

TEXT

Officer Ukuma

IKEMIYAGI SEKIHŌ

CONTEXT

Okinawa

CRITIQUE

Subaltern Identity in Okinawa

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AN INVETERATE WANDERER, Ikemiyagi Sekihō (1893–1951) was born in the historic Kume section of Naha, Okinawa, where early Chinese immigrants and their descendants settled. He studied at Waseda University in Tokyo. Upon Ikemiyagi's return to Okinawa in 1917, he worked as a newspaper reporter and a Japanese-language teacher in a middle school.

In addition to his fiction published largely in the 1920s, Ikemiyagi crafted widely acclaimed *tanka* poetry and gifted translations of French, Russian, and American works. He is also respected for his collection of Ryukyuan historical tales. "Officer Ukuma" (*Ukuma jūnsa*), a prize-winning story selected from more than four hundred manuscripts, won Ikemiyagi seventy yen when it appeared in the journal *Kaihō* in 1922.

"Officer Ukuma" centers on the figure of a low-ranking officer, Hyaaku, from a disenfranchised segment of Okinawan society, who craves confidence and social acceptance in spite of his "impure" background. As an Okinawan of Chinese heritage, the protagonist achieves a modicum of status through his hard-earned position as a policeman, only to be marked as "other" in

both his professional and personal worlds: his background prevents him from becoming a full-fledged member of the Japanese police force, and his peremptory behavior results in his estrangement from family and community. Alienated, Hyaaku seeks comfort in the red-light district, where he befriends the prostitute Little Kamarū. When Hyaaku's conflicted position becomes further exacerbated, he discovers that he cannot escape the pain of his fractured life.

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TRANSLATION BY DAVINDER L. BHOWMIK

On the outskirts of Naha, the capital city of Ryukyu, is a certain village I'll refer to as "X." Its residents are of Chinese descent, and most of them—no, I should say nearly all—are poor and do menial work. Frog catchers go out to the rice fields to hunt for frogs, which they skin and take to market. Frogs are considered a delicacy by people in Naha and in the nearby town of Shuri. There are also fishermen and weavers among the villagers. Their work is humble, and people in other parts of Naha look down on them as "those X'ers," but they enjoy a simple, communal life with few worries.

Their village is thickly shaded by towering subtropical trees—banyan, *deigo*, and *fukugi*. Low bamboo hedges encircle each shabby house made from thatched miscanthus reeds. In the morning the village men walk to the rice fields carrying fishing poles and nets, while the women spread straw mats under the cool shade of the trees and weave hats and sandals, singing the mournful melodies of Ryukyuan folk songs. In the evening, after the men come home from the fields, their wives and daughters go to market to sell the freshly caught frogs and carp. With the little money they make, they buy fish and one square wooden container each of *awamori*, then return holding lighted torches so they won't be bitten by poisonous *habu* snakes. At home they are greeted happily by the men who, after finishing the meager evening meal, stretch out, quietly sipping *awamori*. So accustomed are the villagers to this life that they never find it sad. Though poor, they pool their money so that in bad times they can help each other out. And in this southern clime, no day, even winter, is too hard to bear. They live simply and in peace.

But when one of their own, Ukuma Hyaaku, attained the highly respected position of policeman, it was not only an honor for the Ukuma family but for the entire village. For these Chinese descendants, who barely eked out a living with their menial labor, becoming a government official was no small feat. Indeed, it was close to a miracle.

When word had spread of Ukuma Hyaaku's ambition to be a policeman, all the villagers rejoiced as though his good fortune would be their own, and everyone prayed fervently for his success. The young man's father excused him from his daily chores to encourage him in his studies and his mother engaged a shaman, traveling with her to many sacred sites to pray

that Hyaaku would pass the qualifying examination. The day before the exam, Hyaaku's mother took him to the family's ancestral-tomb, where she recited a lengthy prayer.

The hopes of Hyaaku, his family, and the village were realized when he passed the examination with flying colors. It was considered a triumph for all, and everyone took half a day off from work for a banquet celebrating Hyaaku's success. The village men gathered on the shaded lawn in front of Hyaaku's home, where they passed away the afternoon drinking *awamori* and plucking the three-stringed *jabisen* while nearby the youngsters played at imitating actors in Ryukyuan dance dramas.

