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A Martial Art – Indigo-dyed textiles from Saitama, Japan.

Spring sunshine glows over the patchwork of tilled rice fields across the Kanto plain, north west of Tokyo. A tall chimney juts up from a cluster of buildings in the town of Hanyū, known for both udon noodles, and indigo cloth. During the Meiji period (late C19th to early C20th) this region was known as *Bushu* and there were around 200 separate cloth-making businesses, making the most of the rich soil where both indigo and cotton plants could be raised. Only 4 companies remain today, most now specialised in embroidery, with Kojima Senshoku, the thriving survivor of the traditional '*Bushu-sho*'-indigo industry.

Since its foundation in 1872, Kojima has dyed and woven indigo cotton fabrics, which for a long period were used for agricultural work-wear. The ordinarily dark blue doesn't readily show signs of daily toil while natural indigo, with its distinctive smell (even after washing) is somewhat insect repellent, making it very good all-over colour for out-door clothing. Early bast-fibre (plant stem) textiles and later cotton (cultivated from the 1500s), were easily coloured in the indigo vat, which once prepared, could be used over many weeks. Patterning was also easy as resist dyeing of threads or cloth, together with un-dyed and tonal shades, could deliver variety and serve vernacular traditions or fashionable tastes. As such, indigo made a perfect dyestuff for the once large scale cottage industry.

The popularity of this daily wear continued beyond the second world war, but advancing modernisation of the 1950's brought new organised work and factory uniforms, and the demand for traditional work clothes fell rapidly. Kojima's cloth however, already revered for its high density and durability, and good colour, became increasingly popular in a then growing market, that of the *gi* or garment components of *kendo*, the ancient art of Japanese swordsmanship. Despite increased westernisation, modern Japan was keen to preserve its traditions and as a Japanese martial art, Kendo was increasingly popular. The *gi* was an essential element, and the *iki* (refined aesthetic sensibility) of Japanese dress equally important. High-grade cloth in rich Japanese blue, that held the deep pleats of the *hakama* culottes, and the stitching of layered linings in undergarments, jackets and hoods, was therefore primary and Kojima seized the market. Repeatedly perfected high tensile strength and good colourfastness ensure Kojima remains the leading producer in Japan.

Hideyuki Kojima is the 5th generation incumbent of this indigo empire. After his father died at a fairly early age, he quickly decided to continue the line. He remembers a time when after leaving the countryside for the urban thrills of university life in Tokyo, he had felt release from the smells and sounds of the dye-houses. But he was instinctively drawn back by sweet childhood memories of the factory family, and the confidence and conviction in something understood, ingrained as much as the tell-tale blue in the finger nails of his working hands.

This passion is true of the whole 'family' at Kojima. The 50 or so workers share an obvious joy and pride in the Japanese blue that they make and sell.

The company is very conscious of the need to sustain such a dedicated workforce, and takes-on a couple of apprentices a year, some local and some from further afield, all keen to become part of this special industry. Training then reflects the wider established teaching of the arts and making practices in Japan, where 10 years of rigorous and reflective 'learning-by-doing' is considered the best and most necessary way to acquire independent skills. Kojima also passionately supports the continuance of traditional work and regularly nominates individuals for the prestigious *Dentou Kougei Shi* or Traditional Craftsmanship Award, with two workers currently holding titles. This both contributes to preservation of the crafts and provides very good recognition for the continuing 'brand'.

The factory complex itself is typical of many textile mills and numerous buildings have northwest facing *nokogiri-yane* or 'saw-toothed' roofs. These are striking against the fresh spring sky, the jagged elevations bringing the best light deep into the factory.

The mill carries out every process except spinning, with its mainly cotton yarn shipped in (as far as possible) from domestic supply, but regularly from further afield including Pakistan and India. Traditional dyeing methods are key and while natural indigo dye (from Tokushima) continues to be used for a good deal of the production, 'indigo pure' or chemical indigo, is also widely and expertly employed.

The yarn dyeing vat itself is rich with indigo, the cracked and wozy surface, telling of the anaerobic alchemy below. A semi-mechanised process here is an ingenious modification of traditional Japanese yarn dyeing. Skeins hung and gently tensioned from a set of large hooks are lowered into the deep vat, rested a minute or two, and raised-up again. The green-ish indigo liquor drains away and the skeins are mechanically twisted, the hooks above rotating against fixed bars below, wringing them out in a slowly reversed and repeated action, just as one would do by hand. Dyers then open them up so that air can penetrate to the core, and oxygen can work its magic, turning the cotton blue. This is repeated 10-15 times, depending on the desired depth of colour.

The yarn is then washed around 15 times in fresh water, dipped in a root starch solution ensuring the yarn strength and ease in weaving, and dried naturally in the sunshine. It's then wound-down for warping and weaving on the wonderfully slow and solid shuttle looms, which deliver the most durable cloth. Finishing processes all happen on site too, and in addition to those techniques perfected over many years for the indigo cloths, Kojima boasts a portfolio of services it is able to sell to other cloth makers, bringing welcome business and useful diversification.

Kojima's modern philosophy is both about past and present and while it seeks to preserve the older techniques that deliver special character, it is embracing new technologies or systems that increase volume and efficiency. Established materials are carefully married with the new, and machinery employed only so

far as not to erode the need for underlying handwork. It thus operates a 'Hybrid practice', an increasingly popular take on the traditional paradigm.

The company is expanding its range of goods, seeking to appeal to foreign tastes and to the international fashion industry. It is experimenting with new ideas which retain 'a feel of the Edo period' (an aesthetically rich era, 1603-1867) extending beyond the various grades of kendo hakama and lining cloths, to shirt fabrics, bag canvases and a growing range of indigo products, employing weaving, knitting and printing techniques. The company and indeed town, now welcomes visitors to its yearly *Aizome ichi* 'Indigo markets', where the history, practice and products of the industry can be enjoyed.

Self-awareness, tenacity and cultural pragmatism have thus far secured Kojima's longevity over 140 years and it should continue to enjoy a bright, or appropriately 'blue', future.