Postwar Okinawa Through American Eyes: Thoughts on *The Teahouse of the August Moon*

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When I began teaching courses in documentary film theory at the Waseda University Graduate School of Global Information and Telecommunication Studies in the fall of 2011, I had just begun work on a long-form documentary film about the United States military’s involvement in Okinawa during and since World War II. The film will span the entire period from the Battle of Okinawa in 1945 up to the present—some 70 years. We began filming at the end of 2012, and plan to release the film early in 2015. Thus the film project nearly coincides with my tenure at Waseda, and having a steady teaching job and research support greatly assisted the preparation and production of the film.

During the course of my research for the film, I had the opportunity to explore the many fascinating stories surrounding the 1956 MGM-film *The Teahouse of the August Moon*, directed by Daniel Mann. The film serves as a prism that illuminates various features of the American-Okinawa relationship, and I will examine some of them in this essay.

The story is set in 1946, during the early postwar occupation of Okinawa. Fisby, a rather inept Army captain, is sent to the village of Tobiki to oversee the construction of a pentagon-shaped school and to foster a program of democratic governance. When he arrives in Tobiki, he is showered with gifts, including the services of a geisha named Lotus Blossom. The villagers decide they want to build a teahouse instead of a school, and in the name of democratic process, Fisby agrees. When the village discovers there is a market for its home-brewed “potato brandy,” Tobiki flourishes, but in a manner far removed from the original American vision.

The film is a broad-brush comedy, and the prime target of the satire is the US Army, with its reliance on manuals and rules and its condescending views of “the natives.” By contrast, the Okinawans are portrayed as smart and adaptable. Sakini is especially savvy and adept at shifting Captain Fisby toward acceptance of the villagers’ designs. In time, Fisby begins to “go native,” wearing a bathrobe-kimono instead of his uniform, and defends the village during a crackdown by the military authorities.

Despite speaking in stereotypical broken English, Sakini possesses a certain Okinawa wisdom that is established in his opening monologue, where he addresses the audience directly:

*Sakini: History of Okinawa reveal distinguished...*
record of conquerors. We have honored to be subjugated in 14th century by Chinese pirates, in 16th century by English missionaries, in 18th century by Japanese warlords, and in 20th century by American marines. Okinawa very fortunate. Culture brought to us. Not have to leave home for it.

... Okinawans most eager to be educated by conquerors. Not easy to learn. Sometimes, very painful. But pain make man think. Thought make man wise. And wisdom make life endurable.

By the end of the film, Fisby himself begins to embrace this wisdom.

_Fisby_: I’ll tell you something, Sakini. I used to worry a lot about not being a big success. I think I felt an awful lot like you people felt, always being conquered. Well, y’know, now I’m not sure who’s the conquered, and who’s the conqueror. I’ve learned in Tobiki the wisdom of gracious acceptance...

_Sakini:_ That’s good, boss.

_Fisby:_ It’s a step backward in the right direction.

This combination of satirizing the military mentality (a precursor to the famous novel _Catch-22_, and the film and TV series _MASH_ ) and admiration for a sort of “Oriental wisdom” meant the film’s comedy was not entirely at the expense of the Okinawans. In addition, Brando carefully studied and prepared for his role, in the tradition of the Actors Studio in New York where he received his training, and practiced his Japanese lines well enough to deliver them fluently. The movie was filmed in Japan, so the extras are all Japanese who often speak Japanese among themselves, with no subtitles. For its era (though certainly not by today’s standards), there is a certain degree of respect for what we now call “cultural diversity,” and the large-heartedness of the film was one reason for its wide acceptance.

The film was based on a novel by the same name, and the author’s background helps to explain the tone of the film. The novel was written by Vern Sneider, who served as an Army intelligence officer in World War II. During and after the Battle of Okinawa, he spent six months on the island, where he was responsible for the military government of a refugee camp in the village of Tobaru (now part of Chatan in central Okinawa). He was involved in the very kind of educational and political programs that he came to satirize in his novel, which was published in 1951. One suspects that these experiences led him to understand the limitations of the military mindset and to develop an appreciation for Okinawan initiative and resilience, as these perspectives are reflected in his story-telling.

The book was soon adapted as a play by John Patrick, a veteran playwright and screenwriter (he also wrote the script for the film), and it debuted on Broadway in October 1953. It was a tremendous hit, marking more than one thousand performances, winning three Tony awards and the Pulitzer Prize for drama. This success led to performances overseas (London in 1954, Tokyo’s Kabukiza in 1955), as well as an early (April 1954) production in Okinawa. The film followed quickly, opening in December 1956.

