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“Soft Colonialism”: A *Nikkei* Perspective on Contemporary Okinawa

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This is my third visit to Okinawa, but it is my first long-term stay. By the time of my departure in December, I will have been here in Okinawa for only nine all-too-short months. This is hardly enough time to grasp the deep and rich history and culture of Okinawa that has evolved over the centuries and has spread overseas due to foreign trade, immigration, war, and as it stands today, military occupation. I feel an existential bond to Okinawa because my maternal grandparents were born here and immigrated to Hawaii during the Taishō Era along with thousands of others who sought work in the plantation economy imposed by White American settlers. Christian missionary families that wrested land from Native Hawaiians enriched themselves by exploiting the labor of immigrants from Asia—China, Japan, the Philippines—immigrants such as my grandparents.

The purpose of my coming to the University of the Ryukyus to be in residence at the new American Studies Research Center was to examine the relationship between the US military presence and Okinawan society and culture during the postwar period. I wanted to discover the ways in which Okinawan society has been altered by the overwhelming physical presence of US military bases and the countless American soldiers, civilians, and families who have passed through Okinawa during their service with the armed forces. For almost sixty years, the United States has benefited from the bargain struck with the central government of Japan to use Okinawa as its so-

called “gateway” to East and Southeast Asia where America has repeatedly tried and failed to extend its hegemony to such nations as China, North Korea, and Vietnam.

Before going further, I should clarify what I mean by invoking the phrase “soft colonialism.” I employ this phrase primarily because the death knell of “classic” colonialism was sounded during World War II and throughout the 1950s former colonies of European nations won by force (or the threat of it) their political independence. While the classic colonial system is dead, by no means have former colonies reached parity with their former rulers. Indeed, classic colonialism was so intensely exploitative and destructive that most former European colonies are still struggling to escape the long-term economic and social damage they have sustained.

Some observers in the US and Europe characterize the present epoch, wherein former colonies today exercise formal political sovereignty, as “postcolonial.” This is a term that I reject, because it implies that political sovereignty has brought equality and parity among modern nation-states, which is clearly not the case. “Postcolonialism” as employed at US universities has become a convenient, painless means of explaining away the problems of actually-existing economic underdevelopment in most former European colonies. “Neo-colonialism” perhaps is a better descriptor than “postcolonialism” to explain the unequal relationship between countries of the “north” and countries of the “south” or what is sometimes referred to as the “third world.” Again, “postcolonialism” as a concept has been

eagerly adopted by Anglo-American universities as a means of obscuring both past and present forms of economic inequality between nation-states.

Japan, however, is not a third world country. Neither is it by any stretch of the imagination a “colony” of the US. And despite the human and environmental damage that the US military bases have inflicted upon Japan, it is clear to even the casual observer that the level of public squalor that attends severe poverty is absent. Okinawa, although its per capita income lags behind other prefectures in Japan, is an economic dynamo and social paradise compared to many regions in the US where there are pockets of poverty and misery that rival so-called “third world” countries. From this I conclude that we need to develop a new language, a new vocabulary, new terminology to describe, understand, and explain what is taking place in Okinawa. For this reason, for lack of a better term, this system of inequality might be described as “soft colonialism.”

By employing the phrase “soft colonialism,” I do not want to imply that Okinawa has been spared the suffering of other contested battlegrounds around the world, especially during the Pacific War and the harsh years that followed. I only wish to make the point that an unequal, exploitative relationship can exist even where widespread poverty is absent, homelessness is negligible, and the rate of unemployment is low by international standards. Further, an unequal, exploitative relationship can exist where the standard of living is high, people are by and large healthy, and the population is well-educated. From my vantage point, this is the position that Okinawa finds itself today. Again, I do not want to minimize or ignore very real social problems that might exist in Okinawa. I simply want to make the point that the very presence of the US military in Japan, with Okinawa bearing the heaviest burden of this presence, is by definition an unequal and exploitative relationship.

In walking through Naha Main Place or strolling on the beautiful campus of the University of the Ryukyus, while riding the bus or gliding on the fabulously new monorail, the people one sees and encounters certainly do not look like they are being oppressed or exploited. Most people appear to be content and satisfied with the world around them and their place in it. One can assume that like all people they have their share of personal problems which comes with simply being human. They certainly do not seem like, as Frantz Fanon expressed it in his classic work, *The Wretched of the Earth*. They are well-dressed, well-fed, and healthy. But I would argue that this utter normalcy and acceptance of an unequal, exploitative political relationship is one of the key features of “soft” colonialism. This is also one of the reasons why it is so difficult to politically mobilize the public to throw off this oppressive state of affairs.

