

The Naga-ita Chūgata Aizome Dyeing Technique

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Abstract

With the recent yukata boom in the last few years, yukata of elaborate and colorful designs have appeared in number. While this trend might be considered a new fashion, in the Edo period yukata were likewise worn at times as fashionable casual dress with a multiple of elaborate patterns made with expensive labor-intensive dyeing techniques, primarily tie-dye and stencil dyeing. This essay considers one of these dye techniques, the traditional *naga-ita chūgata aizome* method of stencil dyeing, and describes the details of this dyeing technique based on personal observation of the process at the Noguchi Some-Kōjō workshop in Hachioji, Tokyo.

Introduction

Only a little more than a decade ago, Japanese cotton summer robes called yukata were relatively inexpensive informal wear, primarily for events like festivals and fireworks when worn outside the house. Traditionally, they were dyed indigo-blue and worn with a simple bright red or yellow yukata obi. Nowadays it can be difficult to tell the difference between a high-end expensive yukata and a summer kimono, and in some instances the yukata may well cost more than a summer kimono. It is now not uncommon to see expensive yukata worn the same way as a summer kimono, with another full layer of dress underneath (*nagajuban* 長襦袢) and a proper Nagoya obi. In addition, the colors, patterns, and materials have blossomed far beyond the simple indigo blue. "Brand" yukata by famous Western-apparel designer names have also appeared, some with Western-style patterns in bright colors resembling chintz patterns. The materials and weaves of the yukata fabrics have likewise increased in variety, from the simple "plain-weave" of yesteryear to include such weaves as a check-weave (*kōbai* 紅梅), gauze-weave (*ro* 紹), twisted-weave (*chijimi* 縮), and pongee (*tsumugi* 紬); many of these weaves formerly more commonly used for summer kimono made of silk or hemp. Yukata fabrics have also expanded from the traditional cotton to include hemp-linen blends and even new synthetics developed from athletic uniforms to reduce

sweat and smell in the hot sticky climate of Japan.

This current style of yukata fashion is the result of their renewed popularity among the young high school and college girls, the arbiters of the latest fashion trends in Japan, who dress in yukata to go out on dates with their boyfriends or with friends to festivals and fireworks. However, these high-end examples of yukata are no longer just being worn as simple casual wear to traditional outdoor summer events; they are now also being dressed up as fancy apparel for visits to museums, the theater, dinner-dates, or lunch with friends during the summer.

For members of the older generation, this new style of wearing yukata is almost inconceivable. Prior to this recent trend, the older generation considered yukata to be sleepwear or summer loungewear to wear inside the house equivalent to a housedress, and except at a hot-springs, hardly something one would wear in public other than to a festival or fireworks. Furthermore, the older generation often sewed the yukata at home and prêt-porter yukata were less available, let alone brand-name yukata. However, this older-generation concept of yukata as a housedress was also not always historically true. From the Edo period (when modern yukata originated) to the pre-war era, yukata were not only worn as bathrobes to the public baths, but also as fancy about-town everyday-wear for summer activities. Although in the Edo period yukata were indigo-dyed cotton robes, sophisticated dyeing techniques allowed for a multitude of fashionable patterns.

As is well known, modern yukata (as opposed *katabira* 帷子 robes) developed in the Edo period due to a confluence of events: the new availability of cotton and indigo, and the rise of the public bath. Cotton was reintroduced to Japan in the 16th century and became a popular fabric for kimono among the commoners, often woven in an ikat-weave (*kasuri* 紜). The technique of fermenting indigo for a dye continued to advance from the 15th century and was readily available to the commoners by the mid-Edo period, when it was popularized in large part due to its being an excellent dye for cotton. The public bath arose in the town of Edo in the late 16th century, popularized by commoners who could not have a bath in the house due to expense and fear of conflagration. The first public baths were steam-baths, but once they developed to hot-water baths, yukata were worn to and from the public bathhouse. The early yukata were white cotton robes with simple designs dyed in indigo, similar to what one would find in a hotel or hot-springs today. Soon dyeing techniques advanced and designs proliferated, and yukata were no longer worn just to the bath and lounging around the neighborhood in the hot summer months, but also to summer

activities of walking along the riverbanks to catch the cooling breeze of evening, reveling on the river boats, and enjoying fireworks.