John Patrick had also fought in World War II, but had not been in Okinawa, and perhaps as a result, the play and film have far fewer details that are specific to Okinawa. This is especially true of the geisha Lotus Blossom. While Sneider calls her a “geisha” in the book, she is clearly an indigenous Okinawan type of dancer and entertainer, known as _juri_. But in the film Lotus Blossom wears Japanese-style kimonos, plays a _koto_ instead of a _sanshin_, and sings “Sakura.” There is never any explanation of how a first-rank Japanese geisha would have ended up in a rural village, just months after war had devastated Okinawa.

But then, this being a comedy, there is no hint of the wide swaths of Okinawa that had been reduced to a barren, burned out wasteland. The film takes place in an imaginary land that is not Okinawa at all (just as no one is expected to think that Sakini is anything but Marlon Brando playing an Okinawan). Without expecting or asking for historical accuracy, it will still shed light on the meaning of the film to examine what was actually taking place in Okinawa, behind the scenes of _The Teahouse of the August Moon_. I will examine several aspects of that underlying reality, before turning to the larger meaning of the film.

### The Woman who Inspired Lotus Blossom

There was, in fact, an actual _juri_ who Vern Sneider is said to have modeled the character Lotus Blossom after. Her name was Uehara Eiko. Born in 1915, she was sold into service in the Tsuji entertainment district of Naha at age 4. She was raised by a house mother in the district, and rose to prominence at an early age. Like geisha districts in mainland but with Okinawan content, Tsuji was a high-class entertainment zone, offering dancing, singing, and fine food (and the possibility of largely consensual sexual relationships).

By the 1940s, Uehara had become a house mother herself, looking after a group of six or seven _juri_. After the Japanese military began its troop buildup in Okinawa in...
mid-1944, the restaurants in Tsuji were transformed into "sexual comfort facilities," and many of the women were forced to serve as "comfort women." Uehara was assigned to look after officers, as a "military nurse." An intensive American bombardment leveled Tsuji and most of Naha on October 10, 1944. There is a photo of Uehara, looking oddly lighthearted, having lunch with three officers in a shelter under the Naminoue cliff in Tsuji, on October 11, just a day after the bombardment.

Uehara then joined a unit of the army stationed south of Shuri, where she and the women under her care served as "comfort women." When the battle turned after the American invasion in April 1945, she and the other women escaped to the southern tip of the island, where they barely survived by hiding in natural caves for weeks. Driven from a cave on the last day of the battle, June 23, she surrendered to American forces. Barely conscious, she was raped on the spot; her autobiography implies that it may have been a gang rape.

Taken to the Ishikawa detention camp, Uehara began piecing her life back together. She worked as a housemaid for American officers, and before long had been recruited to put together a group of Okinawa dancers to entertain detainees in the camps. It was around this time that she apparently came to the attention of Vern Sneider. She later recalled, "I was in the general affairs bureau of the military government, and Sneider was in the education bureau. We weren’t that friendly, but at some point he took an interest in me and I became the model [for Lotus Flower]."  

In the extremely challenging environment of postwar Okinawa, Uehara proved to be an extraordinary entrepreneur and a self-directed Okinawan woman, a product of the woman-centered world of the Tsuji district. She began dreaming of rebuilding that district, and by 1952 had used her connections within the US military to gain approval to build "the first building in old Naha, Okinawa Prefecture," a restaurant complex that she named Matsu no Shita, after the restaurant she had been attached to in prewar Tsuji. It was a massive complex, with three parts meant to appeal to its three groups of clientele: One had small, Japanese style rooms, where elegant Japanese shamisen would be performed; another section contained an American-style dance hall; and the third, largest section was Okinawa-style and could be configured to meet the client’s desires.

Before the restaurant opened, Uehara paid a visit to the offices of USCAR (the US Civil Administration of the Ryukyu Islands), where an officer told her that the book The Teahouse of the August Moon had become a bestseller. "I’m sure you know," he said, "but I’ve heard that the author, Sneider, who worked in the military government, modeled the story on you, who were always running around the military government. Why don’t you use that name for your restaurant?" Uehara responded that the name Matsu no Shita had roots in classical Okinawan song, but then her former house mother reminded her of what some elders
at the Ishikawa detention camp had told them: “The Tsuji quarter—the ‘Flower Rack’—originated in a national policy of the Ryukyu monarchy, to have courtesans entertain Chinese and Japanese officials in order to emasculate the domination of Ryukyu. To bring in foreign currency, it makes sense to have a name that’s easy for foreigners to remember.” And so she added “Teahouse August Moon” in English to the name of her establishment.