Unlike a classic colonial setting, the foreign military contingent based in Okinawa remains mostly out of sight. I have never visited a US military base in Okinawa, but if they are anything like those in America (I once taught at El Toro Marine Corp Air Station in Orange County, California) then they are like small cities that provide all the goods and services one would ever need, neatly delivered in a self-contained social world. One could conceivably be born, live, and die within the confines of Kadena Air Force Base without ever setting foot outside the fence that surrounds it. Yet if one spends a few hours at Mihama Carnival Park located directly across the way from Camp Foster, many US service personnel and their families can be seen enjoying themselves along with the “natives” and without apparent friction or even tension between the two groups. The lack of overt conflict between American servicemen and the local people is also indicative of the “soft” colonialism that characterizes the situation in Okinawa, Japan. This is certainly not the case in other countries where there is a heavy contingent of US troops, whether in Panama, South Korea, Saudi Arabia,

Afghanistan or any of the dozens of sovereign nations that have American military installations in place.

If one visits the JUSCO department store next to Carnival Park, there will be a good number of American GIs (soldiers) and their families walking up and down the aisles looking at the goods on display. But they can only look and not buy, since their meager salaries paid in US dollars prohibit them from actually purchasing anything. Besides, the GIs can get almost everything they need at the PX or on-base exchange at below-market prices subsidized by the American taxpayer (such as myself). It is ironic that these American soldiers and their dependents cannot afford to buy anything off-base because Japanese goods are priced out of their reach. This is the exact opposite of the “classic” colonial model where the imperial overlords can buy anything they want and they can buy it very cheaply. Thus another attribute of “soft colonialism” is a situation where the US maintains military installations and stations troops and their dependents in a relatively prosperous nation like Japan. This is “soft colonialism” is at work.

I have yet to see an American military man or woman in a US Marine Corps or Navy uniform while walking down Kokusai Dōri. I wonder if this is because of official orders handed down by the chief of US military operations in Okinawa or whether it is just a matter of individual preference on the part of each American soldier. Maybe they’ve been instructed by their leaders to “blend in” with the “native” people. Perhaps the American service personnel don’t wear uniforms off base because it might serve as a visual reminder to the Okinawan people that a foreign military power lives among them. This would be a good question to have answered. In a “soft” colonial situation such as can be found in Okinawa and throughout Japan, the foreign troops try to be low key; keep a low profile. But whenever I see White, Black, and Latino GIs in civilian clothes walking down the street like they own it, I am filled with barely-contained anger and outrage.

Many if not most Okinawans I suspect do not share the same feelings I have toward the men and women of the US military that one sees at various tourist spots. But this I would argue is one of the results of sixty years worth of colonial domination. That is, it becomes normal after a while to see the oppressor as being harmless.

Yet in observing the Americans on Kokusai Dōri I can see trepidation bordering upon fright in their eyes. Their sense of vulnerability can be seen in that they never travel alone. They are always in group formation for their mutual protection. At minimum, American soldiers travel in pairs; just like nuns or Mormon missionaries on bicycle going from house to house to convert the “heathens” to the word of Jesus Christ. They need the security of at least one other person. Especially since they are naked and vulnerable without the protective covering of their military uniforms and are without their weapons. For make no mistake about it, whether it be “classic” colonialism or “soft” colonialism, the foreign soldiers one see around in civilian settings are trained to deliver violence on command. That is, these are trained killers we see walking among us. Whether they are US Air Force fighter pilots or a USMC infantryman, never forget the fact that their reason for being, their primary mission in life, is to deliver death and destruction when they are ordered to do so. The recent events in Falluja, Iraq remind us of this stark fact.

As I have stated, one of the insidious aspects of “soft” colonialism is that it lulls us into believing that these people are harmless. Some of them look so young and innocent one almost feels sorry for them being so far from home in a “strange” country with “weird” social customs. This again, is part of the psychology bred by “soft” colonialism: Feeling pity for the oppressor. But from my perspective, when I see the nineteen-year old American teenagers walking in a group down Kokusai Dōri all I see is a band of thugs who probably played on the football team in high school and went around beating up their weaker

and smaller classmates. On the other hand, some of them might have been the targets of bullying as children and are now in the US Marine Corps so that they too can experience power and superiority over a "lesser" breed of people whether they are Japanese, Koreans, Filipinos, or Iraqis.

