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## **Arimatsu to Africa: Shibori Textiles Developed for African Trade in 1948–49**

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Shibori is a traditional Japanese textile term now widely used to classify a variety of patterns created on cloth by plucking, stitching, folding and then tightly knotting, binding, or clamping to compress and selectively resist dye penetration. The resulting patterns record the memory on cloth of the processes it sustained. Reading the resist marks on the cloth, shibori artisans can recreate the process or interpret various patterns.

For the Textile Society of America's Fifteenth Biennial Symposium in 2016 I organized a session with papers contributed by Françoise Cousin, Annie Ringuedé, and Ana Lisa Hedstrom and an exhibition titled "Arimatsu to Africa—examining shibori trade, techniques, and patterns," which I curated in collaboration with Hiroshi Murase, a traditional artisan turned shibori producer and community leader, who was unable to attend the symposium.

Joining me in Savannah were Ana Lisa Hedstrom and Annie Ringuedé. Ana Lisa is an internationally renowned American textile artist and contemporary interpreter and teacher of traditional shibori techniques. Her talk was titled "Ingenious and Practical: Parallels in the production of Arimatsu trade cloth and contemporary artists' textiles." Annie is a social anthropologist and urban planner from France, who amid extensive work on development and humanitarian projects in North Africa and West Africa became fascinated by the rich weaving and cloth-dyeing traditions in those regions, especially in Guinea. She shared a presentation on "West African Indigo Textiles under Influences, Case-studies: the Fouta-Jallon wrapper & the Mauritanian *melhafa*." In addition, Françoise Cousin, retired curator of textiles at the musée du quai Branly in Paris and scholar, researcher, and author, was not able to attend the symposium but submitted a paper, "Indigo and resist-dyed textiles in Central and West Africa."

### **Historical roots of shibori in Japan**

Starting in the early 1600s a vibrant Japanese shibori tradition developed in the area around Arimatsu, a newly settled village along the Tokaido, the Eastern Sea Road travelled frequently by feudal lords paying their allegiance to the shogunate government in the new capital of Edo (later renamed Tokyo) and by commoners making pilgrimage to the great Atsuta and Ise Shrines. The majority of shibori patterned cloth was dyed with indigo which was readily accessible and suitable for local bast fiber and later cotton cloth made into clothing such as *yukata*, summer kimono, and gift items such as *tenugui*, an all-purpose bandana-like item. The towns of Arimatsu and Narumi have become synonymous with shibori cottage industry, and guilds of shibori producers continued as cooperatives into modern days and contributed to the economy of local communities.

This paper examines the correspondences and crosscurrents of shibori techniques, designs, and materials between Japan and Africa, as revealed in a group of textile samples from 1948–49 for export to Africa, which I was surprised to come across in a dye studio in Arimatsu where they had been stored and forgotten for over fifty years.

Records of Arimatsu textile cooperatives show that Arimatsu merchants made a brief attempt in 1936 to produce and market shibori fabric for South Africa and Ghana. Their efforts were interrupted by Japan's invasion of China followed by World War II. The ensuing wartime shortage of materials, shrinking demands for nonessential textile items, and the postwar devastation of the country's economy affected the traditional craft production of shibori. As with numerous other basic commodities cotton fabric had been under stringent government control. During the war all Japanese citizens were obliged to donate anything made of metal or wood for military efforts, including shibori tools and equipment. With traditional shibori cottage industry at the brink of economic collapse right after the war, the government released the cotton quota so that the Arimatsu artisans could produce shibori to capture the opportunity to export presented by the Gerber Goldschmidt Group, an export company with offices in Europe, the U.S., South Africa, and Japan. We think the cloth was intended for the resource-rich Belgian Congo or South Africa but have not yet located confirming records.

Another factor that made this brief boom in production possible was the low floating value of the Japanese yen against foreign currency, which lasted until 1949, when the world powers decided to stabilize Japan's currency conversion rate at 360 yen to \$1. The brief boom saved Arimatsu's traditional shibori craft tradition from near extinction.

During 1948–49 nearly a million yards of shibori were produced on broadcloth, mostly blue and white, some with red, yellow, or green, in large bold designs specifically to appeal to African people's tastes and specifications. There was a great deal of creative product development at the time; some of the designs look Japanese and others are totally African. It was a challenge to mass produce shibori efficiently on broadcloth as all cloths dyed in Arimatsu for the domestic market were in units of *tan*, which is about 15" wide and 13 yards long.