The restaurant became a Naha landmark and flourished as a favorite destination for GIs and officers, employing as many as 180 people. Many assumed that the book (and later the play and film) had taken its name from this establishment and referred to it as “the original Teahouse of the August Moon.” Though it was the other way around, Uehara Eiko’s restaurant could be seen as an embodiment of the entrepreneurial spirit and Okinawa resolve that is romanticized in the film.

**Democracy and Occupation**

In an early scene in *The Teahouse of the August Moon*, Capt. Fisby’s commanding officer (Col. Wainright Purdy III) declares, “My job is to teach these natives the meaning of democracy, and they’re going to learn democracy if I have to shoot every one of them.” Purdy is depicted as a bumbling, by-the-book, culturally obtuse officer, prone to utter this kind of condescending comment about the “native” Okinawans. Vern Sneider is said to have based the character on Brig. Gen William Crist, who was the first commander of the Civil Affairs staff that arrived in Okinawa along with the invading American army; this was the section that Sneider worked in, so Crist was his boss.

The Civil Affairs teams were responsible for administration of the detention camps that held some 320,000 Okinawan civilians by the end of the war. This was a monumental undertaking, which for the most part was carried out efficiently and with a good measure of benevolence, though it was also characterized by a degree of arrogance and the kind of condescension that Crist/Purdy embodied. These attitudes were on explicit display in a film called *Objective… Security* that the Marine Corps Photographic Service produced as the war was winding down in 1945.

The film depicts life and governance in the settlement camps under the military government, which was then run by the U.S. Navy. The narration explains the overarching motivation for occupation policies: “To a people whose only crime was to be born slaves, we brought life, hope, the right to work and enjoy the fruits of their labor, to laugh and to play.” All of the effort and expense of this endeavor was justified, especially for the children: “Candy and kind words, medicine and education and recreation would make them more helpful and useful neighbors to a naval base than their broken-spirited parents.”

These were the attitudes that Sneider parodied in his novel. When the play first opened on Broadway, he wrote an essay for the *New York Times*, entitled “Below the
Teahouse,” in which he described the “under story” behind the parody as a critique of the American-centric thinking of the occupiers. He hoped this side of his story might show a future civil affairs officer that “the culture and way of life of an occupied country is often very old and, strangely enough, ideally suited to that country. And that there is more to be learned in this old world than will ever be taught in a pentagon-shaped schoolhouse.”

Thus when Fisby arrives in Tobiki, he suggests giving a speech to the villagers about his goals:

_Fisby:_ I want to make very certain that the people out there understand that I come as their friend, that we intend to lift the yoke of oppression from their shoulders.

_Sakini:_ Oh, they like that, boss. That a favorite speech.

_Fisby:_ What do you mean, “their favorite speech”? 

_Sakini:_ When the Japanese come, they say the same thing, then take everything.

_Fisby:_ No, you don’t understand, Sakini. We don’t come to take anything from them. We’ve come here to give them something.

_Sakini:_ That’s all right, boss. We not mind. After eight centuries, we get used to it. Now when the friends come, we hide everything, quick as dickens.

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**The Reception of *Teahouse* in Okinawa and Japan**

While Sneider skewered the arrogance of the occupier to great comic effect and portrayed the Okinawans as savvy and even wise, his depiction of the Okinawans was clearly not free of its own kind of condescension. In that same _New York Times_ essay, he describes the way he, as a civil affairs officer, worried about dealing with the enemy civilians when he arrived in Okinawa. “It was only natural,” he writes, “that anyone assigned to such duty would have visions of bridges and supply dumps and switchboards being blown up. But, then, the American met the Okinawan—completely lacking in shame and pretense and filled with wide-eyed, childlike gratitude.”

This combination of critique and condescension resulted in a quite complex and mixed response to the play and film when they arrived in Okinawa in the mid-1950s. Within weeks of the play’s debut on Broadway, Maj. Gen. David Ogden, the military commander on Okinawa, wrote the producers to obtain permission to produce the play. Over three weeks beginning April 21, fifteen performances were held at theaters on American bases, as part of the Ryukyuan-American Friendship program that was launched around that time. The performances were for charity, with the proceeds ($5,000) used to build a school for Okinawan children.