The two main dyeing techniques used for yukata in the Edo period were tie-dye and stencil dyeing. The type of tie-dye used for yukata was typically Arimatsu-shibori (有松絞), a form of *shibori* tie-dye that was less-expensive and also not forbidden by the sumptuary laws. The Arimatsu-shibori type of tie-dye was invented as a simplified tie-dye process for dyeing patterns on a cotton hand-towels (*tenugui* 手拭い) and made use of a tying-stand for a less labor-intensive production of tying the knots necessary for *shibori* tie-dye. But by far, the most common dyeing technique for yukata was stencil-dyeing using a mid-size stencil (*chūgata* 中形). So common was this dyeing technique for yukata that in fact “Chūgata” was even used as an alternative name for yukata. (*Senshoku jiten*, p. 267).



Image: Chūgata Yukata from “Stepmother and Stepchild” by Utagawa Kunisada

The full name for this stencil-dyeing technique is *naga-ita chūgata aizome* (長板中形藍染), also called *naga-ita honzome chūgata* (長板本染中形). *Naga-ita* means long-board, *chūgata* means mid-size stencil, and *aizome* means indigo-dyeing. For this technique, a bolt of fabric is laid on a “long-board” table for an application of rice paste using a mid-sized stencil made of compounded Japanese paper with a cut-out design. The stencil is laid on the fabric and then coated with a layer of rice-paste spread with a wide brush. Since the stencil is mid-size in length, it has to be laid on the bolt of fabric repeatedly section after section to cover the entire bolt of fabric. Once the paste is applied and dried, the fabric is then placed in a dye-bath of fermented indigo for dyeing. The areas covered with the rice-paste are protected from the indigo dye and remain the white color of the ground fabric and the uncovered portions are dyed indigo.

The origin of this form of stencil dyeing is not well-known, but one explanation has it that it developed from the technique used to dye the minute-designs (now called *Edo-komon* 江戸小

紋) on the formal samurai garment called the *kamishimo* (袴) composed of a matching set of a sleeveless broad-shouldered jacket and *hakama* (袴) trousers which was worn over a kimono. Indeed, *chūgata* dyeing is very similar to regular small-size dyeing (*komon-zome* 小紋染), except the size of the designs as well as the stencils tends to be larger, and in the *chūgata-zome* dyeing technique the fabric is dyed on both sides. The *chūgata-zome* dyeing technique is rarely practiced today and the tradition remains only at a few dyeing workshops such as in the Katsushika ward in Tokyo and the Noguchi Some-Kōjō workshop in Hachioji. (*Senshoku jiten*, pp. 301-302).

In order to better understand the dyeing process of *naga-ita chūgata aizome*, I visited the Noguchi Some-Kōjō workshop in Hachioji to observe the process firsthand. The Noguchi Some-Kōjō workshop produces yukata fabric using this traditional dyeing technique for several yukata fabric retailers, especially the Chikusen yukata fabric company. Chikusen was founded in 1842 as a company producing fabric for yukata and *tenugui* hand-towels. The company was sufficiently famous that it was included in the Meiji era *Quintessence of Famous Products of Tokyo* (*Tokyo meibutsu kokorozashi* 東京名物志) published in 1901. After the war, it was rebuilt at a location in Asakusa connected to its founder, but later moved to the Nihonbashi area of Tokyo to be closer to the department stores and clothing boutiques serving as their main customers. Chikusen is now one of the main producers of high-end traditional yukata fabrics and the yukata from Chikusen are often featured in summer issues of kimono magazines. The present head of the Noguchi Some-Kōjō, Noguchi Hiroshi, is the sixth generation owner of this traditional *naga-ita chūgata aizome* workshop. The workshop was founded at the end of the Edo period, and at that time they dyed the minute *Edo-komon* designs for the samurai *kamishimo* garments using this technique. At present, Mr. Noguchi works together with his son to continue this tradition of the Edo-period technique of indigo stencil-dyeing. The following is an illustrated description of the *naga-ita chūgata aizome* dyeing technique as observed at their workshop.

