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A SIMPLE IKAT SASH FROM SOUTHERN OKINAWA: SYMBOL OF ISLAND IDENTITY

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INTRODUCTION

When I began this project in 1999, I set out to explore a large theme: the relation between ikat textiles and ritual in Yaeyama, the southernmost island-group of Okinawa prefecture.¹ I hoped to trace direct links to Southeast Asia, imagined by many Japanese and Okinawan scholars as the source of Ryukyuan ikat. I set out to pursue the histories of two ikat textiles—a sash and a headscarf--used on Taketomi, linked, in legend, to ceremonial or ritual contexts, and intended to include ikat garments worn by women on ceremonial occasions. As my study unfolded, the persistence of the legend associated with the sash in spite of any evidence of ritual use—manifestations of that legend today, and the complex history that underlies it—drew me more and more to concentrate on that one simple object. The following introduction to one aspect of my research, focusing on the invented traditions of the sash and its increasing role as a marker of regional identity, is based on 14 months of fieldwork in Yaeyama.

Yaeyama lies on the farthest periphery of Ryukyuan cultural influence, closer to Taiwan and the Philippines than to Kyoto or Tokyo. It has remained distinct from the political center of the Ryukyu archipelago on Okinawa Island, some 300 miles to the north. Geographic, linguistic, religious, social, economic, political, and possibly ethnic factors have insured Yaeyama's separateness.

According to local legend, for 300 years the women of Yaeyama have woven *minsa*-sashes to give to their prospective husbands, incorporating a combination of ikat motifs read as a rebus, meaning “Yours forever more.” Today, in ritual and secular performances of dance and drama, as well as in congregant participation in religious ceremonial, the sash has become a marker of the “simple, island people of Yaeyama” Local textile cooperatives, district governments, and island officials promote this legend. Islanders also use the legend to clarify and enrich their own identities as “simple island people.” Primary documents and object-derived data raise doubts about the historical basis for the legend and for production predating the introduction of machine-spun cotton yarn in the later 19th century. These sources also establish the intimate association of the sash with the gentry at that time. Recent interviews and observations indicate its use by women of the gentry to secure their undergarments.²

¹Support from the Japan Foundation allowed me to pursue my research in Yaeyama for a year from 2000 to 2001; grants from the American Philosophical Society and Asian Cultural Council provided a two-month stay in Yaeyama in 1999, which made the basic research for this study possible. I am particularly indebted to the staff of the Yaeyama Museum (Ishgaki Shiritsu Yaeyama Hakubutsukan), where I was a special research fellow from May, 2001, through January, 2002. My gratitude to all the people of Yaeyama who have cooperated with me and provided information and materials for my project; and to the people of Taketomi, who let me live in paradise, cannot be expressed.

²For an extended discussion of Yaeyama *minsa*-, including its use and meaning, see Amanda Stinchecum, “Minsa- obi/kagan nu bu: Yaeyama tategasuri momen hoso-obi no

Transformations of use, class, and meaning have marked the changing context of this simple object. In tracing the shifting circumstances of this sash, I address the questions posed by Stephen Vlastos in defending Hobsbawm's concept of the invention of tradition. In examining this subject, Vlastos says, "the significant findings will be historical and contextual. How, by whom, under what circumstances, and to what social and political effect are certain practices and ideas formulated, institutionalized, and propagated *as tradition*."³

YAEYAMA IDENTITY AND AND THE MAKING OF A TRADITION

We might define group identity as the shared consciousness of a common history, place, and culture, and the manifestations of that consciousness in the present. In discussing Yaeyama, I refer to regional identity, without regard to ethnic complexities.⁴ Many of the essays in Vlastos' *Mirror of Modernity*, which elaborates on Hobsbawm's concept as it relates to Japan, deal with issues of identity under the label of "invented traditions," although the relationship between invented tradition and identity is not addressed directly, except on a national level.⁵

The invention of a tradition becomes necessary to form a new group identity vis a vis the Other. This new identity may form around a tradition or set of traditions that crystallize in a symbolic object (or, in the case of the Japanese nation, a personage). The concepts of tradition and identity are closely interwoven. In *The Invention of Tradition*, for example, Trevor-Roper's debunking of the Scottish kilt as Highland tradition takes as its subtext the creation of Scottish identity.⁶

In the case of Yaeyama, I will show how the narrow ikat sash, called *minsa-*, underwent transformation from an apparently insignificant utilitarian object to a symbol of regional identity. Today, narrow, indigo-dyed ikat-patterned warp-faced cotton sashes are woven and worn on five of the nine main islands of the Yaeyama group. Sashes with this particular constellation of characteristics are unique to this area within Okinawa and Japan. And I have yet to discover a prototype in Southeast Asia, technologically and

zenshi josetsu, jō," *Yaeyama Hakubutsukan kiyō* 18 (3:2001) 1-19; and "Ge," 19 (3:2002), 1-49.

