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Bashofu – banana-fibre textile culture of Okinawa

Okinawa, Japan's southernmost prefecture is an archipelago of 146 islands stretching between Kyushu and Taiwan whose rich culture has resulted from its topography, and regional influences. As a part of this mix, *Bashofu* or 'banana-fibre cloth', has a distinct local (and national) identity, which has altered over time with the many social, economic and cultural transformations of broader Okinawan (and Japanese) society.

As the name implies bashofu is made from a tree-like plantain in the banana family (*Musa balbisiana*). While characteristic of the subtropical landscape, botanical research has proven that 'thread-banana', distinct from fruit or flower bearing plants (and known as *ito-basho* in modern Japanese), is not indigenous to the islands. Research now also suggests that both plant and textile were introduced from Southern China.

Banana-fibre is technically a leaf fibre, found in the "trunk" (or 'pseudo-stem') of the banana "tree" rather than in the upper green leaves. This trunk actually consists of a series of inter-nesting leaf bases, which can be separated into grades. Outer sections contain relatively coarse fibre and the inner ones finer. In simple terms, this material is divided, softened by boiling, and then scraped ('scutched') to remove the waste phloem. Once dried, the resulting fibre-strips are split into desired thickness, knotted end-to-end in continuous length, spun (twisted for strength) and woven. The work is both laborious and highly skilled, but results in a distinctive cloth, both crisp and light, and cool to the skin, ideal for the regional climate.

Bashofu forms a very interesting part of rich Okinawan history, which is importantly punctuated by periods of both tributary state relations (especially with neighbouring China), and full colonisation. From 1429 the main island of Okinawa was known as the kingdom of Chuzan with China bestowing the title 'King of Ryukyu' on local monarch, Hashi. For a century and a half this kingdom prospered, and trade with China brought great wealth. The ruling classes constructed shrines, temples, gardens, and a palace in the capital city of Shuri (a hill-top town in modern Naha) and sophisticated court culture was established.

In terms of textile culture, records from this time only indicate the use of indigo coloured ramie fibre cloth, with bashofu not arriving in Ryukyu until the 16th century. Evidence is found in the accounts of shipwrecked Koreans (1546), suggesting not only the cultivation of *ito basho* for making cloth but that 'superior bashofu was used for women's court garments'. Bashofu then appears in lists of tribute goods sent to China (1587) and continues to be listed until the later 17th century.

In 1609, Ryukyu was annexed by the Satsuma from Kyushu and heavy cloth taxes were levied on the people of the islands via the Shuri government. The Satsuma preferred refined ramie cloth (*jofu*) to bashofu and traded it on the Japanese mainland. The tax demand therefore left commoners with no alternative fibre and Shuri encouraged the cultivation of *ito-basho* and the

weaving of bashofu. Sumptuary rules issued by the Ryukyuan monarchy in 1639 then specified bashofu be used for formal robes of court officials.

The very finest quality was woven in Shuri, dyed in brilliant shades of yellow, red, blue and green, and became known as Shuri bashofu. Ikat patterning was employed, as were sophisticated structural weaves - gauzes and floating-warp – probably borrowed from Chinese techniques. Plain-weave cloth was also colourfully patterned with the Okinawan stencil-resist technique of *bingata*. Although coarser bashofu was not regulated, and was widely adopted, only plain weave cloth was permitted. This was patterned in indigo-blue or sharinbai-brown stripes, which varied with gender, age and to a degree, district.

By the time of the forced annexation of the Ryukyu Islands by Japan's Meiji government in 1879, bashofu was worn by the broadest spectrum of society. However with the adoption of new 'Japanese' materials, namely silk and cotton by the upper classes, production of refined bashofu fell into decline. Although it remained the main textile of the common people, a lack of high-end demand meant the number of weavers mastering the skills to make bashofu fell rapidly. Finally the ravages of World War Two brought production to a complete halt. But the fortunes (and indeed character) of this textile were to turn in the 1940s when it found a champion in one quiet, modest, but now iconic woman, Toshiko Taira.