*PLATE 1: I found these photos at the Arimatsu Shibori Industry Association. Specialists identified the location as Nigeria, possibly between the 1960s and 1980s. They illustrate the popularity of indigo-dyed shibori textiles among African women. These images belong to the Arimatsu Shibori Industry Association. All the other images in this paper belong to me.*

## Resist-dyed textile traditions in Africa

Among all the textiles made and used in Africa, those that are resist dyed occupy a unique place. They show great diversity of cloths, dyes, ethnic influences, and, above all, the inventiveness and creativity of the artisans, both men and women, which has produced a wealth of abstract and figurative designs and patterns. The earliest examples of resist-dyed textiles in Africa go back to the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. They were found while excavating a funerary cave in the Bandiagara cliffs, which belongs to the Tellem culture in Mali. While some processes, colors, and patterns have been repeated throughout the centuries, others have evolved. Early caravan trade, trading posts on the coast and in the hinterland, importations through Indo-Arab trade by way of Egypt and Sudan, and contemporary world globalization have influenced the changing aesthetic and fashion trends of African textile production. Investigation of the development of resist-dyed textiles in regions affected by colonial trade as well as introduction of more recent world market influences reveals cross pollination of material, techniques, and design that result in spectacularly African style.



*PLATE 2: Another photograph I found at the Arimatsu Shibori Cooperative. Specialists identified the location as Nigeria, possibly between the 1960s and 80s. It demonstrates the popularity of indigo-dyed shibori textiles in Africa and shows extensive use of hand stitching for resist.*

Natural indigo was the primary textile dye in West Africa until chemical dyes became more prevalent. For example, severe droughts in Mauritania in the 1970s decimated indigo plants, and cloth-dyers thus switched to synthetic dyes and ventured into non-traditional motifs to produce thin, multicolored tied and dyed cotton veils. Dyers, in West Africa mostly women, work either with narrow strips of hand-woven cotton sewn

together or on wider and thinner cotton damask called *bazin*, woven in European and, more recently, Asian factories. The resist is achieved through knotting or stitching. The nature of the two types of textiles leads to different forms of pattern organization. There are two major resist media in Africa; one is cassava paste-resist and the other is shaped-resist, which, like Japanese shibori, is achieved through knotting or stitching.

In West and Central Africa, the indigo wrappers and other pieces of clothing are for daily use. Some of the most amazing ones, Yoruba and Igbo textiles in Nigeria and Bamoun or Bamileke textiles in Cameroun, are used exclusively for ceremonial purposes. Patterns on these textiles demonstrate awareness of aesthetic traditions and express the artisans' conceptions of the world and its social organization. In addition to this widespread craftsmanship inherited from the past, European industrial textiles found African markets for printed cotton, such as the Dutch Wax prints. Such textiles became totally "African in design" and were adopted in many parts of the continent.

### **Arimatsu shibori samples for export to Africa**

The inventiveness rooted in folk traditions is evidenced in the Japanese shibori artisans and in the multi-dimensional development of shaped-resist textiles in Africa. So, it is only natural that during the dire economic circumstances of post-World War II Japan, the artisans of Arimatsu rose to the occasion to create shibori to appeal to a market entirely foreign to them—transitioning from their traditional, narrow 15" width of cloth to 45" to 60" with large-scale patterning and unfamiliar bold color combinations.

In Plate 3, two different shibori cloths are cut into equal strips and alternately pieced and sewn to a full width of 49.4". One cloth was hand pleated and bound intermittently, then indigo dyed, creating dark and light bands. Another cloth was pleated and a narrow area intermittently folded, and two to three parallel lines were machine sewn lengthwise over the three layers and dyed in indigo. With two different patterned cloths, the artisan made a new dynamic composite pattern while mimicking the narrow strip weaving construction of typical African cloth.



PLATE 3: Arimatsu trade sample for Africa: Medium cotton, 49.5" wide, each strip is 3" wide, 2-5/8" when sewn. Gold stamp reads: 27649, 2 Yards, registered Design No 254224. In a circle - ..R..NTEED 100% POP... In the middle O.Z.

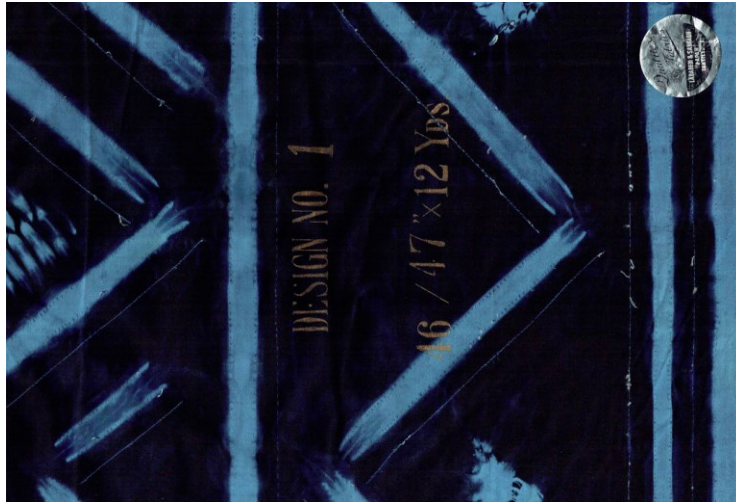


PLATE 4: *Arimatsu trade sample for Africa: 40.5" wide, heavy cotton satin to simulate a glossy, calendared African-style cloth. Gold stamp reads DESIGN 1; 16 x 47" x 12 Yds*