³ Stephen Vlastos, ed., *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 5. See Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁴ See Karen Wigen, "Constructing Shinano: The Invention of a Neo-Traditional Region," in Vlastos, *ibid.*, pp.229 ff.

⁵ Vlastos, "Tradition: Past/Present Culture and Modern Japanese History," in Vlastos 1998, p. 11.

⁶ In Hobsbawm and Ranger, eds., *ibid.*, pp. 15-41. Even by Trevor-Roper's account, the creation of the kilt around 1730 was not in itself a deliberate invention of tradition but a practical alteration in an existing custom, the wearing of the belted plaid, itself a natural adaptation of the shirt and plaid. In the case of the Highlands, the invention of the Highland tradition came later.

The question remains of whether all traditions are invented, in the sense of being a social construct (cf. Vlastos 1998, p. 4).

geographically the most obvious source.⁷ Recent examination collected from ethnic minorities on Taiwan before World War II, now in the Ethnographic Museum, Osaka, has revealed a single example of a narrow, indigo-dyed warp-faced cotton plainweave sash, patterned with stripes and alternating warps. The uniqueness of this example, the absence of any similar item in early 20th century photographs, and the opinion expressed by anthropologist Yoshimoto Shinobu that it has never been established that indigo dyeing existed among the minority tribes on Taiwan, suggest that it may have been imported from elsewhere, including of course from Yaeyama. The traditions of *minsa*-today are associated most strongly with Taketomi, perhaps because “tradition” has been more carefully cultivated and marketed on this tiny island than on others with greater resources for agricultural and other development.

The three main features of the Taketomi *minsa*- tradition, attributed to an indefinite past (sometimes said to be “300 years ago”), are:

- All Taketomi girls/women learned to make *minsa*- obi,
- Each young woman wove a *minsa*— sash, to present to the man she hoped would become her husband. The decoration of the sash consisted of two main elements—an ikat pattern made up of alternating units of four and five white rectangles, and a tooth-like border. The ikat pattern, read as a rebus, signifies, “*Itsu no yo made mo*” (“yours forever more”). The border pattern is interpreted as the innumerable legs of the centipede, reflecting the woman’s wish that her lover or husband visit her with enthusiastic frequency.⁸ If her beloved felt the same, he would wear it as a publicly visible emblem of their love and as a protective token.
- The *minsa*- sash belongs to the people of the islands, the common people, as opposed to the gentry or aristocracy.

Through interviews with women and men on Taketomi, Ishigaki, and Kohama, it became clear that in the first half of the 20th century only some women were able to weave *minsa*-. Women of especially low or high social status did not have the leisure or incentive to do so. Ōyama Sadao, now close to 100 years old, stated that his unmarried mother was barely able to support her eight children and had no time to learn more than the most basic weaving skills to make clothes for them. Teacher and writer Miyagi Fumi was born into a family of Ishigaki gentry in 1891. Her account of life in the town of Ishigaki in the late 19th and early 20th centuries notes the use of *minsa*- sashes (Miyagi 1972). But her son, historian Miyagi Shinyū, stated that he never saw her weaving the

⁷ Narrow cotton sashes, originally woven on body-tension looms without a reed, have been made on the islands of Okinawa and Amami Ōshima (once part of the Ryukyu kingdom, now incorporated into Kagoshima prefecture), but the element of warp-faced warp ikat occurs only in the Yaeyama sashes. The Okinawa sashes (made in Yomitan and Ishikawa) feature a woven pattern that employs a different technology and derives from different sources than ikat.

