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## AJISS-Commentary

# "Prayer for Peace" Trips by the Emperor and Empress

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Emperor Akihito was the first Japanese emperor to be enthroned as a "symbol". Emperor with the conclusion of World War II in 1945 and the enactment of the new Constitution of but Emperor Akihito was the first emperor to assume the throne on the premise of being ;

Article 1 of Japan's Constitution stipulates that "[t]he Emperor shall be the symbol of the the People, deriving his position from the will of the people with whom resides sovereign ;

I have long thought there is no other clause so important yet so irresponsible. Despite the "symbol" - "the symbol of the State and (the symbol) of the unity of the People" - nowhere there any mention whatsoever of what constitutes a symbol and how the emperor should it not be said that the attitude of we the Japanese people since the establishment of the e reason it has been left entirely up to the emperor to determine the meaning and manifest own?

For thirty years after assuming the throne, Emperor Akihito has confronted head-on the d being a symbol means and how one becomes a symbol, questions for which no one else h search for these answers and the path down which Emperor Akihito proceeded in this sea

## Heisei Era.

I am a researcher specializing in microbiology, but since university I have also been a poet in Japan's oldest form of poetry known as *tanka*, consisting of five lines of 5,7,5,7 and 7 syllables. For nearly half of the years of the Heisei Era, beginning in the 15<sup>th</sup> year of Heisei, I was selector of poems for the *Utakaihajime* (annual New Year's poetry reading) at the Imperial Household Agency. At that time I was privy to the poems written by both Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko.

The emperor as a symbol is prohibited from making political statements, so what have been the messages to the Japanese people and Japanese society and what did he want to convey to the nation? I have read the poems written by the emperor and empress clearly convey their messages on these matters. This prompted me to continue a weekly series in *Kyodo News*' member newspapers nationwide. I recently looked back over the Heisei Era through the *tanka* written by the imperial couple. The 63 poems I have recently been compiled as a book - "Poems of a Symbol" - and published by Bungeishunju.

In these serial articles I divided the imperial couple's poems into four themes - "visits to disaster sites and encouragement to disaster victims", "journeys to battle sites inside and outside Japan to comfort the souls of the war dead", "the creation of a new household image for the Imperial family", and "the most romantic exchanges of poems) between emperors and empresses through history" - and these in chronological order. Here I would like to discuss the "journeys to battle sites inside and outside Japan to comfort the souls of the war dead".

While I should rightly refer to the imperial couple as the retired emperor and empress, he has given any particular note to the contrary, use the contemporary appellations of emperor and empress. I will read the imperial couple's poems and consider the feelings and messages they wished to convey in these poems in order to emphasize the presentness of the times at which the poems were written.

There were four anniversary days that Emperor Akihito insisted must be remembered. They are August 9 and August 15, the days on which atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and June 15, the day commemorating the end of World War II. These are all days that no one in Japan has forgotten. Another day the emperor deemed similarly important was June 23, the day on which the Battle of Okinawa, in which so many civilians were caught up, came to an end in the closing days of World War II. On these four days, the imperial couple never failed to offer silent prayers.

One memorable episode took place in June 1994, when the couple visited the United States to commemorate the day commemorating all those who died in the Battle of Okinawa. A formal dinner to be hosted by the mayor of San Francisco and his wife was scheduled for the day commemorating all those who died in the Battle of Okinawa. Upon realizing that this was the time of the memorial services in Japan, the emperor asked that the dinner be rescheduled. The mayor and empress offered silent prayers in their hotel room at the appointed time. The mayor was very gracious in agreeing to this change of schedule, but the emperor's firm resolve to commemorate the day with the commemoration of this anniversary should most certainly be borne in mind.

The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II came in 1995, a year in which the imperial couple comforted the spirits of the war dead at four locations where the devastation of war had been first visited: Nagasaki on July 26 and then Hiroshima on the following day. On August 2 the emperor visited the Aomori Memorial Hall in Aomori City, which suffered tremendous damage during the August 3 Tokyo Air Raids. Later, on August 15, they attended a national memorial service for the war at the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo's Yamanote District. The emperor also visited the Budokan.

Serried row on row,  
Stone monuments carved over  
Fully with the names  
Of all who were lost in the  
Battle of Okinawa.

