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The Fashion for Small-Patterned Textiles in Nineteenth-Century Japan

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This paper discusses the Japanese fashion for small-patterned designs during the late Edo and Meiji periods, focusing on three textiles: patterned silks (*mon-ori*), stencil-resist dyeing (*komon*) and double ikat (*kasuri*). After closing its borders for more than two hundred years (1639–1868) during the Edo period, Japan opened its doors to the world in the nineteenth century. During its self-imposed isolation, only the port of Nagasaki remained open to Dutch and Chinese ships. Here, Japan traded copper for huge quantities of textiles, including Chinese silks, Indian cottons, and Dutch and English wools.

These imported European textiles included patterned silks and printed fabrics produced with technologies developed during the European Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, including the Jacquard mechanism and roller printing. Thus, the Japanese trend for small patterns was stimulated in part by Western technologies.

The first of these three textiles is the patterned silks woven on drawlooms or looms with Jacquard mechanisms. In order to trace the European influence on Edo- and Meiji-period textiles, the author surveyed the details of thousands of small swatches pasted into early nineteenth-century sample books, which are preserved in a textile company in Kyoto. Fortunately these sample books have dated inscriptions on their front pages. Among the Japanese silk swatches, I found small samples of European patterned silks, including lampas, damask, and velvet, although in small quantities. The imported patterned silks were studied by Japanese weavers for their weave structures and designs and subsequently incorporated into Japanese patterned woven textiles, primarily for use in *obi* sashes.

Knowledge of the sophistication and high quality of foreign technologies might be one of the reasons that weavers in Kyoto were inspired to go to Lyon, France, as soon as the national borders were reopened to the world. In 1872, only five years after the Meiji Restoration, three weavers from the Kyoto's Nishijin weaving district went to Lyon to study the Jacquard mechanism.

Since the principle behind drawlooms and looms with a Jacquard mechanism is the same, traditional Japanese designs continued to be woven even after the adoption of the new technologies; however, there were also numerous changes. One such new development is the small-patterned woven designs produced by using a warp pattern step (*decoupure*) of one (which means that every individual warp can be raised independently in making the pattern.) These designs were made possible through the use of graph paper, which arrived together with the Jacquard mechanism. The first Jacquard mechanisms

made in Kyoto were based on the Lyon model (1877), but they were made from wood and had only 100 or 200 needles. Though these mechanisms had fewer needles than their French counterparts, they were perfectly adequate for creating minute pattern motifs with design repeats as short as 20 mm in the warp direction. In obi sashes, the new mechanism's influence is evident in designs with sudden pattern changes—made possible by the newly gained ability to easily replace one set of punch cards with another of a different design midway through the weaving process (fig.1, *all figures placed at end*).

This trend for tiny patterns can also be seen in dyed textiles. In addition to woven silks, Edo-period swatch books contain European textiles with tiny dotted patterns (fig.2). These were printed using wooden rollers with pins or with copper plates. The minuteness of these tiny points likely influenced the aesthetics of Japanese *komon* (literally “small pattern”) stencil-resist designs, although the technique was different.

The Japanese stencils used for *komon* dyeing were usually made with three sheets of *washi* paper that were pasted together with persimmon juice (*kakishibu*) and smoked to waterproof them. The pattern cutter would then carve the designs with one of three types of handmade knives. The *komon* designs discussed here were made by rotating a knife with a semicircular blade to open small holes in the paper. Rice paste would then be applied through the stencil onto a 12-meter kimono-length of white fabric that had been pasted onto a long, flat wooden surface. After being removed from the board, the cloth could either be brushed with a dye or soaked in an indigo vat. Brush dyeing, however, could be done with only limited colors: dyeing with purple, for example, was impossible with this process.

Some of the best-known extant examples of *komon* paste-resist textiles are found in seventeenth-century garments of the samurai, or warrior class.¹ One characteristic of these early pieces is the irregular spacing of the tiny pattern dots. From the mid-Edo period, *komon* patterns were used for official samurai outfits called *kamishimo*, made of ramie, whose patterns were often strictly regulated by the clan families. By the late Edo period, in the early nineteenth century, townsmen also began to wear *komon*-dyed garments as they grew wealthier.