The Naga-ita Chūgata Aizome Dyeing Process

Preparing the Cloth: Starching

The fabric to be dyed is sent from a weaving workshop in Nagoya. Although the fabric arrives already pre-bleached to be white, it still must be starched before the dyeing process begins. The starching is necessary so that the fabric will be firm enough to maintain its shape and not stretch while the stencil and rice-paste is applied. The white bolts of fabric are placed

in a starch bath and then hung outside to dry.¹ This preparation takes a full day for each set of bolts before the dyeing process can start the next day. (Fig. 1)

The Long-Board

Once the bolt of fabric has been prepared by starching, on the following day the dried fabric is then spread out along a long-board (*naga-ita* 長板) and tied in place. The long-board is 6m50cm in length, which is half the length of the bolt of fabric. The name of this dyeing process comes in part from this “long-board” on which the fabric is placed, indicative of how important the long-board is to this dyeing process. The proper placement of the fabric on the board is a crucial step in the dye process; if the fabric is not placed properly and held firmly in place, irregularities will occur in the finished dyed bolt of fabric.



Fig. 1: Mr. Noguchi preparing the starched fabric for drying outside.



Fig. 2: Mr. Noguchi's son cleaning the long-board before laying the fabric.

Before placing the fabric on the long-board, the long-board pre-prepared with a light layer of paste (*nori* 糊) is then cleaned by spraying with water and brushed off. (Fig. 2) Next, the bolt of fabric is laid down along the length of the long-board, then smoothed-down with a plectrum (*jiharigi* 地張木), and tied in place. Once placed and tied on the long-board, the fabric is now prepared for applying the rice-paste using a stencil.

The Rice-Paste

The rice paste serves as a resist so that the portions covered with the rice-paste will not be colored when the fabric is placed in the dye bath; the portions covered with the rice-paste will

1 I neglected to ascertain what the starch was made from, but according to the *Senshoku Jiten* it should wheat bran and is called *shōfu-nori* 正麩糊, p. 301.

be the portions that remain white on the finished dyed cloth. The paste (*nori* 糊) used as the resist is made from rice bran (*nuka* 糠) powder and sticky-rice (*mocha* 餅) powder. Since the resultant paste is an ivory-white color, an orange-pink dye is added to the paste before applying it, so that the portions receiving the rice-paste can be seen against the white ground of the fabric. The orange-pink dye used for this purpose is specially supplied from a dye producer, and must necessarily be a dye that will wash out of the cotton fabric without staining it. Only one day's supply of rice-paste is made at a time, because the paste gradually dries and thickens making it too viscous for application.

The Stencils

The stencils (*kata* 形) are made out of many sheets of Japanese paper pressed and glued together, and then treated with persimmon juice for strength and preservation. According to Mr. Noguchi, these stencils were traditionally made by masterless samurai (*rōnin* 浪人). Although the textile-dyeing workshop at Hachioji began in the late Edo-early Meiji period for dyeing the jacket-trouser formal wear of the samurai (*kamishimo* 袴), and they still have in their possession some 500 stencils from that period, the stencils used for the yukata fabric are actually supplied from Ise in Mie prefecture through the Chikusen yukata company.

Rice-Paste Application

Once the fabric has been spread and tied to the long-board, the stencil is repeatedly placed along the bolt of fabric and the rice-paste spread across the stencil using a brush (*hake* 刷毛). (Fig. 3) For this process of applying the rice-paste to the fabric by using a stencil, it is important that all the light comes from one direction to be able to see clearly where to place the stencil so that the design matches perfectly. One side of the fabric generally requires eight repetitions of the stencil placement, depending on the size of the stencil.



Fig. 3: Mr. Noguchi's son spreading the rice-paste resist across the stencil laid over the fabric.

