

Title	<Special Feature "Nakba after Sixty Years: Memories and Histories in Palestine and East Asia"> Narrating and Listening to the Memories of Nakba in Kyoto: Dialogue between Palestine and East Asia
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Citation	イスラーム世界研究 : Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies (2009), 3(1): 170-175
Issue Date	2009-07
URL	http://dx.doi.org/10.14989/87461
Right	
Type	Departmental Bulletin Paper
Textversion	publisher

Narrating and Listening to the Memories of Nakba in Kyoto: Dialogue between Palestine and East Asia

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The title of the third symposium was “Narrating and Listening to Nakba in Kyoto; a dialogue between Palestine and East Asia.” I will explain the concept behind the title. Why did we narrate the memories of Nakba and listen to them, in Japan, and especially in Kyoto? If we just listen to lived experiences of Nakba by Palestinians and learn the atrocities inflicted upon them by Zionism, then, does it mean automatically that we have just shared their memories? What does it mean by sharing memories of other’s and what is the significance of it? And if narrating and listening to Memories of Nakba in Japan means some venture for our shared future, then, I’m wondering in what terms, and what is at stake, there? Narrating and listening to memories of Nakba in Japan would naturally raise a series of questions such as these. The symposium in Kyoto was an attempt to respond to those questions.

State appropriation of the event as a national tragedy

When the so-called 9/11 incident happened, while this event was automatically translated as a universal human tragedy and shared as such nationwide in Japan, nobody seems to have any memory of the atrocities which took place in Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Lebanon in 1982, where also thousands of people were massacred in the space of only 42 hours by Lebanese phalangist militia under the Israeli occupation of Beirut. For me, these two events seem similar in terms not only of the number of the victims, but also of the fundamental nature of both events which dehumanized the other. And yet, the memory of the Palestinian tragedy has been dealt with as if only related to Palestinians. This disproportion of the memories between these two events was most striking to me and seems to constitute another form of cognitional violence towards Palestinians.

That might be why an essay by Ariel Dorfman, which appeared in a Japanese newspaper soon after the incident of 9/11, struck a chord with me. Dorfman, a celebrated Chilean writer, writes in this essay: there have been countless 9/11s throughout in the history of the world.¹ What he kept in his mind, certainly, was the incident which took place in Santiago on the same day in 1973.

Dorfman pressed the significance of tying the tragedy which took place in

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1 “Futatsu no 9/11 (Two 9/11)” Ashahi Shimbun (November 28, 2001).

Washington and New York on that day to those memories of other 9/11s throughout the world. However, contrary to Dorfman's wish, and also against the wish of the families who were violently bereft of their loved ones in the event and founded the association of peaceful tomorrows to oppose the war against Afghanistan, what followed the incident is, as you all know well, the appropriation of the event by the U.S. as its own national tragedy, which developed later into a series of acts of violence against Afghanistan and Iraq.

We could take numerous examples of this kind of state appropriation of the event as a national tragedy. The Holocaust must be the most acknowledged example of this appropriation. Being regarded as the national tragedy of Jewish people in Zionist discourse, Holocaust plays a crucial role to justify Israeli violence against Palestinians.

We could point out the same thing about Hiroshima. As is well shown in the Japanese unique claim to victimization in the history of Atomic warfare is nothing but the plain example of national appropriation of the event like the Zionist appropriation of Holocaust. In the post symposium informal gathering in Hiroshima, the day before yesterday, Prof. Naono, one of the speakers at the symposium in Hiroshima, stressed that the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are those who were killed or survived, or those who lost their loved ones in the events. Nobody else could represent the victims, not Hiroshima city, nor the Japanese government. However, the event was translated as the national tragedy and the voice of the survivors has been suppressed. They are not allowed to express their expectations as survivors other than in anti-nuke discourse although the wishes of the survivors are not actually limited to it. Their deep fundamental sympathy towards Palestinians or Iraqis who are dehumanized and being killed as if they were nothing is not represented in the national discourse of Hiroshima, as the symbol of the victim of the atrocities caused by the Atomic bomb. So Prof. Rosemary Sayigh's claim or expectation, which was expressed during the discussion in Hiroshima, that Hiroshima should be the symbol of opposition to all kinds of injustice, truly reflect the expectations of the survivors, while actual "Hiroshima" functions for the survivors as a symbol of betrayal of their own expectations, just as the memory of the Holocaust in Zionist discourse is a betrayal of the true victims of the event.