After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, in which the ruling warrior elite and their strictly regulated textile patterns were banished, *komon* dyeing became most favored for women's kimonos of silk or ramie. The dyeing process also changed with the introduction of chemical dyes into Japan from Europe and the invention of *iro-nori*, a new kind of paste mixed with chemical dyes, which was used for the background color.

Iro-nori was applied to the fabric after the plain stencil-resisted paste had dried completely. Then sawdust was placed on top and the whole fabric was steamed to fix the dye. The wide range of shades and colors made possible by these chemical dyes led to changes in women's preferences. Another change seen in the late Edo and early Meiji period is smaller and smaller dots on traditional paste-resist stencil-dyed textiles. The influence of imported European printed fabrics with dotted patterns as well as the

¹ The extant examples of rice-paste-resist stencil dyeing is found in a *dōfuku* coat of Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542-1616), a *dōfuku* of Toyotomi Hidoyoshi (1536-98) and a ramie summer kimono worn by Uesugi Kenshin (1530-78).

increasing technical sophistication of the cutters and dyers led to the creation of a new density of up to 110 holes per square centimeter for such motifs as the traditional *same-komon*, or “sharkskin pattern” (fig.3). The visual potential of komon patterns for women’s kimono also expanded through their use as partial design elements within larger design compositions.

The third textile evidencing the trends for small patterns can be seen in double ikat, or *kasuri*.² Japan’s approximately three-hundred-year history of using this technique is short in comparison to that of India and other ikat producing areas. The temple of Hōryū-ji in Nara contains a seventh-century silk warp ikat³ of Central Asian origin, which entered Japan together with the culture of Buddhism; however, the highly advanced techniques seen in this earliest ikat cloth must have proved too difficult for seventh-century Japanese weavers, and the technique remained unused in Japan for the next thousand years.

The stimulus for kasuri production in Japan came from the textiles of the Ryūkyū archipelago (present-day Okinawa), located between Southeast Asia and Japan, which began to produce double kasuri from the fourteenth or fifteenth century. These kasuri textiles reached Japan in the early seventeenth century as tribute payments to the southern Japanese domain of Satsuma. Whether by way of Satsuma or through direct and independent contact with Ryūkyū, the northern province of Echigo, present-day Niigata Prefecture, somehow came into contact with these kasuri textiles through the well-established marine ties formed through its rice shipping routes. As a result, in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, Echigo, a rice-producing region with an important port on the Japan Sea, began producing double kasuri patterns for its summer ramie kimono. This was the first ramie kasuri in the main islands.

The Edo-period fashion for kasuri is evident in *ukiyo*e woodblock prints of the late eighteenth century, especially in those of Utamaro (1753–1806) and Kiyonaga (1752–1815), who repeatedly include black kimonos with precisely rendered double kasuri patterns in their prints and paintings (fig.4). The trend for black⁴ kasuri patterns accented with red undergarments is depicted as an expression of the *iki* (chic) aesthetic, prevalent in Edo. Thanks to these artists’ precise renderings, we have been able to analyze the composition of kasuri design. Though there has been inconsistency among scholars as to the origin of this kasuri, I suggest that the black kasuri textiles depicted in *ukiyo*e prints were produced in Echigo. This opinion is based on evidence found in

² In this article, the term “kasuri” is used to refer to textiles with patterns dyed onto individual threads. Japan has an earlier tradition, called *shimekiri*, of space dyeing warps to create wide horizontal bands or blocks of ground color, which can be seen men’s kosode (*noshime*), and Noh costumes. Space dyeing has also been used in braided obi of court costume since the Heian period.

³ The date of Japan’s oldest ikat, found in the temple of Hōryū-ji, Nara, is frequently dated Asuka period (A.D. 552–644). It is important to note, however, that the temple of Hōryū-ji was not built until 601; consequently, this textile should be dated seventh century. This point is especially important when comparing this textile to the depiction of kasuri found in one of the Ajanta Caves in India, which dates to the sixth century.

