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The History and the Present of a Traditional Textile of Okinawa, Japan A Narrative of the People in Miyako Island and *Miyako-jofu* Textile

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Preface

Miyako Island, located in the Sakishima Islands in Okinawa Prefecture, is known for the production of the *Miyako-jofu* textile. *Miyako-jofu* is a hand-woven *ikat* textile, which is dyed with indigo and woven with dye-resistant yarns of hand-spun ramie. (fig.1) “*Jofu*” means a ramie textile. In this paper, the dye-resistant process in which designs are reserved in warp or weft yarns by tying off small bundles is called “*ikat*.”



Figure 1. Kimono of Miyako-jofu (July 2005).

This study examines what the meaning and the role *Miyako-jofu* have for the people in Miyako Island and examines the relations between the people and the textile. In other words, this study aims to examine how the textile has been situated in human life until the present, and examine the narrative of the textile in human life.

The research method was as follows. At first, the history of *Miyako-jofu* was considered from the study of the literature. Next, interviews with the members of Miyako Textile Business Cooperative Association and ten weavers were done in August, 2002 and 2005. This study is examined synthetically from the results of the research.

The History of *Miyako-jofu*

Though it isn't clear from when there were weaving techniques in Miyako Island, we can guess the time of it from the literature of the history of Miyako Island. It is written in the book of *Ri-cho Jitsuroku* by a Korean who drifted to Miyako Island in the fifteenth century that the people in Miyako

already had the technique of weaving textiles of ramie, and indigo dyeing. And from the old songs of *Ayagu* in the sixteenth century, it is clear that the people in Miyako wove elaborate textiles and had purple and red dyeing [Inamura 1972:319-320]. The people in Miyako consider the origin of *Miyako-jofu* to be “*Ayasabi-fu*” (the ramie cloth of the striped pattern and of rusty color) which Toji Inaishi, a woman in Miyako wove. According to *The Book of Eiga Family Tree*, Shinei Shimoji Unpei who was Inaishi’s husband saved the ship which came back from Ryukyu from wrecking in 1583. Because his credit was admitted by the Ryukyu administration, Inaishi wove *Ayasabi-fu* and supplied it to Ryukyu to reward that obligation [Toyama Oono 1971:132]. However, before she made *Ayasabi-fu*, there had been ramie textiles in Miyako, and because of that, she can be thought of as having refined ramie textile.



Figure 2. The pillar of the tax (Miyakojima City, August 2002).

Ryukyu was invaded and under the substantial control of the Satsuma Domain in 1609, and then, the Satsuma Domain came to take a land tax from Ryukyu. The people in Miyako Island were considered to be adults, when their height rose more than the pillar of the tax. An adult man had to deliver rice and an adult woman had to deliver cloth as land tax [Sunagawa 1998:22]. This pillar of the tax is left in the roadside along the seashore of Miyakojima City even now. (fig.2) *Miyako-jofu* became the poll tax for the women in Miyako. At that time, the management office, the spinning hut and the weaving hut were built in a village and each process of spinning and tie-dyeing yarns, and weaving and tapping the woven cloth was divided and done at each hut in a village. “*Hajichi*,” the pattern of tattoo which a woman wove was carved on the back of her hands as a mark of skill.(fig.3) The pattern of *Hajichi* became the pattern of cloth of Miyako and it was used after that.(fig.4) They had been forced to severe labor, and the burden of the poll tax was very heavy. *Jofu* became elaborate to the extent that the inspection of the woven cloth was strict.

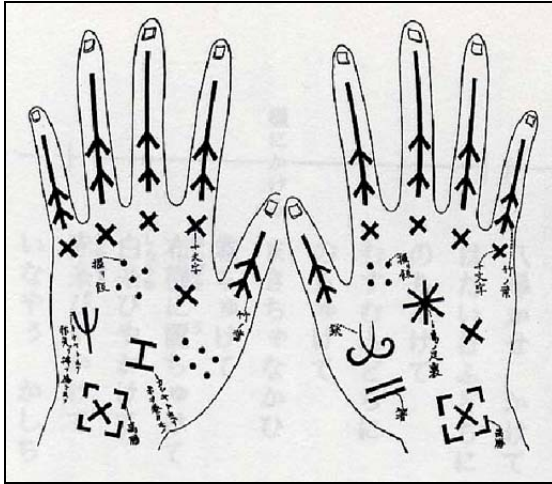


Figure 3 (left). Hajichi (Tattoo on the women's hands) [Takeuchi 1995:227].