It had been May in the early 1920s, a time of year when one didn't feel cold even wearing an abaca-cloth kimono. Red *deigo* flowers were just beginning to bloom and white lilies were opening here and there in the grass of shady groves. Absorbing the fierce southern sunlight, hibiscus flamed brightly among the hedges.

The village men, stripped to their waists, sang, danced, and played the *jabisen* while the women gathered around to watch with obvious pleasure. Our Ukuma Hyaaku looked odd amid all this noisy merrymaking as he sat in a chair someone had brought out for him, like some victorious general, wearing a uniform and cap and carrying a glistening sword. The women stared with admiration and awe at his strangely imposing figure.

The banquet went on this way until dawn, with music and boisterous laughter echoing through the forest on what would ordinarily have been a quiet night in the village.

After he finished his training, Officer Ukuma started working alternate days at the main police station, where he'd been assigned because of his high marks. He spent every other day at home reading books, and his family was proud to see him leave and come back from the station wearing his cap and uniform. When told by visitors from time to time that their son had been seen walking somewhere in his uniform, his family could scarcely contain their delight. And the visitors, too, spoke joyfully, as if seeing him had been some special event, and a few said they hoped their own sons would become policemen someday.

On the twenty-fifth of the month, Hyaaku left for home with his wages in his pocket. His heartbeat had quickened with joy when he held this money for the first time, and now he fingered the thick envelope tucked inside his right pocket as he walked along briskly. Arriving at home, he barely

managed to calm his excitement, then went into the living room and tried to look nonchalant as he took out the envelope and handed it to his mother.

"Well, now!" His mother spoke happily as she took the envelope and examined its contents. "Twenty-three yen," she said after counting the bills. "It's not much." Though she'd already heard that this was all his salary would be, she seemed surprised when she actually saw the money.

The next two or three months went by peacefully, but Hyaaku's family began to feel that he was growing distant from them. He rarely spent time with other young people in the village anymore and they seemed to have lost interest in him as well. He thought only about how he might succeed as a policeman and how he could use his present position as a stepping-stone to something higher.

Hyaaku grew more and more short-tempered. Whenever he came home he complained, "This house is dirty. It's filthy!" And, blaming his sister, he bawled her out constantly. After his fellow officers dropped by one day, he got even more upset about the house. Hyaaku's mother cried at the sight of him railing at his sister and wondered what had caused her good-natured son to change so drastically.

But things only got worse, and Hyaaku began meddling in the lives of his fellow villagers. One day during a local festival he stood up in front of the crowd gathered in the village square and, looking as if he'd been waiting for just such an opportunity, began to speak. At first the villagers thought Hyaaku would be announcing good news of some benefit for them. Since Hyaaku was a policeman and a fellow villager, they expected to hear that, through him, the city government would be making improvements in their living conditions. They imagined he would say something about lower taxes, road repairs, or perhaps free medical care. What Hyaaku told them, however, completely betrayed their expectations.

"From now on the sewers must be cleaned thoroughly every day. When it's hot in the summer, many of you go around without clothes. This is a crime punishable by law, so if a policeman sees you, expect to be fined. I'm a policeman, too, and from now on I won't let you get away with anything just because you say you're from this village. We public officials value nothing more than impartiality. So we can't look the other way even if a member of our own families or a relative does something wrong or vulgar."

He went on to chastise them for things that, until now, they had done without a second thought. "Furthermore," he said, "drinking until late at

night and singing is forbidden. You must drink less, work harder, and save your money so you can get more respectable jobs.”

Hyaaku continued this loud and heated harangue while the villagers stared at him, looking very uncomfortable. They could not bear the thought that Hyaaku now saw himself in a position different from their own. So when the festival ceremonies ended and the drinking and merrymaking began, not one person offered him a cup of *awamori*.

