

Okinawa, Hawai'i, and the American Popular Imagination

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In 2003 I delivered versions of this paper in Okinawa, at Nanzan University in Nagoya, and at Tohoku University in Sendai. Two years later I rewrote it for a conference that Gary Okihiro held at Columbia University, New York City. Tonight I want to present that part of the paper that never yet has been shown, sometimes because of time constraints and sometimes because the videotapes in this part of the talk failed. The failure was that I tried to make a master copy consisting of just those segments I wanted to show, but the tapes contain a scrambler to prevent any copying whatsoever. This time I have the original tapes, cued in, and I shall devote time only to the parts of the paper that were skipped in the past and that I have added in conclusion.

I turn now to two American cultural productions about Okinawa in order to expose Okinawa's place in the American imagination. First, there is *The Teahouse of the August Moon*. John Parker wrote the popular play by that title in 1952. In 1956 the director Daniel Mann made a film out of the play, with one of the most admired American actors of the time, Marlon Brando, getting top billing. Brando plays the part of Sakini, a translator and interpreter in the American occupation of Okinawa. If you wonder how Brando could play the part of a native Okinawan, I can say it was by means of eye makeup, black hair dye, and exaggeration.

Sakini introduces the drama. He speaks directly to us, the audience. Sakini tells us about how Okinawa has been subjugated for 800 years, first by Chinese, then by Japanese, and now by Americans. The

post-WWII Americans are old news to the Okinawans. In Hollywood words of Oriental wisdom, Sakini says about the pains of oppression, “Pain make man think, thought make man wise, wisdom make life endurable.” He demonstrates to us, too, that he understands cultural relativism, when he comments about how Americans are shocked when Okinawan men and women bathe together in public o-furo and onsen, which Americans consider to be shameful public nudity. Yet Americans are not shocked by marble statues of naked women and men in museums, gardens, and other public places where Okinawans would find them distasteful, at the very least.

It is 1946. A United States Army captain, Fisbee (Glenn Ford), is assigned by his colonel to introduce democracy and economic development to a village called Tobiki. Sakini goes to Tobiki to serve as interpreter to Captain Fisbee. Tobiki happens to be Sakini's hometown.

[The videoclip shown here begins with Fisbee getting his assignment from Colonel Purdy. The filmscript is marked by a verbal humor, or satire, based on a character's ignorance of how stupid he sounds and the audience's knowing more than the character does. Colonel Purdy tells Captain Fisbee that he is determined to teach the “natives” the meaning of “democracy” “even if I have to shoot every one of them.” Purdy also hands over to Fisbee a thick binder called *Plan B*, a US military handbook for rebuilding Okinawa, beginning with a school house shaped like the Pentagon.]

Colonel Purdy sends Fisbee off to Tobiki village by exhorting, “The eyes of Washington are on our occupation team, and the eyes of the world are on Washington.” The line echoes John Winthrop in 1630, aboard the *Arabella*, carrying Puritan Pilgrims from England to New England. In his famous speech or sermon, Winthrop says, “We are as a City upon a Hill” ; the eyes of the entire world are on the Massachusetts Bay Colony to see how the Christian venture of civilizing the American wilderness will work.

Colonel Purdy's statement that he will force democracy upon the people of Tobiki even if he has to kill them to do it has, I believe you too find, a disturbing echo in how President George W. Bush and his regime were determined to make Iraq into a model of American democracy. The two echoes come together: Winthrop's zealous City upon a Hill and Bush's Iraq. But in the film Colonel Purdy is satirized for his grandiose allusion to John Winthrop, whereas in 2003 George Bush indeed took the allusion seriously enough to go to war, to model Iraq upon America, the "City upon a Hill," in terms of "democracy," and the US is still at war. In *The Teahouse of the August Moon*, Captain Fisbee himself speaks platitudes, when he goes on to say to Sakini, "We don't come here to take anything. We come here to give them something," meaning democracy, when Sakini suggests that the American occupation is an old story of conquests of Okinawa.

Other aspects of the American representation of Okinawa and how Okinawans interact with Americans catch my attention. In this film and the play, Okinawa is a backward place. Sakini wears rags. Even the American jeep assigned to Fisbee and Sakini is old and worn. You might say that everything looks old and shabby because a war has happened here and things have gotten broken. But in the film people live in houses that look like they came from the set of Kurosawa's *Shichinin no Samurai*, seemingly regardless of a historical context. Indeed, Kurosawa's great film appeared in 1954, two years before *Teahouse*. When Sakini and Fisbee arrive in Tobiki and hold their first village meeting, the houses surrounding the gathering place, the clothing of some of the village people, the gestures the people make, and even the raised earthen platform that Fisbee and Sakini stand on and Sakini's ringing of the alarm bell are directly reminiscent of village scenes in *Shichinin no Samurai*. This backwardness is directly associated with timelessness, so-called tradition, and powerlessness, or the inability to change and to make history. Even when the satirical edge is taken into account, in this story it is the Americans alone who have the power to bring

change and make history.