⁴ The most common method of producing the color black in Echigo was a two-step process: an initial dye bath containing a mixture of charcoal soot from pine wood and ground soybeans, followed by a subsequent over dyeing with indigo.

Edo-period offertory banners preserved in Tokamachi City Museum in Niigata Prefecture and in dated swatch books, especially those from the Tokamachi area (fig.5).

The *igeta*, or “well motif”—a kasuri cross pattern usually composed of two vertical and two horizontal lines—can be clearly traced back to Ryūkyū kasuri. In Echigo, however, the double lines found in Ryūkyū examples were gradually increased to form more detailed crosses. The *igeta* kasuri motifs depicted on black ramie kimono in ukiyoe prints frequently contain up to six lines in the warp direction and five in the weft, as seen in Utamaro’s 1793 depiction of the famous courtesan Takashimaya, who would have worn the highest quality ramie summer kimono available in her day. Most of the extant Edo-period black kasuri in Tokamachi have four lines in each direction—an interesting point, considering that four is the average number of lines found in *ukiyoe igeta* renditions.

With the Ryūkyū *igeta* motif as a starting point, Echigo producers developed their own double kasuri designs. Since Echigo had an earlier tradition of striped ramie cloth, they tended to treat kasuri-resisted threads in much the same way as stripes, interspersed alternately with background threads. This alternation of kasuri threads and ground-colored threads becomes a fundamental basis for the next generation of small-patterned kasuri (fig.6). By the early Meiji period, in the late nineteenth century, the technique of alternating kasuri and ground threads had been transmitted to other weaving areas resulting in the invention of various new kasuri production techniques (fig.7).

Between these double-kasuri crosses, Echigo producers also added motifs of simple weft kasuri. Here, too, can be seen the influence of Ryūkyū weft motifs formed by adjusting the position of each kasuri weft by hand from the selvages, a process that allowed for the creation of freeform motifs, such as birds, clouds or waves. In Echigo, however, these simple patterns were created with more calculated methods that removed the need to hand-shift each pick. The first method utilized bamboo measures (fig.8). A new device called a *koba jōgi*—a stack of thin boards with weft kasuri motifs painted on one side, used to mark off the areas to be tie-dyed—allowed for the creation of larger, clearer, and more pictorial designs (fig.9-10). These pictorial weft kasuri designs spread to other weaving regions by way of the Japan Sea and Inland Sea shipping routes (*Kitamaesen*) in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, sparking the production of new types of cotton kasuri along the coast. It was at this point that the two most distinctive characteristics of Japanese kasuri—the alternate arrangement of kasuri warps with ground colored warps and the use of pictorial weft designs—became firmly established.

During the Meiji period, huge demand for kimono cloth stimulated the development of a wide variety of innovative kasuri techniques. The kasuri patterns formed with these techniques frequently feature tiny double-kasuri crosses and always include an alternate arrangement of kasuri and ground threads in the warps as well as in the wefts. The making of dotted pictorial kasuri formed of tiny crosses was facilitated by the graph paper that was introduced into Japan from Lyon, France, together with the Jacquard mechanism.

Additionally, the importation of Western machines to spin cotton and reel silk⁵ were also important factors in the development of minute double kasuri during the Meiji period. Further discussion of the innovative techniques for producing minute kasuri patterns can be found in my 2002 *Textile Museum Journal* article.

Conclusion

The development of original production techniques by Japanese weavers was frequently the result of the incorporation and combination of new mechanisms and methods from abroad with traditional, local methods. The boom in small patterns in the late Edo and Meiji periods is no exception: had Japanese craftsmen not been influenced by Western technology, these minute patterns would probably never have been realized.