During those days Hyaaku's fellow officers often visited him at home. He would offer his guests *awamori*, and some of them stayed on from afternoon late into the night, drinking and raising a ruckus. These tough, brawny young men were loud and rude. Unlike the local people, they didn't play the *jabisen* or sing Ryukyuan folk songs, but would bang on their plates and bowls, singing incomprehensible songs from Kagoshima and reciting Chinese verse. Occasionally one of them would stand up all of a sudden, brandishing a stick, and do a sword dance. Their wild behavior frightened Hyaaku's quiet family, who did not even want these men in their house. They were especially upset at Hyaaku for joining in their carousing.

From olden times these villagers had instinctively feared the police. Nevertheless, at first they rejoiced when Hyaaku became a policeman. But now they were worried about his dramatic change in attitude; and on top of that, the other policemen's frequent comings and goings from Hyaaku's house also made them uneasy. These officers, staggering through the streets on their way home, would shout insults at the villagers who wore few clothes when they worked. As such things occurred more often, the villagers began to curse the very presence of Hyaaku's house, which they only rarely visited, in their midst.

Gradually, even Hyaaku himself began to sense the changed attitude of those around him. At home he was always irritated. And the cold looks of villagers he encountered on the street made him hostile. It angered him that he was now the village outcast, and to make matters worse, he discovered that his fellow officers were making fun of him because he came from this village. When he overheard them call him “that X'er,” he could feel his face grow hot. Hyaaku was so ashamed of his birthplace, where he still lived, that he talked to his family about moving, but they could not agree. Nothing hurt them more than the thought of leaving this village—not only because they had grown so used to it, but also because moving was sure to make them even poorer.

Thus Hyaaku could find no relief from the hostility he felt toward the village, and he grew increasingly lonely. Among his fellow officers he could not find a single true friend. Since most of them were from other prefectures—Kagoshima, Saga, and Miyazaki—their lives and feelings differed sharply from his own. Although he could join them for drinking and merrymaking, he was unable to speak with them from the heart. Even when they talked at the police station, he sometimes found himself murmuring, “They are strangers.” And he sensed that they also viewed him as an outsider. Yet even though Hyaaku's feelings of isolation were becoming unbearable, his fellow officers continued visiting his house to drink and were every bit as rambunctious as before.

Summer that year was very hot, and there was a long drought. Every day dazzling sunlight filled the clear, bright Ryukyuan sky. The sultry scent of earth and weeds wafted up into the parched air as the powerful sunlight reflected off Naha's red-tiled roofs and bore down on people's eyes and skin. The grass that grew above the high stone walls around houses became withered and crackling dry. One moment a lizard with gleaming silver skin could be seen dashing out from a wall only to hide itself again seconds later inside a crack in the stones. In the afternoon hours, the sun made the road seem like a desert, filling the air with its silent, piercing rays.

Sometimes a waft of clouds would appear in one portion of the sky like shimmering layers of mica, and people thought how wonderful it would be if the clouds turned to rain. In the late afternoon, the setting sun would blaze through the layered clouds, and when the villagers saw its rays shining on the green hills and forests, they would hope for rain the next day. The dream-like voices of children singing echoed in the quiet sky that glowed as the sun set.

The fabled monkey's home has burned. To fix it let's buy a bit of birdlime.

The children would sing this song happily, though they didn't understand the words, at any hour of the evening. But when the sun finally set, the layers of clouds vanished and the sky seemed to envelop the earth with throngs of stars glowing brightly like sweeping grains of silver dust.

As the days and nights dragged on this way, Hyaaku seemed to wilt like the withered grasses and trees, growing utterly downcast. He could find no relief even in his work, and life had become unbearably dreary.

One night, when he was fed up with these doldrums, a fellow officer from Kagoshima invited him to go for a walk along the seashore. Even those

who had lived here long admired the beautiful evening hues on the beaches of this coral island. The reef looked like it had been whittled down here and there, and in some places the tide had gnawed out deep, dark hollows. The wave crests surging toward the beach would seem about to melt away, then reemerge, ashen and white, beneath the pale blue moonlight. Sorrowful melodies came flowing like a mountain stream from the hills or the shore where prostitutes sang love songs. Their alluring voices seemed to beckon Hyaaku as cool breezes wafting off the ocean danced over his skin. Near where he sat, from time to time, he could see in the moonlight the fair-skinned face of a prostitute dressed in a thin *tonpyan* kimono as she swam by expressionlessly. On his way back that night, invited by his fellow officer, Hyaaku went for the first time to Tsuji, Naha's renowned brothel district.