The military came to Uehara Eiko at the Teahouse August Moon to ask for her assistance in recruiting Okinawans for the cast, and she agreed to help. Hama Yukiko, one of the dancers at her teahouse was chosen for the lead role of Lotus Blossom, while workers from her kitchens and other employees were cast as villagers and commuted to Zukeran for weeks of rehearsals. Uehara was given VIP treatment at the premiere, and enjoyed the play. She later noted that various scenes reminded her of the time she spent in the detention camp in Ishikawa, and the episode where Sakini explains that geisha are skilled entertainers and not prostitutes brought to mind the way her house mother had lectured GIs during those days.

Uehara acknowledged that there were some who felt that the play was contemptuous of Okinawans, but quoted the American counterargument that the play “suggested that it was the American government that was wrong-headed.” In fact, however, the Okinawan criticism had caught the military off guard, as they had intended the project to foster Ryukyuan-American friendship. Typical of those who objected to the script of the play was the noted Okinawan writer, Ōshima Tatsuhiro. “It is true that Okinawans sometimes misunderstand democracy,” he wrote in the _Ryūkyū Shimpō_ after watching the play. “It is also true that we love music. But I cannot understand sacrificing the construction of a school. This parody is insulting. More objective contemplation is demanded of a writer.”

Given the high value placed on education in Okinawa, it was the villagers’ choice of a teahouse over a school (rather than other misrepresentations or exoticisms mentioned above) that apparently drew the strongest criticism in Okinawa. This opposition led the military to abandon its original plan, to stage the play both on the US bases and in civilian venues in Naha.

But instead of reflecting on why Okinawans might object to the play, the military rather snootily faulted them for having no sense of humor: “Even though the comedy pokes fun at soldiers, the fact that American servicemen enjoy watching the play in Okinawa is evidence of the high level of American democracy... If Okinawans are unable to appreciate the humor that fills this play, there is no value
in staging it.” In its report of the production, “Okinawan Hit Wows Okinawans,” *Life* magazine ignored the dissent entirely: “Everybody who saw the play, both soldiers and Okinawans, loved its satire of the Army’s initial attempts to bring minshushugi (democracy) to the people of Okinawa.” The magazine had earlier exuded, “Never in the history of military occupation has a conqueror paid a more hilariously charming tribute to a former foe than *The Teahouse of the August Moon*. . . . Behind the character of Fisby, and behind the story itself, is an appreciative attitude toward alien people and values that can be one of democracy’s most heartening by-products.”

Commenting on this trough of misunderstanding, Miyagi Etsujiro wrote, “The problem lay in the military brass thinking that the joint production of the play would foster friendship. Okinawan residents had begun to call 1954 ‘the dark age.’ It was unreasonable to tell people to laugh it off. . . . The very thing the play was satirizing was this self-satisfaction on the part of the military. In suggesting that the joint production of the play would advance Ryukyuan-American friendship, the military had brought that satire to life.”

1954 was the year that President Dwight Eisenhower declared in his State of the Union address that the US would maintain its bases in Okinawa indefinitely. The Korean War had led to the expansion of the bases, until they occupied 26 percent of the island in 1954 (up from 17 percent in 1950). There had been a clash over land seizures on Iejima in 1953, and there would be another forcible seizure of land in central Okinawa in 1955. Disputes over land leases and compensation were simmering just as the play debuted, and they exploded into the all-Okinawa opposition movement (shima-gurumi tōsō) in 1956. Given these developments, it is not surprising that many in Okinawa did not share the *Teahouse* humor.

When the film was released in Japan and Okinawa in 1957, however, there was surprisingly little critical comment. This was the case even in Okinawa, and the reception in Japan was actually enthusiastic. It is true that the film was not a hit in Okinawa, where it had a disappointingly short two-week run, but the commentary was favorable. The artist Kabira Chōshin, for example, cited its “conscientious and wonderful cinematic expression,” while another column praised the film for having fewer misconceptions about Okinawa than most films, leading Shinjō Ikuo to ponder over “the absence of disfavor.” He suggests that “the criticism of the US military served as a self-satirizing reversal that headed off and neutralized criticism of the violence of domination and confiscation carried out in Okinawa under military occupation.” And the vehicle for this neutralization was Marlon Brando’s Sakini.

Shinjō points out that Sakini was equally popular among American, Japanese, and Okinawan viewers. The *New York Times* referred to the Broadway version of Sakini (performed by David Wayne) as a “middleman,” in a “rich, humorous, forgiving performance that is...so wise and pure.” Brando’s Sakini won the same raves: “He appears to grovel to the occupying army, but in the end it is he who outsmernts them,” wrote the reviewer in the *Mainichi Shimbun*, while the *Asahi Shimbun* reviewer called him “the representative player for Okinawa. There’s no way around being occupied by the other party, but within that, he carries out a truly skillful resistance.” For his part, Mishima Yukio remarked that Brando’s performance had “depth, and is close to exquisite.” The Okinawan writer Ōshiro was now less critical than he had been of the play, finding Sakini’s lines to be “quite philosophical, as if the Okinawan people had taken an objective look at themselves.” Through Sakini, the writers speak “on behalf of the Okinawa people...who are more clever than the conquerors.”

