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Changes in the Way of Traditional Cloth Makings and the Weavers' Contribution in the Ryukyu Islands

Toshiyuki Sano and Yuka Matsumoto

This article is based on a fieldwork project we conducted in 2013 and 2014. The objective of the project was to grasp the current state of how people are engaged in the traditional ways of weaving, dyeing and making cloth in the Ryukyu Islands.¹ Throughout the project, we came to think it important to understand two points in order to see the direction of those who are engaged in manufacturing textiles in the Ryukyu Islands. The points are: the diversification in ways of engaging in traditional cloth making; and the importance of multi-generational relationship in sustaining traditional cloth making. Before we talk about these points, we like to briefly mention historical changes to understand Ryukyu's traditionality. And we also like to show cases we have observed all over Okinawa.

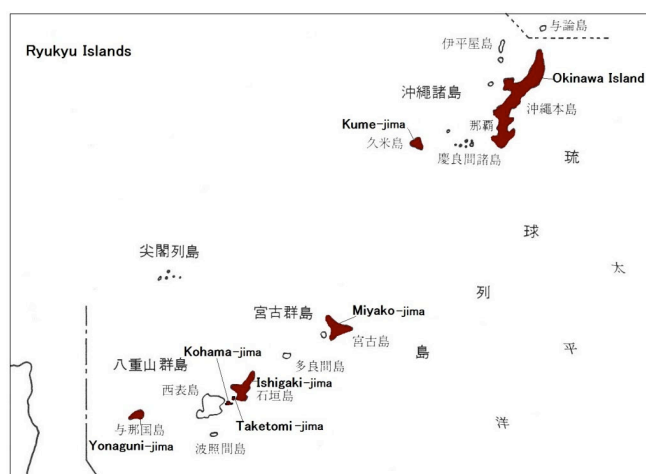


Figure 1. Map of the Ryukyu Islands, Okinawa Prefecture.
(Shaded are the islands we visited in 2013-14)

We begin with the historical changes in relation to the traditions of crafts and textiles in the Ryukyu Islands. Basically the tradition had developed over many centuries with influences of both neighboring and far-away cultures (Kerr 2000[1958]; Tanaka and Tanaka 1976[1952]). Some of the Ryukyu traditions died out and some of them were sustained or even elaborated in the course of historical changes.

Historical Changes in the Ryukyu Islands

It should be noted that there are three major changes (Kerr 1953). First change was the coming of

¹ In this article, we use the term "Ryukyu" to refer to the area we studied which overlaps with Okinawa Prefecture as one of Japan's administrative units since the Meiji period, and thus the two terms "Ryukyu" and "Okinawa" are interchangeable. The reason of our use of Ryukyu is because we like to emphasize that the traditional ways of cloth production in this area are rooted in the eras of the Ryukyu Kingdom prior to the Meiji period.

the power of the Satsuma Domain which controlled over Ryukyu from 1609. In the western part of the Ryukyus (Miyako Island and Yaeyama Islands), the poll tax system (Nintou-zei) made people pay tax with woven cloth. Types of the cloth were designated by Satsuma (Toyama and Ohno 1971: 133,149). Second change took place at the time when the area became one of Japan's prefectures in 1879 but the poll tax system was not abolished until 1903. So the poll tax system lasted for approximately 280 years. And third change was brought by World War II.

Throughout and after these changes, people had to adjust their ways of making traditional cloth. Especially in Okinawa Main Island, materials, tools and documents for traditional cloth making were almost all lost in fierce battles in the island during WWII. It took years and many efforts for people to restart and revitalize the traditional cloth making.

Current State of Traditional Textile Making: Diversification

Now, we proceed to the current state of people who are engaged in traditional cloth and textile making. Figure 2 shows the places we visited during fieldwork. Each place has distinct traditional textiles except for Urasoe and Tomigusuku where people have created new textiles respectively. While we were visiting them, we found the diversity of their activities much more than expected.

To explain how the diversification has taken place, it is useful to use three categories which Toyama and Ohno (1971:22) used 43 years ago to describe people who were engaged in traditional dyeing and weaving. We can compare our cases with the cases described by Toyama and Ohno in their volume which shows us the 1960s state of traditional dyeing and weaving in Okinawa just before the Okinawa's reversion to Japanese administration from U.S. occupation in 1972. Thus, our comparison of our cases with theirs shows us changes for over 40 years.