With these instances of co-opting national tragedies as a backdrop, it would seem clear that the significance in narrating our memory of an incident in its true singularity, and without relativizing or minimizing it, lies in our exploration of ways to open up and connect it to the memory of tragic events suffered by others in different times and different places. And we could find out an apparent example of an attempt of this sort in a Jewish American scholar, Sara Roy's essay "Living with Holocaust; a Journey of a Child of the Holocaust Survivors." Admitting that the Israeli occupation of Palestine is not Holocaust, Roy sees no difference between the victimizer of these two events, in their fundamental

nature as the injustice against the human and, being a child of Holocaust survivors, she strongly denounces the violence of the Jewish state against Palestinians.²

From the eastern end of the Asian continent

Following Dorfman's expression, there have been countless "Nakbas" in the world. The colonization by Japanese government of Ainu-moshiri, or the land of Ainu people in the northern island of Japan, was certainly a Nakba for Ainu people. It is only in 2008, more than one century after the colonization, that the Japanese government has acknowledged that Ainu are the indigenous people of Japan, but the fact that colonization of their land by the Japanese was definitely the colonial invasion is still negated in the national history of Japan. In the late 19th century, the Japanese government prompted the colonization of the land of the Ainu, considering it a land without people. It is not a mere historical coincidence that the same expression was used at the both ends of the Asian continent, during the same period of the global modern history. This would seem to me the stark evidence that Israel and Japan are connected in the same historical vein and sharing, in establishing their modern state, colonialism on the basis of racism.

Likewise, the annexation of Korea by Japan in 1910, which deprived the Korean people of their national identities, was certainly a Nakba-like experience. For 36 years, the Korean people lived under Japanese colonial rule, suffering from the violent consequences caused by the event, politically, economically and culturally.

In his keynote speech in the symposium in Tokyo, Prof. Nur Masaluha mentioned that Palestinian Nakba turned out to be full of massacres, which surpassed our former knowledge in terms of the frequency. And responding to Prof. Masaluha, Prof. Ali Quleibo insisted that Nakba for the Palestinians does not only mean the physical massacres, but the continuous cultural massacres, as well. Likewise, Japanese colonial rule of Korea was also experienced by the Koreans as a series of cultural massacres.

At the last period of the Asian Pacific war, Korean men were brought to Japan in violent ways and forced to work in order to make up for the lack of Japanese labor force. They were forced to live in conditions like concentration camps and countless people died because of the starvation or lynching. The concentration camps are remembered in Japanese collective memory as something related only to Nazi or Stalinist regimes but Japanese history is not free of similar violence. Terms like "forced migration" or "forced labor" are registered in the Japanese historical lexicon, but they have nothing to do with the forced labor of the prisoners of Nazi concentration camps in the Japanese collective imagination. Rather, the term "concentration camps" means in Japanese collective memory the experience of the

² Roy, Sara. 2002. "Living with the Holocaust: The Journey of a Child of Holocaust Survivors," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 32(1), pp. 5–12.

detention of Japanese soldiers in Siberia and their forced labor under the Stalinist regime of the Soviet Union after the World War II, the memory of their suffering as the victim.

Prior to the forced migration of the Koreans, a large number of people “voluntarily” come to Japanese inlands from Korea, however, this voluntariness was just another form of forced migration, because they were deprived of the means of their livelihood in their own homeland as the result of Japanese colonialist policies and forced to migrate to Japan where they could find far greater chances of economical prosperity.

And numerous women in Korea and other parts of Asia under Japanese occupation were sexually victimized by the Japanese military, left physically and emotionally scarred for life, although the memories of their experiences have been suppressed for almost half a century due to the nature of the sexual violence.

Palestinians—whether refugees, those living under Israeli military occupation or those in Israel—have been suffering from the violent consequences of the Nakba tragedy for over 60 years. Actually, as Prof. Yuzo Itagaki commented in the Symposium in Tokyo, Nakba is not an event which took place once and for all 60 years ago, but has been continuing throughout these 60 years. So was the Nakba for Korean people. The end of the Japanese colonial rule in 1945 did not mean the end of the violence of Nakba for them.

