

Skidmore College Creative Matter

Master of Arts in Liberal Studies (MALS) Student
Scholarship

Academic Departments and Programs

8-31-2015

An Aesthetic of Resourcefulness: Japanese Folk Textiles from the Edo Period and Beyond

Mary E. Dolden Veale
Skidmore College

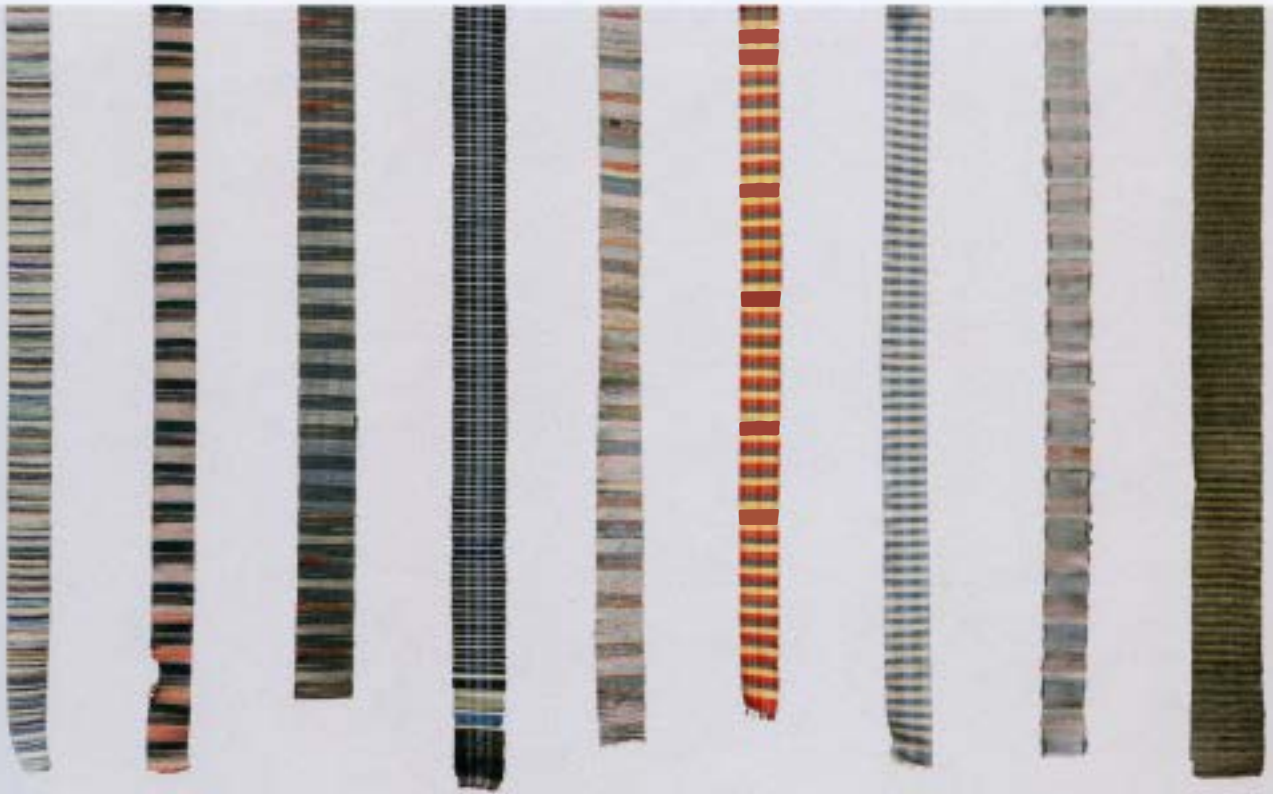
Follow this and additional works at: https://creativematter.skidmore.edu/mals_stu_schol

 Part of the [Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dolden Veale, Mary E., "An Aesthetic of Resourcefulness: Japanese Folk Textiles from the Edo Period and Beyond" (2015). *Master of Arts in Liberal Studies (MALS) Student Scholarship*. 111.
https://creativematter.skidmore.edu/mals_stu_schol/111

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Academic Departments and Programs at Creative Matter. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master of Arts in Liberal Studies (MALS) Student Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Creative Matter. For more information, please contact jluo@skidmore.edu.



AN AESTHETIC OF RESOURCEFULNESS

— *sakiori* —

Mary Dolden Veale

AN AESTHETIC OF RESOURCEFULNESS:
Japanese Folk Textiles from the Edo Period and Beyond:
Shifu, Sakiori and Boro

Skidmore College
June 2015

AN AESTHETIC OF RESOURCEFULNESS:
Japanese Folk Textiles from the Edo Period and Beyond:
Shifu, Sakiori and Boro

by
Mary E. Dolden Veale

Final Project submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

Skidmore College
June 2015
Advisors: Sangwook Lee, Claudia Mills

Abstract

This paper describes the place in time – the vernacular context in social, economic, cultural and geographic terms – in which specific utilitarian textiles -- *sakiori*, *shifu* and *boro* -- were produced in Japan from, roughly, the Edo (or Tokugawa), through the Meiji, Taisho, and Showa periods, or 1600 to the mid-1900's. *Sakiori*, *shifu* and *boro* clothing and household textiles incorporated re-purposed, recycled fibers and materials in response to conditions of poverty and harsh living conditions in rural Japan. These utilitarian artifacts affect particular aesthetic qualities, reflective of the conditions within which they were originally produced, and are resonant, to some contemporary audiences, in their simplicity and humility of a late 20th and early 21st century modernist sensibility.

Definitions of Japanese textile terms:

Shifu

Shifu is cloth woven using either recycled paper, which has been treated and spun to form the weft in fabric, or *washi* paper as the weft in weaving this fabric.

Sakiori

Sakiori is cloth made of torn cotton weft and hemp warp. Later the warp used was cotton. Pieces of cotton were torn into strips and then used as the weft in the weaving of this utilitarian cloth.

Boro

Boro is the term that defines household textiles and clothing that were sewn of rags and remnants of cast-off, Japanese clothing. They were often sewn and mended in layers to create warm and durable items for wearing and use by the northern, rural population of Japan.

Table of Contents

I. Introduction

- A. Background
- B. MALS Academic Structure

II. Thesis

- A. *Shifu*
- B. *Sakiori*
- C. *Boro*
- D. History, Aesthetics and Resonance

III. A Place in Time

- A. Geography
- B. Social, Political and Economic History
- C. Isabella Lucy Bird – A Valuable Observer of Japan in 1878
- D. Cotton and *Tabane* in Japan
- E. *Ai*: Indigo
- F. *Kitamaesen*

IV. Objects to Artifacts

- A. Weaving Technologies and Materials
- B. Plain Weave
- C. *Shifu*
- D. *Sakiori*
- E. *Boro*

V. Aesthetic Context

VI. Conclusion

An Aesthetic of Resourcefulness: Japanese Folk Textiles from The Edo Period and
Beyond; *Sakiori, Shifu and Boro*

I. Introduction

Background

In the autumn of 1993 I moved to Okinawa, Japan where I lived for the following three years. Prior to that, and based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I had worked as a writer, editor and consultant focusing on topics of design, art and architecture. During the mid-eighties, I made several trips to Tokyo as a design consultant to Japanese universities, but actually living in Okinawa was an entirely new and enlightening experience. Unbeknownst to me as a new arrival in 1993, Okinawa has an incredibly rich and deep heritage of art and craft, in many disciplines, but especially in textiles, and has, since at least the 14th century. Lucky me.

On one of my earlier trips to Tokyo around 1984, I found a small shop called Numo that specialized in textiles made in Japan. As I think back, that was a beginning of what became an intense, lifelong interest in Japanese

textiles. Many years later, and having lived abroad in very different places –



Figure 1 Sakiori
Obi early 20th c.

from California to Cairo, and Texas to Dubai – I decided to follow that interest in broader terms; in historical textiles, while studying for a Masters of Arts in Liberal Studies (MALS) degree at Skidmore College. The MALS program would allow me to focus on a program of study that I hoped would form the basis for writing a book on the international tradition of ragweaving, a fairly particular type of folk, or vernacular, textile that had evoked my personal interest.

*“Blessed are they who see beautiful things in humble places where
other people see nothing.” Camille Pissarro*

My goal in this thesis is to describe the place in time – the vernacular context in social, economic, cultural and geographic terms – in which specific utilitarian textiles -- *sakiori*, *shifu* and *boro* -- were produced in Japan from, roughly, the Edo (or Tokugawa), through the Meiji, Taisho, and Showa periods, or 1600 to the mid-1900's. *Sakiori*, *shifu* and *boro* clothing and household textiles incorporated re-purposed, recycled fibers and materials in response to conditions of poverty and harsh living conditions in rural Japan. These utilitarian artifacts affect particular aesthetic qualities, reflective of the conditions within which they were originally produced, and are resonant, to some contemporary audiences, in their simplicity and humility of a late 20th and early 21st century modernist sensibility.