Emperor Akihito, 1995

All of those people  
Suffering still the evils  
Of the atom bomb  
Oh, what must have been the pain  
Of their days down fifty years!

Emperor Akihito, 1995

Fifty years from bombing,  
Now on the earth of Hiroshima,  
Dropping so gently,  
A rain shedding where it falls  
Only the fragrance of rain

Empress Michiko, 1995

These are all poems that were read during this series of journeys to comfort the spirits of the war dead. The first poem was read when the emperor visited the Cornerstone of Peace in Okinawa. It has been a tradition for the emperor, whenever in Okinawa, to visit the Cornerstone of Peace, on which are inscribed the names of those who died in the Battle of Okinawa, but the imperial couple's feelings for Okinawa ran deep, and they visited it long before the emperor's abdication.

As is well known, the emperor's first visit to Okinawa in 1975 while still crown prince saw him visit a cave in which they had been hiding and throw fire bombs immediately after the emperor bowed their heads before the Tower of Lilies and laid down a wreath of flowers. With so many

and civilian, having been sacrificed in the war and Okinawa's reversion to mainland Japan prolonged post-war occupation by the US military, people's feelings toward the imperial fa

Despite this incident, the imperial couple had deep feelings for Okinawa, and with each visit with greater warmth by the people of Okinawa until eventually these visits were being eagerly received. It can well be said to have occupied a special place among the imperial couple's journeys to war dead. The emperor even wrote numerous *ryuka* (a traditional Okinawan form of poetry) which is difficult even for native Okinawans, to express his special feelings toward Okinawa, and re sense of his mourning for the war dead.

The third poem, written by the empress, is a highly-crystallized work. The expression "A rain only the fragrance of rain" in the latter part reflects the refined sense of the poem and, next to the fragrance of rain, it naturally harkens back to the "black rain" that had fallen on Hiroshima after the war. The poem's structure illuminates the peace we enjoy today by recalling the rain that fell on the streets of Hiroshima shortly after the atomic bomb was dropped.

During his reign, the emperor did not miss a single memorial service commemorating the war dead. He made repeated journeys throughout the Heisei Era to Hiroshima, Nagasaki and elsewhere to comfort the souls of the war dead and composed many poems on the victims of the war.

These journeys to comfort the spirits of the war dead were not limited to Japan. Countless were his visits to comfort the souls of the war dead in China and Manchuria as well as in the southern theater of Indochina and the Pacific during the war, and it was the imperial couple's firm determination to comfort the souls of the war dead that led to a series of overseas visits.

Their first such visit was to Iwo Jima in 1994, the year before the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the war's end. They went to Saipan to mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the war's end, and in 2015 they made a journey to Okinawa to comfort the souls of the war dead on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the war's end.

On this isle that once  
Was burned bare by battle-fires,  
All these fifty years  
Ownerless, the castor plants  
Have gone on growing lushly

Emperor Akihito, 1994

Water now fills, so calmly,  
The stone basin to the brim  
At this memorial site,

How you, who died in the war,  
Must have thirsted for water then.

Empress Michiko, 1994

At Saipan  
An old man who had fought there,  
Just as it had been,  
Lying down on the sea-shore  
Told us the whole sad story.

Emperor Akihito, 2005

At the end of this island  
Those women with determination  
Kicked the cliff and jumped  
Ah, sad to think of the power  
Of their soft foot-soles.

Empress Michiko, 2005

In fierce battles there  
Countless persons lost their lives  
I now see the isle  
Across and beyond the sea  
Lying so green and serene.

Emperor Akihito, 2015

Could they be, I wonder,  
The souls of the departed  
Here in Palau  
I watch the silver white terns  
Gliding low over the sea.

Empress Michiko, 2015

I have paired up poems composed when the imperial couple visited Iwo Jima, Saipan, and often referred to as a land of suicidal attacks, and in 1945 the ground had been bombed to rubble. Soldiers nevertheless managed to hole up in underground bunkers, only for many of them perhaps during suicidal attacks, after more than a month of incredibly intense fighting. The temperature was 48°C in the underground bunkers carved out on this volcanic island, and the second poem

contemplates the soldiers who died in want of water. The first poem by the emperor pond human action in the face of nature as he witnesses the vitality of the castor oil plants that than half a century since these soldiers died.