Facing its streets were long rows of two-story houses surrounded by high stone walls. From inside drifted the plucked notes of *jabisen*, the echo of drums, and the high-pitched voices of young women. Hyaaku's friend entered through the roofed gate at a certain house, knocked on the door, and gave a signal. At length a girl's voice asked, "Who is it?" and the door opened. The girl, seeing Hyaaku's friend, smiled broadly. "Come in," she said, and the two men were led to a six-mat guestroom. Inside was an alcove decorated with a scroll of Chinese poetry, and a black lacquered koto lay nearby. In front of one wall sat a long lacquer chest, its brass fittings gleaming brightly. The cupboard beside it also seemed very new, its varnish still fragrant. Across the room stood a large folding screen on which was painted a *deigo* tree with a white parrot perched on one of the branches that bloomed in a profusion of red blossoms.

To Hyaaku it all looked beautiful and exotic. After a time some women came in carrying liquor and food on red lacquer trays. While the two men drank, the women played the *jabisen* and sang. Presently a geisha, who seemed to be about fourteen or fifteen, appeared wearing a flashy red-patterned kimono and performed dances grasping a halberd and waving a fan.

At first Hyaaku was shy, but as the *awamori* began to take effect, even he eased into a rare, rollicking mood. At last he was telling jokes that had the women laughing and was beating with surprising facility on some drums in the room.

That night Hyaaku bought a woman for the first time. The girl he was matched with, a prostitute called Little Kamarū, seemed scarcely out of puberty—probably seventeen or so—with a round, doll-like face. Something in her sweet, childlike manner captivated him. When the party ended and

they went together to her room at the rear of the house, Hyaaku sobered up all at once and felt strangely uneasy. He leaned against the wooden tray around the hibachi while she hung the blue mosquito netting and pretended not to notice her changing out of her kimono. But as she disrobed he caught a glimpse of her white shoulders, and the sight of her long arms moving gracefully caused his eyelids to tremble.

The girl, now dressed only in a thin nightgown, entered the mosquito netting, fastened down on three sides, and slipped over beside Hyaaku. Silently, he poured water from a clay pot into a teacup and drank it. The girl picked up a round fan but made no effort to fan herself as she leaned over beside him against the charcoal brazier and stared down at the white ashes inside. Every now and then Hyaaku could hear her breathing deeply.

The next morning Hyaaku found himself sleeping next to the girl under the blue mosquito netting. Though mildly surprised and embarrassed, he was secretly delighted. But when she awoke, the girl seemed to be in a very bad mood. Later she saw him out to the front gate. "Please come again tomorrow," she said. Hearing this, Hyaaku imagined he might be followed and left hurriedly, returning home on a road few people traveled. That day, when he faced his family, he felt awful. No matter how much he told himself that what had happened last night was of no consequence, he continued to feel he had done something terrible.

Hyaaku vowed he would never stay in Tsuji again. His fellow officer had invited him that first time and arranged for the girl. But Hyaaku had not paid her and thought he'd better go back just to give her the money. So on the evening he received his salary, Hyaaku went alone to her house. He said little after entering her room and remained standing as he downed two or three cups of the Chinese tea Ryukyūans like to drink. Then, very awkwardly, he took out a five-yen note from his wallet and handed it to the girl, but she refused to take the money. And, thinking he wanted to leave, she asked him to stay. Just then another girl, her companion, came into the room. "Please stay and visit a while," she also urged him. So that night, too, he drank *awamori* and slept in Kamarū's room.

The next day, when Hyaaku returned home, he gave his mother the remaining eighteen yen from his salary and told her he had deposited five yen in his postal savings account. Then he explained in great detail how the postal savings system worked. His mother nodded silently.