Over the years, I have maintained my interest and love for antique and simply old textiles, textile design and what is variously termed “naïve,” “vernacular,” “country” or “folk” art or craft. Having been fortunate enough to have traveled fairly extensively, and

living abroad many years, I have seen, enjoyed and sought out folk textiles – quilts, rag weavings and *catalogne* weaving from North America and Scandinavia, *sakiori* and *shifu* weavings and the eccentric form of tattered and mended textile – *boro* – from Japan – are some examples. I am not a collector, but perhaps better described as a scholar in training.

There is an ephemeral quality to most of these utilitarian objects, and it is reflected in the changes in aesthetic and cultural value some these pieces have taken on over time. But many, if not most, have simply disappeared with time and neglect. Many, having been originally made for heavy household use or work clothing, were simply worn beyond redemption, never having been accorded the status of “worth saving.”

But over time, with changes in global design awareness and tastes, and worldwide access through technology, just as American quilts went from trunks and attics to art museums and art collectors’ storerooms in the latter half of the 20th century, the *sakiori*, the *boro* and some of the old rag rugs, indigenous household cloths, bedding and domestic carpets, even as fragments, have been studied, exhibited, valued and, at least to some extent, have lately become “collectible” to individuals and to institutions.



Figure 2 *Catalogne* blanket, Quebec, 20th c.

Especially in the case of the Japanese vernacular textiles I describe here, there is some measure of heroism in their preservation and collection. Their extreme utilitarian nature -- refashioned from original clothing into other forms of clothing, then taken apart and made into bedding or household cloth, including diapers and, simply re-made, *again*, into cleaning rags and potholders, or in the case of sakiori, actually torn into strips and rewoven -- makes their continued existence somewhat remarkable. How many, many other examples are simply gone, and are we seeing mainly "the best" of what was deemed, somehow, worthy of preservation?

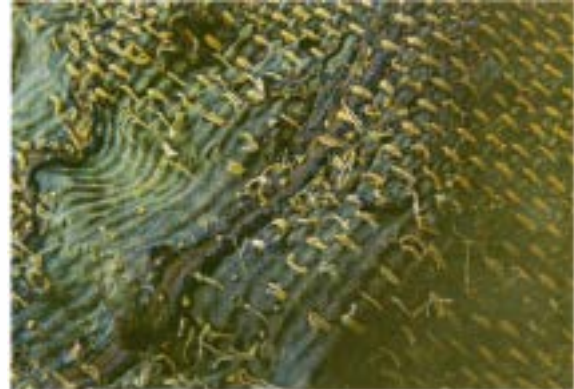


Figure 3 Detail of boro; sashiko stitching

The practice of making simply woven, inexpensive rugs out of recycled (or re-purposed) fabric strips continues in the present, in vast quantities, but now at an industrial, not domestic scale in China, especially. Even on a smaller, hand-woven scale, in the 1990's the daughters of the garbage men of Cairo, Egypt, were taught, in an effort to improve their lives and develop marketable skills, to weave simple rugs from the scraps of fabric gleaned (and cleaned) from the city's trash heaps. Right now, in India, the vibrant but fragile "hand loom" industry is in danger of becoming obsolete, the result of new legislation to promote and protect the commercial (or power loom) weaving industry.¹

In their 1977 book, *The Quilters: Women and Domestic Art*, Patricia Cooper and Norma Bradley Bufordⁱⁱ wrote an oral history based on their conversations and observations of the women of the Texas Panhandle and New Mexico who, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, grew up and raised families in essentially pioneer households under very tough circumstances, and – out of necessity of one sort or another – made quilts. I found that book in the Cambridge, Massachusetts Public Library sometime in the mid-1980's, and so began my ad hoc material culture studies. Unable to find a copy for myself until years later, I copied, by hand, many excerpts from that book. That exercise had a profound effect on my understanding of the value of recording not only the products of these women's way of life, but the importance of understanding how and why these examples of domestic artifacts are so clearly a reflection of time and culture, and, specifically for me, how the culture, circumstance and a certain humility, informs and shapes the creation – and our appreciation of, or perhaps attention to – what has been created. Ergo, my course, in sailing terms, in the study of material culture was set.

MALS Academic Structure

The focus of my Master of Liberal Arts research and study program at Skidmore was to learn to look closely and comparatively at specific examples of North American and Japanese folk textiles from the late 19th through the late-middle 20th century. Their commonality lies in the



Figure 4 Plain weaving;
cotton warp, rag weft



Figure 5 Indigo-dyed and natural rag yarns, Japan

basic techniques (ragweaving, tabby (or plain) weaving structure, mending and patchwork) and materials (recycled fabrics; especially cotton, natural yarns, and paper) from which they are made and what might, in material culture parlance, be termed a “provenance of context”—one of social, cultural and economic austerity

-- they share, to some extent. Their similarities and their differences will continue to be part of the discovery of my future research, including an exploration of their historical and geographical contexts from a global perspective.

The MALS coursework and seminars, research papers and interaction with liberal arts faculty steered me in unexpected directions – particularly in terms of socio-cultural history – in my academic pursuits over the course of three years of

Skidmore’s low-residency program. Under the supervision and guidance of my faculty



advisor, Sangwook Lee, professor of Fiber Arts at Skidmore, I also worked in a studio internship with a colleague of many years, and a master weaver, Claudia Mills.

Figure 6 Studio work; author's documentation

of Fiber Arts at Skidmore, I also worked in a studio internship with a colleague of many years, and a master weaver, Claudia Mills.

From the beginning studio sessions, in 2013, with Claudia at her summer studio in Westfield, New York, where she described and demonstrated the basics of weaving to me, the novice, I was able to apply and integrate, at least some of my research and knowledge of folk textiles – that of Japanese *sakiori* and of North American ragweaving – to an exercise in which I learned to weave and to gain a set of skills, however rudimentary. In so doing, those hours spent preparing fabric and yarns and thread and at the loom paralleled the learning of millions of people over centuries of human experience, the world over. And I was aware of that, as I began a part of what I had set out to accomplish at the outset of the Masters Program -- to look closely. And, I found my studio experience heightened by an awareness of the relevance of textiles as the *artifacts* of a particular time and place. As the historian Lauren Ulrich remarks, “The history of textiles is fundamentally a story about international commerce in goods and ideas. It is therefore a story about exploitation as well as exchange, social disruption as well as entrepreneurship, violence as well as aesthetics”ⁱⁱⁱ (Ulrich 414).

Anna Jackson, writing in her excellent book, “Japanese Country Textiles” in which she describes that collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, points out, “Although perceptions of the past or present cannot be overlooked, we need to be aware of how our understanding of material culture is formed. Meaning is never fixed; it is constantly shifting.”^{iv} (Jackson, 22.) In learning more about the discipline of material culture studies, as well as my own personal interest in and continuous study of the aesthetics of these particular objects, their “meaning” and perhaps their cultural value

has unfolded, and “shifted.” My studies have revealed a new, deeper knowledge – historical, physical, and in the case of cloth, tactile – of their provenance.

II. Thesis

In this thesis paper, I explore, looking evermore closely, several specific types of folk textiles that were created during a particular time and place in Japan's long history. These vernacular textiles – *sakiori*, *shifu* and *boro* – project, I believe, an aesthetic of resourcefulness and I will describe the cultural context that surrounded the people, women and men that made, and used, them. Often, upon examination, these sorts of humble, re-purposed textiles are described as telling a story by virtue of the fact that they incorporate within their structure elements of someone's past. This is certainly true within the research and writing on the tradition of American quilts. Generally, in these Japanese textile examples, it is only possible to describe an *anonymous* history without the possibility of attribution to an individual. The pieces that survive can, usually, only be tied to a historical period, a geographical region and sometimes a particular population, and the resources their makers had access to during those moments in their history, which is then revealed as a part of the "story" these textiles tell.

I will go into further detail in later sections, but for clarity here are brief, non-technical definitions of the three specific vernacular textiles that are the focus of this study:

Shifu



"*Shifu* is cloth

Figure 7 Japanese account book; mulberry paper

woven from

spun or twisted paper, mostly from special kinds of washi (Japanese handmade paper).

Some *shifu* is not made entirely of paper, but with a silk or cotton (or other) warp. For

centuries in Japan, *shifu* has been put to many uses, but primarily it has been sewn into clothing. Although its manufacture is labor-intensive, *shifu* has been a material cheaply had – you could weave it out of any old account book. As clothing, *shifu* keeps the wind out and warmth in. If it gets wet, the paper threads expand and also seal in the heat, very useful if you are, say, a fisherman. But this unaffected cloth can also be, like the paper from which it is made, gentle, humble and humane – and exquisitely beautiful.”

Sukey Hughes in a review of *A Song of Praise*, by Susan J. Byrd. (Byrd, cover)



Figure 8 *Shifu* fabric made from recycled account book that has been cut into strips, then spun into "yarn" (bottom right). The black "dots" in the fabric are from the ink used in the account books

Sakiori

Cotton reached northern Japan in the mid-19th century, by sea, in bundles of rags; it was then sold and sorted and washed and stitched into larger, usable swathes of pieced goods, (*sashiko* or *boro*) or torn to form thin strips of cloth used as rag yarn weft for the woven product, *sakiori*.

