

"Machibuse" (literally "To Waylay" or "Ambush") is a story about a nameless ronin who finds himself in a bizarre ambush scheme designed to destroy a clan. While the story itself is a work of fiction, some important elements do place it near the end of Tokugawa Era, perhaps in the early 1840's.

Introduction - the Tokugawa Era

The Tokugawa Era (approx. 1603-1868) is also often called the Edo Period. This period of military-rule was characterized by its relatively peaceful order overall, clear division of the social hierarchy, extravagance by the privileged classes, isolation from the West, and a lot of convoluted treachery, as well as many important cultural and intellectual developments.

For many centuries, Japan had a form of feudal system, in which the servants, vassals and palace guards of the Daimyo (the military Lords of independent regional domains, who maintained a castle, a home base, and several strategically-located satellite fortresses) were granted a piece of land (a fief), or in most cases, a stipend that came with a specific official post. In return, the vassals were expected to dedicate their lives to the service of their masters. The relationships between masters & vassals were based on this reciprocity of services and rewards, and were emotionally very strong. It was not uncommon for the servitors and followers of a Lord to join him in death.

Almost two-hundred Daimyo-ruled domains and their associated castle-towns existed in the early-Tokugawa period, of various sizes depending on each Daimyo's holdings and the agrarian production of the fiefs they controlled. However, the number of Daimyo decreased quickly during this era, as the Tokugawa Shogunate was always maneuvering to reduce the power of, and if possible, destroy, the Daimyo.

Tokugawa society as a whole was divided into four basic classes. Class was somewhat hereditary, in that once born into a particular class, it was impossible to become a member of a higher class. Although not a wealthy class and owning no land (land was owned by the Daimyo alone), at the top were the privileged class of Samurai (about 10% of the total population), the governing, sword-carrying members of the society. The Samurai class originally emerged around 800 AD, and they were both highly skilled in military arts and highly educated, especially in Confucianism, whose basic philosophy taught virtues of benevolence, propriety, righteousness, fidelity, wisdom and loyalty.

Each person was expected to follow the virtuous examples of the ancient sages. The Shogunate demanded that Samurai closely follow these rules of conduct and ordered that they study Confucian classics. In the early years of the Tokugawa Era, the Shogunate was heavily concerned with the problem of a large number of Samurai who became masterless as many Daimyo fell and lost their domains. These detached Samurai were called "ronin," and many of them went on to become teachers of swordsmanship, Confucian scholars, somewhat-privileged farmers, or simply became townspeople.

The main character in "Machibuse" played by Mifune is a ronin, whose background is unknown. It marks the fourth and final time that Mifune played this character; the other three films in which he appeared are "Yojimbo," "Sanjuro," and "Zatoichi meets Yojimbo."

Accounting for approximately 80% of the population were the peasants, the class of people whose function was, in short, to serve the Shogunate and the ruling classes' economic requirements. These villagers were required to till the land, producing grain (rice, barley, and wheat), and were taxed harshly; 50% or more of the crop (esp. rice, which often played a role of currency in many official functions). As the Shogunate's expenses (which included expensive constructions and renovations, as well as the extravagant lifestyles of its members) skyrocketed, the tax burden on the peasantry became higher and higher. Many families were severely punished for failing to pay the required taxes, and some had to sell family members into temporary bondage (slavery was illegal, but this form of service was a common practice).

In fact, the brothels (whose customers were largely Samurai) were filled with daughters of these peasants. In addition, the Shogunate considered the peasants to be a readily-available labor force. They regularly called upon the peasants to participate in maintaining public roads and facilities.

The majority of the townspeople consisted of artisans and merchants. Many of these, as well as the retainers of the Daimyo and the Shogunate gathered around castle-towns where most business was done. Among these were wholesalers and money-lenders, some of whom accumulated enormous fortunes and survived into the modern era, transforming themselves into some of Japan's largest companies.

