

The tradition of facial tattoo in Taiwan: The case of the *Truku* people

Diane Johnson, Yi-Ju Tseng and Jia-Huey Her

Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

University of Waikato

Private Bag 3105, Hamilton, New Zealand

Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages, Taiwan

Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages, Department of English

900, Min-Tzu 1st Road, Sanming District Kaohsiung, 807

Taiwan

[dianej@waikato.ac.nz; misty@mail.wtuc.edu.tw]

Abstract

The art of body marking (tattoo), is a traditional pan-Austronesian tradition that has been lost or partially lost in many countries. In the case of the *Truku* tribe in north eastern Taiwan, the traditional practice of facial tattoo ceased around the 1930s and there are now only a few tribal elders (both male and female) who still bear the characteristic tribal markings. This paper reports on a research project in which a questionnaire was administered to 100 members of the *Si-La-An* sub-tribe of the *Truku* people. The findings indicate that although the respondents know that this was once a significant cultural practice within the tribe, detailed knowledge and understanding of the traditional customs and practices associated with facial tattoo is inconsistent and opinions about the value of continuing the custom vary considerably.



Figure 1: *Nainai - Atayal Facial Tattoo*¹

Introduction

Historical accounts of Taiwan indicate that indigenous people had been living in the country for some 8000 years before major Han Chinese immigration began in the 17th century (Blust, 1999). Although there is some question about the origins of the indigenous tribes in Taiwan, they are largely recognised as Austronesian, with ethnic links to the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Madagascar and Oceania (Bird, Hope & Taylor, 2004; Hill, Soares & Mormina, 2007). Using a combination of DNA, radio carbon and computer simulations, a team of researchers at Victoria University in New Zealand have calculated that Austronesian-speaking people left Taiwan around 5 thousand years ago, travelling to the Philippines, Indonesia, and islands such as Papua New Guinea and reaching parts of Polynesia around 2.5 thousand years ago and New Zealand round 7 hundred years ago (Harrington, 2005).

There are currently 14 different indigenous tribes recognised by the Executive Yuan (the executive ethnic council) in Taiwan - *Ami*, *Atayal*, *Bunun*, *Kavalan*, *Paiwan*, *Puyuma*, *Rukai*, *Saisiyat*, *Tao*, *Thao*, *Tsou*, *Truku*, *Sakizaya*, and *Sediq*. A further eleven groups identify themselves as independent tribes but remain unrecognised by the Executive Yuan - *Babuza*, *Basay*, *Hoanya*, *Ketagalan*, *Luilang*, *Pazeh/Kaxabu*, *Popora*, *Qauqaut*, *Siraya*, *Taokas*, *Trobiawan*. Each tribe has its own geographical territory and each has a range of unique customs and ceremonies.

The indigenous people who participated in the study reported in this paper are members of a sub-group of the *Truku* people (太魯閣族), who are sometimes also referred to as *Taroko* people. This tribe was officially recognized by the Executive Yuan on January 15th 2004. Prior to this, they were regarded as members of the larger *Atayal* tribal grouping, along with the *Sediq* people. The *Truku* people are mostly concentrated in the area around Hualien and the Taroko Gorge in the north east of Taiwan. It is estimated that there are 24,000 people who have ethnic ties to the *Truku* tribe. *Figure 2* below shows the most populous areas of *Truku* inhabitation in Taiwan.

