

# Hachijojima

## An Island with Unique History & Culture

By Natsuko TOYODA

The other day, I participated in a tour to Hachijojima, an island far south of Tokyo. It was an overnight tour to see the sights on the island. The Tokyo Islands Tourist Federation, which is looking to attract foreign tourists, had invited media people such as staff from English-language magazines and websites to the tour. In Japan's period of blisteringly fast economic growth when overseas trips were hard-to-realize dreams, Hachijojima, so far from the mainland, was a dream destination known as the "Hawaii of the East." At its peak, as many as 200,000 people visited the island, but the numbers are on a downward trend. Nonetheless, if you learned the attractions of the island, you would probably want to visit.

### Culture Brought by Kuroshio Tidal Current

Hachijojima, approximately 300 km south of Tokyo, is an island in the shape of a bottle-gourd on which stand two mountains. With a population of roughly 8,000, tidal currents in the northern part of the island are fast, and it was once difficult to reach the island from the mainland. However, there is evidence of early human life on the island, with excavated earthenware dating back around 7,000 years. One reason for this was the *Kuroshio* Current, which swept to the shores objects and boats from the south, bringing to the island many aspects of culture along with arts and crafts (Chart below). The island's museum houses such objects as a *rakan* Buddhist statue ❶ wearing a Western mantle, which would have been unusual on the Japanese mainland at that time. The statue, seen to be from China's Ming Dynasty, is thought to be an object that came floating on the waters, or which used to be an ornamental piece of a ship.

Another allure of the island is the *Kihachijo* silk textile ❷ featuring a stunningly bright yellow color. Written records on the hand-woven fabric can be found dating back to as early as the 14th century. The high reputation of this textile reached the mainland, and it was used as a gift to the Imperial Court and the *shogunate* feudal government.



The yellow color does not fade, and the secret behind this is that it is dyed with the *kobunagusa* plant, or *Arthraxon* (a genus of grass in the Poaceae family), which is similar to *tsuyukusa* (dayflower). The history of *Kihachijo* is not clear, but legend has it that around 2,200 years ago, China's Qin Shi Huang, king of the Qin state, sent a mission to Japan, and the textile is said to have been passed on during that time. In China, yellow was a color for nobles, and the dyeing method is the same as that used to dye the emperor's yellow-colored clothes. Because weaving was a woman's job and because of the influence of a maternal society – we do not know which came first – the status of women on the island is said to have been high.

### Rich Island Loved Even by Exiles

In the Edo period (1603-1867), the island served as a destination for exiles. But convicts, once told that they would be exiled to Hachijojima, were said to have wept with tears of joy. The temperature on the island is warm, averaging 18 C, and there is plenty of rainfall, causing no shortage of water. There are two mountains on the island, and the mountain on the eastern side, Miharayama, has a deep forest that is the island's water reservoir ❸. Hot springs are also found, and geothermal power generation has been undertaken in recent years. Among islands in the region, Hachijojima is the only place where rice can be grown thanks to abundant spring water. There is a rich variety of agricultural produce such as *satoimo* (aroids), hot peppers and *ashitaba* leaves. *Ashitaba*, a wild plant native to this island, has attracted attention from the mainland as a highly nutritious vegetable ❹❺. Fruits such as mangoes and passion fruit have also begun to be grown recently in greenhouses heated by geothermal energy. On Mt. Hachijo-Fuji on the western side of the island is a farm that produces fresh milk appreciated by local people, including neighboring islanders ❻.

And fish are delicious! I tried the traditional *kusaya* – a fish dried after being dipped in fermentation liquid – dressed with mayonnaise and *ashitaba*. It was somewhat similar to blue cheese. Of course, there is plenty of fresh fish, and I savored *onagadai* ❻, an expensive fish on the mainland, as a *sugata-zukuri* dish (sliced raw fish with head and tail on) served without stint. What an unexpected luxury! And the island even has its own *shochu* (distilled liquor) ❼. The technique of making *shochu* was introduced by Tanso Shouemon, a mer-

chant from the province of Satsuma (now Kagoshima Prefecture). He was exiled toward the end of the Edo period reportedly for engaging in illegal trading even though he had only done so on the order of the provincial government faced with financial plight.