Three categories of Toyama and Ohno are:

- (a) Those who are engaged in dyeing and weaving as a part of their ordinary lives.
- (b) Those who are engaged in dyeing and weaving as a means of living or for industry.
 - (b-1) Those who are making a folk-craft type of cloth.
 - (b-2) Those who are making cloth with having a commerce-oriented mind to expand production while following traditional ways.
- (c) Those who are engaged in dyeing and weaving with a desire of making crafts while seeking their traditional beauty.

We have tried to sort our cases according to the above categories and the following are the tentative result of our sorting.

- (a) Those who are engaged in dyeing and weaving as a part of their lives.

Case of Kohama-jima women

Women in Kohama-jima customarily practice "Indoai"-dyeing and hand-weaving. One of them is

Ms. Kedomori Hideko.² She showed us a group picture of her family members gathered for a birthday party for her becoming 85 years old. The picture is impressively illustrating that each family member wears a indoai-dyed and hand-woven Kimono which Ms. Kedomori made. “Indoai” indigo-dyeing and hand-weaving are still practiced among women in Kohama-jima who believe in a local custom that women weave and dye for their family members although family members wear hand-made fabrics only for several occasions of annually-held local community rites.

At the beginning of every July, a community craft and art fair is held at a community center in Kohama-jima. Women, mostly middle-aged and elderly, are eager to enroll their achievements for the fair. Main exhibits are hand-woven and hand-dyed cloth and clothes. Community members enjoy seeing traditional craft making as well as new ideas of color combination and clothing styles. At the same time, they can check how specific persons, in the 80s and 90s, are still doing fine jobs.

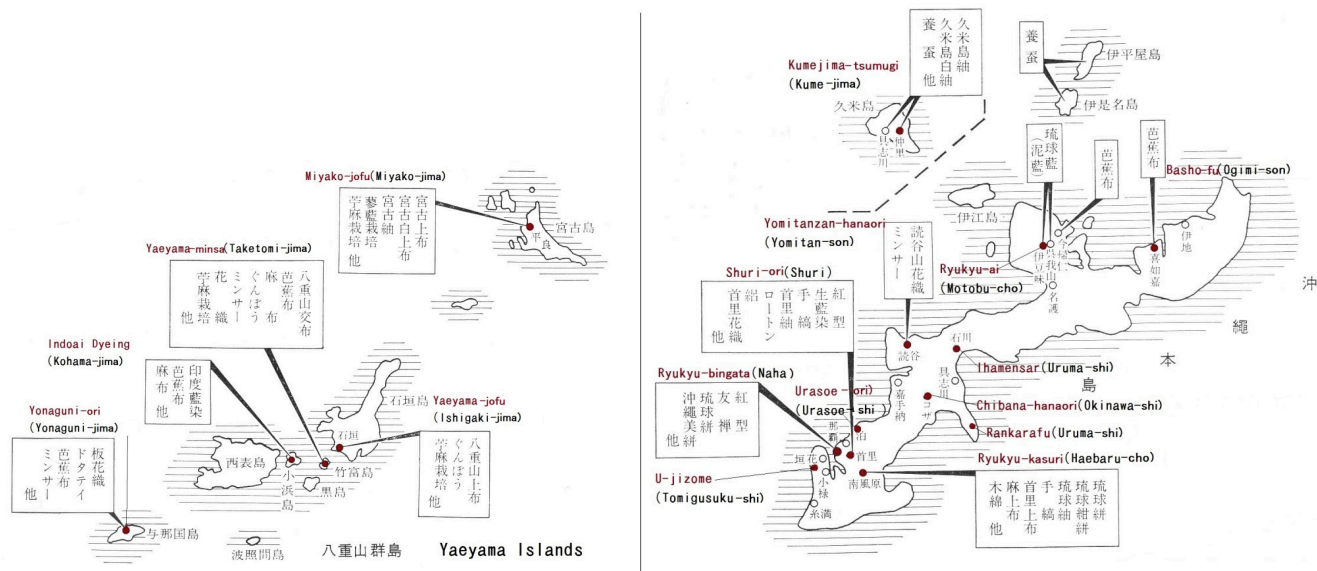


Figure 2. Study places, dotted and the textile names at each place listed in Japanese in boxes (the left map shows the western part, Yaeyama Islands, and the right the eastern, maps not equally scaled).

(b) Those who are engaged in traditional weaving and dyeing as the means of living or for industry.

(b-1) Those making folk-craft type of crafts.