According to an expert in vernacular Japanese textiles, Stephen Szczepanek, and many others, *sakiori* is an

invented term: 'saku' in Japanese means 'to tear'; and 'oru', to weave. In earlier forms of *sakiori*, the warp would have been some type of bast fiber; hemp often, but wisteria, nettle and linden were also used; later, cotton yarns became the norm for *sakiori's* warp. Early *sakiori* were characteristically blue, fashioned from indigo-dyed, used *kimono*; cast offs from Japan's city dwellers.



Figure 9 *Sakiori* detail; cotton warp, cotton rag weft

Boro and Sashiko

"Not just rolls of soft cotton yardage, but any scraps of old cloth were coveted commodities to the poor folk of Tohoku [In Aomori, northern Japan]. The tiniest precious snippets were saved.

... They soaked worn-out old clothes in rice-rinsing water, never wasting the least scrap, stitching



Figure 10 *Boro* futon cover; date unknown

over ripped and ragged layers as thick as they could. Or else, they cut it into thin ribbons, which they re-loomed with hemp warps into distinctive nubby sakiori – literally “tear-woven” – cloth.”^{vi}(Boro, 3) The running stitch that was used, generally in a white cotton thread, is known as *sashiko*, and has itself become part of the lexicon that defines the particular properties of *boro*. (In an attempt for clarity: Some accounts appear to refer to *sashiko cloth* in a similar way to that which is now used to describe *boro*. But *sashiko stitching* appears not only as the holding stitch for fashioning whole pieces of cloth from recycled rags: it was also used, sometimes decoratively, but almost always with the aim towards strengthening areas of a garment or household textile where it was applied.)

History, Aesthetics and Resonance

In 1994 The San Francisco Art & Craft Museum mounted a major exhibition: *Riches from Rags: Saki-Ori & Other Recycling Traditions in Japanese Rural Clothing*. In the exhibition catalogue of the same name and authored by the textile experts Shin-Ichiro Yoshida and Dai Williams, the museum’s Director, J. Weldon Smith, introduces “What might be called “*an aesthetic of poverty*” [author’s emphasis] which produced unique beautiful fabrics and stunning costume designs.”^{vii} It was that aspect of poverty that I focused on for much of my initial material culture-based examination of the context in which these vernacular textiles were created. But perhaps in the “shift” that I have experienced -- less a shift than a deepening, more complex view -- is that which allows me to refer, more accurately, I think, to “*an aesthetic of resourcefulness*.”

In the catalogue accompanying the 2011 exhibit *Mottainai: The Fabric of Life; Lessons in Frugality from Traditional Japan* at Portland's Japanese Garden, Diane

Durston, the Garden's Curator of Culture, Art and Education wrote:

There is much the world can learn from Japanese culture. *Mottai* was originally a Buddhist term that referred to the "essence of things." Applied to everything in our physical universe, the word suggests that objects do not live in isolation but are intrinsically linked to one another. "*Nai*" is a negation, so "*mottainai*" is an expression of sadness for the disrespect that is shown when any living or nonliving entity is wasted. It is very much in line with today's efforts to promote the "3Rs": to reduce waste, reuse finite resources, and recycle what we can."^{viii} (Durston, 2)

And so, in this research paper, we will move, first, from Durston's, the author's and the readers' own contemporary viewpoints *back* into the places and histories that defined a culture and people who made these textiles. "Originally... recycling techniques were applied to cloth made from traditional bast fibers. Later these were replaced by cotton... However, the beauty inherent in both forms of commoners' clothing springs from the same source...the frugality of their life and the virtuosity of their labor." (Williams and Yoshida, 8.) And it is important to point out that this is an exploration of a scarcely documented group of textiles – that of the *common Japanese people* of the Edo and Meiji periods. In the Edo period at least 90% of the entire population were the rural poor – farmers, fisherman and woodsmen and their families who lived essentially in serfdom to the local lords or *daimyos*. "While the power and prestige of Japan's ruling and wealthy elite ensured that many of the textiles they used were carefully preserved, the belief that the textiles of the common people are worthy of preservation is a relatively recent phenomenon." Anna Jackson writes in describing the

country textile collection at the Victoria & Albert Museum. "As a result older examples rarely survive." (Jackson, 28.)

An article from *The International New York Times* on May 12, 2015 describes the recent archaeological discovery of the remains of a medieval hospital's cemetery for the indigent poor smack-dab in the center of Paris' Second Arrondissement: Pierre Vallal, deputy regional director of the French National Institute for Preventive Archaeology (INRA) was quoted: "The history of this hospital really bears witness to the whole history of France. This is a total history, not just the history of the rich and famous. This isn't Versailles."^{ix} I think it is valid, in the case of looking at these vernacular textiles to approach this part of the history of Japan in much the same way – as a total history – that is inclusionary and comprehensive.

In later sections and at the conclusion of this paper, I will look *more closely* at what perhaps is still, for me, the outstanding question. How and why my own embracing interest in *shifu*, *sakiori* and *boro* textiles, and the interest of others in the contemporary world, essentially "through Western eyes," continues to resonate. When I first came to this topic, it was with a somewhat naïve acceptance of these pieces of cloth being born out lives of dire poverty and dreadful life circumstance. As this research into the context in which they were created has continued, I still believe that the aspect of *resourcefulness* is an essential, and defining, characteristic. But I shall poke a gentle hole, I believe, in my own overly simplistic assumption of what they reveal. Despite the dearth of accurate documentation, the fragility and ephemeral nature of the textiles, and their very scarcity, "... it is still possible to reconstruct something of the textile's past. ...

cloth has a great capacity for communication. It is a significant site of personal, social and cultural identity, since indications of status, wealth, gender, religious beliefs and ideological values can be woven into its appearance." (Jackson, 28.) These folk textiles, perhaps quite significantly, appear initially to be anti-status, anti-identity, and anti-ideology. "Timeless", "simple", "anonymous" are descriptors often used. And yet, we are judging through a contemporary, Western lens. Their beauty is in fact "timeless" to me, and I believe they have more to reveal and we, now well into the first quarter of the 21st century, are looking at them differently, again. The "material" deserves another look.

III. A Place in Time

Geography and Geology

The archipelago of islands that is Japan resulted from a dramatic geological incident 18,000 to 30,000 years ago, when the landmass that was then a part of the eastern coast of the Asian mainland, in a violent, "mountain-building" rupture, was torn away. The resulting "arc-shaped, like a bow tightly strung" curve of islands lies, * (Williams and Yoshida, 9) variously and roughly on a northeast to southwest axis, 200 to 500 miles off the existing coasts of Russia, China and



Korea, is mountainous and volcanic in profile, and in personality. There have been at least four catastrophic earthquakes since the beginning of the 17th century. The entire country's identity as an island is important not only geographically, but also in terms of place; surrounded by the seas that separate it, literally, from the rest of the world.

The flats, now mostly cultivated fields, are "mere adjuncts to the mountains," (Williams and Yoshida, 10) and the landscape is notable for deep, heavily forested fissures of rock, steep and running rivers emptying, in one direction, into the interior flatlands, carrying alluvial soils; in another, flowing into the sea, often swollen by floodwaters, within coastlines of often dramatic heights rising from the Sea of Japan to the west and the Pacific Ocean to the east of the archipelago. Generally, the inland, or western, coast is subject to the cold currents and colder climate patterns emanating and crossing from Siberia, China and Korea; warmer currents buffet the eastern coast along the Pacific and the climate is wetter, and more humid. Okinawa's southernmost collection of islands is sub-tropical; Hokkaido, the large northernmost island experiences Siberian-strong winters.

'*Uruhonsu*' or Aomori, the north-facing region of Honshu (the main island of Japan), hemmed in by mountains and facing the Sea of Japan, is referred to as "*yukiguni*" or snow country. This is the region from which the traditional weaving of *sakiori* is most identified, though the making of *sakiori* textiles was certainly not exclusive to Aomori. It was along Japan's western coast, fronting the Inland Sea of Japan, at shipping ports established during the late 16th century, that the *kitamaesen* – 'floating



Figure 11 Detail; work coat with sakiore body and sashiko-stitched collar

marketplaces” stopped to sell and trade bundles of rags and old clothes gleaned from the cities, in effect ferrying cotton to places where it could not grow.

The history of *sakiore*, and *boro*, I believe, is linked, without question, to the widespread introduction of cotton to Japan’s urban society that

occurred, generally, during the Edo period and onward. Crucially, relative to these textiles’

development, the *kitamaesen* shipping routes along the Inland Sea coast and north brought used and discarded cloth north to the people living in remote fishing and mountain enclaves that had had, for generations, very little in the way of physical connection to any commodities, outsiders or other cultures. But the *Japanese* culture of weaving and clothing production “extends back to a time several hundreds and, perhaps, thousands of years before Christ.” (Williams and Yoshida, 11) The traditions of early bast weaving, including *shifu*, which specifically incorporates paper thread and yarns, usually in combination with bast fiber warps, was not existentially dependent on the importation of cotton, and *shifu* and bast-related weaving (extant pieces are quite rare and fragile by their very nature) preceded *sakiore*. The ancient bast weaving tradition was not exclusive to the northern regions; bast fibers were used for weaving, pre-cotton, all over Japan, but where the climate was harshest its use, though extremely difficult and time-consuming in the making, continued even after cotton became available. At least in its toughest form, *tafu* or “thick cloth,” fashioned from the bark of

the paper mulberry, (Williams and Yoshida, 17) continued to be made for heavy work clothing, as were the very thickest examples of *sakiori*, for padding and strength, made and worn, at least in northern provinces, until the early 20th century. (See Figure 11).