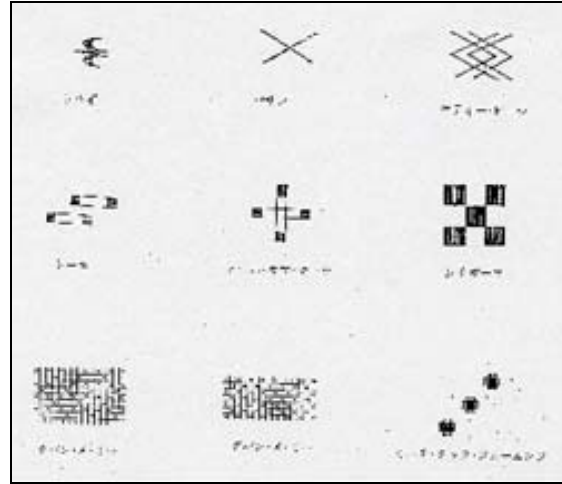


Figure 4 (right). Izu [Hirara City Board of Education 1997:169].

Miyako-jofu was carried as the cloth of Satsuma to the Kansai, and Satsuma merchants dealt in cloth at expensive prices in the latter half of the nineteenth century [Sunagawa 1998:34]. The poll tax was abolished in 1903, and a Miyako Textile Cooperative was established for the first time. The outputs of *jofu* numbered over 10,000 pieces in Miyako in the Taisho Period, and *jofu* was the important specialty of Miyako Island [Sunagawa 1998:57]. When “*Kasuri-Simebata*”, the machine which ties yarns, was introduced at that time, the pattern of the cloth became clearer and more complicated compared with tying by hand.

The production of *jofu* was interrupted in Miyako during World War Second, but the Miyako Textile Trade Association was established soon after the War in 1946. After that, Miyako Textile Business Cooperative Association was established in 1958, and the association exists today. The outputs of *jofu* were 2064 pieces in 1953, but after that, they decreased drastically. Then there were 288 pieces in 1982, and they were less than 100 pieces in the 1990's latter half [Sunagawa 1998:57]. *Miyako-jofu* was authorized in The Traditional Craftwork of The Minister of International Trade and Industry Cabinet designation in 1975, and also authorized in The Important Intangible Cultural Assets of The Agency for Cultural Affairs designation in 1978. However, the outputs of *jofu* were 12 pieces in the association in 2001.

Because the Japanese people changed their clothing style from the kimono to Western style in the post-World War Second era, the demand for *Miyako-jofu* decreased remarkably, and it is said that the continuance of *Miyako-jofu* is in a critical condition at present.

The Production Process of *Miyako-jofu*

The definition of *Miyako-jofu* as a Traditional Craftwork of the Minister of International Trade and Industry designation is “hand-woven, hand-spun ikat textile tie-dyed ramie yarns”. The definition of *Miyako-jofu* as an Important Intangible Cultural Assets by The Agency of Cultural Affairs designation is “hand-woven, hand-spun double-ikat textile and tie-dyed ramie yarns with natural plant-dye such as indigo”. The association manages the production of *Miyako-jofu* as double-ikat ramie textile with hand-spun and hand-woven dyeing with natural plant such as indigo, accordance to the two definitions. (fig.5)



Figure 5. Miyako-jofu labeled by inspection of the association.

The manufacturing process of *Miyako-jofu* is as follows: (1) spinning yarns, (2) tying yarns according to the pattern, (3) dyeing, (4) weaving, and (5) washing and tapping the cloth. The manufacturing process of *jofu* follows the traditional way where each craftsman does each different process. Several months are necessary for one piece of *jofu* to be completed.

1. Spinning yarns

Ramie is called “*Boo*” in the dialect of Miyako. Ramie (*Boehmeria nivea*) is divided into some kinds such as “*Blue boo*” and “*Red boo*”. The seedling of *boo* is usually planted in the field in March or February at the beginning of each year. *Boo* is harvested after about 40 or 50 days. The harvest is possible 4 or 5 times a year. *Boo* which is harvested in early summer is called “*Urizun boo*” and has the best quality. The outer skin of *boo* is taken from the stem and the rest of the skin called “*Raw boo*” is trained severely by the shell of the abalone. “*Raw boo*” is torn delicately and it is spun and connected by the finger after drying.