Case of Kume-jima tsumugi in Kume-jima

In a traditional way, a family is the unit of manufacturing Kume-jima tsumugi cloth, which requires mud-dyeing, which is actually a cooperative work. For the mud-dyeing, several families of relatives and friends come together to the specific spot of good mud early morning and help out one family's dyeing work. This is an exemplary practice of so called *Yuimaru*, a mutual cooperation prevailing in Okinawa.

Case of Kijoka-bashofu in Ogimi-son, northern Okinawa Main Island

Bashofu yarn is made from banana-tree trunk in winter season and the yarn is dyed with Ryukyu-ai (indigo) and Common garcinia (*Garcinia sublimptica*)(yellow) in Kijoka area of Ogimi

² We spell the name of non-academic ordinary person in the family-name-first, Japanese customary order.

Village.³ Ms. Taira Toshiko, Japan's intangible national treasure, contributed to revitalizing Bashofu production with other Kijoka women during post-WWII period and has since then led a group of collective workers and a group of young trainees who learn the whole manufacturing processes of bashofu in Kijoka.

Case of Miyako-jofu in Miyako Island

The production of Miyako-jofu is based on the division of labor consisting of yarn-tying, indigo-dyeing, weaving and tapping the woven textile. The most difficult part is to keep sufficient fine yarns due to the shortage of skilled spinners who have been becoming old.

(b-2) Those who are making cloth with having a commerce-oriented mind to expand production while following traditional ways.

Case of Ryukyu-kasuri at Haebaru, southern Okinawa Main Island

Ryukyu-kasuri production has been enhanced when the new method was introduced from mass-manufacturing of Oshima-tsumugi. The feature of the method is the technique of bundling yarns at one time for ten bolts of Kimono textile. The volume of Ryukyu-kasuri production is the largest among traditional textiles in Okinawa.

Case of Yomitanzan-hanaori at Yomitan-son, central Okinawa Main Island

The weavers recognize that the character of Yomitanzan-hanaori is similar to Southeast Asian textiles which are very colorful, and thus think that the textile might be originated in Southeast Asia. The weavers belong to a cooperative association which plays a role of managing overall manufacturing processes and marketing.

Case of Yaeyama-minsah in Ishigaki-jima

A local business establishment has been producing Yaeyama-minsah textiles, and tried to create new designs for small items such as bags with Yaeyama-minsah textiles. The new designs got popularity but soon lost it and then the company returned to the original design of traditional color combination and motives. The patterns of Yaeyama-minsah obi textiles are said to have cultural meanings.⁴

(c) Those who are engaged in dyeing and weaving with a desire of making crafts while seeking their traditional beauty. This category is currently seen among individuals in various places in association with the category (b-1).

Case of Yaeyama-jofu in Ishigaki-jima

Ms. Aragaki Sachiko (69) creates colorful ramie cloth not only bleached ramie cloth (traditional Yaeyama-jofu) but also her originals based on her research on the history of Yaeyama-jofu with a recognition of traditional local weaving.

Case of Ryukyu-bingata at Shuri and Naha, southern Okinawa Main Island

³ See Cort (1989).

⁴ The historical background and cultural meanings of Yaeyama-minsah have been extensively studied by Stinchecum (2001 & 2002).

Bingata textile is dyed by a group of artisans belonging to ateliers rather than by individual artisans. They create their original motives inspired by classic ones. They produce textiles for Kimono and Obi only.

Case of Yonaguni-ori in Yonaguni-jima, the western-most island

Ms. Tsunoda Reiko, who moved from Tokyo to Yonaguni in 1988, has been creating Yonaguni-ori with motives which she translates from motives once used with old body-tension loom to motives for modern frame loom. She creates Kimono, Obi, and small goods such as coasters and table mats.

We tried to sort our cases according to the categories. However, the categories do not work well with what we found in our project. This is because of the fact that Toyama and Ohno (1971) did not mention categories which we need now, for instance, a category of people engaged in preserving traditions. From this, we understand that an individual weaver now plays multiple roles in relation to traditional cloth making. For example, one weaver can contribute to new product making, to creative artistic activities, to educational activities, to preservation activities, and to local revitalization activities. So, we like to point out the diversification has taken place in traditional cloth making in the Ryukyu Islands.

Inter-Generational Relationship

Let us move to the second point. In the western half of Ryukyu, we heard that weavers recently went to Japan's Main Island to examine old cloth and textiles originated from Okinawa and to learn the masterfulness of weaving and dyeing techniques. Many of cloth and textiles made in Okinawa do not exist in the original places because they were sent as payment in the poll tax system to the Satsuma Domain in Kyusyu, then many of them were circulated in Japan's Main Island. The similar situation is seen in the eastern part of Ryukyu, as we have mentioned, because of WWII.