Social, Political and Economic History

A Simple Chronology of Japanese History

Early

From prehistoric to 710 A.D.

Classical

Nara Period 710-794

Heian Period 794-1185

Middle Ages

Kamakura Period 1185-1336

Muromachi Period 1336-1573

Momoyama Period 1573-1615

Tokugawa (or Edo) Age

Edo Period 1615-1868

Modern Age

Meiji Period 1868-1912

Taisho Period 1912-1926

Showa Period 1926-1989

Heisei Period 1989-

The Edo, or Tokugawa, period, as it is also known, was a span of time of “secluded peace,” after centuries of wars and disruption in Japan. During this time, expansion of the national economy included dramatic improvements to infrastructure and transportation, commerce, and literacy. The Tokugawa shogunate (*bakufu*), based in Edo (what is now Tokyo), held the real political authority. The imperial court continued,

but only with nominal authority. The *bakuhan* was strong and conservative, enforcing strict social policies in the country, along with the regional military lords (*daimyo*) who ruled their own domains (*han*). All trade and exchange abroad was very strictly limited, almost to the point of complete prohibition. The population nearly doubled over the course of this period – a tremendous rate of growth -- from about 18 million in 1600 to more than 30 million at the beginning of the 19th century.

During the first 200 years of the Edo Period, about 90% of the population lived on and worked the land, “their life full of oppression” (Williams and Yoshida, 16). The shogun Ieyasu, who founded the Tokugawa shogunate in 1603, was quoted by a Confucian scholar: “With the farmers the idea is to just keep them alive, not to allow them to starve or freeze. If you allow them to get too wealthy they won’t work the land. They are like rapeseeds. The more you press them, the more you get from them.”

But during this time the merchant and artisan classes thrived. Established cities like Osaka and Kyoto prospered; even urban members of the samurai class, as well as the artisans and merchants – the new “middle class” -- took part in the growth of what were known as the “pleasure quarters” – a big-city aggregation of teahouses, theaters, restaurants, and the attendant courtesans, entertainers and prostitutes. New forms of entertainment – drama (Noh theater), literature, painting and printmaking emerged.

Commerce and fashion, in the cities, gained a level of particular sophistication. The woodblock prints of the time (Figure 12) provide to us a rich visual history of this urban naissance and the fashions, or *iki*, in fabric and clothing.



Figure 12 Toyokuni; Woodblock print, 1820's. Crowds on the Ryogoku Bridge

The final shoguns were those of the Tokugawa clan, who had come to power in 1603 and ruled until 1868. Tokugawa Ieyasu, the founder of the dynasty, built the new capital in Edo. His grandson Iemitsu completed the national isolation policy. The shoguns had established a strict class system, with the samurai (warriors) at the top (but under the shoguns and then, the *daimyo*), followed by farmers, artisans and merchants. Immediately under the shoguns were the lords with the title *daimyo*, each of whom ruled a part of Japan and to whom the commoners paid taxes.

In the Edo period, the continued prosperity that came with peace brought eventual changes to the class system. Peace and stability left the shoguns without wars to fight and they, as a class, became landowners, less able to capitalize on their vast holdings. The artisans in the cities and the merchants became wealthier, and wealthier. Farmers increased their productivity, improvements to infrastructure gave them access

to markets, the population was growing and demand was high not only for food, but timber, cotton and silk, indigo and other dyes, and, paper. More people needed more things.

Perhaps inevitably, from the mid-19th century, there was a shift from the isolationism and conservative policies of the first 200 years of the shogun-dominated Edo period. Notably, US Navy Commodore Matthew Perry, arriving in Uraga in 1853, forced, in effect, Japan to open up to the world. The Treaty of Peace and Amity between Japan and the US was signed in 1854, and within four years commerce treaties were concluded by Japan with many other countries. By 1867 the Edo shogunate, the last, fell. The 14-year old Emperor Mutsuhito was “restored”, Edo was re-named Tokyo, and the Meiji (“enlightened rule”) Restoration was underway.

The Meiji Restoration

During this period, the island nation became more nationalistic in identity as the *daimyo* lost control of the regions and centralized government took hold. In the name of Emperor Meiji, numerous striking and far-reaching social, political, and economic changes were legislated through a series of edicts. Japan opened its borders; sending several high-ranking expeditions abroad and inviting foreign advisors – including educators, engineers, architects, painters and scientists – to assist the Japanese in rapidly absorbing modern technology and Western knowledge.

“Throughout the century, however, the drive to Westernize is paralleled by continued isolationist tendencies and a desire to resist foreign influences. Eventually, as

has happened numerous times in the nation's history, after the Japanese assimilate what has been borrowed, they use these imports to formulate a new but distinctly Japanese modern society." ^{xi} (Heilbrunn) As an example, "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 rest of 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."^{xii} (Kobayashi, 388) In her research into *kasuri*, among other techniques, Keiko Kobayashi, found that the import of some textiles – Chinese, Indian, Dutch and English -- into then-closed Japan (in exchange for copper) had an impact on textile "fashion," and that when the borders opened the Japanese were eager to learn not only the foreign techniques, but then to adapt their own mechanisms and techniques to produce a uniquely Japanese version of the imports in favor. Again, the cloth tells a story through its provenance.

Sometime in the late 15th century cotton cultivation first came to Japan by way of Korea and China (and possibly through, or by way of, Okinawa). By the mid-18th century cotton became "a fixture of everyday life" (Szczepanek in Durston, 34), though not by any means, to most Japanese commoners. Up until the mid-19th century, cotton was grown, domestically; again, it must be stated that the culture of spinning and weaving cloth was endemic. "For centuries, Japanese farmers had grown, spun, and woven cotton in their households for domestic consumption and local markets. By the nineteenth century a thriving putting-out industry had emerged in the countryside, an

industry that at first received an enormous boost from the importation of cheap yarns [from China] in the wake of the forced opening of Japan's ports."^{xiii} (Beckert, 402)

Notably, in 1880 Shibusawa Eiichi founded the Osaka Spinning Mill with some 10,000 spindles and hundreds of rural women were brought in to work in the mills. What was also "imported" was a paternalistic management structure, as was the norm in the mills of New England in the United States and in Great Britain.

Isabella Lucy Bird – A Valuable Observer of Japan in 1878

In 1878, when the intrepid explorer and writer Isabella Lucy Bird sailed into Yokohama Harbor in Japan aboard the ship "City of Tokio," she was about to begin an adventure in a country that had been open to the "modern" outside world for only 24 years, after 250 years of near-complete isolation. Even then, at the early part of what is known as the Meiji Restoration period, Japan's rapid adoption of new government structures and industrialization, infrastructure building and integration of the mainly agricultural and remote villages to the cities was highly evident. The population was about 34 million "souls" (Bird, 1.7).^{xiv}

And Isabella Lucy Bird was anxious to strike out on her own and leave what she, even then, considered the already too-transformed urban centers, that had been exhaustively (if not accurately), in her view, described by other writers to the interested rest of the English-speaking world.

"From Nikko northwards my route was altogether off the beaten track, and had never been traversed in its entirety by any European. I lived among the Japanese, and

saw their mode of living, in regions unaffected by European contact. As a lady travelling alone, and the first European lady who had been seen in several districts through which my route lay, my experiences differed more or less widely from those of the preceding travellers; and I am able to offer a fuller account of the aborigines of Yezo, obtained by actual acquaintance with them, than has hitherto been given." (Bird, I.vi-vii.). And off the beaten track she went, describing in great (if at times, forgivingly Victorian) detail, the landscapes, people, customs, animals, trees, flowers, hardships, weather, food and lack thereof, and rituals, through a series of letters to her ailing sister back in Edinburgh. She was adept and diligent in her correspondence, amazingly so. In her descriptive letters, we can see her -- after days spent in drenching rain on horseback (sidesaddle, sometimes, astride, at others) with only oiled paper waterproofing to cover her, over steep and practically non-existent mountain paths accompanied only by her young, complaining but ever-helpful Japanese translator, writing -- by the light of smoky oil housed in a paper lantern, in a small shoji-screened room in a Japanese country inn. We can see her making her notes, and composing her letters home, all the while mindful that they would eventually be published in book form. And others, too, saw her back then: many times, as she recounted, she would look up from her writing, or from her pallet on the floor, to eyes peering at her through holes in the paper of the room's shoji screen walls.

What strikes the reader of Bird's *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* is the immediacy of the simple, uneducated, unworldly population she meets. By travelling into the more, actually, very remote regions of 1870's Japan, she was, literally, travelling back in time,

pre-Meiji period perhaps. In the case of her trip into Yezo (Hokkaido) among the aboriginal people, the Ainu, she experienced what life might have been, generally, in much of rural Japan during the early years of the Edo period. Perhaps that experience was, simply, timeless.