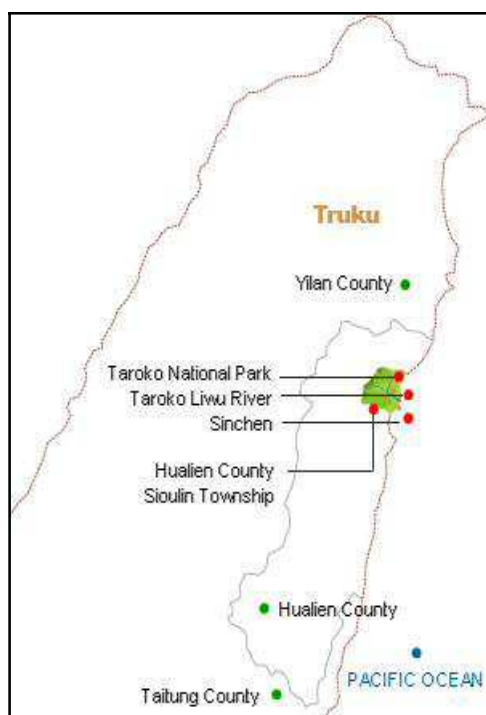


Figure 2: Truku Tribal Population Distribution²

A brief history of facial tattoo in Taiwan

According to the Council of Aboriginal Affairs in Taiwan, the origin of tattooing can be traced back to about 1,400 years ago. At least seven of Taiwan's indigenous tribes - *Atayal*, *Truku*, *Saisiyat*, *Paiwan*, *Rukai*, *Puyuma* and *Tsou* - practised some form of tattooing. However, it appears that *Atayal*, *Truku* and *Saisiyat* were the only tribes who applied designs to the face. While *Saisiyat* women were tattooed only on the forehead, *Atayal* and *Truku* also tattooed the cheeks and the chin. In common with other Austronesian groups (e.g., indigenous Tahitians and Māori in Aotearoa/New Zealand), the indigenous people of Taiwan used tattoos for different purposes in the case of different tribes. They were a form of adornment or beautification and a way of signalling status, spirituality, maturity, chastity, geographical origins and genealogy.

Traditionally, the *Atayal* and the *Truku* inhabited Taiwan's mountainous regions (up to heights of 2,400 meters above sea level) and made a living by hunting and weaving. For female members of the tribe, tattoos symbolized chastity, weaving ability and duty. Generally, girls received their first tattoo at around five years of age. At around the age of fifteen, they received a second tattoo as a symbol of adulthood. In addition to being a sign of a female's weaving skills, the second tattoo was also seen as means of testing chastity, the belief being that a promiscuous female would not survive the tattooing process. In order to earn the right to be tattooed, and therefore also the right to take a partner and create their own family, males had to prove their expertise in hunting and in battle. Men who were particularly successful at headhunting were given special tattoos on their chests, feet and foreheads. For both males and females, tattoos were a symbol of the transition from childhood into adulthood. The traditional markings were an indication of recognition that the individual was now ready to take on full adult responsibilities (Liao, 1998).

Tattooing generally took place in winter or in autumn. Tattoo artists (many of whom were women) used jute threads to draw patterns on the face of the person being tattooed. The marks were then etched on the face using iron needles, the wounds being coloured by the application of ashes. The tattoos applied to the faces of women were much more complex than those applied to the faces of men. Women generally had a straight line on their foreheads and chins, with two U-shaped lines on their cheeks. Men, on the other hand, generally had just one straight line each on their forehead and chin (Xu, 1989). According to an *Atayal* tattoo expert, Tien Kuei-Shih, the more complex the pattern, the more responsibilities one had in society (Tien, 1997).

Tattooing and the *Truku* people

For the *Truku* people, tattoos provided a connection between the past, the present and the future. They often evoked past tales and events through reference to the spirit of an ancestor. Tribes people who were tattooed were believed to be protected by the spirits of the ancestors, whereas those without tattoos were vulnerable to early death. For females, the absence of tattoos was also believed to have a negative impact on fertility and thus, in the long term, on family fortune (Lee, 1999).

Tattoos were considered to be of particular importance at the time of death, when tribal ancestors would be waiting to greet and guide their kinsmen and women to the other side of the Rainbow Bridge (彩虹橋) that had to be crossed in order to enter the after world. The form, shape and symbols contained within the tattoos allowed the

ancestors to recognise members of specific families and to link the recently arrived with their closest family ancestors (Ma, 1999). Only those who were tattooed were believed to be able to cross the bridge.

Facial tattooing and the period of Japanese occupation

Up to the point at which Taiwan was colonised by Japan (1895), the practice of facial tattoo was a regular part of tribal custom (Zheng, 1995). The Japanese, however, viewed the practice as barbaric and introduced a policy forbidding tribes to practice this traditional art form. For this reason, during the period between 1895 and 1945, the practice decreased. Although it was still practised in secret for some time, it had virtually ceased by around 1930 (Lee, 1982). Some attempts were made to resist the prohibition of tribal customs by the Japanese rulers of the country. One particularly famous incident of rebellion was the Wu-She Event (霧社事件) of October 1930 when a number of Atayal kinsmen mounted a revolt against the destruction of their land, their property and their tribal customs and practices, including the art of facial tattoo. The revolt was led by Mona Rudao, the son of a famous *Atayal* chief, who committed suicide in December 1930 to avoid being captured alive by those who were hunting him and the other rebels. Although the rebellion was relatively short-lived, it has great significance for the indigenous people of Taiwan. Rudao is revered as a champion of indigenous rights (Liao, 1998). Statues commemorating and celebrating him can be found in many villages and towns in the *Atayal* tribal area.