There is unfortunately not adequate space here to offer my appreciation of each and ever add a bit of commentary about the fourth poem by the empress. While in Saipan, the imp side on the edge of Suicide Cliff and Banzai Cliff and deeply bowed their heads. While the tinge, these sites in particular were where soldiers and civilians alike had thrown themself "Long live the Emperor!" The bitterness that the emperor unquestionably felt when thinkir even though the emperor being referenced was not himself but his father, defies imaginat emperor and empress bowing their heads deeply no doubt gave many Japanese a shock.

I would like to quote something I wrote in "Poems of a Symbol" about the empress' poem "Empress Michiko's poem pictures the soles of the women who jumped to their deal soles must have keenly felt the cliff, their last point of contact with this life. Stepping bodies would have floated in the air as they lost touch with this world. The empress visualized the soles of their feet unless she empathized with the women about to th side of a cliff."

At a ceremony commemorating the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his coronation, the emperor in 20: "Ever since ascending the throne as Emperor and to this day, I have spent my days country and for the happiness of the people and thinking about my role as the symt this path of seeking the ideal role of the Emperor as the symbol of the State as desi of Japan, has been an endless one. It is my hope that those who will succeed me w ideal role of the symbol of the State in the next era and the era after that, and that to and complement the role of the Emperor as the symbol of the State."

The emperor's own thoughts on how to fulfill his duties as a symbol can be clearly discern what is important for the emperor is the strong commitment to serving as a symbol, focu: emperor but on what to "do" as emperor. His wish to abdicate after growing elderly stems about being unable to serve as a symbol if no longer able to do what was needed.

Numerous people have witnessed the transformation of the visits to disaster-hit areas and the spirits of the war dead into the most prominent aspect of the emperor's service as a s that these two major tasks may have become identical in the emperor's own mind when c symbol.

During visits to disaster-hit areas, the significance lay in the fact that the emperor drew cl up in disasters, shared their suffering and gave them encouragement. Characteristic of the condolence visits was that they were never content with one visit to the sites of the natur: in particularly large number during the Heisei Era. They would unfailingly visit disaster-hit a third time and lift the people's spirits.

Besides drawing closer to disaster victims, the emperor and empress conveyed a clear-cut message that the suffering of disaster victims would never be forgotten. Media attention on the suffering of disaster victims tends to fade over time. Not being forgotten by the emperor naturally gave the victims the sense they were remembered by the rest of the nation, providing considerable encouragement to disaster victims setting out on their journeys to comfort the spirits of the war dead as well.

My contention and conclusion is that offering support and never forgetting were two significant elements of the journeys to comfort the spirits of the war dead as well.

The emperor has repeatedly mentioned that he will never forget those who fell victim to the war. "Japan then entered the Heisei Era, during which we reached the milestone years of 50<sup>th</sup> and 60<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of the end of World War II. I have believed it is important not to forget those who died in World War II and that the peace and prosperity of post-war Japan was built upon the sacrifices and tireless efforts made by the Japanese people, and to pass on this history to the next generation born after the war. It gives me deep comfort that the Heisei Era is coming to an end."

These words were spoken by the emperor in 2018 at a press conference on his birthday, with his fervent insistence that we pass the memories of the war down to subsequent generations and not let them be forgotten.

At the same time, the following words, spoken after the end of a journey to comfort the spirits of the war dead on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the war's end, drew my attention:

"We would like to continue praying for the repose of the souls of all people whose deaths were caused by the war, never forgetting the sorrows of their deceased families and wishing for world peace."

While it hardly needs to be said that these journeys to comfort the spirits of the war dead were for those who had fallen victim to the war and to pray for their souls, the emperor's words speak to the importance of "praying for the repose of the souls" and "never forgetting the sorrows of their deceased families".

There are families whose fathers and brothers were sent to fight as soldiers during the war, and whose immediate families or other relatives died as civilians caught up in war in a foreign land. For these families, the war rages on, no matter how much time passes.

The emperor's words during his journeys to comfort the war dead teach us that the essence of offering support and not forgetting is offering support to those burdened with these sad memories and letting them pass from the nation's memory.

As I mentioned earlier, the true nature of a symbol as embodied in the emperor and empress is these two ideas of "offering support" and "never forgetting". The appearance of these two visits to disaster-hit areas and diachronically in the journeys to comfort the war dead can be seen as a "symbol" in the Heisei Era.

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