This portrayal of Sakini outwitting the conquerors (toward the end of the film, Fisby calls him a “rare rascal”) and engaged in a form of “resistance” is less threatening than it might seem for two reasons, Shinjō suggests. One is that, in going “native,” Fisby (and another American officer in Tobiki) shed their uniforms, along with their political and military superiority, and become “oddly desexualized and disarmed.” They are far from the macho, armed, and authoritarian figures that the actual occupiers presented in Okinawa. Miyagi points out that officers engaging in such behavior would have been labeled “gook lovers” and
promptly run out of the military.\textsuperscript{21}

The second reason is that the “middleman” Sakini “is suspended in an oddly ambiguous state of ethnicity and nationality,” which allows viewers to see him through their own prisms. When Fisby tells Sakini again, “You really are a rascal,” Purdy actually responds, “No, he’s really an American. He’s really got get-up-and-go.” Japanese viewers can see him engaged in resistance, and Okinawans can see him expressing their philosophical ideas.\textsuperscript{22}

Shinjō goes on to ask who the real “rascal” is, who is actually “outwitting” whom. His answer is that Fisby, by accommodating the villagers of Tobiki, succeeds in controlling them, that the “resistance” is coopted into acquiescence in the continuing occupation. For the military occupation, he writes, “Okinawa trying to be Okinawan represents no threat to the occupying army; on the contrary, in pursuing the politics of occupation, it can produce a useful subjective illusion among the local population. This reversal can be seen as the foundation of this film.\textsuperscript{23}

In other words, the “wisdom of gracious acceptance” that Fisby claimed to have learned from his time in Tobiki implied that the Okinawa people “graciously accepted” the continuing presence of the American military, while the military could believe it had the capacity to develop an “appreciative attitude toward alien people and values.”

This belief, on the part of the US military, in the benevolence and generosity of the occupation of Okinawa often made it difficult to comprehend the opposition and dissent that Okinawans, in ever larger numbers, expressed in the years that followed. For example, a December 1958 article in \textit{Harper’s} magazine, “The Outraged Okinawans,” examined “why they hate us, in spite of all we have done for them.” Evidence of this “hate” was the growing support for “pro-Communist” parties, and the writer found that among the causes were the continued occupation of ancestral lands and crimes committed by American servicemen (chronic problems that were, of course, absent from \textit{Teahouse}).\textsuperscript{24}

But perhaps Sakini got the last word on this subject. In April 1957, the \textit{New York Times Magazine} reported that the recent election of “reputed Communist” Senaga Kamejiro as mayor of Naha “came as a sharp jolt to the Americans who have tutored Okinawans in democracy for nearly twelve years, and” the magazine titled the article “Okinawa: ‘Sometimes Painful’ Lesson for Us.” The writer quoted “the wily Okinawan interpreter” Sakini, that “learning from the conqueror is ‘sometimes painful.’ And sometimes,” he continued, “as is happening on Okinawa today, it is the conqueror who suffers the pain.”\textsuperscript{25}

Today, some 57 years later, one can only regret that the conqueror did not learn its lessons better, or more quickly.

\textbf{Endnotes}

1 Much of the account of Uehara Eiko’s life is based on her autobiography, \textit{Tsuji no hana} (Flower of Tsuji) (Tokyo: Jiji Tsūshinsha, 2010).

2 \textit{Guntai wa joshi wo mamoranai} (Militaries do not protect women) (Tokyo: Women’s Active Museum on War and Peace, 2012), p. 18.

3 Uehara, p. 138.


5 Uehara, p. 273.

6 Uehara, p. 272.


10 Uehara, pp. 293–98.

11 Quoted in Yonaha, \textit{op. cit.}


14 \textit{Life}, November 2, 1953, p. 130. This was a report on the Broadway play, which had just opened.

15 Miyagi, p. 341.

16 Fisch, p. 168.


19 These and the other quotes here appear in Shinjō, p. 33.

20 \textit{Ibid.}, p. 28.

21 Miyagi, p. 340.

22 Shinjō, p. 35.

23 \textit{Ibid.}, p. 46.