In the Plate 4 sample, a bold design was executed by hand and machine stitch resist. Light lines were created by sewing a folded bit of cloth, as in pin tucking, by sewing machine; and the entire cloth was dyed, possibly synthetic indigo was used. The inside of each sewn line was exposed to less oxygen therefore making it lighter against the dark ground.



PLATE 5: *Arimatsu trade sample for Africa: 40.5" wide, heavy cotton satin to effect calendared glossy African cloth.*

The design in the Plate 5 sample was executed by two types of bound resist, simple *tegumo* shibori and large-scale *miura* shibori; afterwards the cloth was dyed, possibly with synthetic indigo. The inside of each bound resisted area receives less oxygen therefore making light versus dark. Often, Japanese artisans used traditional techniques and patterns but enlarged them so much that on a broadcloth the result looked bold and exotic, thus more “African,” quite different from conventional Japanese shibori cloth. And enlarging shibori units meant taking less time to decorate large cloths.

Some of the African-export shibori samples I found in Arimatsu resemble traditional African ethnic textiles found in the past century. For example, many of them use cotton sateen broadcloth, which is similar to *bazin riche* or *bazin gros*, historically exported to Africa from European manufacturers. In addition, centuries-old indigo-dyed fabrics often produced calendared or polished surfaces with a glossy sheen favored by many native peoples.

The colors for export are predominantly blue and white but include colors not traditional in Japan—bright red, orange, yellow, and sometimes purple and green. Some shibori-dyed broadcloths were cut into strips and sewn back to mimic traditional African hand-woven strip cloth. The use of sewing machines to produce stitch-resist was a new feature in the Arimatsu shibori repertoire at that time where a large variety of laborious hand stitching was widely used.

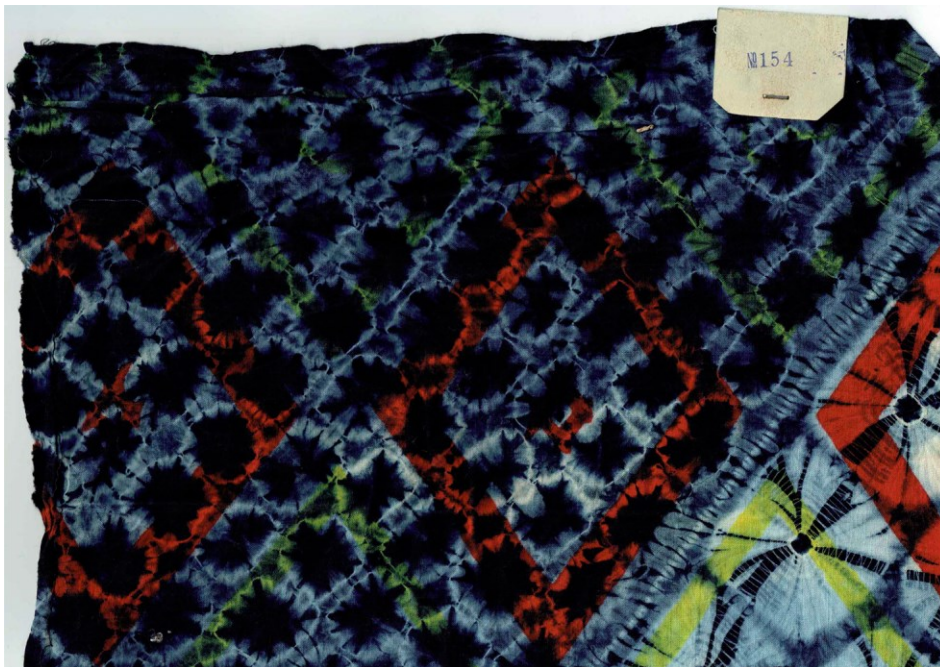


PLATE 6: Arimatsu trade sample for Africa: Medium cotton, 34.5" wide. Tag No. 154.

Another innovation was the extensive use of colorful prints onto which the blue and white shibori patterns were dyed. The cloth in Plate 6 was first printed by *Chusen-zome*. Rice paste was applied using a special paper stencil, layer after layer, creating a column of wet rice paste resist. Dyes were then poured from the top in red and yellow—a fast printing process with multiple colors. *Miura* shibori, *tegumo* shibori, and *nui* shibori were applied over the printed cloth and dyed in indigo.