⁸ Islanders of Taketomi, Ishigaki, and Kohama explain this as a practice from the days of *kayoi kekkon*, a form of uxorial marriage in which women remained in their parents’ houses after the union of the couple; their husbands visited them at night. On Taketomi, after the birth of 2 or 3 children the couple married formally, and moved into their own home. This practice continued on Taketomi and other Yaeyama islands into the 1960s.

sash, or indeed weaving at all.⁹ Moreover, not a single informant had personally engaged in the practice of gifting the sash as described above, or recalled hearing that her (or his) parents or any other particular person had done so.

Although the rebus reading of the four/five-element ikat pattern is peculiar to the sash, its role as a protective token gifted from a woman to a man under her care may have been transferred from another cloth object. Narratives associated with a small scarf (*tiisa—ji*), sometimes said to have been given to a lover as a love token, and sometimes to a man by a woman as a protective token, are not confined to Yaeyama (Oshiro 1983:839).¹⁰

Taketomi chronicler and founder of the island’s Buddhist temple, Ueseto Tōru, notes that the scarf was a private gift and declaration of love (in response to which the man who received it would reply with a gift of a bead necklace); “long ago, he writes, “this was said to have been dyed with the giver’s menstrual blood”(1977:122).¹¹ The *minsa-* sash, presented after the exchange of scarf and beads, was a more public declaration, worn openly.¹²

These two textiles, the sash and the scarf, had no connection to the Shuri monarchy; they played no official role as an item of court or official dress, were not objects of official trade, and, unlike some other Yaeyama textiles, were not used as a form of tax payment. They almost entirely undocumented. Neither has been of interest to scholars, reflecting a center/periphery tension in Okinawan studies (and among the people of Okinawa themselves).

As to the third element in the *minsa-* tradition, that they belong to the common people of the islands, the earliest documentary evidence points to the association of the sash with the gentry in the later 19th and early 20th centuries.¹³ Clearly, this was an invented tradition, but not one made of whole cloth.

Today, the sash itself, and the *minsa-* pattern of 4/5 ikat elements derived from it, have become a symbol of the “simple island people” of Yaeyama (although its expression on Yonaguni is somewhat different). Women and men wear the sash in dance and dramatic performances dedicated to local deities at religious festivals (*matsuri*). Most significantly, the use of *minsa-* in these performances is confined to roles in which men and women portray “simple” villagers, farmers, fishermen, artisans, and others doing menial labor. The performance itself helps to authenticate the tradition it portrays.

⁹ Miyagi Fumi, *Yaeyama seikatsu shi* (Naha: Okinawa Taimusu-sha, 1972); and personal communication from Miyagi Shinyū, Naha, Okinawa, July 28, 2000.

¹⁰ Ōshiro Shizuko, “Tiisa-ji,” Okinawa Daihyakka Jiten Henshū Jimukyoku, ed., *Okinawa daihyakka jiten, chūkan* (Naha: Okinawa Taimusu, 1983), p. 839.

¹¹ Ueseto Tōru, *Taketomijima shi, minwa/minzoku hen* (Tokyo: Hōsei Daigaku, 1976), p. 122.

¹² Although there are *tiisa-ji* in many museum and private collections, the only red ones I have seen are recent recreations.

¹³ Two documents, one dated 1873 and one 1876, refer to *minsa-* in contexts associated with the gentry of Ishigaki; although we do not know whether the word refers to what we know today as Yaeyama *minsa-* (that is, an indigo-dyed, ikat-patterned, warp-faced narrow cotton sash), a 1904 photograph clearly shows a young girl wearing a sash of the Yonaguni type. See Stinchecum, *ibid.*

Thus, it is no accident that the importance of the sash to the people of Taketomi, in particular, manifests itself in the context of performance.¹⁴ Women also wear the sash in other religious ceremonial (*gyōji*); in secular performances of dance or drama; in cultural programs prepared for a national television audience; and in images used to promote Yaeyama tourism.¹⁵ Some priestesses on Taketomi wear *minsa*-sashes on some, unfixed, occasions when they perform rituals that are not part of a festival. The sash, unlike the plain white or tan loose over-ropes they don before offering prayers, is not considered an essential part of their dress. Women villagers who participate in these rituals as congregants, or who form a procession to escort the priestesses to or from their shrines, often wear *minsa*-sashes, along with Ryukyu-style robes made of golden fiber-banana, or imitations of fiber-banana, or dark blue ikat or striped robes. In this context, the women of the three villages on Taketomi, for instance, represent themselves as “island villagers” by wearing clothing they associate with an imagined, shared past. In the case of an NHK filming (May 5, 2000) of a number of women weaving and singing in the home of one of them, the imagined past, in which women wove communally (something that did not, according to local informants, occur on the island), was projected back onto local residents by the film-makers.