At much lower social rank were the 'commoners,' which the Shogunate classified as a part of the 'outcast' population. These included exiled and ostracized members of villages, as villages had their own appointed chiefs who punished unruly members of their villages by sentencing them to exile. Others, the so-called "non-people" and "lowly-people" included: descendants of slaves, people with physical disabilities and abnormalities, beggars and prostitutes. This class was at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and as such, they were not accounted for in official surveys, and were required to live in certain fixed (and undesirable) areas.

Interestingly, actors and performers were officially considered to be outcasts, as they were also required to live near their theaters, and to hide their faces in public.

In the last years of the Tokugawa Era, the Shogunate's expenses were increasing at a much more rapid pace than their revenues, despite their ability to raise taxes at will (mostly from the agrarian base). Also, the last of the Shoguns had employed many prominent scholars, who showed great interest in western science and technology, in an era when the nation adhered to isolationist disciplines. In 1853, Commodore Perry arrived in Japan. The US was developing its power in the Pacific, and wanted to develop commercial relations with Asian nations. It also had many whaling ships in the Pacific which required shelter and supplies in the vicinity, another reason why it felt a need to open Japan's doors using any possible means. Perry's arrival, coupled with a great scholarly interest in western knowledge, led many leading Bakufu (another word for Shogunate) officials to conclude that the western powers were so far advanced that it would be irrational for Japan to continue to refuse to establish full diplomatic ties. The Shogunate thus felt a great internal pressure to abandon isolationism and anti-foreign sentiments. In 1866, the 14th Shogun, Iemochi, died, and Hitotsubashi Keiki was appointed the 15th Shogun. Keiki appealed for unity, by restoring political power to the Imperial Court (restricted by the Shogunate until then to only handling scholastic affairs). In a matter of months, faced with opposition within the Shogunate, Hitotsubashi resigned. A new provisional government, with no former Tokugawa associates, was formed, and a brief civil war followed. In the ensuing power vacuum, it was relatively easy for the Imperial Court to gain influence, and more than 250 years of Tokugawa rule was at an end.

During this era, there were also great cultural developments, many of which could not have been possible without the extravagance of the ruling classes. Such developments include literary works, especially haiku (17-syllable poetry) and fiction. The higher classes enjoyed literature, because education, which included literature among other topics such as military arts, was fairly well organized. Even the commoners could receive some form of education at temples, or from masterless Samurai.

Puppetry and Theater also became very popular, primarily in the Yoshiwara entertainment district of Edo (in 1868, after the new Meiji government was established, Edo was renamed Tokyo), where many Kabuki theaters, tea houses, and brothels were located.

Aside from these were developments in the fine arts. Woodblock printing and painting, originally introduced to Japan from China around the 8th century, while mainly commercial productions subject to the censorship and approval by the city magistrates, took art to new heights. Ukiyo-e, "the pictures of the floating world," and others by such famous artists as Hokusai and Hiroshige, influenced many European artists, especially the French Impressionists. Military crafts were also being perfected by a few artisans, most of whom were employed as retainers of the Daimyo and Shogunate. Prior to the isolation of Japan during the Tokugawa rule, Japan had a short-term trading relationship with the Portuguese, and in 1543, muskets were introduced, and many smiths quickly learned to produce them. Despite the Samurai preference for honorable swordplay, a fair amount of dirty-work "got done with guns."

The Cast

As in his other films, Mifune gathered a cast of superstars in "Machibuse". However, this film is especially noteworthy for featuring three of the biggest names (even that would be an understatement!) in Japanese motion picture history.

Mifune Toshiro

Undoubtedly Japan's best-known actor, Mifune starred in over 130-plus films and numerous television series during his 50-year career. He is best known in the west for the films he made with Kurosawa Akira, such as Yojimbo and The Seven Samurai, and for his starring role as Lord Toranaga Yoshii in "Shogun."