2. Tying yarns by the pattern

Before, *jofu* with stripes and with no pattern was made, and in the Meiji Period, double-ikat of the cross pattern was made, and at present, there are various patterns of *jofu*. The pattern is drawn in the graph paper. This is called “*Izu*” which means a kind of notebook of collected patterns since the times of the Ryukyu Empire. And a lot of new designs were made in Miyako, in the Meiji and the Taisho Periods when the people wore kimonos generally.

Glue is used to set up the warp or weft yarns so as not to deviate from the *ikat* patterns. Though it was bounded with the plantain yarns by hand before, now, it is bounded using *Kasuri-Shimebara*, which is the bounding machine from the Taisho Period until now.

3. Dyeing

For dyeing, indigo from the main island of Okinawa and Miyako are used. A little water is put in the pot, and tree ash is added and warmed and cooled down. Indigo is put in that water, and made to

ferment for 5-6 days. The yarns are soaked in the liquid of dye many times, and dried, and this process is repeated.

4. Weaving

It is woven by using a weaving machine. After the cloth is woven for about 10cm, the irregularity of the pattern is prepared and corrected.

5. Washing and tapping the cloth

Woven cloth is washed with hot water, and glue and dirt are washed away. Cloth is wrung by hand, and the width of the cloth is prepared at the time of half-dryness. After that, the starch glue of the sweet potato is applied to the dried cloth. After drying, the cloth is folded, and the surface and the reverse side of the cloth are struck with a mallet. *Jofu* becomes smooth, and the pattern becomes vivid by this process.

The Present Condition of *Miyako-jofu*, and the Makers and People Who Surround Them

The relations between *Miyako-jofu* and the people from the positions of the craftsmen and the people who surround them in Miyako are examined below.

1. The Makers of *Miyako-jofu*

The definition of double-ikat hand-woven textile by ramie hand-spun yarns with indigo-dyeing goes back to the age of the poll tax. At that time, the patterns of *Moyako-jofu* took the influence of *Izu* which is the notebook of pattern collections of the Ryukyu Empire, and the people in the Satsuma Domain liked *jofu* of dark blue like cloth of Yamato. Concerning this history, there is a difference of opinion over the definition of *Miyako-jofu* between the association side and the individual weaver side. In other words, the association side takes the tradition of *jofu* seriously, and recognizes only a dark indigo colored double-ikat. On the other side, the weavers recognize other textiles with stripes or with no pattern by various plant-dyeing also as *Miyako-jofu*. The makers of *Miyako-jofu* are divided into different two situations, and these sides are examined.

(a)The association side

The difference of opinion between the association side and the weaver side has relation to the matter of how each process has been divided since the old days. The association side has the opinion to keep the traditional division by each craftsman, and to hand down the technique. The craftsman of each process is stationed in the association, and the craftsmen demonstrate production to the internal and external visitors to the island. A person who hopes to learn each process is accepted as a trainee, and the association gives him (her) an opportunity to learn the technology. Local schoolchildren and junior high school students come in their class of integrated studies, for the study-tour. As trainees, there are many people who come to learn how to weave especially advanced techniques. The trainers are local weavers who teach the technique of indigo dyeing and weaving. Some of the weavers chosen from them are entrusted with the control of the association, and manage the association. The old women of each house spin yarns by themselves. The association holds the classes of spinning yarns to hand down its technique to the younger generation and to the children. The process of tying yarns and tapping by the mallet is heavy labor and it is a man's work. A local man gives demonstrations of the process in the association.

The individual weaver of *Miyako-jofu* is also a member of the association. There are some

weavers who came to have a strong consciousness to keep the traditional technique of dark blue ramie textile, by doing the work of the association which it has the job of administration.

(b) The weavers' side

At present, about ten weavers plant-dye and weave cloth for kimonos and obis. Because the weavers are not able to spin yarns, they buy the yarns from the old women who are good spinners. It is important for them to obtain yarns whose quality is excellent. It is a problem that the technicians who spin yarns are growing old. The yarn spinning technique preservation meeting made a start in 2002 to get over this problem. The people of the preservation meeting have made fields of ramie in the suburbs, and they hold spinning classes for children regularly by using the ramie which has been harvested from the field. This is a grass-roots movement to hand down the technique of spinning yarns for the next generation.