Without planning to, Hyaaku visited the girl's place two or three times after that, and the more he saw her the more something about her attracted him. He wasn't sure if it was her soft, beautiful body, her kind, gentle demeanor, or the glittering, gay surroundings in which she lived. But he felt drawn to her like a magnet.

This girl, Kamarū, was the daughter of a family who had once owned many acres of farmland in the countryside. But after her father died, her none-too-bright older brother had been deceived by swindlers and lost the family fortune. After squandering all of their property, he fell deeply in debt, and to repay the family's losses, his sister was sold into prostitution. The intimacy with which she confided this to Hyaaku, so different from her attitude toward him on their first meeting, caused him to feel even more drawn to her.

The relentless drought that year brought bad times for everyone. In the pleasure quarters, all the houses lost customers. Only two or three regulars showed up at Kamarū's place, and even their visits became more infrequent. No matter what time Hyaaku went to visit Kamarū, he always found her waiting impatiently for him. And the more she showed her feelings for him, the more his feelings for her deepened, and he no longer tried to control them.

When Hyaaku went to see Kamarū on the evening of his next payday, he boldly handed her two ten-yen bills.

"You'll be in trouble if you give me this much. One is enough," she said, returning the other bill to him.

"Take it," he insisted, handing it back to her. "I should give you more. Next time I will."

When Hyaaku went home the next day, he told his mother he had loaned his month's salary to a fellow officer in a financial emergency who would pay it back the following month. Even as he spoke, he could feel his face growing hot and his voice trembling. His mother looked at him suspiciously but said nothing.

On the afternoon of September 27 a cold wind began to blow. Hyaaku was working at the police station and had just started wondering if it was going to rain when a typhoon warning arrived from the weather bureau. "Violent winds expected locally. Caution advised in coastal areas." A low-pressure system had formed in the ocean 160 knots southeast of Ishigaki Island and was said to be moving in a northwesterly direction toward Okinawa.

By evening the storm was raging. The thick branches of the huge trees in front of the police station swayed in the wind. Baby sparrows, lost and

confused, flew in circles, beating their wings. Yellow dragonflies, swept this way and that by the gale, swarmed around the mulberry trees. And in the sky far above the town could be heard the shrieking cries of seagulls seeking refuge.

That night Hyaaku changed at the station from his uniform into his street clothes, then went to Kamarū's place. Her house was filled with fear as the girls waited anxiously for the violent wind and rain. To avoid having things blown and tossed about, Hyaaku helped the girls put everything inside the house. The sun had just set when the storm brought torrents of rain. As the doors of the house began rattling, the walls and beams trembled. After a time, the electricity went out, and candles were lit. Kamarū's face looked pale in the candlelight flickering through the gloom. When the doors started shaking violently, she hurried over next to Hyaaku, crying, "I wonder if we're safe here!" Outside, the gale howled and sent tiles flying off the roof to crash shattering against the stone wall in front of the house.

The violent storm continued for three days and three nights. Skipping a day of work, Hyaaku spent all of those nights with Kamarū. Amid the sounds of roaring wind and rain, they looked into each other's eyes and talked of many things, their mutual attachment growing stronger than ever. By now they could not bear the thought of being apart, even for a single day. Hyaaku proposed they live together but knew this was impossible, since he had no income other than his twenty-three-yen monthly salary. *How I wish I had money!* he thought, and understood for the first time why a man would commit a crime for a woman. He realized that *right now, if the opportunity came, even I . . .* and was frightened by his own thoughts.

On the fourth day the wind and rain stopped, so Hyaaku left Kamarū's place around noon but didn't feel like going home. Instead, he walked aimlessly through a cemetery behind the pleasure quarters. Here and there on the wide hillcrest sat Ryukyuan-style tombs carved from sheets of rock lacquered white, making them look like stone huts. With the rain gone, the sky was clear, but in this deserted field of graves Hyaaku felt lonely.

With no destination in mind, he wandered among the graves, passing in front of a gabled tomb, when the shadow of something moving inside caught his eye. Peering in, Hyaaku saw it was a man. He rushed inside all at once and dragged him out. In that moment Hyaaku's languid mood vanished and he became the consummate policeman.