He was born in China in 1920. As his father was a photographer, the young Mifune pursued photography. During the war, he served as an aerial photographer. Wishing to develop his camera techniques further, he sent his resume to Toho film studios just after WWII and settled in Japan. He became a Toho employee, but soon after he decided to audition for various parts, and in 1947, appeared in his first film. The following year, Kurosawa Akira invited him to star in "Yoidore Tenshi" ("Drunken Angel"). Mifune continued to appear in sixteen of Kurosawa's films for the next twenty years. During this period, their collaborative efforts like "Rashomon" and "Seven Samurai" not only won them international fame, but others like "Yojimbo" and "Akahige" have also won awards during the Venice Film Festivals.

During the 60's, when it was fashionable for many superstars to form their own movie companies, Mifune also established his company, Mifune Productions. While these films did not earn him the acclaim that he enjoyed while working with the famed director, audiences all over the world continued to enjoy his works on both silver-screen and television.

Mifune plays a nameless ronin-for-hire, an yojimbo (guard, watchman, bodyguard, etc.) in "Machibuse". His background is unknown.

Katsu Shintaro

Mention his name, and most people associate it with Zatoichi, the blind swordsman. Katsu starred in and/or produced almost two-hundred movies. He also formed his own company, Katsu Productions, during the 60's, which enjoyed enormous success with the "Kozure Ookami" (Lone Wolf & Cub) series (which stars his brother, Wakayama Tomisaburo) as well as the later Zatoichi series. Samurai Cinema has released the entire Lone Wolf & Cub series as well as Katsu's hilariously over-the-top Razor series.

For more on Katsu, please refer to our liner notes on "The Razor," available on our website.

In "Machibuse", Katsu plays a former Shogunate physician, Gentetsu.

Ishihara Yujiro

Ishihara starred in over a hundred Nikkatsu-produced movies, produced over ten movies. He also enjoyed a successful singing career, but perhaps he is best known as the chief detective in one of the longest-running TV police-detective series, "Taiyoo ni Hoero!" (Bark at the Sun!).

He appeared with Mifune in three movies produced by the Mifune Productions - two of which are available from Samurai Cinema; "Fuurin Kazan", in which he makes a cameo appearance as Uesugi Kenshin, the legendary rival of Takeda Shingen, and "Machibuse". Just a couple of years before his death, Mr. Ishihara also lent his voice to an anime movie, "Waga Seishun no Arcadia" (Arcadia of my Youth), available from AnimEigo.

In "Machibuse", Ishihara plays Yatarou, the "Yakuza" traveler. It should be noted that "Yakuza" during the Edo period referred to gamblers, not the mafia-like groups that are now more commonly known. This character also speaks in a manner that contrasts highly with others, and we have paid special attention to the way his lines are rendered.

"Koku", "Koban" and other matters monetary

"T...Two ryo is a great deal of money! It's 10 days of my salary!" -- Ibuki

The so-called "Koku-daka" system of calculating rice production was adopted before the Edo era. During the Tokugawa period, it became the standardized way to rate the holdings of the villages and fiefs. A "100,000-koku" Daimyo meant that he ruled a domain that produced 100,000-koku of rice.

Of Koku, George Sansom says that: "...the product of one choo (approx. 2.5 acres) of first-class paddy," which are wet fields where rice is grown, "is of the order of 10 koku, a koku being the equivalent of about 5 bushels of dry measure in England or the United States." Furthermore, "...in all discussion of the amount and quality of the crop, the ruling fact is that 1 koku of rice is the average annual consumption of one person." He also states the amount of labor that's needed for producing such a sizable amount: "To cultivate one choo of mixed (wet & dry) arable land required the full-time labor of four or five men."

To give you a better idea, the Shogunate, combining all of its scattered fiefs, controlled about 7 million-koku. There were almost 300 Daimyo, who altogether controlled 25 million-koku. Kaga, which was the richest fief, was a "million-koku fief."