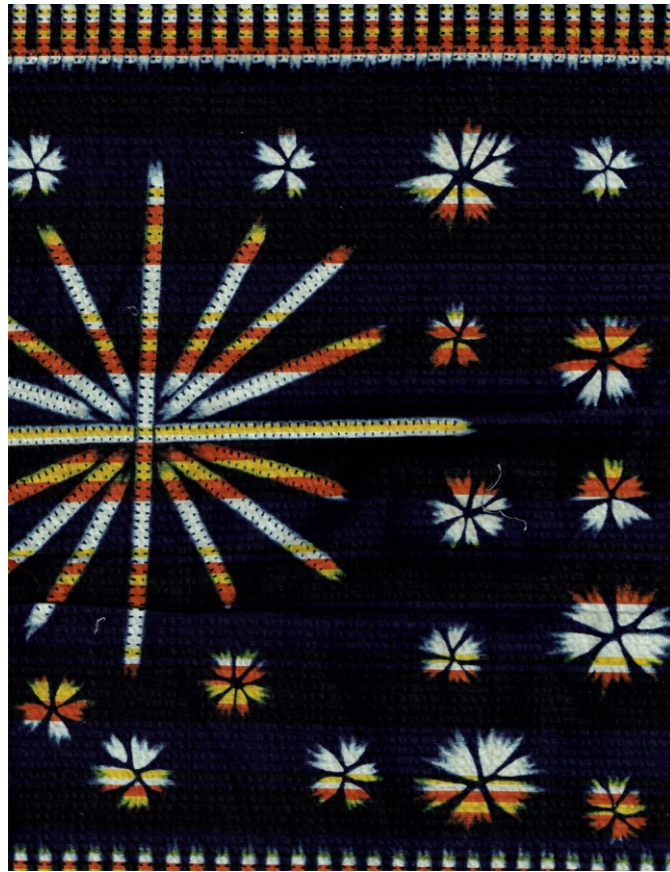


PLATE 7: Arimatsu trade sample for Africa: Medium cotton. 34.5cm wide. Lion label with CI trademark. Gold stamp reads, Superior Quality, Shibori Print, D/n HP423A, 48" X 3.75 Yds, Made in Japan. Red label with C. Itoh Co, Ltd. Itochu Corporation was founded in 1858, the second-largest Japanese trading company.

The sample in Plate 7 is called *itajime* shibori, board clamp-resist, or sometimes called *sekka* shibori, folded flower shibori. This sample was produced by Harisho Itajime Studio in Arimatsu. Owing to the popularity of this type of shibori amongst the African trade, large machines were designed and built to aid quantity production. This shibori technique was relatively easy to master, and shaping the cloth took less time; therefore the production cost was much less than with most other shibori techniques. Because of the lower cost the technique was even used to decorate under-kimonos and baby diapers; and it was more conducive to quantity production on broadcloth for export.

The cloth was first fan folded vertically; next the narrow folded cloth was repeatedly folded in an accordion-fold fashion into a series of triangles or rectangles, depending on the design. Finally the entire small folded cloth was sandwiched by a piece of wooden board at each end, clamped tightly and dyed in different colored synthetic dyes.





*PLATE 8: Arimatsu trade sample for Africa. Seersucker cotton, printed with stripes in red and yellow.*

The sample in Plate 8 is printed to resemble real shibori in texture as well as details; for example, the print simulates needle marks.

We are just beginning to explore this brief and fleeting historic period with its intensely creative production activities. The question of which patterns and techniques originated in Arimatsu and which in Africa is challenging. We must wonder whether some of the tie-resist and stitch-resist techniques we see on the shibori samples for African export may have subsequently influenced African artisans and been incorporated into the African design lexicon. At the same time, we can examine Arimatsu shibori to see if this detour by Japanese artisans into African markets influenced traditional Japanese folk shibori patterns.

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Internationally known textile scholar Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada is cofounder and president of the World Shibori Network and recipient of the 2016 George Hewitt Meyers Award from the George Washington University Museum Textile Museum for her lifetime achievements and exceptional contributions to the field of textile arts. Since 1992 she has co-chaired ten International Shibori Symposia (ISS) in nine different countries. She has curated numerous international exhibitions, edited and contributed to symposium proceedings, and conducted original research. Her

publications include *Shibori: The Inventive Art of Japanese Shaped-Resist Dyeing* (1983), *Kimono Inspiration: Art and Art to Wear in America* (1996), and *Memory on Cloth: Shibori Now* (2002). She has produced a series of three DVDs with Michel Garcia on natural dyeing with sustainable methods and an educational DVD with Andrew Galli, "Arimatsu Narumi Shibori: Celebrating 400 years of Artisans Design."