"Sir, I have not done anything wrong. I am just hiding here," the man said. Hyaaku forcibly searched the man's clothing and found one yen and fifty sen tucked into his waistband. He assumed the man had stolen the money. Though Hyaaku repeatedly asked the man his name and address, he wouldn't say a thing. "I will not do anything bad, sir," he said, as Hyaaku dragged him off to the police station for questioning. Hyaaku was filled with pride at having arrested his first criminal. He shoved the man roughly into the interrogation room, as if he'd been some stray dog, then went to give his report to the police inspector. Warm sweat dripped from Hyaaku's forehead onto his cheeks.

When the inspector heard Hyaaku's report, he smiled. "Well, now, this is your first real achievement. Good work. Hey, Chief Watanabe," he called, and ordered the patrol chief to interrogate the suspect. Officer Ukuma stood nearby and listened to the questioning. He admired the skill with which the chief conducted his interrogation, thinking how great it would be if the suspect really turned out to have committed a theft. On the other hand, if he hadn't, Hyaaku realized it would make him look inept, and waves of anxiety began rolling over him. But as the questioning progressed, it became clear that the man had indeed stolen the money, and eventually he confessed.

"I was a wealthy son in a certain town but got into business over my head, lost everything, and had to sell our rice fields and farm land. So you see, originally, I wasn't poor or a thief. Then, on top of my family's financial ruin, we had one poor crop after another, and it got so hard for us to make a living that I came to Naha on my way to Daitō Island. I was going there to find work as a migrant laborer but failed the physical because of some infectious disease and couldn't go." (Hyaaku thought it was probably tuberculosis, since even as he spoke, the man coughed frequently.)

"At that point all I could do was look for work in Naha, but before I could find some, I spent all the money I had and got thrown out of my rented room. I was walking around town when the storm hit, so I searched for shelter and found that open tomb. Staying inside there I was afraid I would starve. Fortunately, the rain let up this morning, so I left the tomb and headed for town. I went into a liquor store to ask for some water and saw some bills lying on top of a wine barrel. Before I knew what I was doing, I grabbed them. Then I got scared holding that money in my hand, and without looking back, I ran away again to the open tomb. So you see, originally, I was no thief. My younger sister has done quite well as a prostitute in Tsuji. If only I'd gone to her place I could have found a way out

of my troubles, but with the awful state of my clothes I was afraid of what she'd think. Please forgive me. I'll never do anything like this again."

As the man told his story in a heavy Ryukyuan country accent, his voice gradually started to waver, and by the time he'd finished, tears were streaming down his cheeks. "Sir, please forgive me. Please." He bowed so low his head touched the floor.

Seeing this, the chief laughed loudly, obviously proud of his successful interrogation. "How about that, Officer Ukuma. It's just as you suspected. A true crime! Ha, ha, ha."

But Officer Ukuma was unable to laugh, and a lump of fear filled his chest and threatened to cut off his breathing.

"Well, what's your name?" the chief demanded.

The man did not answer, and now Officer Ukuma's face revealed the unbearable tension he felt as he stared at him. It might have been his imagination, but the man's face seemed to resemble that of Kamarū, whom he had left only a short time earlier.

Pressed relentlessly by the chief, the man finally spoke. "I'm Gima Tarū." Now panic seized Officer Ukuma.

After revealing his name, the man took a deep breath and told the chief his age as well as the name, age, and address of his younger sister. Then, again he pleaded for forgiveness.

Officer Ukuma's hunch had been correct, and this man was none other than Kamarū's older brother. Painfully regretting his arrest, he raged and cursed at himself for having been so proud of dragging this man into the station only a short time ago. Now the chief turned toward him. "Hey, Officer Ukuma," he said, "since we have to question his younger sister as a witness, you go to her place and bring her in."

Officer Ukuma felt all the blood in his body rush to his head. For a time he could only stare blankly at the chief. Then his eyes began smoldering with the fear and rage of a wild beast fallen into a trap.