In 1601, the 'gold' coin called a "koban" was first minted, and was worth 1 ryo. At first, it weighed 44 momme of silver (1 momme = 3.75 grams, or 0.13 oz.) and contained 67.7% gold, 27.8% silver, and 4.5% copper. But the value (and content) fluctuated widely over the years. After the mid 1700's, the Shogunate established the rate of one ryo equaling to 60 momme of silver in weight as a guide (and also equaled 1 koku of rice in value).

Obviously, a ryo is one large unit of currency. "Zeni" coins were made in smaller denominations called "mon" and "kan". The desirable exchange rate established by the Shogunate was that one ryo would equal four-thousand mon, and one kan would equal one-thousand mon.

The "Tempo-sen" Coin

First produced by the Shogunate in the sixth year of Tempo (c.1835), the Tempo-sen was an elongated coin, much like a koban coin, except that it had a square hole at its center. The exchange rate was established of one-hundred mon per Tempo-sen. (In fact, Tempo-sen was nicknamed "Hyakumon-sen" (100-mon-sen).) By 1865-7, the production of Tempo-sen was halted.

"It was the Elder Mizuno Echizenokami who had an affair with a lady-in-waiting. I became his scapegoat... and I left Edo..."

Even though the Mizuno character himself does not appear in "Machibuse", he is a historical figure whose importance to the story must be noted here.

Mizuno Tadakuni (b.1794, d.1851 - the "Echizenokami" refers to a highly distinguished title given to someone in a high-ranking official post) became a Roju (Elder) to Tokugawa Ieyoshi, the 12th Shogun, in 1834. He is best known as the brains behind what is called "Tempo no Kaikaku" (the "Tempo Reforms") of 1841-3. While the topic itself is beyond the scope of these liner notes, suffice to say that Mizuno tried to force a number of stringent, at many times simply unrealizable, policies into effect. For instance, he called for improving social conditions by the elimination of over-spending and pleasure-seeking by the ruling classes.

He also tried to evict many Daimyo who had fiefs near Edo and Osaka - his intention was to reclaim the land, making it the Shogunate's. This is partly illustrated in the story that Gentetsu tells, about Mizuno and a certain clan. While the authoritative status he enjoyed as the Shogunate Elder cannot be understated, Mizuno's attempts were met with strong oppositions, and his reforms in essence failed.

Gentetsu also tells a story about Mizuno and the lady-in-waiting with whom the Elder had an affair. There are, in fact, many tales about Mizuno and women, for example:

"In 1840, less than a year before launching his campaign to restore the nation to moral health, Mizuno Tadakuni was reputedly obsessed with sex. 'I have been making surreptitious inquiries about Mizuno's tastes,' reported one of Tokugawa Nariaki's agents, 'but at the moment he cares for nothing but women,' adding that the senior councilor was giving his servants money to make sure of a ready supply. "

(source: Tsuji Tatsuya, "Tokugawa Nariaki to Mizuno Tadakuni," Jimbutsu soosho furoku, no.154, Tokyo: Yoshikawa Koobunkan)

"Sanshuu Pass, which connects Shinshu, Ina and Suwa, was a crucial bottleneck during the Age of Warlords. However, by the Edo period, it had become a backroad frequented mostly by outcasts."

Sanshuu (lit. "three rivers") is a nickname for the Mikawa Province, which is now the prefecture of Aichi (mid-east prefecture, capitol Nagoya, approx. 200 km south-west of Tokyo). The nickname comes from the fact that Mikawa literally means "three rivers", though written using a different kanji character for "river".

"A lantern surprise? What's with that?"

The original line in Japanese contains a phrase, "Yabu kara bou." Literally, this would mean "a stick out of the bushes", but the phrase is usually used figuratively to mean "something that is unexpected, or sticks out" or "something that happens suddenly". This line is therefore a pun.

"Good! Let's do the 'Attack of Takeda Shingen's Troop at Kawanakajima!'"