Commercial development of *minsa*- in Ishigaki began in 1972. The adaptation of the sash motif to other textile forms, and adoption of techniques of mass-production, such as the use of chemical dyes and a loom with a reed, promoted the circulation of “*minsa*-style” textiles far beyond the shores of Taketomi, Ishigaki, and Kohama Islands. This helped to establish a type that was not associated with any particular island, opening the way for the identification of *minsa*- with Yaeyama as a whole. Today, the *minsa*- pattern appears on *minsa*-accessories, place mats, and wall hangings manufactured in Ishigaki, and sold both to tourists and local residents; as well as in commercial and private spaces, such as the rooms at Ishigaki’s Club Med. The pattern has been used by the local government in public places, including the Yaeyama Post Office interior and the paving on Ishigaki Pier. Shirts decorated with the pattern are worn by Yaeyama officials on government business in the prefectural capital of Naha. *Minsa*-sashes and other items are also sold as tourist or “craft” items at souvenir shops, hotel shops, craft stores, and museums in mainland Japan as well as in Naha.

The sash, and its pattern of four and five rectangles, has come to represent the people of Yaeyama: as expressed in their own use of it, to themselves and to outsiders (primarily mainland Japanese); and as adopted by businesses and local government. Some ambiguity remains, however, regarding just whose identity is symbolized by the *minsa*-sash. Certainly, the people of Taketomi think of *minsa*- as a Taketomi Island tradition. The designation of the island’s festival of first rice shoots, Tanedori-sai, designated as an Important Ethnic Performing Art by the Japanese government’s Agency

¹⁴The limited scope of this paper does not permit me to note in detail this use of the sash in performances on local and national levels beginning no later than the mid-1950s. See Stinchecum, *ibid*.

¹⁵Vlastos notes the power of the “performative aspect of invented tradition. . . . [which] provides a convincing sensory spectacle of continuity with an ‘age-old’ past,” despite the absence, or at least the thinness, of any such connexion (pp. 7-8).

for Cultural Affairs in 1977, preceded by three days of performances at the National Theater in Tokyo, reinforced the association of the *minsa-* sash with Taketomi. This was followed by the national government's designation in 1986 of the island of Taketomi as a 'townscape preservation area.' It was recently declared a World Heritage Site as well. The national attention thus focused on Taketomi in particular has set it apart from the other islands of Yaeyama. Taketomi islanders have come to view their "traditions" as the basis for development to a far greater extent than the people of the other islands, where resort development effectively shuts out local participation; agriculture and fishing labor to remain viable industries; eco-tourism undergoes the growing pains of a new idea; or where craft production struggles to break the bounds of the past. In the earlier stages of my fieldwork, conducted in 1999-2001, the suspicion aroused among Taketomi inhabitants that I was a spy attests to the importance of *minsa-* to Taketomi identity.

But insofar as *minsa-* has been exploited by local government and commercial development, and is worn for festivals and performances on other islands, its force as a symbol transcends a single island and extends to Yaeyama as a whole. Assertions of Yaeyama identity have been directed towards, and acknowledged by, people of Tokyo rather than Okinawa prefecture. Mainland Japanese cognescenti had been primed to be receptive to an essentialized Yaeyama since before World War II. The reports of Yanagi Sōetsu, Tanaka Toshio, and other luminaries of the Folk Craft Movement, who visited Yaeyama in 1939-40, and Tonomura Kichinosuke, founder of the Kurashiki Folk Craft Museum, who came to Ishigaki and Taketomi in 1957, whetted the appetites of "folk craft" enthusiasts in Tokyo.