Half of the bolt is laid out along the long-board at a time, and the remainder rolled and

secured at the end (see Fig. 3). Once one side of the bolt of fabric has been applied with the rice paste, the long-board with the fabric still attached is then set outside on an angle to dry in the sun, which takes approximately 20 minutes. After drying, the bolt of fabric is then flipped over, and the other side also applied with rice paste with the use of the stencil. Similar to Ukiyo-e woodblock prints, markings in the stencil resembling zither bridges (*kotoji* 琴柱) are used to match the design correctly on both sides. One might think this correct matching of the design on the front and back of the fabric a slow and painstaking task, but the dyeing artisans are quite fluent in their task and do it rapidly despite the flawless application.

Once the design in rice paste has been fully applied along both sides of the entire length of the bolt of fabric, the long-board with the fabric still attached is once again set outside on an angle to dry. Then, the fabric is removed from the long-board and stretched open with hangers (*shinshi* 伸子) to hang outside. (Fig. 4) The fabric is next coated on both sides by brushing on a lukewarm paste called *gojiru* 豆汁 made of soybeans (*daizu* 大豆) and a small amount of indigo (*ai* 藍), so that the indigo dye will fully permeate the fabric. This process of spreading the paste on the two sides with a drying in between takes half a day. After the *gojiru* paste has been applied and dried, the fabric is set in a dark place for a week hung upside-down from its *shinshi* hangers in an accordion style.



Fig. 4: The fabric stretched open with *shinshi* hangers to dry outside after applying the rice-paste.

Indigo Dyeing

The prepared fabric is then soaked in the indigo dye-bath (*ai-game* 藍壺) for five to ten minutes, and the dried indigo used to make the bath comes from Tokushimaya 徳島屋 shop in Shikoku. When the fabric is removed from the fermenting-indigo bath, it is first a greenish color and only becomes blue when oxidized by exposure to air. Upon removal from the bath,



Fig. 5: Mr. Noguchi soaking the fabric in the dye-bath and checking the result.

the fabric is opened one hanger at a time to check how well the dye has permeated and to allow the indigo to oxidize to blue. (Fig. 5) Then this process of soaking the fabric in the dye-bath and checking it is repeated three to four times until thoroughly dyed. The fabric is then hung upside-down from its *shinshi* hangers and strung out accordion-style until dry in order for the dye to set.

After drying, the fabric is washed and cleaned. First the *gojiru* paste is carefully brushed off with a hand-brush in a tub of water, and then the pink *nori* rice-paste used as the resist is removed by soaking and rinsing in a tub of cold water. Finally the dyed fabric is hung outside to dry and the dyeing process is complete for a finished bolt of yukata fabric. (Fig. 6) The portions of the design that had been coated with the pink paste were preserved



Fig. 6: The dyed and cleaned bolts of fabric hung outside to dry.

from being dyed with indigo and those portions remain white, while the exposed portions have become dyed with indigo. The entire process takes between seven and ten days to complete depending on the weather.

Production Schedule

The designs that are going to be used that year for the yukata fabrics are decided by Chikusen in September, and the stencils sent from Ise through Chikusen. The Noguchi Some-Kōjō workshop then dyes samples of the fabric designs (*mihon* 見本), which are displayed at a two-day product-display exhibition (*tenjikai* 展示会) in the following month of January. The product-display exhibition is attended by the retailers who decide, based on the samples, which fabrics and how many they wish to order for that year. After which, the orders for the dyed fabrics are then sent from Chikusen to the Noguchi Some-Kōjō workshop. The indigo dyeing begins in March and is generally completed in June, when the finished fabrics are sent to Chikusen, and from there to the department stores and kimono boutique retailers.

Conclusion

Until recently, the dyeing process at the Noguchi Some-Kōjō workshop was a family-held secret tradition, but now as a dying art rarely practiced anymore, Mr. Noguchi and his son gladly share their knowledge so that this tradition may be more widely known. The family workshop is based on an apprenticeship system within the family, and it takes years of training. After six or seven years of apprenticeship, the son can now apply the rice-paste used as the resist, but the father still does the actually dyeing himself and is the manager in charge of overseeing the overall production. Only after having observed the dyeing process, can one fully appreciate all the labor and care that goes into producing a traditionally-dyed *naga-ita chūgata aizome* fabric. Considering the labor and quality of these hand-dyed fabrics, the finished yukata is truly a bargain for its price.

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