When the weavers are going to make *Miyako-jofu*, they ask craftsman who specializes in tying the yarns using the *Kasuri-Shimebata* machine because the weavers cannot tie yarns by themselves. Because the weavers can not create the patterns freely, they choose patterns from the sample which the craftsman owns, and specifies the pattern to tie. The weavers have been getting over the matter that they can not create patterns freely, and because they came to think that the definition of *Miyako-jofu* has to be spread to colorful ramie textiles, they established the meeting of “*Adan-no-kai*” in 1983. The symposium to think about the future of *Miyako-jofu* which was held in Miyako Island at that time was the start of the establishment of the meeting. The conclusion of the symposium was that *Miyako-jofu* could be more colorful. (fig.6) *Adan-no-kai* was organized by the weavers, dressmaking shop managers and the designers, and they held a regular meeting and fashion shows.



Figure 6. Reiko Shinzato with obi (sash) (Miyakojima City, July 2005).

Dressmaking shop managers and the designers make the clothes such as the shirts and the jackets

from colorful *jofu*, then they make the design which the administration of the Okinawa Prefectural Government proposes expressing a feeling of cool comfort as “*Kariyushi wear*”.

2. The People of Miyako Island Who Surround the Makers

The people in Miyako think *Miyako-jofu* making to be difficult and hard work, by the studio study-tour of the association in school education. *Miyako-jofu* symbolizes the severe poll-tax age for the people of the middle-aged and aged generation in Miyako. They don't think that they want to make *Miyako-jofu*. It is necessary that children feel yarn-making to be familiar by holding yarn-making classes and so on. However, because the weaving process is too precise and complex, it is difficult to adopt weaving *jofu* as part of the education.

There are some teachers who make original textbooks on *jofu* and they hold study-tour and experience classes, and they are doing the activities of interchange between the weavers and the students. However, *Miyako-jofu* as a subject in the school education of Miyako has decreased.

A Narrative of *Miyako-jofu* and the People Who Surround It

There are two counter movements. The one is the movement which tries to keep the traditional method of *jofu*, and the other is the movement to recognize the difficulty of the production of *jofu*. The weavers have been trying to connect the two counter movements each other. They think the definition of *jofu* by the association to be wider, and they think that the cloth created by themselves applies to the definition of *Miyako-jofu* too. They send *jofu* to the wholesale stores in the Kansai and the Kanto districts, and show their kimono designs in exhibitions and on fashion magazines. They also make clothes from *jofu* in cooperation with the local dressmaking shop managers in Miyako, and they are spreading the designs toward the inside and the outside of the island.

The weavers held meeting for the preservation of spinning ramie yarns in cooperation with the citizens of Miyakojima City to solve the shortage of yarns that was recognized recently. They place the activities of the meeting under The Traditional Craft Preservation Business of The Agency for Cultural Affairs, and manage classes for the children, and they are preserving techniques, traditions and trying to enlighten the activities. Moreover, there is a movement to choose the theme of *Miyako-jofu* in school education to raise the next generation, too.

The economic problems concerning *Miyako-jofu* are a significant challenge, too. It takes a long time until one piece of *jofu* is completed, though the wages for the work are low. It is also a problem that the price of yarns isn't stable. But people in Miyako think that it is impossible to produce yarns abroad to maintain the quality of them. A weaver contracts individually with a wholesale store in the country, and from now on, the reclamation of a systematic market channel will be necessary.

Because *Miyako-jofu* has been influenced by the Okinawa boom and ecological boom, the demand for *jofu* has risen in Japan. The opportunities for exhibition of *jofu* and the introduction of the *jofu* kimono to magazines are increasing. Simple color by plant-dyeing and the transparency of *jofu* by ramie yarns are evaluated. In such social conditions, the weavers are doing trials of things such as succession of techniques, the creation of kimonos and obis of various designs, and the new development of modern fashion through mutual understanding between the makers and the people surrounding them in Miyako.

As mentioned in the above, the people in Miyako Island have always had relations with *Miyako-jofu* and have passed the tradition down through the ages.

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