Yet at the same time, it is the Americans who are characterized as being unable to understand the Okinawan peoples' timeless and unchanging ways of communicating and the reasons for their actions and words. It is as if to the Americans, the Okinawans are speaking in code. One example of this is the treatment of another main character, a “geisha” named Lotus Blossom (Machiko Kyo) who is given to Captain Fisbee as a fine gift. Fisbee is repelled by the “gift.” It takes a while for Fisbee to understand Sakini's explanation that the “geisha” is not a prostitute. Lotus Blossom then becomes the inspiration for the building of the Teahouse in the title of the play.

As you can see, this play and film are satirical about the Americans in it, although the satire is based upon a kind of primitivist portrayal of Okinawans. It is a comedy that ends with the villagers of Tobiki accomplishing something in their way, while the Americans mostly get in the way. I admit that I could not stand to watch the entire videotape this time, because in the film, the Okinawan characters are also portrayed as relentlessly silly, foolish, childish, and stubborn. They become the vehicles of satire, the characters whose function it is to expose the weaknesses of the Americans but who themselves have no such depths as strengths and weaknesses that matter. I know I saw the film when I was young. When I was sixteen in high school, I played the part of Sakini on stage. Nearly every male sansei actor must have played the part—and some nisei too. It must be a kind of shodan shiken for sansei actors, a training technique forcing us to perform a role that raises issues of representation, of Asian American identity, and of stereotype—in other words, a role that forces us to play to stereotypes.

Another American film of note, set in Okinawa, is *The Karate Kid Part II*. This one appeared in 1986, exactly thirty years after the Teahouse was built on screen. The setting is forty years after the 1946 setting of

Teahouse. Has anything changed?

[The film clip illustrating this part of the talk begins with the arrival of Miyagi and Danny at the Naha Airport. After the encounter narrated below, the two reach Tomi village by taxi. Now in the 1980s, Tomi has been all but annihilated in the expansion of the Kadena Airbase at that site in what is supposed to be southern Okinawa. But nearby, Miyagi finds and returns to his original home, where his aged father lies dying.]

We see that Miyagi and Danny are unexpectedly met at Naha Airport by Toguchi Chozen, the tough nephew of Sato the karate master and the enemy of Miyagi. Interestingly, Okinawa is again characterized as being backward: the big, black, shiny Cadillac that Chozen commands in this 1980s setting is of around 1956 vintage. The car is thirty years old. Chozen and his driver take the new arrivals to a hangar. In the background is a propeller-driven airplane, again implying that Okinawa is behind the times. Then when Miyagi and Danny are forced to take a taxi to Tomi village—a return for Miyagi to his hometown, similar to Sakini's return to his hometown thirty or forty years earlier—they pass a point where the United States military people are building or repairing a road. Again it is the Americans, the military, who make changes and history, or who erase history. This film floats in and out of timelessness and the passage of time. When Okinawans in the film make history, they do so for personal reasons by hurting one another.

In *Teahouse*, Colonel Purdy gives Captain Fisbee a thick book, *Plan B*, to instruct Fisbee on how to carry out his economic and democratic project. The book is so thorough, the colonel says, that Fisbee, an English teacher in civilian life, will not have to think for himself. The point in this satire is that the book in many ways is useless, because it does not concern how Fisbee is to understand and expand his awareness of Okinawans.

Jump to *Karate Kid II*. When Sato and Chozen accost Miyagi and Danny and force them to take a taxi to Tomi village, Chozen throws Danny's book out of the car and onto the ground. The book is titled *Okinawa*, a tourist guide book. Danny has been reading it, just as Fisbee read his manual. Chozen's rough gesture of throwing the book is as if to say that this book will not help Danny, a gaijin, understand what is going on at all. And to be sure, again we find that to the gaijin, Okinawan communication is by codes of speech, gesture, silence, and rituals. In this sense, *Karate Kid II* is really about the Kid after all, Danny, the male child who does not understand the communications of the adults and the young Okinawan woman he is falling in love with. Though supposedly set in Okinawa, the film is not centrally about Miyagi, the Kid's teacher, the indigenous one, the native of Okinawa. And in both of the films, a native woman is the male gaijin hero's key to understanding the Okinawan code.