During the transitional period surrounding the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan's changing social situation led to a rapid increase in textile demand. The new Western technologies imported to meet these productivity needs led to changes in traditional techniques but also gave Japanese craftsmen a heightened concern for accuracy. While the Western world was interested in the irregular, asymmetrical, and non-scientific qualities of Japanese objects exhibited in world expositions, Japanese craftsmen were opening their eyes to the mechanical world. This phenomenon may be one factor behind the trend for small patterns made with highly precise methods. At the same time, the breakdown of the feudal system allowed commoners an unprecedented freedom of dress and led to new demands for *osharegi*, stylish kimonos worn on the town by the fashion-conscious women of the new bourgeoisie. The smart, somewhat masculine small-patterned textiles created in this environment express the tastes of both their producers and their consumers.

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For illustrations, see below.

⁵ The silk reeling machine was introduced to Japan in Meiji 15 (1882).

Fig.1. Small patterned weaves with sudden change from a sample book dated Meiji 27, 1881. These fabrics for obi sashes were woven on looms with Jacquard mechanisms.
 Weave: patterned satin, lisere. Ground: 5-end satin with two picks in the same shed.
 Pattern: effect of short floats by one of the two foundation wefts.
 Distance of repeats: 18mm. Step: one foundation warp.

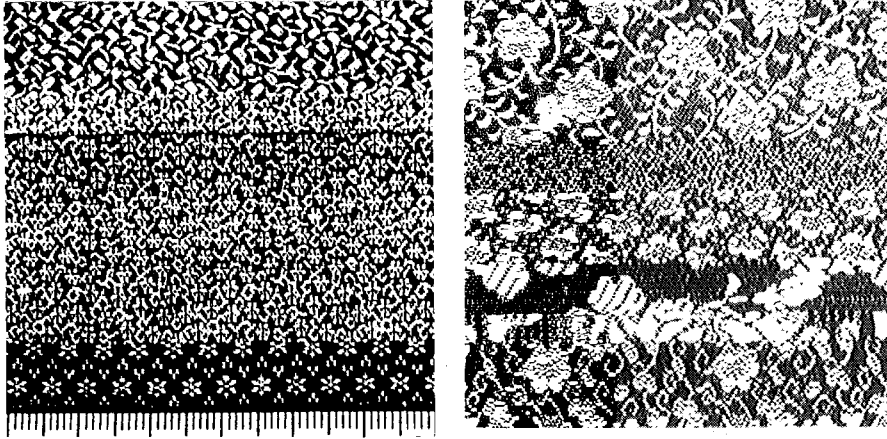
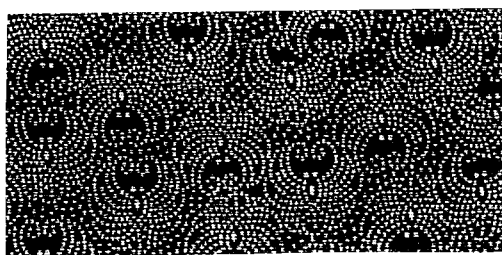
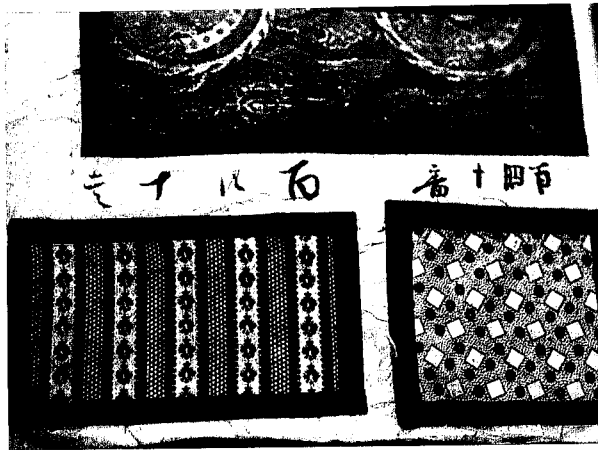
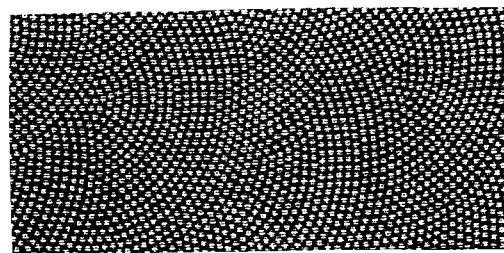


Fig.2. European prints found in the sample book dated 1829.