The advances that were quickly transforming the cities, towns and some ports into different societies had barely reached many of the places she describes, and so, we the readers of *Unbeaten Tracks* get vivid glimpses of the ways of life in rural "Old Japan", through the lens of an exceptionally adventurous, and determined woman of the late 19th century. Isabella Bird was the first woman, ever, to be named a Fellow of the henceforth-male Royal Geographic Society. (A well deserved, if hotly contested, achievement after having published books about her travels to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii), the Rocky Mountains, China, Korea and the Malay Peninsula, among others.) And Japan was unique, to some degree, as a consequence of its long isolation. "I was entirely unprepared for the apparent poverty and real dirt and discomfort I have seen since leaving Nikko. With us [Bird was from Edinburgh] poverty of the squalid kind is usually associated with laziness and drunkenness, but here the first is unknown, and the last is rare among the peasant proprietors. Their industry is ceaseless; they have no Sabbaths, and only take a holiday when they have nothing to do. Their spade husbandry turns the country into one beautifully kept garden, in which one might look vainly for a weed. They are economical and thrifty, and turn everything to useful account... The appearance of poverty may be produced by apathy regarding comforts to which they have not been accustomed.

These people wear no linen [underwear], and their clothes, which are seldom washed, are constantly worn, night and day, as long as they will hold together." (Bird, l. 170-1)

Her account, relative to the clothing of the commoners, or sometimes the lack of it, the spreading access to cotton, new and used, and prevalent rural hand weaving traditions, adds some very real background to our understanding -- not hearsay, or just simply clues -- of where and how the folk textiles known as *sakiori*, *shifu* and *boro* came to be. As Bird did -- in her trip to what she called Yezo, and is now known as Hokkaido, to stay with and record the language, customs and lives of Japan's aboriginal people, the Ainu -- we can also experience, to some extent, the "travel back in time" that is both demanded and afforded by our study of the earliest antecedents of these vernacular textiles.

In this excerpt from what seems to be, for her, one of the most compelling, if difficult of her experiences in Japan, she proceeds into what we would now describe as a study of material culture. She is describing what ethnographers and historians count as one of the earliest forms of weaving cloth -- that of bast fiber, (warp and weft) and the techniques used for weaving bast into cloth. It is, in technique if not in exact type of bast fiber, what had been the basis for work clothing made from the inner bark of available trees and of grass fibers, in Japan, for centuries, and before cotton became widely available in northern Japan. Even after, until the mid-20th century, when cotton did not serve the need for strength of cloth to cushion a heavy load, or proved to be, still, too expensive for a native population living in extreme conditions, bast fiber

weaving was employed, and valued. In the case of the Ainu, the inner bark of elm (Williams and Yoshida, 17) was turned into the thread for weaving the cloth that would become clothing.

She writes of her experience living with the Ainu people of Hokkaido:

“The women are occupied all day, as I have before said. They look cheerful and even merry when they smile, and are not like the Japanese [mainlanders], prematurely old, partly because their houses are well-ventilated, and the use of charcoal is unknown. I do not think they undergo the unmitigated drudgery which falls to lot of most savage women, though they work hard. The men do not like them to speak to strangers, however, and say that their place is to work and raise children. They eat of the same food, and at the same time as the men, laugh and talk before them, and receive equal support and respect in old age. They sell mats and bark-cloth in the piece, and made up, when they can, and their husbands do not take their earnings from them. All Aino women understand the making of bark cloth. The men bring in the bark in strips, five feet long, having removed the outer coating. This inner bark is easily separated into several thin layers, which are split into very narrow strips by the older women, very neatly knotted, and wound into balls weighing about a pound each.



Figure 13
Illustration of an
Ainu weaver's
shuttle from
[Unbeaten
Tracks in Japan](#)

No preparation of either the bark or the thread is required to fit it for weaving, but I observe that some of the women steep it in a decoction of a bark which produces a brown dye to deepen the buff tint.

The loom is so simple that I almost fear to represent it as complicated by description. It consists of a stout hook fixed in the floor, to which the threads of the far end of the web are secured, a cord fastening the near end to the waist of the worker, who supplies, by dexterous rigidity, the necessary tension; a frame like a comb resting on the ankles, through which the threads pass, a hollow roll for keeping the upper and under threads separate, a spatula-shaped shuttle of engraved wood, and a roller on which the cloth is rolled as it is made. The length of the web is fifteen feet and the width of the cloth is fifteen inches. It is woven with great regularity and the knots in the thread are carefully kept on the underside. It is a very slow and fatiguing process, and a woman cannot do much more than a foot a day. The weaver sits on the floor with the whole arrangement attached to her waist, and the loom, if such it may be called, on her ankles. It takes long practice before she can supply the necessary tension by spinal rigidity. As the work proceeds, she drags herself almost imperceptibly nearer the hook.

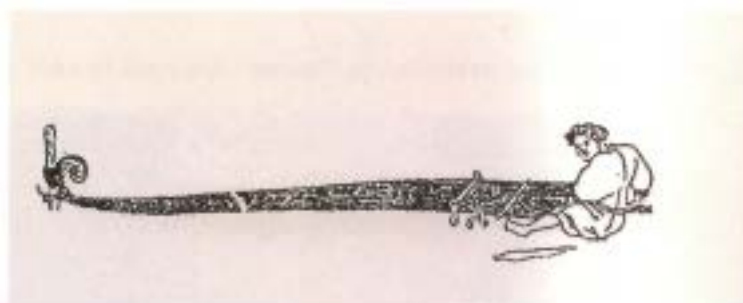


Figure 14 Backstrap loom and weaver

In this house and other large ones two or three women bring in their webs in the morning, fix their hooks, and weave all day, while others, who have not equal advantages, put their hooks in the ground and weave in the sunshine. The web and loom can be bundled up in two minutes, and carried away quite as easily as a knitted sofa blanket. It is the simplest and perhaps most primitive form of hand-loom, and comb, shuttle, and roll, are all easily fashioned with an ordinary knife."

(Bird, II. 93-5)



Figure 15 AINU coat; elm bark fabric with indigo-dyed applique and cotton stitching

And so, from Bird's account of perhaps the earliest edge of this research paper's window into vernacular textiles in Japan, we look, next, to see the beginning of the thesis' *material* focus: a culture of weaving; the introduction of cotton to Japan; the cultivation and production of cotton, and the swift and lasting changes that material brought to the lives of even the "lowest" of Japanese society during the Edo period and beyond.

Cotton and *Tabane* in Japan

Once the commoners in Japan came to learn of the warmth and other qualities of cotton it was inevitable that they would seek any means to exchange it for the hemp and other bast clothing they had always worn. Lower-income people, formerly clothed in *asa* (translated as cloth of hemp or ramie), bark, paper, and assorted other substances, none of which was very satisfactory as material for garments, being neither warm, comfortable, nor readily washable, were eager for cotton. As the market economy developed during the Edo period and as the demand for cotton increased, the *daimyo* further encouraged the production of thread and cloth. However, even in the late Edo and early Meiji periods, poorer farmers could not afford to use the cotton they themselves produced -- even as restrictions, imposed by the shogunate, for their allowance to wear it, in certain colors relative to their social status -- were eased. Instead it was sold to dealers and shipped to the great commercial centers of Osaka and Edo (Tokyo). Urban demand for the cotton was high; "with the exception of rice, cotton and cotton thread became the most important commercial goods in Japan, more important than rapeseed, dried sardines, sake, lumber, or indigo."^{xv} (Hanley, 95) The farmers had to make do with used cotton clothing that was recycled back to them from the cities, and on leftover, poor quality thread which they spun and wove in winter when there was no other work to be done on the farm.

Around the turn of the 19th century, cotton cloth became more universally available in Japan's cotton growing southern and western regions and in those regions almost every village had a dyeshop or "*kon'ya*". "Most commoners wore either indigo-

dyed or yellow ... during the late Edo the general availability of cotton promoted the development of "shima" (striped), "tsutsugaki" or starch resist and "katazome" or stencil dyeing. Cotton dyed in these techniques were used for clothing, bedding and wedding gifts." (Williams and Yoshida, 20)

Ai: Indigo

"As emblematic of folk life as Japan's blue and white cotton fabrics are, cotton is not native to Japan and a relative newcomer to the Japanese cultural landscape. ...

Cotton was a boon to the Japanese. Unlike bast fiber which can be wiry and unforgiving, cotton was pliable, soft, comfortable to wear, and it eagerly drank in the dye."

(Szczepanek in Durston, 34) When cotton *did* become

widely available, during the late Edo period, indigo production rose too, bringing wealth to the growing areas

of Tokushima, (Awa) on Shikoku Island, and other, southwestern growing areas. So

precious was indigo to Edo period commerce, Jenny Balfour-Paul relates, in her book *Indigo*, that in the eighteenth century, Japanese farmers who were accused of giving away "the secrets of production to outsiders were apparently beheaded."^{xvi} (Balfour-

Paul, 106) In the mid-19th century, the fashion-conscious new, urban middle class in the



Figure 16 Indigo dyer; an important position in Edo-era Japan

cities wildly embraced indigo. By the beginning of the 20th century, 40,000 acres of indigo were under production in the Tokushima area alone.