Recording facial tattoos

A member of the *Atayal* tribe, Tien Kuei-Shih, has begun to make a photographic record of the remaining examples of this lost art in Taiwan. Tien Kuei-Shih remarks "Since most of those with tattoos are very old, it is urgent to preserve their life histories as living records of tribal culture. I have interviewed all the tattooed men, the youngest one being 83 years old and the oldest 103. When I finished my first study in 1993, there were still 82 old men with facial tattoos, but now there are only 34" (Lee, 2003, ¶7). Tien strongly believes that his work will make a contribution to handing down one aspect of tribal heritage. He sees the patterns and traditions of facial tattoo as being linked to other tribal arts (with symbolic patterns), such as textiles, wall-decorations, woodcarvings and ritual dances. Of all of the tribal arts, he considers facial tattoo the most difficult to preserve and he is urging the Taiwanese Government to support the work of the *Atayal* people and other indigenous groups to help to create tribal archives before the traditional practices have gone forever (Tien, 1997).

The research project

The overall aim of the research project reported on here was to explore the extent to which, in a small sub-group of the *Truku* tribe, the *Si-La-An*, the traditions and practices of facial tattoo are still understood and valued. A subsidiary aim of the project was to explore whether there was any prospect of this art form being revived in some way in the future as an expression of tribal identity.

Research methodology

The research was conducted through a questionnaire written in Chinese (because not all members of the tribe speak the tribal language). The 24 questions in the questionnaire were divided into three different categories: a) personal information about respondents, b) understanding of the custom of facial tattooing and c) possible future of this custom. Piloting of the questionnaire involved a small group of

respondents, some of whom were members of other indigenous tribes. On the basis of their feedback, amendments were made to eliminate errors and ambiguities in some of the questions. One hundred (100) copies of the questionnaire were then distributed to members of the *Si-La-An* sub-group of the *Truku* tribe in Hualien County. Ninety-nine (99) completed questionnaires were returned.

Data analysis

Participant profiles

As shown in *Figure 3*, ninety-nine completed questionnaires were returned, with 53% of respondents being male and 47% female.

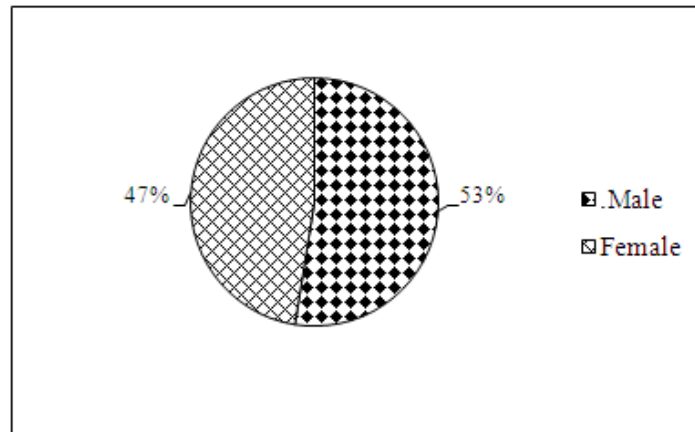


Figure 3: Gender of respondents

The age ranges of respondents are recorded in *Figure 4*. The majority were between the ages of 16 and 20 or over the age of 51. This is perhaps because many people between the ages of 21 and 50 leave the tribal area to live in cities in search of work opportunities.

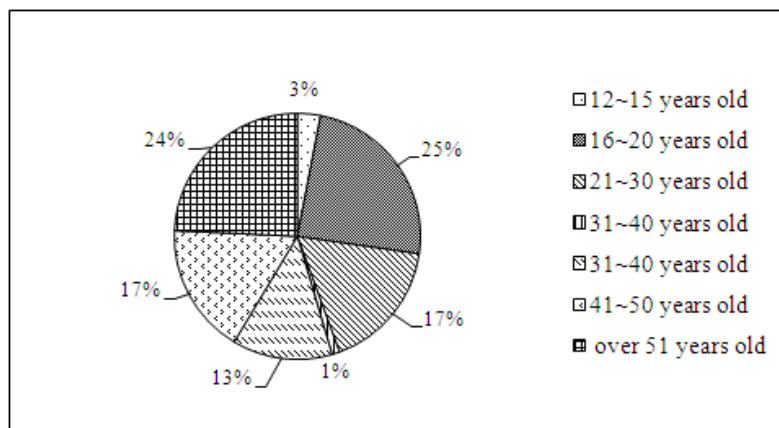


Figure 4: Age range of respondents

Figure 5 shows the respondents' employment status. The majority of respondents were students, white-collar workers or retired.

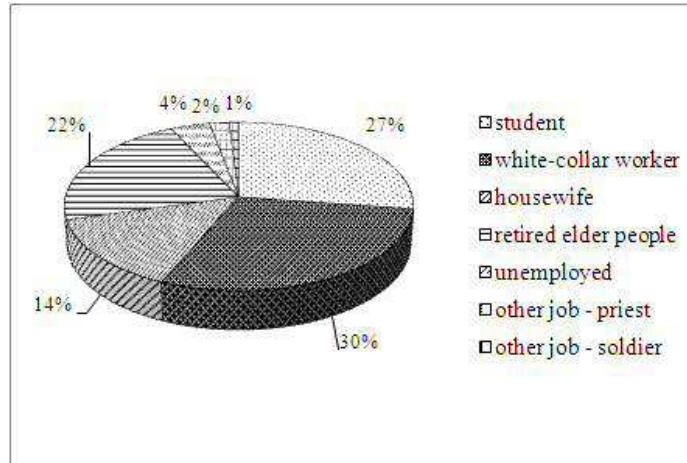


Figure 5: Respondents' employment status

Participants were asked to indicate whether or not they considered themselves to be indigenous. Only 3% did not.