Most of you are probably unaware that many of the young men who join the US military have criminal records. Many were given the choice of being thrown into prison or to join the US Marines. Yet these are the same people that are held in awe and even reverence by the "natives," whether they be Okinawan, Korean, or Filipino. This too, is part of the social psychology among colonized people: Idolizing the oppressor. The irony is that these young American men and women are in fact considered "losers" by most other Americans. The US military itself has a cute rhyming phrase they use to describe the how these "losers" become "winners" once they leave their civilian lives behind and become soldiers. The rhyme is "Zero to Hero." That is, they have "zero" job prospects, "zero" future as civilians. But in putting on the uniform of the US armed forces with the American flag on it one automatically becomes a "hero." That is the meaning of the phrase "Zero to Hero."

The Zero to Hero Syndrome is not restricted to US military personnel. I first observed it ten years ago when I came to Japan as a Fulbright lecturer. Everywhere I went, I ran into White Americans who were treated like minor celebrities just because 1) They were White, 2) They were American, 3) They spoke English. The problem with that is they were *born* White, they were *born* American, and they *grew up* speaking English. So none of the respect and awe they commanded had anything to do with actual talent or achievement. After all, it was only an accident of birth that they were White, American, and spoke English. And each one of them I talked to was acutely aware what he was getting away with a type of "fraud." Yes, they were perpetrating fraud upon people who suffered from the colonial

mentality; the colonized mind that had them thinking that anyone White, American, and English-speaking is a superior being. I am exaggerating slightly in order to make a point, but what I am describing here is a colonial mentality that allows losers (zeros) to become winners (heroes) for no good reason at all.

When I speak of the "colonial mentality," I must acknowledge the fact that the concept did not originate with me. Thinkers such as Franz Fanon have written extensively about the social psychology of colonized people (which includes most of the non-European world) that persists long after they have gained formal independence from the colonial power. In his classic study *Black Skin/White Mask*, Fanon (who was a psychiatrist by training) described a situation whereby Black people of African origin have donned a "White mask" in order to survive in a system rooted in White Supremacy. The metaphorical "mask" that Black people were made to wear was the wholesale adoption and adoration of everything they believed gave the White man his superior power: His religion, his language, his art, his philosophy, even his physical being.

The insights offered by Fanon have application to a wide range of people across the world during the modern era. Yes, I would think that even Okinawans are afflicted with the Black Skin/White Mask syndrome. I can say this because I have observed almost identical dynamics at work among *Nikkei* people; at least those in the US. I will go further and state that the colonized mentality of Japanese Americans is much deeper and far more extensive than anything I have observed in Japan. And the reason for this deep level of self-alienation lies in the fact of our minority status; not just in our small numbers (about 750,000) but in the relative lack of power we possess in comparison to White Americans. The colonized mentality of *Nikkei-jin* is also the product of relentless attacks on our community by White Supremacists from one's neighbors all the

way up to the White House occupied by the president of the United States of America.

Let me provide at least a couple of examples of the colonized mentality of Japanese Americans, which includes of course Okinawan Americans. And this holds true for the US mainland and Hawaii. I mention this because Hawaiian *Nikkei* like to believe that they live in a multi-racial paradise, which is far from the truth. Hawaii *Nikkei* might be worse off because most of them do not even recognize there is a problem of White Supremacist power not only throughout the US but globally as well. Again, here are two examples of *Nikkei* colonial mentality and behavior.

Example one: The figure for out-marriage for Japanese Americans is about seventy per cent. That is, seventy percent of all Japanese Americans today marry non-Asians. Further, in almost every case Japanese Americans marry White people. Not Black, not Latino, not Middle Eastern, but White people (which include the various ethnic groups such as Irish, English, Italian, Jews). I mention the fact that they choose White marriage partner to the exclusion of other non-Asian groups because this demonstrates the Japanese American acceptance of and complicity with the system of White Supremacy. The ones who marry White people like to say that “love” is colorblind, but if that were true then they would be marrying Black people, Latinos, or Native American equally as often. But they do not; they marry White people.

Example Two: Last year, just before coming to Ryudai, I had the opportunity to work with a group of *Nisei* in their middle seventies who as teenagers were thrown into a concentration camp with their families because all Japanese Americans were accused of being loyal to Japan and not the United States. These young men and women went to high school together in an American concentration camp and they graduated as a class in 1945, the last year of the Pacific War. They were a close-knit group and beginning in the 1960s started to hold class reunions that brought

together former classmates from all over the US. The project I worked on was an oral history of their years spent as students at Topaz High School located on the Topaz concentration camp in the state of Arizona. The title of the book that resulted is *Blossoms In the Desert*.

