

Records of Dyeing and Weaving Techniques at Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties

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Introduction

The presentations we have heard so far were themed on tangible textile artifacts that have physical shape. In my presentation, I will talk about intangible dyeing and weaving techniques that do not have physical shape. Today, the techniques for producing manually manufactured textiles are considered to be a cultural property and cultural heritage not only in Japan but throughout the world.

Textile artifacts can be stored in museum storage, and their restoration and conservation can also be discussed. However, this is not the case with manual textile techniques that have no shape; they cannot be placed in storage to be handed down. Tangible textile artifacts have been institutionally protected such as by the Law for the Preservation of National Treasures (enacted in 1929) and the Law Regarding the Preservation of Important Works of Fine Arts (enacted in 1933). Intangible techniques, on the other hand, were stipulated for the first time in 1950 in the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties. The Act on Protection of Cultural Properties provides for various categories of cultural properties and includes textiles in the scope of tangible cultural properties and dyeing and weaving techniques in the scope of intangible cultural properties.

You may wonder, then, as to how and by whom intangible textile techniques are protected. Dyeing and weaving techniques are protected by various projects and public recognition systems of organizations and institutions such as the Agency for Cultural Affairs, represented today by Ms. Koshiishi who gave a keynote presentation, as well as local public corporations and other governmental and private agencies, such as the Pola Foundation for the Promotion of Traditional Japanese Culture, for example.

Techniques in and of themselves are intangible cultural properties. The most well-known safeguarding method by the central and local governments is the system by which techniques are designated and the holders of these techniques (individuals and organizations) are certified.

For example, the *Mokuhanzuri Sarasa* (wood-block) dyeing technique was designated an intangible cultural property, and Mr. Shigeto Suzuta (1954-) was certified as the holder of the technique in 2008. Similarly, the *Saganishiki* brocading technique was designated an intangible cultural property, and Ms. Fumi Koga (1927-2015) was certified as the holder of the technique in 1994. I repeat, techniques in and of themselves are intangible cultural properties. For this reason, the designation is canceled in the event the holder of a technique dies. Not only individuals, but organizations may also be certified as

holders of a technique. For example, the *Kurume Kasuri* (ikat) dyeing technique was designated an intangible cultural property in 1957, and the Important Intangible Cultural Property Kurume Kasuri Technique Holders' Association was certified as the holder of the technique. In the case of tangible cultural properties, it is rare for a designation to be canceled once a property is designated. However, in the case of intangible cultural properties, it is not the textiles that are produced but the techniques that are used to produce them that are designated as cultural properties. Therefore, when the certified holder is lost, the designation is canceled.

Another safeguarding method that is popularly employed is to keep records. Records kept by the Agency for Cultural Affairs (including the National Commission for Protection of Cultural Properties) include document records, independently created work process samples, and documentary films of craft skills. This type of safeguarding method is also employed by local public corporations, and there are also video records kept by the Pola Foundation for the Promotion of Traditional Japanese Culture. Furthermore, video records and catalogs are at times compiled on occasions of museum exhibitions, and records may also be taken independently at the initiative of organizations of technique holders.

The Agency for Cultural Affairs has kept records of craft skills since the mid-1940s, and these records are stored in Tokyo National Museum and other museums. Additionally, the website of the Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties discloses results of a survey on records of the Edo Komon (paste resist stencil) dyeing technique dated 1952, for those who may be interested¹⁾.

As I mentioned earlier, the Agency for Cultural Affairs has also produced documentary films of craft skills since 1971. The process of creating a craft is filmed and recorded, and that craftwork is purchased by the Agency for Cultural Affairs. It is an attempt to comprehensively preserve both the records of the production process and the products themselves. In this way, intangible cultural properties that have no shape have been safeguarded and preserved by keeping various records through such means as document records and video records of relevant skills.

1. Records of dyeing and weaving techniques at Tokyo National Institute for Cultural Properties

Dyeing and weaving techniques cannot be manifested without materials and tools. It is most important what type of material is used, what kind of tool is used, and how the craftwork is processed.

1-1. Dyeing and weaving techniques and tools

When we turn our eyes to techniques that have been handed down through the generations in Japan, we can see that different tools have sometimes been used to produce the same effect.

Let us take a look at tools that are used in the process of extracting fibers from a type of hemp called *karamushi* (ramie). In Showamura, Fukushima prefecture, where *karamushi* that is the raw material for Ojiya-chijimi (ramie plain weave crêpe from Niigata) and Aechigo-jofu (ramie plain weave ikat from Niigata) textiles is cultivated, tools called *ohiki-ita* (fiber extracting plate) and *ohiki-go* (fiber

extracting scraper) are used (Fig. 1)²). However, fibers for the Miyakojofu (ramie plain weave ikat from Okinawa) textile are extracted using a shell called *mimigai* (*Haliotis asinine*) (Figs. 2, 3). Naturally, if the tool differs, the skill also differs. However, the difference in the end product is not readily apparent from the Ojiya-chijimi or Miyako-jofu textiles. Any minute differences in yarns become inconspicuous during the processing, dyeing and weaving of the yarns.

Let us take the *hera*, or spatula, that is used in stencil dyeing as another example. How had this tool been used? Even if all that remains is the spatula, it is possible to record its material and shape at a later time. However, from the spatula itself, no information can be extracted as to how it was held in the hands of craftsmen or what kind of motion was involved in applying the starch paste. Yet, the significance of the tool can only be recognized if such “intangible” information exists. This is precisely why we wish to record intangible information relating to tools.