Takeda Shingen was one of the most famous pre-Tokugawa Era warlords who fought Uesugi Kenshin, yet another legendary warlord, on many occasions. Their best-known battle over Kawanakajima is part of the story in "Fuurin Kazan" (Samurai Banners), also released by Samurai Cinema. Check the website for more information than you could possibly want about this wonderful historical figure.

"Ao, don't you cry..."

The translated song at an early scene is a form of what is called a "magouta", or "song for horse(s)". Here, a caretaker of the horse (whose name is "Ao", a common name for horses, just like "Rover" is for dogs) is singing the song before the horse is to be sold away.

Note on Names

All Japanese names appear in their original order (family name first) in AnimEigo/Samurai Cinema releases. [The only exceptions are those in our own staff!]

Research Notes:

A considerable amount of historical research was necessary in translating Samurai Cinema's films and in compiling the information contained here. Among the many sources we have consulted, the following were especially helpful:

- 1) "Tokugawa Japan - The Social and Economic Antecedents of Modern Japan" Chie Nakane, Shinzaburoo Oishi and Conrad Totman, eds. Univ. of Tokyo Press, 1990
- 2) "Japan - A Historical Survey" Mikiso Hane. Scribner, 1972
- 3) "A History of Japan: 1615 - 1867" George Sanson. Stanford Univ. Press, 1963
- 4) "A History of Japan: 1334 - 1615" George Sanson. Stanford Univ. Press, 1963

Production Staff

Japanese Production Staff

Produced by Mifune Toshiro & Nishikawa Yoshio
Screenplay: Fujiki Yumi, Oguni Hideo, Takaiwa Hajime & Miyagawa Ichiro
Director of Photography: Yamada Kazuo
Art Direction: Ueda Hiroshi
Recording: Ichikawa Masamichi
Lighting: Satoo Yukio
Assistant Directors: Maru Teruo & Yasui Osamu
Music: Sato Masaru
Editing: Araki Yoshihiro
Sound Effects: Nishimoto Sadamasa
Camera Assistant: Murano Nobuaki
Lighting Assistant: Doi Naoyuki
Recording Assistant: Kobayashi Nao
Art Assistant: Takayama Hikozaburoo
Set Design: Yoshida Yoshio
Set Decoration: Satoo Kasataka
Makeup: Kobayashi Shigeo
Costumes: Ikeda Makoto
Continuity: Fujimoto Fumie
Fight Choreography: Kuze Ryou & Nana Yookai (Mifune Productions)
Special Thanks: Kawanakajima Jindaikoo Drum Corp, Shinoi Preservation Society
Developing: Tokyo Labs
Sound Rerecording: Toho Dubbing
Line Producer: Kurmada Mamoru

Directed by Inagaki Hiroshi

US Production Staff (Subtitling)

Executive Producer: Robert J. Woodhead
Translator: Shin Kurokawa
Dialogue Checker: Ueki Natsumi
Cultural Consultant: Hisayo Klotz
Subtitling Director: Robert J. Woodhead

Cast

Mifune Toshiro
Ishihara Yuujiro
Asaoka Ruriko
Katsu Shintaroo

Nakamura Kinnosuke, Ichikawa Chuusha, Arishima Ichiroo, Kitagawa Mika, Tsuchiya Yoshio, Togami Jootaroo, Nakanishi Mieko, Yamazaki Ryuunosuke (Zenshinza), Hisano Seishiroo, Araki Yasuo, Tanaka Hiroshi, Kimura Hirohito, Sada Yuutaka, Achiba Shinsuke, Sawanobori Yuzuru, Okita Shun'ichi, Suzuki Haruo, Kaminishi Kooji, Uruki Yasuji, Echigo Ken, Itoo Minoru, Gondo Yukihiko, Kakiki Kooji, Arai Isamu, Yoshiyama Kazutoshi, Endoo Toshio, Yokota Shigeyoshi, Ooshima Mitsuyuki, Kimizuka Masazumi, Nakayama Kengo and Takahashi Yoshiharu