A woodblock print by Toyokuni from the 1820's (Figure 12) shows crowds around the Ryogoku Bridge in Edo gathered for a fireworks display. Many are wearing *kimono*, of indigo-dyed, *kasuri* (crisscross patterned) woven cloth. When edicts were issued by the shogunate to restrict the wearing of the more ostentatious "fine clothes"; embroidered and patterned, sumptuous silks and brocades by that growing middle class, there was an interesting shift to more restrained fabrics. This new fashion was perhaps out of necessity or lawfulness, but according to Anna Jackson: "The use of such "lowly" fabrics and patterns [as *kasuri*, for example] did not signify the humble compliance of the merchant classes, however. The gorgeous ostentation denied them was consciously rejected in favor of a new fashion aesthetic known as *iki*, which can roughly translated as chic. Outward flamboyance was replaced by subtle elegance, and in [woodblock] prints of the period elegant and fashionable women are often depicted wearing indigo-dyed *kimono*." (Jackson, 58)

Eventually, this indigo-dyed cloth, worn and then cast off by the merchant and artisan classes, sold as used clothing and material, would find its way into the bundles of used clothing and rags, the *tabane*, of rag merchants. Those merchants would send their wares up the coast of the Inland Sea, in trade for the goods needed and available from the remote coasts – fish fertilizer and oil from Hokkaido, and "tax rice" from the rich, rice-producing areas serviced by the *kitamaesen*.

Kitamaesen

“There are several terms used to describe the Edo-era coastal traders, the most generic term being

bezaisen. This was the term that seamen and ship-owners tended to use. The literal origins of the name are vague but probably refer to



the vessel type *-sen*, as [Figure 17 Kitamaesen; A Floating Marketplace](#)

a word ending, means “ship” – and sometimes the word is romanised as *benzaisen*.

More specific terms for the coastal traders include *kitamaesen* – best translated as

“northern coastal trader” – the type that sailed along the Sea of Japan coast to

Hokkaido. From the north the most common cargo was herring, salmon and kelp in

trade for rice, salt, cotton, cloth and sake from the mainland. It has been said that the

term *kitamaesen* was used by Pacific coast sailors and was a derogatory reference to the

ships of the Japan Sea. This Japan Sea coast is more rural than other parts of the

country...^{xvii} (Bennett, 136) Perhaps, to the hardy Pacific coast sailors, the *kitamaesen*,

“really just floating markets”; (Williams and Yoshida, 14) wooden vessels with no keel and propelled by a single sail, seemed less worthy of any sailor’s respect than ships that sailed the open seas.

With the tremendous growth in population at that time, the late Edo *bakufu* encouraged expansion and development of the farming and industries that were native to local *daimyo* domains. A vastly improved means of transportation and distribution was required to move goods from place to place, and the difficult roads and frequent flooding of rivers – and subsequent washing-away of bridges – dictated sea routes be developed along the coasts of the narrow and long Japanese archipelago. Shipping routes were



Figure 18 Kitamaesen shipping routes along the North Coast

established along both western and eastern coasts as part of the Edo period reforms; the western route, the *Kitamaesen*, provided the means to move goods, including cotton, up and north from the southern cities (the route originated in Sakai, just south of Osaka), and importantly, for the ships to return with the fish meal and oil that served as fertilizer critical to the growing needs of the southern agricultural areas. Relative to our specific focus – *sakiori* – as said, cotton was of existential importance. But the

kitamaesen was the vehicle for introducing and transporting used cotton to the remote northern regions.

It is speculated that the *ai*-dyed, blue cotton clothes worn by the sailors aboard the ships may have been the northern commoners' first introduction to the soft, pliable, washable and warm cloth. It is also thought that the villagers of the western coast ports may have sold their bast woven clothing or cloth in exchange for used cotton in the form of rags or for new, lesser quality cotton goods. And, so monetary value was also introduced. We saw from Isabella Bird's account of the Ainu women weavers that they, at least in 1878, had some experience in selling the textiles they wove. The last northern stop the ships of the *kitamaesen* made was in Hokkaido, before turning back south on the return to Osaka and the urban markets. They may have bought the bark cloth made by the Ainu there, and sold it, along their return route to Osaka.

IV. Objects to Artifacts

Weaving Techniques and Materials

We have seen from Isabella Bird's description of the Ainu weaving elm bark fibers into cloth, that what is generally accepted as historical fact, is the use of the "izaribata", or backstrap loom as the earliest means of weaving cloth. Other than the Ainu people of Hokkaido's use of elm, most of the Japanese mainland's bast cloth was fashioned of other fibers, found in even very early examples – "irakusa", a native nettle, tree basts such as "shina", linden, and basts from vines and shrubs such as "fuji", wisteria and "koso" or paper mulberry. (Williams and Yoshida, 20-1) The *jibata* loom, or "loom that sits on the ground," was introduced to Japan around the 5th century, a dating, again, generally accepted by historians, and thought to have been brought in by Chinese or Korean specialist weavers (and, may have come by way of Okinawa). Around the same time, according to Dai Williams, was the almost simultaneous introduction of the "takabata" or high loom with a rigid frame. The reason for these advances was two-fold: the obvious difficulty and limitations of the backstrap loom's production, and the fact that cloth from this early time was generally produced as tribute. (Again, historians look to the earlier, fine tribute cloth coming from the Ryukyu islands, what is now Okinawa, in a northern trajectory of more sophisticated weaving techniques into Japan's mainland.) The valuation of the cloth, as a tax essentially, then demanded further standardization of size and an increase and consistency of quality.



Figure 19 Illustration; Jibata loom

With the *jibata*, it was possible to roll the finished sections; it was therefore possible to produce cloth of 15 to 18 meters in length. Access to these sophisticated looms, and the skill needed to work on them, generally, remained limited to only "specialist" weavers until, according to Anna Jackson of the V&A, the early 19th century, when the looms were in widespread use in "advanced cotton weaving areas". (Jackson, 71) It is also important to understand that, even with the basic nature of the backstrap loom and early floor looms, and simple plain-weave techniques "great skill and patience were required to achieve a balance of warp and weft, and to maintain the overall tension and subsequent density of woven fabric." The backstrap loom was also uniquely suited to the weaving of *sakiori*, or perhaps conversely, the thick and uneven weft of cotton rag strips demanded the heavy beating that was most easily accomplished by the physically-demanding, backstrap loom process, which was more forgiving of irregularity in weft material.

Hemp, which by the mid-17th century was cultivated on small family plots of many commoners, was widely used for weaving. As late as the 1940's it was still used in rural clothing, and is often seen as the warp in *sakiori*. Its cultivation effectively ended at the conclusion of World War II.

Plain weave

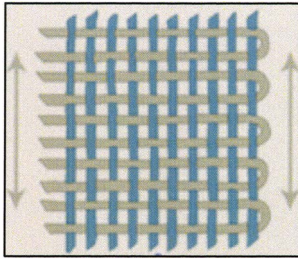


Figure 20 Illustration;
plain weave

Plain weave (also called tabby weave or linen weave) is the most basic of three fundamental types of textile weaves. It is strong and hardwearing, and with some few exceptions is the technique that is associated with *shifu* and *sakiori*. In plain weave, the warp and weft are aligned so they form a simple crisscross

pattern. Each weft thread crosses the warp threads by going over one, then under the next, and so on. The next weft thread goes under the warp threads that its neighbor went over, and vice versa.

Rural weaving on the *jibata* loom would have been mainly in plain weave and used for making cloth for work clothing, often using the very heavy and thick wefts of, perhaps recycled, *kozo* (paper mulberry) cloth that was favored for hard use.

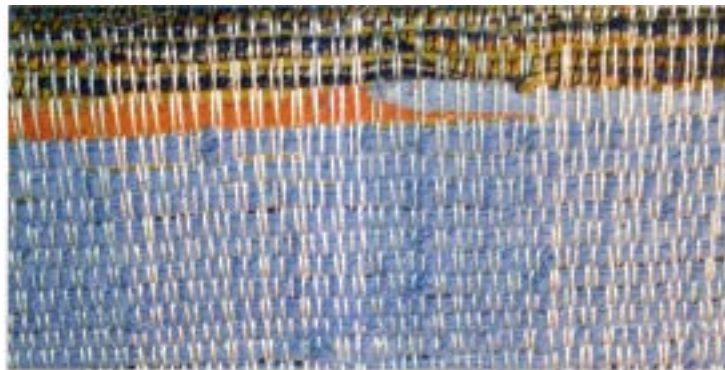


Figure 21 Example; plain weaving



Figure 22 Poster illustrating three components of the shifu process; recycled paper, cutting and breaking the paper fiber

Shifu

In *shifu* the weft is paper thread or yarn that has been spun, laboriously, from *washi* or from various recycled paper, including *washi*, that is cut into strips, the fibers broken down by pounding, or rolling, enough to be spun into thread or fine yarn. In later years the warp would be cotton, but hemp was very often the thread of choice, as it was easier than other fiber basts, and stronger, to use as the warp. No one wants to have to repair a broken warp.