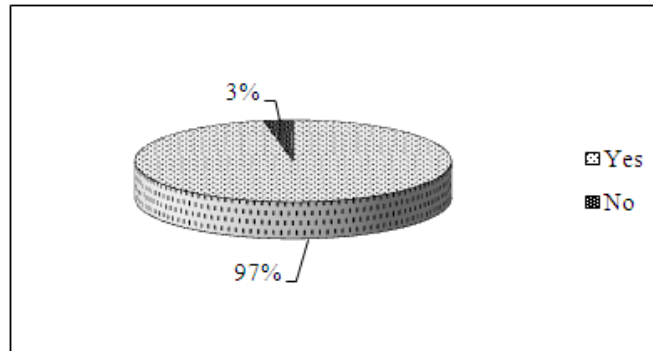


Figure 6: Indigenous or not?

In Hualien County, the inhabitants are almost exclusively indigenous. However, they are not necessarily members of the *Truku* tribe. There are also members of other tribes, such as *Amis* and *Atayal*, who live in the same area. As shown in *Figure 7*, the majority of respondents were from the *Truku* tribe.

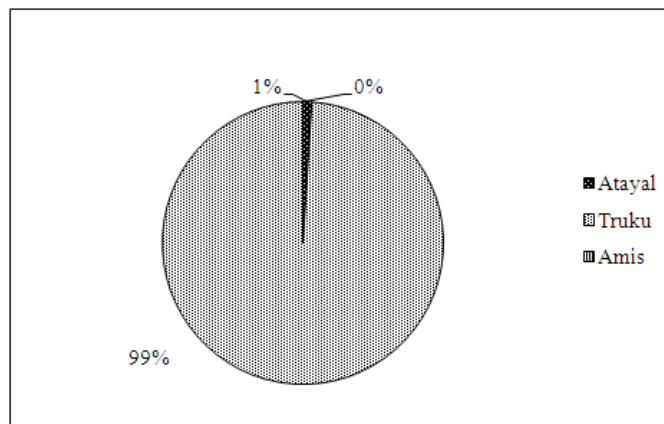


Figure 7: Tribal affiliation of respondents

Knowledge of the traditional practice of facial tattoo

Participants were asked if they had heard about the traditional practice of facial tattoo. Only 5% indicated that they had not. Of the 95% who had heard of this traditional practice, most of their information had come from family members, from friends or from contexts and events where tribal history was passed down orally. The respondents' sources of information about facial tattoo are outlined in *Figure 8*.

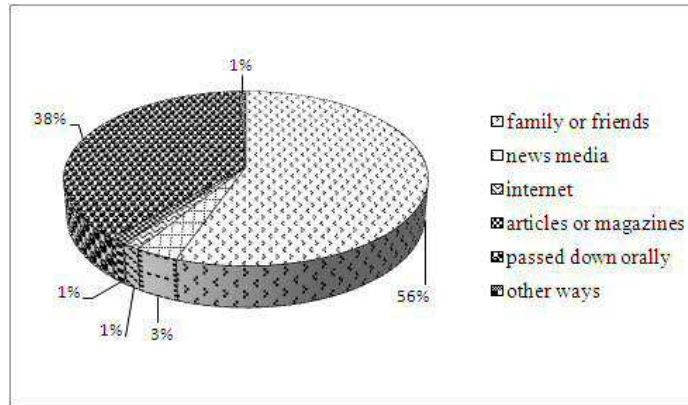


Figure 8: Sources of information about the practice of facial tattoo

Participants were also asked if they had ever talked about, or shared information about the tribal tradition of facial tattoo with friends who were not indigenous. The majority (82%) indicated that they had.