Taira was born in 1920, in the village of Kijoka (87km north of Naha) where bashofu weaving was part of everyday life. In 1944 as one of a group of 110 Okinawan girls, she was sent to Kurashiki in Okayama Prefecture, to contribute to the war effort making aeroplane parts. Later, whilst working in a spinning mill, she was encouraged by the president to reconsider Okinawan culture through traditional textiles. She received broad technical training in weaving under Tonomura Kichinosuke (a member of the Japan Folk Crafts Association), and read Soetsu Yanagi's 'Bashofu monogatari'. She was greatly impressed by his admiration for both the textile and its culture.

She returned to Kijoka in 1947 determined to work with bashofu. However this was challenging on many levels as whilst ito-basho crops had been largely cut down to help avoid spread of malaria, culturally, US occupation and influence had also changed society. Fewer and fewer people were interested in bashofu and especially kimono. Being inventive, Taira began making and selling interior textiles (table-cloths, cushion covers) for mainly American residents and tourists seeking souvenirs of Okinawa. This raised profile, and driven by the criticism of elderly bashofu weavers (accustomed to finer cloth), Taira decided to develop a high quality production system. She rallied a large number of women, including those who had lost husbands during the war, and friends and veterans of bashofu, encouraging them to work with her.

From the mid-1950s technical education of bashofu weaving began and 'The Association for the Manufacturing of Banana-fibre cloth in Kijoka' was established enjoying a subsidy from Okinawan Government. In 1974, two years after the reversion of Okinawa to Japan, bashofu was designated as

one of Japan's 'Important Intangible Cultural Properties'. Taira (as head of the organisation) was regularly exhibiting nationally and bashofu became widely recognised. Orders increased and commercial value climbed. Now officially certificated with 'authenticity', it was classified as one of Japan's 'Traditional Craft Goods'.

Indeed, tradition remains a big part of the continuing story. Aesthetically while Kijoka-bashofu is still made by hand from Okinawan ito-basho plants it differs characteristically from the simple striped or checked cloths of old. Encouraged by greater understanding of visual identity and broader traditions, ikat (once reserved for the higher classes) has been blended with traditional colouring to develop distinctive patterning and symbolism. Together with some structural weaves the palette has also increased, reintroducing reds, yellow, greens and pinks, contributing perhaps to an emerging 'new bashofu'.

In June 2000, fifty years after the law for the protection of Cultural Properties was established, Taira was designated 'Holder of Important Intangible Cultural Property', or 'Living National Treasure'. Bashofu has thus become known as 'Taira Toshiko's bashofu', and once popularly considered the cloth of the common people, it has been raised to valuable cultural capital. Customers are now rarely ordinary people but rather the wealthy purveyors of traditional culture and international museum curators.

Today, while this wave ensures annual production is sustained, it has none-the-less significantly decreased. 664 kimono bolts were woven in 1957 whereas contemporary annual output has been under 200. This is largely to do with the difficulty in maintaining a skilled workforce. Community is everything in the bashofu cottage industry. Until fairly recently, efficient division of labour employed the efforts of all, young or old. But changing lifestyles and opportunities have impacted the traditional organised system, particularly the employment of a wide age-range of workers. Where sustained and stimulating working lives used to contribute to the famous Okinawan longevity, skilled elderly weavers are now retiring to nursing homes. Meanwhile the small numbers of young Okinawans (and others from farther afield) attracted to come and learn the skills, rarely stay long beyond the traditional ten-year apprenticeship.

However, while there are challenges, passion and enthusiasm run high and the weaving workshops of Kijoka (and indeed a small number of other minor production centres) continue to produce bashofu. These efforts in establishing standards of making and sharing of knowledge, together with broad cultural regeneration and appreciation, should secure the lasting place of bashofu in Okinawan and Japanese material culture.