having devoted her retirement years to travel and narrating, Numata has visited many of the former colonies, incorporating the knowledge she gains from such visits into her narrative accounts of the war's end.

Matsuda Go is another witness who tries to give his own personal experience a broader perspective. Whereas witness accounts almost always begin with the blast coming out of nowhere from the innocent and clear blue August skies, Matsuda begins his story with stories of war-time education, showing parallels between educational practices of the day and the school system that his audience is still a part of. He also shows photographs from Japan's aggression in China, photos from the Nanjing massacre, pointing out to the young people in his audience that the gleeful young men on the picture might well be their grandfathers. And then he will tell about his experiences in Hiroshima. In that way, writes Yoneyama, “Matsuda's narrative reminds his audiences that his approaching death is not a matter of course. It was caused, or could have been prevented, by the decisions of people in power [...] his narrative shows young listeners that power produces knowledge, action, and historical consequences” (Yoneyama, 133).

Narrative purpose

James Phelan gives a rhetorical definition of narrative as “somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose that something happened” (Phelan 2005, 323). With regard to the testimonial practices of the A-bomb survivors, it seems beyond any doubt that the last bit of the definition “for some purpose” plays a very important role not only in the shaping of the narrative, but in the way in which it is received as well. It is impossible to regard a testimonial account of the A-bomb isolated from the circumstances of its production. The way in which the story is told will *always* affect also the way in which the bombing of Hiroshima is understood as a historical event. Having for a long time been deeply inscribed in a universal peace movement, there now seems to be a growing concern that the larger picture, Japan's own war-time responsibility, has perhaps gotten lost along the way. Consequently, a new context has been created for narration, inviting a more critical stance. And within this new context, other kinds of stories are being told. Not just of Hiroshima. Last year, at the age of 88, for example, Hidaka Rokuro published his memoirs from his childhood in Manchuria, entitled “What I thought during the war: the tale of one family.” His family, he says, had always spoken out against the war, but only within the confines of the home. Sixty years had to pass since the end of the war before he could bring these thoughts to the public. The urgency felt in Japan today, then, is not only due to the fact that the many witnesses of the war-time Japan

are disappearing. It is that these witnesses will disappear without the full story having been told. The urgency, then, is also instilled by a fear that their many still *untold* stories will disappear with them.

References

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