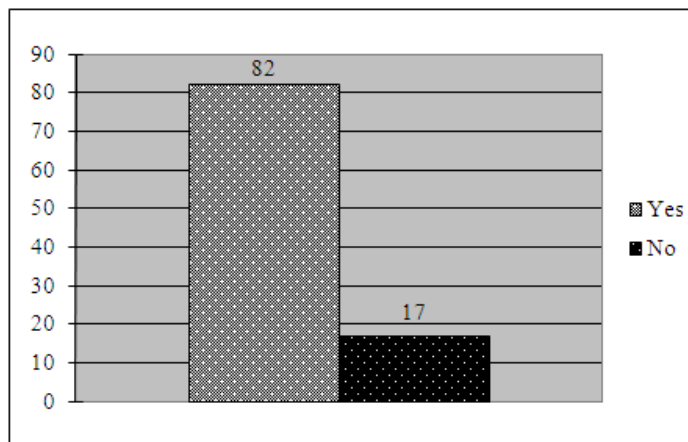


Figure 9: Sharing information about facial tattooing with non-indigenous friends

Respondents who had shared information about facial tattoo traditions were asked which aspects of the tradition they had shared. They were given four options of which more than one could be selected: *history*; *form*; *meaning*; *legend relating to origin of the practice*. A large number (82%) reported that they had recounted the legend relating to the origin of the practice of facial tattoo (see *Figure 10*).

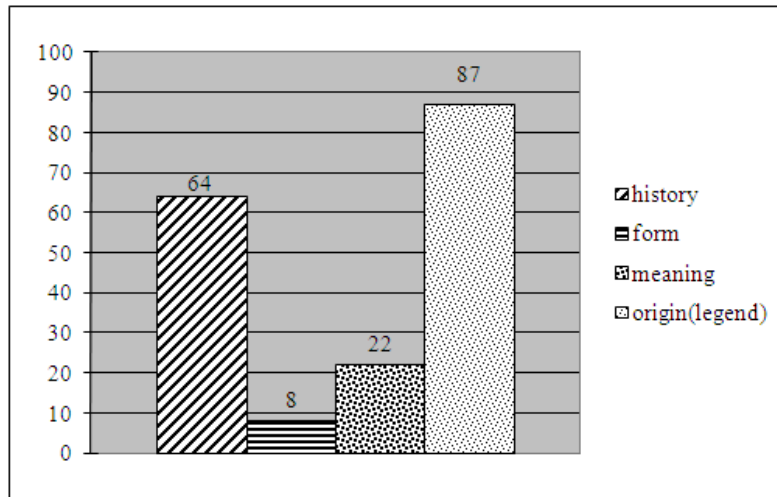


Figure 10: Aspects of the tradition of facial tattoo shared with non-indigenous friends

As indicated in *Figures 9 and 10*, there is a desire to share aspects of the custom of facial tattooing with non-indigenous friends. However, knowledge of the details surrounding the practice appears in some cases to be uncertain and/or inaccurate. An example of this can be found in the data presented in *Figure 11*. When asked about the age at which a tattoo was first applied, most replied that it was between the ages of 11 and 20. In fact, girls were often given their first tattoo around the age of five and so the expected response was 1 – 10. Only 1% of participants responded correctly. The majority (58%) selected 11 – 20, with over one third selecting ‘don’t know’.

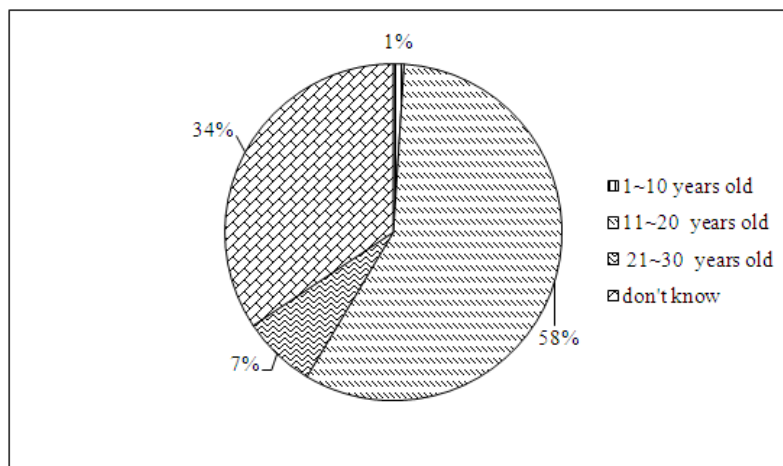


Figure 11: Age when first tattooed

Participants were asked about the qualities that were required by a man to make him eligible for tattooing. They could select from: *divination*; *hunting*, and *I don't know*. While most respondents (83%) responded correctly that a male had to show prowess in hunting, 12% did not know and a further 5% selected divination. This is shown in *Figure 12* below.