Performing arts handed down to this day on the island represent a blend of its traditional music and dance with varieties of folk songs and *Bon* midsummer festival dances of exiles' home provinces. In a building which was the former residence of the prestigious Hattori family, visitors can watch drumbeating and dancing. On the retro-looking stage with a nostalgic feel of the Showa period (1926-1989), local people wearing *Kihachijo kimono* danced and beat the drum to the tune of the Hachijo folk song "*Shome-bushi*." <sup>6</sup> Medieval records show that islanders cordially received people who came from different provinces, and this spirit of entertainment must be something inherent in them. Given such a warm, simple welcome, I had a great feeling, forgetting all about my urban life back in Tokyo.

Blessed with such an environment, I imagine that the convicts, living freely on this island, were able to find peace in their hearts.

### Historical Remnants Scattered over Island

The exiles had a vast variety of backgrounds and some were *daimyo* feudal lords, priests and craftsmen. The skills they brought with them were greatly useful for the cultural development of the island. The Hattori residence mentioned earlier is surrounded by *tama-ishigaki* (round-stone wall) made up of neatly piled round stones. Their geometric patterns made by the *roppozumi* (hexagonal masonry) method of placing six round stones around one stone have an exquisite beauty <sup>10</sup>. The stone wall was reportedly made by an exile called Kondo Tomizo at the end of the Edo period. He was exiled to the island at the age of 24, and although he was pardoned at the start of the Meiji period (1868-1912), he went back to Tokyo only once and returned to the island where he stayed until his death at 83 in 1887. The writings he kept, called "*Hachijo-jikki*" (Hachijo Records), describe the manners and customs of the island and are highly regarded as historical documents.

In the Hattori residence, where we watched local dancing, there was a Buddhist altar adorned with elegant engravings, made by Tomizo. I wondered why such a brilliant and talented young man had to be exiled. Then I was told that the crime he committed was the murder of seven members of a neighboring farmer's family. Tomizo was the eldest son of Kondo Juzo, a *hatamoto* (vassal to the *Shogun* feudal tycoon) famous for exploring Hokkaido and northern territories on the Edo feudal government's orders. As the Kondo family's successor, Tomizo was expected to sail smoothly and blithely through life.

However, his father divorced his mother when Tomizo was small and, although an intelligent and talented man, his father made a misstep in human relations at work, and was subsequently demoted to a position in Osaka. Tomizo grew up seeing his father living in disappointment and losing himself in drinking and womanizing. When Tomizo was 16, he fell in love with a local girl. He returned to Edo (today's Tokyo) and asked for permission to marry the girl, but met with opposition from his father, who was back in Edo by that time. Running away from home, Tomizo set out for Osaka to meet the girl, but was unable to reach there and ended up spending four years training himself at a temple.

When he turned 20, Tomizo returned to Edo as his father had



stopped disowning him. He learnt that his father was in dispute over the land of their house with the farmer living next door who had formerly been a gambler. His father won a lawsuit on the use of the land, but this did not deter the farmer from behaving badly, and the neighbor even threatened a sneak attack.

Tomizo's father again appealed for legal help, but partly due to the fact that he was regarded as a troublemaker by government officials, his assertion of the farmer's wrongdoing was not recognized. Tomizo's father became completely crestfallen. Tomizo apparently decided to "avenge" on behalf of his father because he wanted to help him, leading to the killing of the farmer. However, Tomizo cited the following as a main reason: "If I helped my father, he might give his consent to my marriage."

Nobody may know the true reason. In later years, English minister-counselor Ernest Sato visited the island and heard the reason for exile from Tomizo. He allegedly gave it as "falling in love with a girl." However, Sato had the insight to recognize that it occurred because of "his filial wish to protect the honor of his family and of his father."

Tomizo made great contributions to elevating the cultural standard of Hachijojima, and he has been respected by the island locals to this day. And Tomizo did not forget his first love for the rest of his life, reportedly recording her as "wife in name only" in the family tree. Looking at the elegant, meticulously built stone wall, I felt I could sense Tomizo's feelings in it.

Many such historical anecdotes are found all over Hachijojima. It is a good idea to trek the island for its historical interest, or to take part in an array of outdoor activities such as fishing, diving and windsurfing. From March 21 to April 4, the "**Freesia Festival**" <sup>11</sup> will be held, with flowers no doubt blooming to form multi-colored carpets covering many places of the island. The island is not much touristy yet and off the beaten track, having a laid-back atmosphere that is becoming increasingly difficult to find on the mainland. Four flights and one overnight ferry trip are available to the island every day from Tokyo. I recommend a trip since it is a place you can visit quite easily.

Photo: Hachijo Town



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