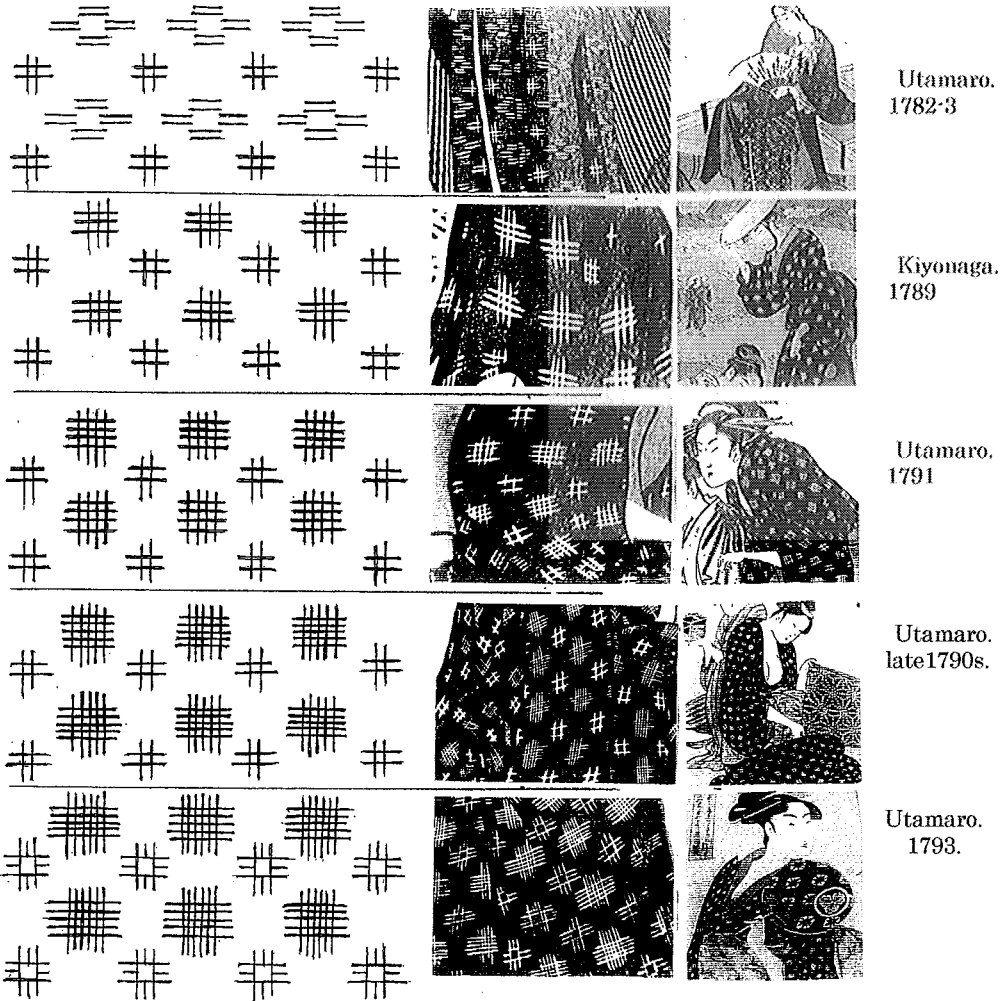
Butterfly



Same-komon (Sharkskin)

Fig. 3. *Komon* tiny dot patterns, which became smaller with the influence of European prints.

Fig.4. Kasuri patterned summer black kimono depicted on Ukiyoe wood block prints from the end of the eighteenth century. Though based on the Ryukyu *igeta* motif, Echigo increased the number of warp and weft kasuri.



From the book of "Ohbei Shūzō Ukiyoe Shūsei Zaigai Hihō," (Ukiyoe Prints in Western Collections) Gakushū Kenkyūsha. 1972.