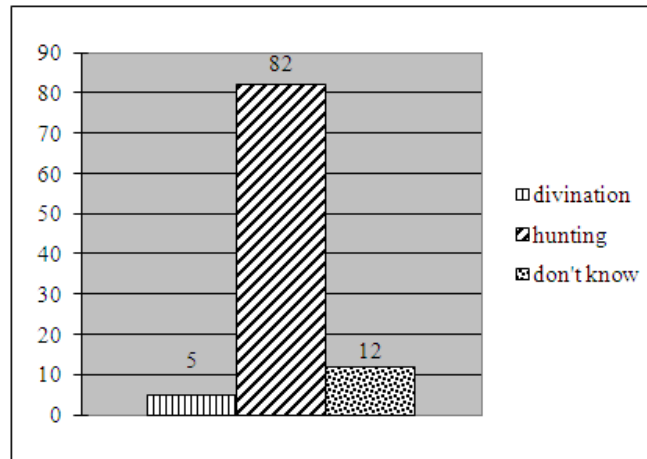


Figure 12: Qualities required of males in order to be eligible for tattooing

As indicated in *Figure 13*, the majority of respondents (81%) indicated that females needed to be able to demonstrate weaving skills in order to be eligible for tattooing. However, 3% selected ‘can give birth’, 2% selected ‘can do housework’ and 14% selected ‘I don’t know’.

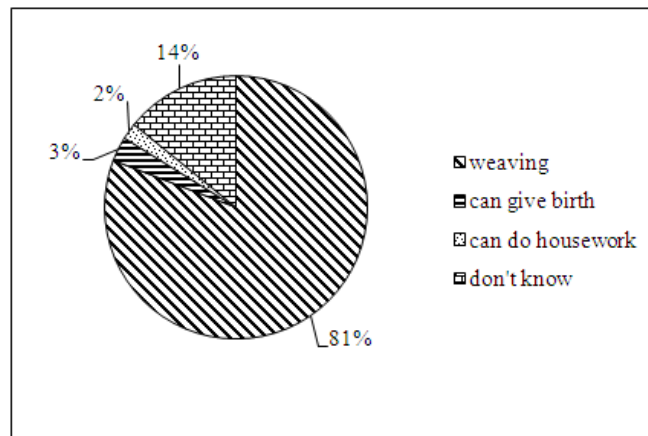


Figure 13: Qualities required of females in order to be eligible for tattooing

As indicated in *Figure 14*, 19% of respondents were unaware that male and female tattoos were different.

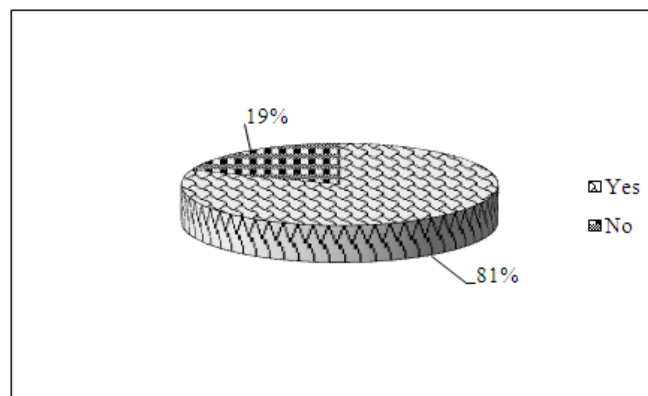


Figure 14: Male and female tattoos – same (Yes) or different (No)?

The data reported in *Figure 15* indicate beliefs of informants about the symbolism of tattoos in the case of males. As this was a multiple response question, that total amounts to over 100%. Just over half (54%) of the respondents were aware that tattoos in the case of males symbolized adulthood and just over 40% (41%) were aware that they also symbolized bravery.

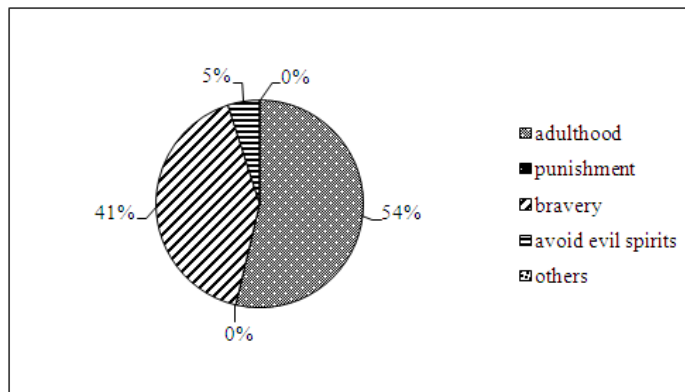


Figure 15: Symbolism of tattoos for males

The data reported in *Figure 16* indicate the beliefs of respondents about the symbolism of tattoos in the case of females. While over half (56%) reported believing that tattoos symbolized adulthood (56%), far fewer (12%) reported that they symbolized chastity.