Distinctions between the Outer Islands of Yaeyama and Miyako, on the one hand, and Okinawa Island, on the other, would have meant little to mainland Japanese, to whom all of the Ryukyu Islands, then under the U.S. Occupation, were literally a foreign country until Reversion to Japan in 1972. Within Okinawa today, Yaeyama and Miyako remain marginalized, as uncivilized territories. While they may be the object of study for specialists in Okinawa universities, the general Okinawan public displays little interest. But an appeal for legitimization to a ready-made mainland audience could be depended upon to be enthusiastically received. Yaeyama identity may be negotiated first with the center of the Japanese state (Tokyo), and thus authenticated, confront the center of Okinawa in Naha.¹⁶

Why and when did the invention of Yaeyama tradition and a new identity become necessary? Before the end of World War II, travel among the Islands of Yaeyama was limited: forced emigration opened new land to agriculture; grain and cloth was brought to Ishigaki for payment of the poll taxes levied on the Outer Islands; more recently, occasional trips to town were made to purchase supplies, get medical care, or conduct business; and Taketomi residents commuted to neighboring Iriomote to cultivate rice. With little other communication among the islands, isolation reinforced by multiple

¹⁶ Discussion of the documented stages by which this simple object travelled from its association with the gentry class in the later 19th century, and its role as an underwear accessory, to its current status as a symbol of the "simple island people" of Yaeyama must be deferred to another occasion. For an account in Japanese, see Stinchecum, "Jō, ge."

languages and dialects, each island developed practices somewhat different from those of its neighbors.¹⁷

During the post-war years, a diffusion of village or island ways led to the formation of a broader based, Yaeyama identity. Several factors contributed to a decline in the sense of community that had bound the inhabitants of individual villages, and, probably to a much lesser extent, of each island. The increasing urbanization of Japan; the decline of the sugar industry in Okinawa; and the 1972 reversion to Japan after the Occupation, which made travel to mainland Japan a simple matter, brought about the gradual depopulation of Okinawa's smaller islands (like small islands worldwide). Children were and still are sent to the capital of Naha, or to relatives in Osaka and Tokyo after elementary school, to attend schools with higher academic standards. Sometimes they were accompanied by their mothers, decreasing not only the number of young people, but also women, the guardians and facilitators of social and religious practices in island villages.

As post-war children traveled beyond Yaeyama to attend high school and college, local languages were never learned, avoided, or forgotten. The loss of population, particularly that of women and young people, and of the local languages and dialects, has meant fewer candidates for the religious duties of the *tsukasa*. On Yonaguni, where shrine ritual requires twelve priestesses, there is now only one.

Throughout Yaeyama, the ubiquity of television, faster and more frequent ferries, improved road systems, direct flights to the mainland, and the proliferation of cell phones has opened up communication among the islands, between Yaeyama and mainland Japan, and with the rest of the world. In the past ten years, mainlanders looking for a fresh start in this tropical paradise and the adult children of islanders making a "U-turn" to return to their roots have contributed to the weakening of local bonds. The onslaught of outside stimuli, combined with the loosening of community ties have contested the multiple identities that had been forged in Yaeyama villages since Japanese took control of the Ryukyu monarchy in 1609.¹⁸

On Taketomi, changes in the past 50 years include the end of uxori-local marriages; the abandonment of Ryukyu-style clothing for everyday wear; reduced usage of the local language; and the adoption of the floor-loom and the reed for weaving *minsa*. More recently, innovations such as the elimination of a number of regular rituals from the island's calendar; the substitution of imitation fiber-banana cloth in ritual contexts; the presence on the island of dogs and bars; and the proliferation of privately owned cars have altered the face of Taketomi.

¹⁷ Linguists recognize at least four languages within Okinawa prefecture today: Okinawan (based on the language of the old capital, Shuri); Miyako; Yaeyama; and, distinct from the latter, Yonaguni. Dialect differences persist between Taketomi and Ishigaki, for example, between Taketomi and Kohama, and so on.

¹⁸In 1609, the Ryukyu kingdom was invaded by the Japanese feudal domain of Satsuma, and the resulting subjugation and control of the monarchy and its subalterns by Satsuma. This ended only with the forced annexation of Ryukyu by the Meiji government and the establishment of Okinawa prefecture in 1879.

CONCLUSIONS

Transformation of the sash from a utilitarian object associated with the gentry class to a symbolic identity marker of the islands' "common people" of formerly commoner status; and from an object made entirely for personal consumption to a product for outside markets, are post-World War II developments. These transformations have been accompanied by the transference to the sash of meaning formerly associated with another item made of cloth: that of a protective token gifted by women. Since World War II, the people of Yaeyama have reinvented this simple sash, with its array of identities and rich histories, as a symbol of their separateness.