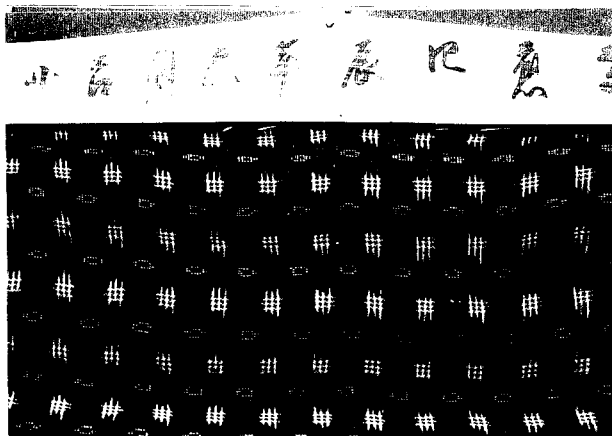
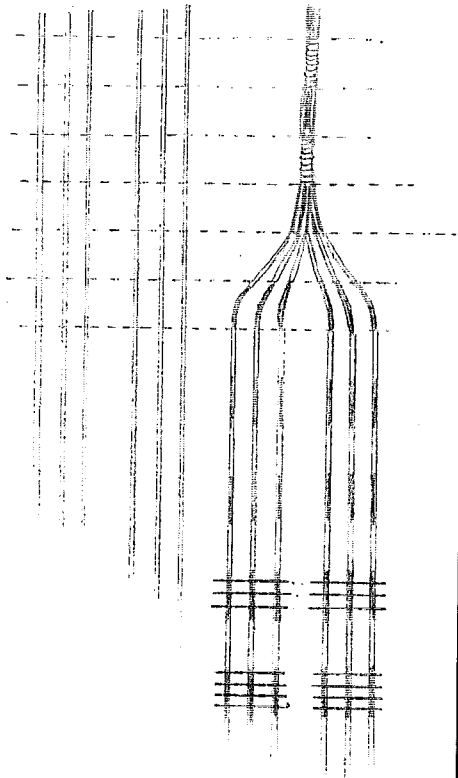


Fig.5. Black kasuri cloth resembling kasuri kimono in Ukiyoe prints. This offertory banner, dated 1868, was woven in Tokamachi and is now preserved in the Tokamachi City Museum.

Fig.6. The Echigo region has a long tradition of stripes on plain weave ramie. Stripe warps are arranged alternately with ground-colored warps. Kasuri patterns are created in a similar manner but have the visual difference of breaks in the stripes, caused by the resist dyeing.



Offertory banner of double kasuri.
Dated 1832. Tokamachi City Museum.

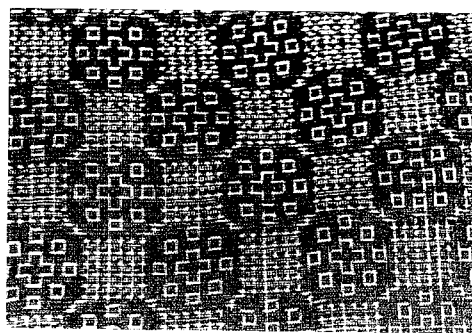
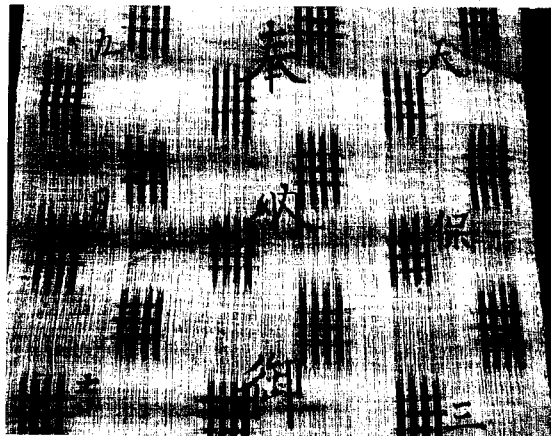


Fig.7. Hand-tied Oshima kasuri from the early Meiji period (ca.1870s), created by the alternation of kasuri threads and ground colored threads.