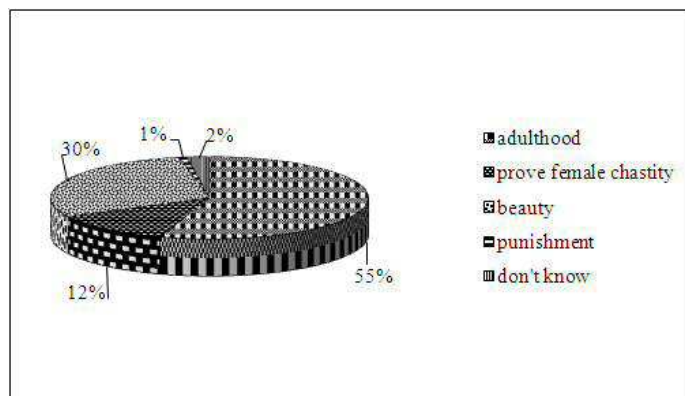


Figure 16: Symbolism of tattoos for females

Views about tattooing and the future

The final questions in the survey focussed on participants' beliefs about communicating information about tattooing to future generations and about the future of this traditional practice. As indicated in *Figure 17*, the majority of the respondents indicated that they believed that information about the practice of tattooing should be communicated to future generations.

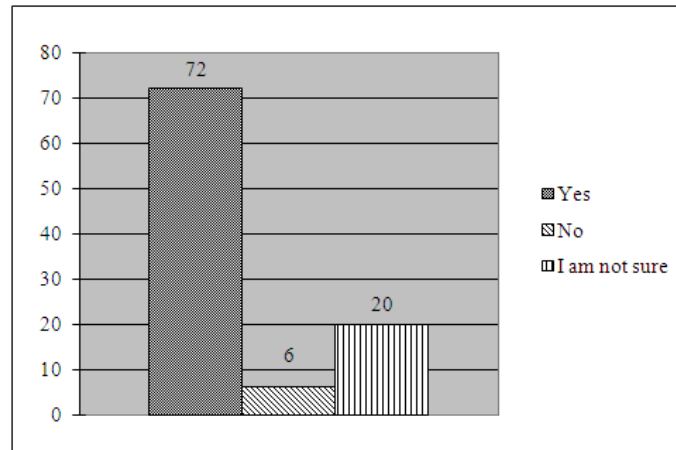


Figure 17: *Should information about facial tattooing be communicated to future generations?*

Participants were asked to indicate which aspects of tattooing they believed to be of positive value. They could select one or more from three listed attributes: *beauty (very pretty)*, *individual symbolism*, *symbolism of group unity*. As indicated in *Figure 18*, just under one third of respondents indicated that they believed that tattoos were of positive value in relation to beauty (31%), approximately one third indicated that they believed them to be of positive value in relation to individual symbolism (33%) and just over one third indicated that they believed them to be of positive value as symbols of group unity (36%).

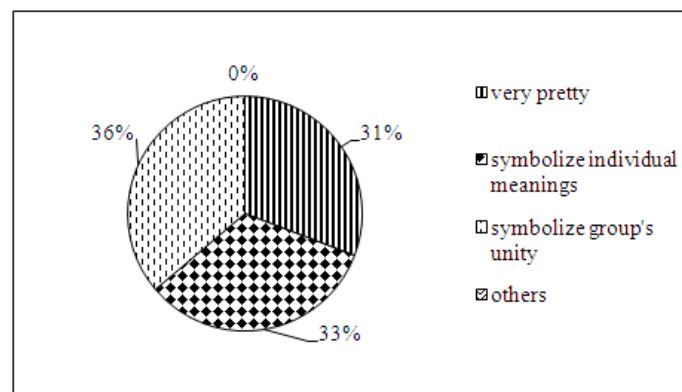


Figure 18: *Respondents' views about the value of particular aspects of tattoos*

Participants were also asked whether they believed that there were negative aspects to tattooing. As indicated in *Figure 19*, only 3% reported believing that there were no drawbacks associated with tattooing. A considerable number reported believing that it was harmful to the skin (42%), and over one quarter believed that it could be the occasion of ridicule by others (26%) and/ or that it was ugly (29%).

