

# Origin Study on Tattoo Custom “Hajichi” in the Ryukyu Islands-An Investigation from the Intercultural Communication Perspective

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## Abstract

There was once a tattoo custom, called “hajichi” in the Ryukyu Islands. Considering the patterns and purposes of hajichi from the culture science perspective and combining with the history of Ryukyu Islands for root and truth-seeking exploration seemingly help to conclude that Yunnan Province in China is possibly the place of origin of hajichi custom. The tattoo culture in Yunnan may spread to Ryukyu and further roots and grows there based on the exchange convenience in the age of great navigation in East Asia.

**Keywords:** Hajichi, The tattoo culture, Ryukyu Islands, Yunnan Province.

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## INTRODUCTION

There was once a tattoo custom, called “hajichi” in the Ryukyu Islands with women at their tens being the acceptors. Hajichi does not mean random pattern tattoo on anybody areas, but has rules to follow. Hajichi patterns are always found on the back of hands, fingernails, fingertips and other areas of the acceptor now, but its origin is still unknown. In addition, few pieces of research have focused on the origin of hajichi. Therefore, a bold interpretation of the origin of hajichi was presented in this paper, expecting more excellent opinions and ideas.

The author once made a case study of 1976 hajichi acceptors and understood that in modern times, women accepted hajichi operations mainly because that they did not want to be brought to Yamato<sup>1</sup> areas and other places. For long, accepting hajichi means that a girl has grown up and married. In addition, the hajichi patterns are hardly accepted by other nationalities.

<sup>1</sup>It means Mainland Japan. Mainland Japan is a term to distinguish the area of Japan from its outlying territories. It was an official term in the pre-war period, distinguishing Japan and the colonies in the Far East. After the end of World War II, the term became uncommon, but still is used as an unofficial term to distinguish the area of Japan from the Ryukyu Islands or Hokkaido.

Therefore, these women accept hajichi operations to reduce the risk of being brought to foreign areas.

In a narrow sense, hajichi plays the role of protecting women to a large extent, which may also be the main cause for the existence of hajichi. Furthermore, considering the patterns and purposes of hajichi from the culture science perspective and combining with the history of Ryukyu Islands for root and truth-seeking exploration seemingly help to conclude that Yunnan Province in China is possibly the place of origin of hajichi custom.

There is a minority named “Derung Nationality” in Yunnan Province and women of the nationality always bear face tattoos. The custom can exist for the long term mainly because of the antagonism and hostility between tribes. Women are important for a tribe as women shoulder the duty of reproduction. The face tattoo means the identity and is also an effective way to prevent women from being caught by the enemy tribe, “Lisu Nationality”. Similarly, in Burma bordering Yunnan Province, there is also a minority with face tattoos for women only – Chin Nationality. Karen Nationality residing in the east and south of Burma and north and west of Thailand also prefers fingernail tattoos. Karen Nationality once lived in Yunnan Province today and then migrated southward to Burma and Thailand nowadays. It can be predicted that the tattoo custom in Yunnan Province has also

spread in Southeast Asia areas together with the ethnic migration. With the development of marine technologies, global trade and cultural exchange have embraced a broad development space. Owing to the trade exchange, the Ryukyu Kingdom self-named “Bridge of Nations”<sup>[2]</sup> accepted foreign cultures to a large extent. These foreign cultures were rooted and developed in Ryukyu and intermingled with the local culture inevitably, forming the unique Ryukyu culture.

The author made bold speculation, considering the following possibilities for the spreading path of hajichi culture: 1. The tattoo custom in Yunnan Province directly influenced the Ryukyu Islands; 2. The tattoo custom in Yunnan Province indirectly influenced the Ryukyu Islands via Fujian, Taiwan, etc.; 3. The tattoo custom in Yunnan Province indirectly influenced the Ryukyu Islands via Thailand, Burma, etc. The speculation is essentially based on the Chinese culture worship of the Ryukyu Kingdom. In 1372 during the reign of King Satto (察度)<sup>[3]</sup>, the Ryukyu Kingdom started the frequent exchange with mainland China. The earliest literature related to hajichi custom was in 1534, during which mainland China was under the reign of Ming Dynasty. Zheng He's traveling to the west during Ming Dynasty is considered a benchmark event in the world history of maritime navigation. In 1407, Zheng He sent high-rank officials to visit Ryukyu and in 1409, Zheng He visited Ryukyu personally. Moreover, Zheng He was born in Yunnan Province where the tattoo culture was prevailing. So, this may promote the people in the Ryukyu Kingdom to accept tattoos willingly. Therefore, the tattoo culture in Yunnan may spread to Ryukyu and further roots and grows here based on the exchange convenience in the age of great navigation in East Asia.

In July 2019, the author attended an academic conference on ethology in Chuxiong Normal University in Yunnan Province and proposed the opinion that “the hajichi custom in Ryukyu may originate from Yunnan”. During the conference, the author received data related to the tattoo culture of minorities in Guizhou, Hainan, Taiwan and etc., and completely believed that the spreading and inheritance of tattoo culture is an epitome of cultural exchange among Asian countries. The discussion among scholars is profound in connotation but easy to understand, constituting a solid pace towards the clarification of tattoo custom.

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<sup>2</sup>The Kingdom of Ryukyu is a splendid place in the South Seas, with close intimate relations with the Three Nations of China, Korea, and Japan, between which it is located, and which express much admiration for these islands. Journeying to various countries by ship, the Kingdom forms a bridge between all the nations, filling its land with the precious goods and products of foreign lands.

<sup>3</sup>Satto (察度) (1321 – November 17, 1395) was King of Chūzan. He is the first ruler of Okinawa Island who was recorded by contemporary sources. His reign was marked by expansion and development of Chūzan's trade relations with other states, and the beginning of Okinawa's tributary relations with Ming Dynasty China, a relationship that continued for roughly five hundred years, almost until the fall of the Qing Dynasty.