My job was to act as interviewer and editor for dozens of people who contributed memories of their incarceration at Topaz. I was shocked to learn that for the vast majority of the former concentration camp internees (there were a few exceptions) they harbored no bitterness or anger at the government who had taken away their freedom and that of their *Issei* parents. Their families had lost everything during the war and as prisoners they were completely dependent upon the US government for their welfare. Yet the *Nisei* I talked to did not feel embittered by being taken from their homes in the San Francisco Bay area and relocated to the remote Arizona desert, where it is very cold in the winter and very hot during the summer. One man, a retired aerospace engineer, went so far as to say that he benefited by being uprooted and then thrown into a concentration camp because during his last year in high school he was given the choice of leaving Topaz to attend high school on the East Coast of the US. He claimed that he never would have gotten this “opportunity” had it not been for his being imprisoned. This to me seems like the perfect example of the colonized mind: Being grateful for having been done an injustice. It did not come as a surprise to me when I learned that none of his children married Japanese Americans or Asian Americans, but married White people. For his children—like many other *Sansei*—learned the harsh lesson from their parents that it was a liability to be a Yellow person in White Supremacist society. So they wanted to escape their Japanese American identity and assimilate into the White world the best they could. And one of the ways to realize this process of assimilation was to marry a White person.

Another person who was married to a former internee bragged to me that all three of her daughters were married to White American men as if they had won the ultimate prize. She was especially pleased that her half-White grandchildren “looked better” because they had European facial features as opposed to having what she must have considered to be an undesirable “Japanese” or “Asian” physical appearance. It did not occur to her that the genetic contribution of the Japanese side of the family might have been improving the looks of the White side of the family. No, like colonized people everywhere living under the regime of White Supremacy, she had internalized the belief that White people were the ideal embodiment of everything she herself was not. This again is one of the insidious consequences of the colonized mentality.

I am using just the example of Japanese Americans here, but the problem exists among other Asian American groups from what I observe. South Asian American (people whose origins are in India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh) women have told me, for example, that their mothers warned them not to spend too much time in the sun because it would make their skin too dark. Filipino Americans—who tend to be darker than Asian American groups like Koreans, Chinese, or Japanese—have told me that those among them having lighter skin color are considered to be more physically attractive, especially in the case of women. The examples go on and on to the point where I have heard the same complaints, over and over again. Incidentally, my frustration with hearing the same problems again and again was one of the reasons that I produced an all-Asian American erotic movie, to say, “Look, this is what we look like. This is what we are. These are our naked bodies. We need to embrace our Asian-ness and get over idolizing White people because it is a form of control that keeps them in a position of superiority.”

To conclude, during my stay I observed a good many parallels between the “soft”

colonialism that results from the unequal relationship between Okinawa, the U.S., and the central government authorities of Japan and the colonized mentality of most Asian Americans. That is, in both settings the rights and prerogatives of White American Supremacy is simply accepted and taken for granted by many if not most people the world over whether they be Asian American or Okinawan. That having been said, I believe it is realistically within the ability of non-White people—whether Okinawan, *Nikkei*, or Asian American—to overcome the five-hundred-year legacy of Euro-American colonialism. The strength and power of our diverse forms of cultural expression—music, song, dance, literature, intellectual labor, athletics—combined with ongoing political struggle will prevail in time over even the most sophisticated high-tech weapons systems employed by the US and its allies. The United States will learn this lesson in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, North Korea, and in other parts of the world where it has tried to extend its economic control through the use of brute military force.

As an academic, I believe that the university both in the US and Japan will play a crucial role in achieving true independence for Okinawa. Certainly, when I return to teaching in January, you can bet that I will be sharing with my students what I have learned by living several months in a part of Japan where the US military society reigns supreme even sixty years after the end of World War II. Here in Okinawa, the University of the Ryukyus from its very birth has been a key institution in challenging the assumptions of US imperial control and power. More recently, the American Studies Center at Ryudai has been established as a site where creative minds can gather regularly to exchange ideas and develop strategies toward achieving an authentic and real democracy in both Okinawa and the United States. It is at the university where the next generation of leaders will acquire the intellectual skills and critical thinking ability that will inform the new literature, film, music, and

scholarship they will be producing in opposition to all forms of imperial domination whether in Iraq or Okinawa.

Finally, so long as the United States is committed to a global system of military terror, there can be no democracy for Americans. Likewise, so long as the United States maintains bases and troops in sovereign nations like Japan, there will be no substantive democracy for the Japanese people including the residents of

Okinawa. The US military establishment in Okinawa presents not only a clear and present physical danger to human beings, animals, and the natural environment but its existence will erode what progress has been made toward democracy and freedom since the end of the Pacific War. With this final observation, I will conclude. I look forward to working with you in this long-term struggle.