There are really two types of *shifu*; the more utilitarian clothing that incorporates recycled paper, generally as weft, and was made in response to having paper as an

available resource (in Japan quite plentiful from the 17th century). An indigo-dyed, *shifu* kimono such as the one below (Figure 23) is an example, though fewer examples of dyed *shifu* work clothing are seen than those with natural colors from warp and weft:



Figure 23 Indigo-dyed *shifu* (paper weft) *kosode* or *kimono*

The second "type" of *shifu* incorporates fine washi paper, or handmade paper of various, finely made types. This practice, which goes back to the 15th century in Japan, is still in practice in contemporary fiber arts, in Japan and in various forms in other countries, as well. " *Shifu's* past industry, like that of *washi*, no longer exists as it once did when master craftspeople were maintained for every stage of the paper threadmaking process for *Shiroishi shifu*." (Byrd, 45) But, as Susan Byrd points out, contemporary makers who are carrying on its tradition still follow the attention to fineness and detail of the past.

"*Shifu* should be woven with the thread's character in mind, a tightly twisted or rolled paper thread that expands slightly when washed. Using a counter-balanced floor loom (*hata*) enables a closer beat due to the threads spread. The loom is often threaded for a narrow width of cloth,



Figure 24 19th c. woodblock print; work at the loom

set at forty eight to sixty-four ends per inch (*epi*) or warp threads per inch. A gentle beat is important because of the thread's nature; however, it is difficult to do it consistently well. Much practice and a sense for the appropriate beat will achieve the weaver's preferred feel for the *shifu*." (Byrd, 88.)

Sakiori

In Aomori the rags were cut with scissors and then torn into strips about 3mms. wide. The Director of the Aomori Keikokan Museum noted that this preparation of the weft "given the extreme value of cotton cloth itself, the act of tearing it up must have taken on sacred aspects." (Yoshida and Williams, 25.)

Sakiori was woven from cotton rags or scraps that came from the large bundles, or *tabane*, that the rag merchants sent along the shipping routes of *kitamaesen* from Osaka or Sakai to the south. The clothing fashioned from the *sakiori* cloth, in its earliest



and original forms, was meant to be heavy and durable – essentially for workwear for both men and women. In early sakiori the warp was hemp or other bast fiber, the weft was the torn or cut rag – sometimes really only bundled threads; the color was primarily dark blue as this was what reflected what was most available. Later, as cotton thread became more widely used, the white thread was used for stitching and within the weft as a more decorative or *hade* (fancy) effect.

Figure 25 Sodenashi: sakiori work vest, 1950

According to Dai Williams:

“Weaving sakiori [on a jibata loom] required special techniques as the weft was very thick. Unlike contemporaneous bast fiber or cotton weaving, making sakiori required the use of a separate batten and shuttle. The batten was longer and heavier in order to beat the thick weft down well; the shuttle was a simple stick around which the rag was wound. The thickness of the weft combined with the friction set up between the cotton weft and bast warp required considerable power and the precise timing in the batten stroke. On the other hand, given the thickness of the weft, the weaving went quickly.” (Yoshida and Williams, 27.)

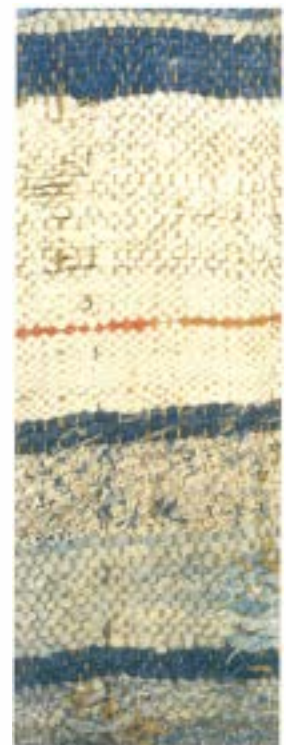


Figure 26 Detail: Sakiori hemp warp, cotton weft

As with *shifu*, described above, there occurred a refinement to *sakiori* -- from the original, very heavy, *sakiori* as cotton became more available, as rags fashioned from old clothing, mostly *kimono* or *kosode*, and as more colors (and dyes) -- began to be incorporated into more decorative and less utilitarian clothing, such as *obis*.



Figure 27 Rice planting season provided an opportunity for young women to wear the 20th c. version of a fancier type of *sakiori* - the *obi*

Boro

In Japan, mended and patched textiles are referred to as *boro*, or rags. For some time, the *boro* tradition was regarded with great shame since these utilitarian textiles provided a reminder of the rural poverty endemic in Japan's history. Sewing together layers of repurposed fabric would add warmth and durability to a finished piece. A running stitch called "sashiko" was employed and sashiko is an important presence in Japanese rural culture. "Poverty is the root of the *boro* tradition of recycling in Japan. Textiles, particularly cottons, were valuable and not to be wasted." (Sorgato, 13.) Used clothing and rags, many that were dyed with indigo, Japan's ubiquitous blue, were washed and stitched together with bast fiber thread (and later cotton) patched,

reinforced to make wearable coats (*noragi*) for farmers, fisherman and forest work.

Recycled clothing was also transformed by deconstructing garments to create *futon*

bedcovers, household items, carrying cloths and bags, diapers and finally, potholders.



Figure 28 *Boro futon* bedcover with *sashiko* stitching 185 x 131 cm

V. Aesthetic Context

“In considering the apparent qualities of particular objects, we need to recognize how 20th century critics have shaped our aesthetic values. The directness we perceive in ‘folk craft’ objects appeals to us looking, as we inevitably do, through our late-20th century eyes. The objects have a simplicity which received artistic opinion throughout most of this century has maintained is a hallmark of good design.” Anna Jackson of the V&A Museum wrote this in 1997, as a part of her thorough examination of the terms and aesthetic arguments, at the time that surrounded the Museum’s definition of its collection of “country textiles” from Japan.

In the early part of the 20th century, a school of thought and preservation was promulgated by Yanagi Soetsu (1889-1961), the founder of the Japanese Folk Craft movement. Yanagi’s intention was to preserve the traditional crafts of Japan, and his fervor was, in part, fueled by the concerns that arose during the early decades of the 20th century in which the rise of industrialization was thought, by many within Japanese society, to be considered a threat; that Japan would lose its identity as a nation. It was Yanagi who coined the term, “*mingei*”; an abbreviated word derived from “*minshu*” (common people) and “*kogei*” (craft) and was translated, deliberately as “folk craft”, not, as “folk art”. As Jackson explains, in order to qualify as “*mingei*” objects needed to be, above all, functional, “beauty born of use”, and had to be: made by hand, anonymously, using natural materials, traditional methods and designs, and simple forms, one of many similar pieces, and inexpensive. Jackson argued that Yanagi’s definition was too

restrictive, and limiting, of the large pool of "country" objects – not only textiles – but many other forms of traditional Japanese craft. These definitional arguments are old, sometimes still relevant, and at times, still emotional, topics of linguistics and of art vs. craft categorization, aesthetic philosophy and curatorial concern. Anna Jackson's solution, within her text, was to acknowledge, "They [the objects that fit within Yanagi's collection criteria] do seem to share a certain directness. ...They do not have the ostentation of much of the art created for the castles of the military elite. Nor do they share the pre-occupation with ever-changing fashion that is the hallmark of the "floating world" of the city. The aesthetic found in so-called folk objects is also far removed from that which informed the sophisticated pieces of technical virtuosity produced in the Meiji period." (Jackson, 21) And she was forceful in her argument that the objects must be looked at in the broader context – not only through Yanagi's viewpoint in the early decades of the 20th century. "Meaning", as quoted earlier, "is never fixed; it is constantly shifting."

My first introduction to the "folk" textiles from Japan came in the form of a gift. My sister brought me a *sakiori obi* from a trip she made to Japan in the late 1970's. At that time, I barely knew what an "obi" was, and I certainly didn't know anything about *sakiori* or its provenance. What I did know that it was, to me, a beautiful object. It was subtle, and beautifully woven, I thought. The weave was so tight, the colors and striping subdued but striking. The form of it, narrow and so



Figure 29 Sakiori obi;
mid-20th c. my "gift" ob

long, finished at one end with some silver threads that seemed to say, "This is special." What I now know is that yes, this is indeed a *sakiori obi*. It was quite probably made sometime around the early or mid-20th century, and it was, perhaps, woven by a young woman who was, in fact, to wear it as a sort of fashion statement, and to showcase her skills as a weaver. It might have been woven by a trained weaver to sell to someone else. It is not typical of the *sakiori* that I have focused on in this research in that it is not "utilitarian". It appears to have been woven from recycled cotton, and perhaps some silk. According to Dai Williams, *sakiori obis* became popular after WWI and narrow "yamaobi" or "mountain obi" are found all over Japan. This was not an item of clothing woven out of necessity. Perhaps my appreciation of it has increased with this added knowledge, but there has to be, I believe, an enthusiastic aesthetic acknowledgement that there are factors unique to its form, design and material that are intrinsically appealing. What I mean by aesthetic context reflects these ideas. The change this personal study has brought to me, in gaining a depth of knowledge about these "cloth objects," is what I think of as a more informed, "eye". And, further, in all the time I have spent researching, looking, weaving, handling the fabric and materials since first being given this obi, a deeper range and change in aesthetics has been unfolding.