Both *Teahouse of the August Moon* and *Karate Kid II* are, perhaps predictably, about the Americans and not about Okinawans. Another way to say this is that Okinawan characters such as Sakini and Miyagi are representations of indigenous peoples, who generally are quite useful but not central to American narratives of cross-cultural, multicultural, and international encounters. And what is the connection with Hawai'i? Precisely this: the representations of Okinawans in these American cultural productions do resemble how Hawai'i's indigenous people too are represented. Representations of the indigenous people of Hawai'i can sometimes include peoples not of native Hawaiian origin, when the multicultural, native and immigrant peoples of Hawai'i are lumped together as one brown-skinned race. It just happens that the actor who plays Sato in *Karate Kid II* is by birth and history a sort of trickster who is able to blur any lines between native and immigrant groups in Hawai'i. Specifically, this man, Danny Kamekona, is a descendant of the Gannen-mono of 1868. His Nihonjin ancestor remained in Hawai'i when many of that very first group

returned to Japan weary of their brutal labor in the torrid sugarcane fields. The ancestor married a native Hawaiian, and so the immigrant's family began. Being a descendant of this Gannen-mono, Danny Kamekona had a Japanese surname. But, as I understand, when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, the family changed their name to the native Hawaiian name of the maternal side, Kamekona, to shield themselves from anti-Japanese recriminations in Hawai'i during WWII. Pay attention to Kamekona playing the part of Sato. Is he Japanese? Is he not? Is he Okinawan? Is he Hawaiian? Maybe it is fate: Kamekona's name—the Gannen-mono forebear's name—before the family changed it was Sato.

Karate Kid II was filmed in Hawai'i. If you yourself have visited O'ahu, you might recognize that the production occurred at Kane'ohe. You can see the island popularly known as "Chinaman's Hat" in the background when Miyagi and Danny arrive at Tomi village in the taxi. As far as American cultural productions are concerned, Hawai'i and Okinawa may be as interchangeable as these material conditions of filmmaking suggest.

But maybe Okinawans and Hawaiians do share something in common. Naichi may from time to time criticize themselves for perpetuating *shimakuni konjo*. By comparison, sometimes I think that we in Hawai'i celebrate this trait, which Milton Murayama, a Nisei novelist of Hawai'i translates as "the narrowness of an island people." Maybe Okinawa people too value their island setting and sources.

Idealistically speaking, together we are island people. We have strong attachments to our islands and our communities. We identify ourselves with our islands. We are conscious of relationships of power and of our marginalization in the nations that encompass us. We are conscious of the popular appeal of the tropical and primitive images with which we and others promote tourism or at least ask for benign treatment. We know we speak or until recently spoke languages different from the dominant one in our respective nations. Whereas the majority of people in our nations of

Japan and the USA either think we are nice, friendly, and harmless or do not think much of us at all, we are terribly aware of our difference from the dominant groups, and in one way or another, in some part of our lives, we resist being made the same as the majority of others. We resist assimilation.

We too can thus idealize supposed traits we share as island people. To do this, however, is to do as the films do, conflating Okinawa and Hawai'i into one easy blend of images and ideas. I propose in conclusion that Hawai'i, Okinawa, and the Philippines are structured into ideas about a Pacific America not because of a shared, loving sense of humanity but because of the military designs and purposes of the United States of America. In 1908 Mark Twain wrote to the Hawaii Promotion Committee (Tourist Bureau) with thanks for a gift of a koa wood mantelpiece sent to him from Hawai'i. On this occasion of the completion of his final house in Hartford, Connecticut, Twain called Hawai'i "the loveliest fleet of islands that lies anchored in any ocean." While this expression has been used widely as Twain's poetic praise of the islands, the metaphor of a "fleet" of ships has to mean a fleet of military naval ships, American warships, anchored in the Pacific, especially when the phrase was penned by the Vice President of the American Anti-Imperialist League, Twain himself. To think of a Pacific America is to think of imperialism. Like Victor Bascara's argument in *Model-Minority Imperialism* that the Asian American model-minority myth is based upon and thus exposes how Asian Americans have been used as imperialist models of assimilation, America's uses of islands in the Pacific expose the ideologies and structures of American territorial, hemispheric, and global imperialism. I note that the predominance of the US military in thoughts about a Pacific America is close to what we see in the clips from the two films, where change is made by those in power, and those in power are the US military. In this sense, as Oscar Campomanes warns in his article in the *Japanese Journal of American Studies* where the proceedings of the fortieth anniversary symposium of the

JAAS are published, transnationalism all too much of the time is centered on the United States in such a way that the concept of transnationalism itself becomes totalizing and imperial, with the military of the United States right there at or underneath the center. Where in the two films or in an envisioned Pacific America, finally, are the people who are the subjects of America the makers of culture, change, and history?

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