Before WWII, Yanagi Muneyoshi and other promoters of Japan's craft movement rediscovered the beauty and mastery of Ryukyu crafts including cloth and textiles, and luckily enough they collected pieces of cloth and clothes in 1938 in Okinawa (Yanagi 1959). The collected pieces survived in Japan's mainland, and as mentioned before, they recently play a role as model for the weavers who reside in Okinawa and are interested in connecting with their predecessors by seeing the old textiles.

This recent reconnecting efforts made us realize that it needs to take a certain length of time before current weavers started connecting to past weavers two or three generations before. What they actually do is as if grand-daughters do learn by watching grand-mothers doing. Two or three generations mean a time length of approximately 70 years. It is exactly this time length that we needed to have more clear view of the importance of multi-generational relationships among those who have been engaged in traditional weaving and dyeing during post-WWII period, that is, 69 years.

In our recent interviews, we have heard from veteran weavers of their 80s that they have chances to teach their grand-daughter in Yonaguni-jima, grand-daughter-in-law and niece in Kohama-jima how to make cloth and textiles in traditional ways. Actually elderly weavers are very receptive to teaching younger generations as well as peer generations on request.

Traditionally, Kohama-jima women manufacture Kimono for their family members with the indigo and ramie plants which she raises on her property (Kagaya 2007). Adult men usually have four pieces of Kimono which his mother woven and dyed for each occasion of local seasonal rites (Fig.3).



Figure 3. Kohama-jima men wear Kimono dyed in blackish color while sitting around the stage on which performances took place as part of Kitsugan-sai, the rite for rich harvest. Photo courtesy Toshiyuki Sano. September 2014.

In addition to such multi-generational teaching and learning relationship, we have seen a case of sibling cooperation in which elderly older sister came back to her original home town in Kume-jima to help her younger brother keep making traditional cloth (Fig.4).



Figure 4. A Kume-jima man weaver (to the left) is finishing his traditionally-made cloth Kumejima-tsumugi with a help of his older sister. Photo courtesy Toshiyuki Sano, February 2014.

To sum up our two points, we made diagrams (see Figure 5, 6 and 7). In the first diagram (Fig.5) we situate the training projects sponsored by national or local government to raise successors. The backdrop of promoting such projects is not merely the awareness of shortage of successors but the interest of rediscovering local cultural resources and revitalizing local industries. Such projects have prevailed all over Japan in 1970s and 1980s. In Okinawa, like other parts of Japan, the projects raised

students to contribute to preserving traditions. The contributors include a certain number of non-Okinawan Japanese who moved to Okinawa. Many of them are just becoming senior citizens now.

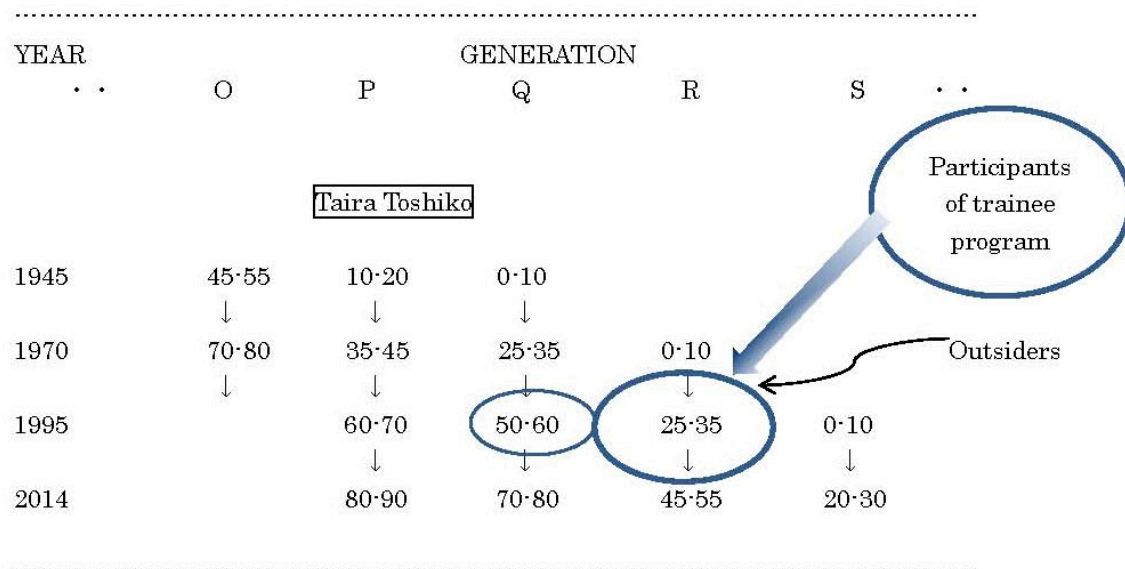


Figure 5. Generational chart of those who have been engaged in traditional dyeing and weaving, situating the nation-wide training projects to raise prospective successors. Numbers indicate ages.