The relatively recent interest in *boro* textiles illustrates this phenomenon. Describing the *boro* collected in the 1960's by Chuzaburo Tanaka, Yukiko Koide and Kyoichi Tsuzuki make a 21st century assertion:

"If exactly reproduced and labeled with French or Italian designer tags, these "not-so-glad rags" would undoubtedly fetch high-end prices, so perfectly artless

is their detailing. Not that they are in any way "precious" like *mingei* "folk craft" or contemporary auteur patchwork quilts; no these are products, pure and simple, of a shivering desire to thickly overlay whatever was on hand for heavy-duty warmth.

Just as consummate "outsider art" shocked contemporary art professionals, the beauty and sheer compositional skill of these boro creations made by impoverished country folk pose fundamental questions to fashion and design circles everywhere." (Koide and Tsuzuki, 4)



Figure 30 *Donja*; boro sleeping robe

It is arguable now that, in the early 21st century, our collective view is shifting with a global perspective, especially when tied to notions of increasingly limited resources, on a global scale, and a focus on sustainability. There are lessons to be learned.

Scholars, such as Susan Hanley in her book, "Everyday Things in Pre-Modern Japan" and designers and writers such as Azby Brown, in his book "Just Enough: Lessons in Living

Green from Traditional Japan (2009) are actively reshaping how some of the Edo-era issues of poverty, austerity and social stratification can be analyzed, and criticized, from Western perspectives in their writing.

“The Tokugawa solutions to limited resources enabled the Japanese to reach a high level of civilization using a minimum of resources, and wherever possible, natural, renewable materials. These solutions led to a society in which beauty and luxury were found in good design rather than a vast number of objects on display. The best, rather than abundance, was highlighted. Even the rich followed these principles and kept the large quantities they owned in numerous storehouses, bringing out only a few objects at a time to be appreciated. The material culture of the Tokugawa period can trace its roots to medieval times, if not earlier. But what should be noted is that the direction the material culture took was not the ornateness of the Toshogu shrines or the Kano school of painting, but the simplicity of the *shoin* style and ink drawings. This is not to argue that the rulers and the wealthiest of merchants were not guilty of waste, but the general principles of using less energy, fewer resources, and reusing and recycling let many more people participate in a higher standard of living and culture than if the trend had been toward the wasteful use of scarce resources. By defining luxury in terms of austerity and sparseness, many more people were able to have a high level of physical well-being.” (Hanley, 76)

The conjunction of these global, social, economic and environmental issues now: a turning away from the late 20th century’s culture of abundance, a recognition of finite resources, an embrace of recycling, a now-historical (modernist) regard for sparseness and simplicity, and, the perhaps ever-present quest for “authenticity”; these are all, it would seem, factors of aesthetic context from our 21st century eyes.

VI. Conclusion

My research has shown, I believe, that in the Edo and Meiji periods the economic, and, correspondingly social, significance of textiles became increasingly important to Japan, particularly to its rural communities. I have concluded that the widespread introduction of cotton, particularly, was crucial in its impact on the quality of life, and comfort of the commoners of Japan. The particular textiles that I have focused upon, *sakiori* and *boro*, bear witness, as artifacts, to the process of the “trickle down” of cotton’s interjection into rural communities. The weaving process of *shifu*, is reflective, in particular of the Japanese reverence for using materials at hand, and in the exquisite attention to natural materials being crafted into finely-made utilitarian objects.

I did not realize, until I took on this study of vernacular textiles, that it would be possible to trace the history and impact of these largely anonymous cloth objects or techniques as they made their way through a particular place, time and culture. (And I was surprised and inspired by the depth of English-language sources that I could explore; initially, I was very concerned by my lack of Japanese language skills.)

What strikes me, now at the end of this exercise, are three areas of outstanding interest, and perhaps further speculation:

1. “The appearance of poverty” (Byrd)

Most of the texts that describe *sakiori* and *boro* describe their provenance as a result of the dire poverty and harsh circumstance experienced by the commoners of the Edo era. I don’t dispute that *from our eyes and our Western experience* it is not incorrect to describe, as did the museum director in San Francisco, early, utilitarian

sakiori as defining “an aesthetic of poverty.” But what is, I believe, important to my further research, is to be open to a more nuanced view: that out of those circumstances, and the hands and looms and needles of the makers of *shifu*, *boro* and *sakiori* came some extraordinary objects that were clearly fashioned with care, deliberate design and extraordinary effort.

At the same time Isabella Byrd described dirt, ragged clothing, hygiene and weather vulnerability, she also remarked on the industriousness, energy, work ethic and family cohesiveness of those rural Japanese people living “in dire poverty”. The isolation the shogunate structure imposed on the entire country exaggerated what I think of the “island mentality” of the nation of Japan. They were isolated, but they were living in relative peace and security. They had to rely simply on the resources they had on their lands. It created, I would argue, a culture that we presently observe as creatively resourceful and sustainable.

2. “A world cross-snarled” (Ulrich)

The opening of Japan to world trade in the mid-19th century brought along with it a worldly culture of valuation, economics, wealth (and poverty), greed and abundance. Following the 14th century-era *kasuri* (ikat) technique of weaving from the Ryukyu islands (Okinawa, now) is akin to the term “Follow the money.” The practiced weavers of the Ryukyus paid taxes to shoguns in southern Japan in the form of fine *kasuri* cloth. It became popular, and valued, on the Japanese mainland. Weavers were enlisted, even forced, to move themselves, and then to teach the *kasuri* techniques of weaving, to mainlanders – and in a process that depended on access to cottons, dyes, and

economic development on the main island, four centuries later (!) we see the fancy ladies of the “floating world” of Edo-era pleasure quarters swathed in black, blue and red *kasuri kimono*.



Figure 31 *Kasuri kimono*, 19th c. V&A Museum Collection

3. And finally:

“Nobody really thinks who does not abstract from that which is given, who does not relate the facts to the factors which have made them, who does not in his mind undo the facts. Abstractness is the very life of thought, the token of its authenticity.” Herbert Marcuse

Perhaps antithetically to the whole enterprise of this research paper, perhaps not, I am, still, interested in allowing my mind “to undo the facts”. I say that relative to the aesthetic qualities of these textiles; what Anna Jackson describes or concedes as “directness”. There is an abstract quality to *shifu*, *sakiori* and *boro* objects. They are not figural. They are not, really, what most viewers would describe as “pretty.” Their richness, still, to me lies at least to some extent in the mysteries of what they are

composed of, where those rags and fibers came from and how their current incarnation reveals some unknown history. The abstraction here, though, is that one doesn't necessarily have to know any of this to experience the pleasure of their being. Perhaps what they reveal – without being unraveled physically or intellectually – is what I have labeled “An Aesthetic of Resourcefulness”; a delight in their spirit.



Figure 32 *Sakiori obi*, 19th c. V&A Museum Collection

Citations

i. IANS. New Act will kill handloom industry: designer. New Delhi. Doha, Qatar: Gulf Times, May 4, 2015.

ii Cooper, Patricia and Norma Bradley Buford, *The Quilters: Women and Domestic Art*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1977.

iii Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of the American Myth*. New York, Vintage Books, 2002.

iv Jackson, Anna. *Japanese Country Textiles*. Victoria and Albert Museum Far Eastern Series New York and Tokyo, Weatherhill, 1997.

v Byrd, Susan J. *A Song of Praise for Shifu: Shifu Sanka*, Chicago, Legacy Press, 2014.

vi Koide, Yukiko and Kyoichi Tsuzuki eds., *Boro: Rags and Tatters from the Far North of Japan*. Trans. Alfred Birnbaum. Tokyo: Aspect Corp, 2008.

vii Yoshida, Shin-Ichiro and Dai Williams, *Riches From Rags: Saki-Ori & Other Recycling Traditions in Japanese Rural Clothing*, San Francisco, San Francisco Craft & Folk Art Museum, 1994.

viii Durston, Diane ed., Kei Kawasaki pub., Stephen Szczepanek, Mottainai: The Fabric of Life: Lessons in the Frugality from Traditional Japan: Art in the Garden at The Portland Japanese Garden, exhibition catalog, Kyoto, Gallery Kei, 2011.

ix Breeden, Aurelien. "Mass grave found in Paris, to archaeologist's delight," *International New York Times*, Paris, May 12, 2015.

^{xi} Japan, 1800-1900 A.D.. In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-. <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ht/> (October 2004)

Accessed 4/28/2015

^{xii} Kobayashi, Keiko. "The Fashion for Small-Patterned Textiles in Nineteenth Century Japan, *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. Paper 473, 2004.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/473> accessed April, 2015

^{xiii} Beckert, Sven. *Empire of Cotton: A Global History*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014.

^{xiv} Bird, Isabella Lucy. *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan: An Account of Travels on Horseback in the Interior including Visits to the Aborigines of Yezo and the Shrines of Nikko and Ise*, Volumes I and II, New York, G.P. Putman's Sons, 1880.

^{xv} Hanley, Susan B. *Everyday Things in Premodern Japan: The Hidden Legacy of Material Culture*, London, UC Berkeley P, 1997.

^{xvi} Balfour-Paul, Jenny. *Indigo: Egyptian Mummies to Blue Jeans*, London: The British Museum P. 2011.

^{xvii} Bennett, Jenny. *Sailing Into the Past: Learning from Replica Ships*, Casemate Publishers, Seaforth Publishing