Fig.8. Prototype for pictorial weft kasuri. Simple bamboo sticks were used to mark a bundle of threads.



Fig.9. The *koba jogi*, used for creating pictorial weft kasuri. The design is painted on stacked boards.

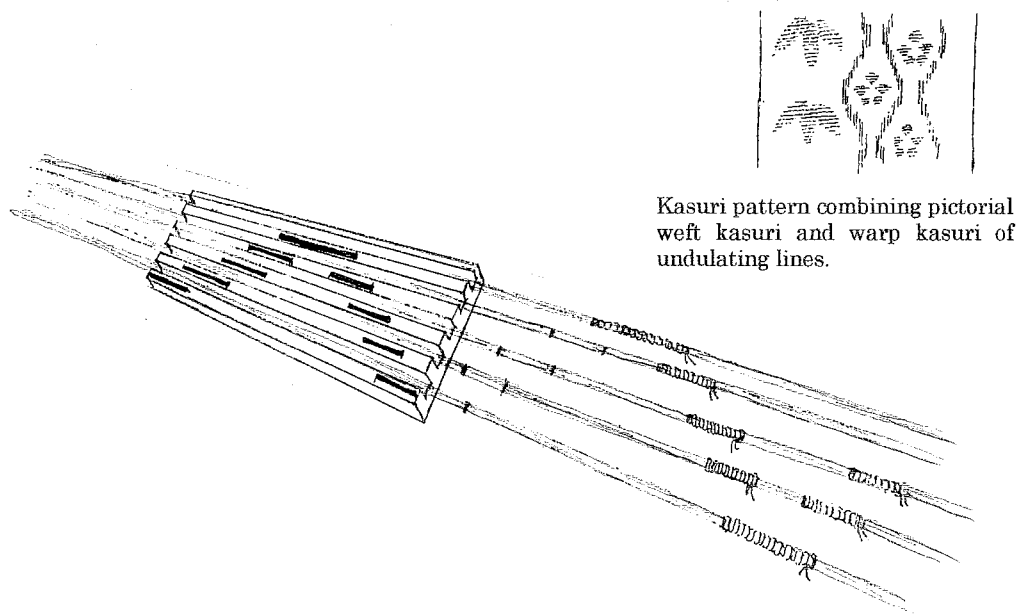
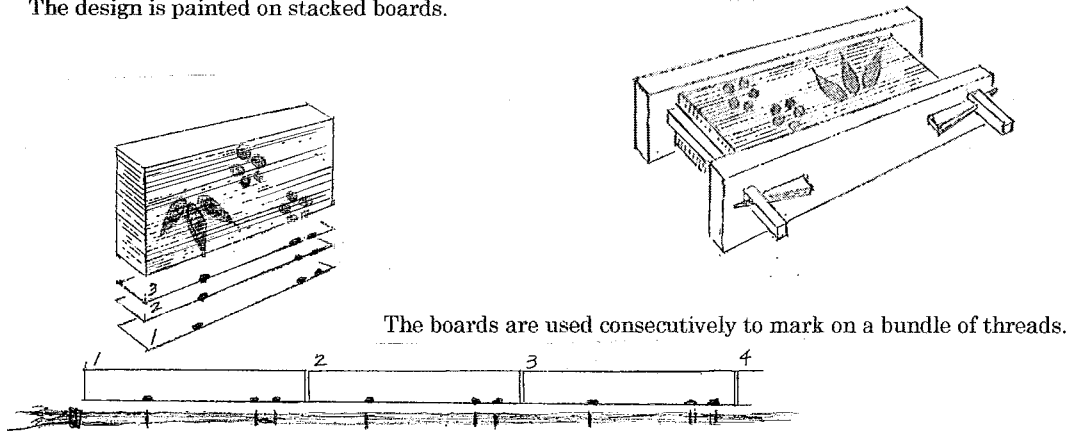


Fig.10. The *mizo jogi*, used for warp kasuri. The grooved board is slid along bundles of warp threads in each groove in order to mark the warp kasuri pattern of undulating lines.