Figure 6 shows that former students of trainee programs now have multiple roles and contribute to the diversification of traditional weaving and dyeing activities individually.

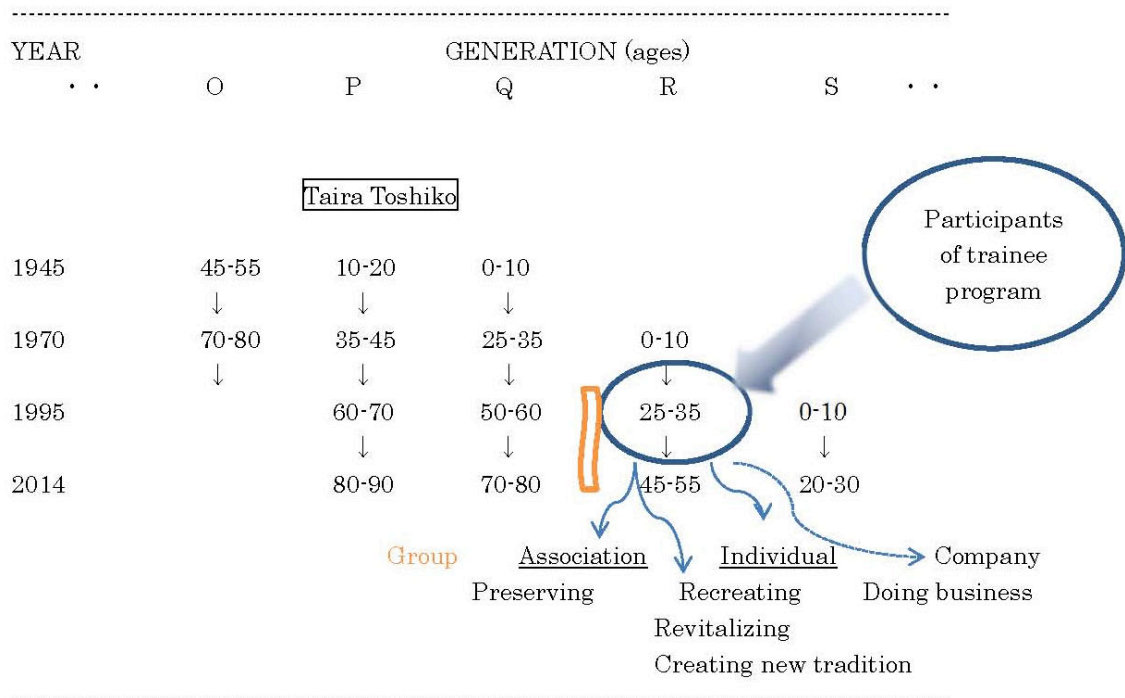


Figure 6. Post-training passages of trainees.

The third diagram (Fig.7) shows how the relationship between grand-mother and grand-daughter has been sustained. We include the life course of Ms. Taira Toshiko, one of Japan's intangible national treasures, as a reference case. Weavers, who are now in their 70s and 80s, had regular works throughout their lives, and they started to engage in making traditional cloth after their retirement. They learned how to make cloth in traditional way by watching how their mother and grand-mother did.

It is important to point out that we tend to think that the kin-based learning-teaching relationship is a past story. However, it still exists in Okinawa. It has been difficult to understand it until now because the grand-daughters of weavers in their 70s and 80s in 1970 were busy in doing their regular works and they were not seen in weaving and dyeing places, which might make Toyama and Ohno concern about the shortage of weavers' successors in 1960s. This concern is still spoken. But the situation has been changed. Grand-daughters in their 20s and 30s can come to their grand-mothers and learn weaving and dyeing traditions from them. They do not need the institutionalized training project.