I would like to refer to the April 3rd incident which took place in Cheju island in southern Korea. Prof. Mun Gyonsu, one of the speakers in the symposium in Kyoto, is also the author of the detailed book about the event.³ In April, 1948, during the same period when the violence of ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians was storming at the western end of the Asian continent, at Cheju Island, on the other end of the continent, which was under the American military rule at the time, tens of thousands of people, who were demanding the unification of their homeland were massacred by the regime in the process of state formation. Although the majority of the people who were killed in the incident are the victims of state terrorism, the memory of their experience has been long suppressed in the national history of Korea, due to the Anti-communism which is at the core of its national identity. The bereaved families were forced to remain silent about the incident and prohibited from mentioning it in public for about half a century. They were prohibited even from expressing their sorrow.

As the bodies of the victims were buried under the thick concrete of the Cheju airport, the memory of the event has long been also buried under the concrete of National history. It was just ten years ago when the reconciliation between the state and the victims’ families started, and following the expression of the Korean writer, Mr. Kim Sokpong, the bereaved families are finally getting “the pleasure of recovering the freedom to express their

³ Mun Gyonsu. 2008. *Saishūtō Yon/San Jiken: “Tamuna no Kuni” no Shito Saisē no Monogatari* (The Cheju Island Uprising beginning on April 3, 1948: A Story of Tamna Death and Revival) Tokyo: Heibonsha.

sorrow.” I cannot help asking myself if the bereaved families of Sabra and Shatila will ever get this pleasure.

Those Korean minorities in Japan who came to live in Japan as the result of Japanese colonialism have remained in the state of “semi-refugees,” and have been exposed to various forms of discrimination, legally, socially, and institutionally, in Japanese society throughout these 60 years.

However, the memories of the Korean Nakba have not been fully admitted or appreciated by Japanese in their national history. Rather, they are repressed and sometimes negated just like the memory of the Palestinian Nakba in Israeli national history.

In 1991, Kim Hak-sun in Korea came out as a former victim of Japanese Military sex slavery and demanded an official apology by the Japanese government and compensation. Her coming out made Japanese society, which had been at peace in its collective amnesia and satisfied with the memory of its own victimhood in the war, face its own criminal past as the victimizer. Since then, Japanese society has been a battlefield of the civil war of the memory during the last decade of the 20th century.

Those who deeply wish to reconcile with the victims of their national crimes and build true peace in Asia together with them, made their efforts in sharing the memory of their suffering, and inscribing this memory in the textbook of the history of Japan, which made a certain success in publishing the comfort women issue in history textbooks for junior high school students, while right wing nationalists prompted the project to publish “the new textbook of Japanese history” which will foster so called “sound nationalism” in Japanese children, excluding those memories of disgrace as they put it.

Japan and Israel, which exist at the both ends of the Asian continent, are in the alliance with each other in terms of the negation of their own criminal pasts. Japanese nationalists claim that Japanese colonial rule is not a “Holocaust” because the Holocaust is an incomparable event in human history. They make this claim just to deny Japanese responsibility for historical crimes. They claim that what Japan did is just the same thing as the Britain and France did, and since they didn’t apologize, why should we? In this sense, the alliance of the denial of the responsibilities for historical injustice is worldwide, not only between Israel and Japan.

Dialogue between Palestine and East Asia

The memories of Nakba, either Palestinian Nakba or Korean, or the one suffered by Eastern European Jewry, need to be opened up to the memory of others, against the national appropriation of its memory. In Kyoto, we thought over diverse questions regarding this phenomenon through dialogue between Palestine and Eastern Asia, both of which narrate their own experience of Nakba.

Prof. Sari Hanafi, a professor of sociology, at American University in Beirut who also teaches transitional justice, and is the director of the center of refugee's and diaspora studies in Ramallah, talked in his keynote speech about the destruction of the land and memory of Palestine which has been developing as the violence of "Spaciocide" throughout these 60 years.

Subsequently, there was a speech by Prof. Mung Gyong-su, entitled "The Origin and the Present of the Problems of Korean Residents in Japan," which illustrated the nature of the violence in the root problems of KMJ (Korean Minority in Japan). Both speeches revealed a historical vein connecting the two Nakbas.

Then, Prof. Yeong-ae Yamashita, who has been engaged in activities for supporting former "Korean Comfort Women" spoke about the victims of Japanese sex slavery, another example of the never ending Nakba in East Asia.

The symposium in Kyoto was the very first attempt to connect the experiences of Nakba in Palestine and the history of East Asia and share their memories. I hope this dialogue will be the first step for us to make a different history and different world in the future.

* After the symposia, inspired by the session and the dialogue between Palestine and East Asia, Prof. Hanafi wrote a new paper, "Haifa and its refugees; the remembered, the forgotten and the repressed" which is included here in this special issue instead of his original keynote speech.