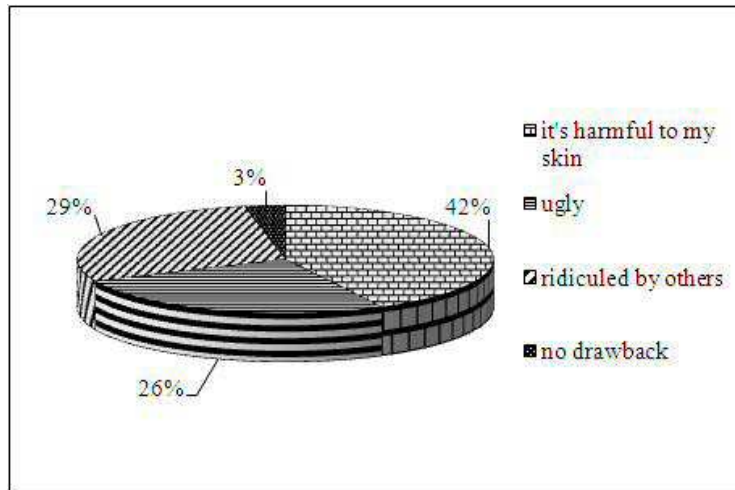


Figure 19: Potential disadvantages of tattooing

When asked their opinion about the disappearance of the custom of facial tattoo (see *Figure 20*), only a small number were unconcerned about it (15). A considerable number expressed regret in that it signalled to them that the culture was disappearing (62) and/or that it made it generally more difficult to pass the culture on to future generations (60). On a personal level, almost three quarters of respondents indicated that it had a negative impact on their own desire to cherish their culture (78) and/ or to pass it on personally to others.

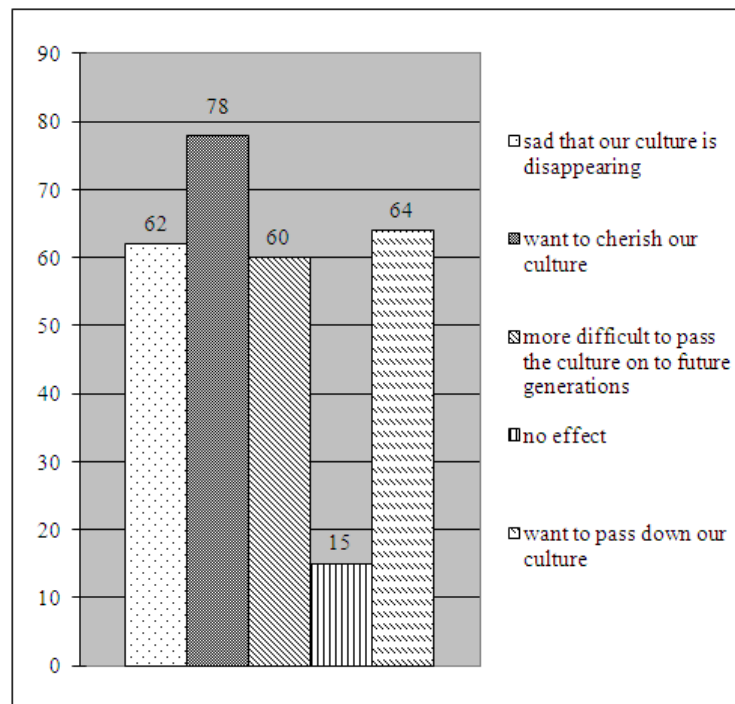


Figure 20: The impact of the disappearance of facial tattoos

A final open question asked whether participants believed that the custom of facial tattoo should be continued and why. Only 18% indicated that they believed that it should. Of those who believed that it should not or indicated that they were uncertain, the majority indicated that they nevertheless believed that passing on information about the practice to future generations was important.

Conclusions

The custom of facial tattoo is a significant aspect of tribal identity for the *Truku* people. The tattoos are reminders of ancient customs and practices, of legends and heroes and a way of tribal life that is slowly disappearing. It is clear that while the majority of respondents to this questionnaire were not in favour of continuing the practice of facial tattooing, they were in favour of ensuring that information about the practice was communicated to future generations and many of them had discussed it with non-indigenous friends. Even so, their own knowledge and understanding of the practice of facial tattooing appears to be patchy. The tools and skills of traditional tattooing have largely disappeared and much information about it has already been lost to many (Liu, 2004). This makes it all the more important that Tien Kuei-Shih's photographic records and his careful documentation of the tradition is supported.

A final note

On Tuesday, January 22nd 2008, the *Taipei Times* reported that a young *Atayal* couple had had their faces tattooed in the traditional manner. In an interview with reporters, Shayun Foudu observed that facial tattooing was a cultural tradition of the *Atayal* tribe and that she felt very proud to have a tattoo on her face and to have finally done something to preserve her tribal tradition of facial tattoo ("Atayal Woman", 2008). It is interesting to speculate on whether the actions of this young couple will mark the beginning of a resurgence of the practice of facial tattoo in indigenous tribes in Taiwan.



*Figure 21: Young Atayal couple*³

Endnotes

1. Photograph reproduced with kind permission of Patrick Cowsill who refers to the custom of Japanese colonialists of “[severing] sections of . . . faces with tattoos” (see *Atayaal Facial Tattoo*: <http://patrick-cowsill.blogspot.com/2006/12/atayal-facial-tattoo.html>)
2. Source: The Digital Museum of Taiwanese Indigenous Peoples. Available <http://www.dmtip.gov.tw/Eng/Truku.htm>
3. From “Atayal Woman” (2008).

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