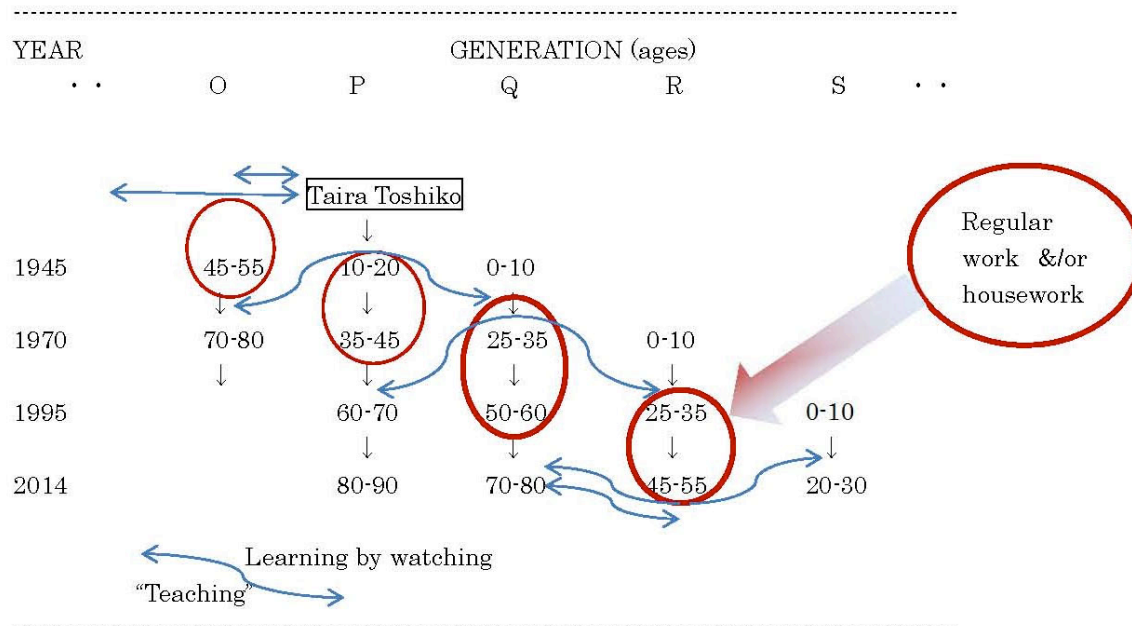


Figure 7. Inter-generational relationships in teaching and learning the traditional ways of manufacturing textiles.

In relation to the multi-generational relationship, two cases are noteworthy: Ms. Kedamori Hideko(86) in Kohama-jima, and Ms. Sakihara Kiyo(90) in Yonaguni-jima. Ms. Kedamori (Fig.8) is one of the women who are actively engaged in local activities such as being a director of local community hall and a member of elderly women's choir while planning the schedule of planting and harvesting indigo and ramies, making dyestuff and threads, and weaving and dyeing cloth for family members such as children, grand-children, great-grand-children and in-laws. She thinks, as other women in Kohama-jima do, it a traditional custom for Kohama-jima woman to prepare hand-woven and dyed Kimono for every family member. She relearned from her friend how to make traditional cloth and clothes while she was reaching the time to retire from working as a principal of a day care center in

a larger town, and she came back to home town with her retired husband, then she has been engaged in traditional cloth making. She has recently taught traditional ways of making cloth to her niece and plans to do so to grand-daughter in-law.



Figure 8. Ms. Kedamori (86) and her pails of “Indo-Ai,” a type of Indigo uniquely used in Kohama-jima. Photo courtesy Yuka Matsumoto, July 2014.

Another case is from Yonaguni-jima, where two sisters have played a role of local leading figure like Ms. Taira Toshiko, and now the younger one, Ms. Sakihara Kiyo (90) is teaching her grand-daughter who has studied modern cloth and design making in Tokyo.

Concluding Remarks

To conclude, we have found a wide variety of ways of being engaged in traditional cloth making while we were visiting people in various places in the Ryukyu Islands. This finding does not tell us clearly about the overall general new single direction. However, when we change our framework from the viewpoint of preservation with an emphasis on organizational projects to the viewpoint of individual engagement, it turns out to be clear that individuals are making efforts to find multiple meaningful ways of engaging in traditional dyeing and weaving, and are surely enjoying such diverse engagement. And Okinawa people sustain kin relationship in everyday life much more than urbanized Japanese people, and they use it for succeeding traditional dyeing and weaving. By doing so, they can keep potentiality, flexibility and variety of engaging in traditional dyeing and weaving activities. This is, we believe, essential in the Ryukyus for sustaining traditionality and navigating the future direction in various areas including traditional cloth making at the time of facing with global challenges.

Acknowledgement

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