Over a period of two years, from 2014 to 2015, we conducted a joint survey of the Kumagaya dyeing technique with Kumagaya city in Saitama prefecture. We recorded information about how tools are used, acquired and maintained by each craft workshop and compiled a report accompanied by video images (Fig. 4)³). The survey was conducted at a time when craft workshops in the Kumagaya area had been going out of business or facing a lack of successors. Thus, we decided to record such “intangible” information about the usage and maintenance of tools that have long been used. As it was information that needed to be personally acquired from relevant craftsmen and could not be recorded once they went out of business, we felt strongly the necessity of giving proper thought to the relationship between techniques and tools through this project.

There was also much to learn about the Edo Komon dyeing technique that was a tradition in the Kumagaya area, through its tools. Up to now, my understanding of Edo Komon was that it is a method of dyeing in which starch mixed with a dye is applied to a fabric using a stencil and spatula and fixing the pattern by steaming the fabric.

However, in the Kumagaya area, there was also a technique that uses a screen (Fig. 6) instead of a stencil and spatula to apply starch to the fabric (Fig. 5). In the conventional method of stencil and spatula (Fig. 5), patterns are connected using aligning marks on the stencil called *hoshi*. On the other hand, in the method that uses a screen (Fig. 6), a framed screen (fitted with a stencil) is first secured with metal fittings, and starch is applied with a screen spatula while sequentially shifting the screen to the next adjacent position. In both methods, starch is applied to the fabric using a stencil, but the technique and the amount of time it takes completely differ depending on the tool that is used. The conventional technique is designated an Important Intangible Cultural Property by the name of Edo Komon, but the technique that uses a screen is not included within the scope of the designation.

The question, then, is whether the two Edo Komon techniques can be distinguished by the finished textile product. Both resemble each other, but they are difficult to distinguish. Even with the same material and technique, the tool that is used and the skill that is applied may sometimes differ. The

skill that is fostered in each region and is difficult to decipher from the finished product, may itself be considered an intangible cultural property. This is precisely why records of dyeing and weaving techniques kept by Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties attach particular significance to the usage and maintenance of tools, and why it is important for intangible information acquired from such surveys to be stored along with the tools themselves. In the future, I believe it is necessary to think about keeping records of intangible cultural properties by focusing on tools and understanding their relationship with techniques.

1-2. Dyeing and weaving techniques and materials

Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties focuses on materials used by dyeing and weaving techniques in the same way it focuses on tools. In fiscal 2016, a joint project was implemented with Kusatsu city in Shiga prefecture to produce records of the technique for manufacturing a type of blue paper called *aobanagami* (blue flower paper). Also known as spiderwort-dyed paper, *aobanagami* is made from a blue dye extracted from the petals of the spiderwort flower (Fig. 7) and is used by dissolving the dye from the paper with water for drawing preliminary sketches for Yuzen textiles and Ukiyo-e prints (Fig. 8). It was valued, particularly because it washes away with water (Fig. 9).

There are only three farms that produce *aobanagami* today. With respect to Yuzen dyeing, a material called synthetic *aobana* (water soluble blue dye) has also come to be used in the sketching process in addition to *aobanagami* in modern times and later. Its combination with other materials used in Yuzen dyeing has brought a change to the dyeing process and technique. Presently, the usage of *aobanagami* is also being surveyed in conjunction with the recording of the *aobanagami* production process.

2. Future issues

The magazine *Senshoku Bijutsu* (dyed and woven fine arts) published in 1952 contains a discussion on intangible cultural properties and dyeing and weaving techniques (pages 27, 30), and presents issues that still exist today. For example, it mentions the opinion that not only craftsmen, but the many materials that pertain to techniques, including the main materials and secondary materials, also need to be preserved. It also calls for the need to properly manage materials based on an understanding of what kinds of techniques should be secured and preserved and what kinds of materials are needed. For more than 70 years since the perspective of cultural property protection has been applied to dyeing and weaving techniques, our predecessors have established various systems and developed a framework for the safeguarding of techniques. As their successors who have inherited the responsibility, what are the issues that we should address today?

I think many of the techniques for producing materials and tools that have been passed down will no longer exist ten years from now. The reason is because most of the craft workshops we visited in our survey lacked a successor and were operated by elderly craftsmen. This is precisely why I think

one of the projects that Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties should engage in now is to leave records of techniques that have no successors.

In the recording of dyeing and weaving techniques pursued by Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, I wish to seek the identity of these techniques by focusing on the relationship between techniques and the tools and materials that are used. Within the history of textiles in Japan, what role will techniques that have been inherited today, play? Through what kind of process were they passed down and further developed? I believe it is important to keep records in reference to a clear understanding of such transitions.

The project also has the meaning of accumulating information that would benefit the conservation of textile artifacts in the future. There will probably come a time a hundred or two hundred years later when people will talk about contemporary works of art as cultural properties and cultural heritage dating back from the 2010s. When that time comes, records about their production would be extremely helpful at the time of conservation. As Mr. Shunsuke Nakayama, Director of the Japan Center for International Cooperation in Conservation, mentioned earlier, when an attempt is made to conserve contemporary textile artifacts, there are those which already pose a question as to how they were originally produced. From this perspective, I think it is important to keep a record of today's dyeing and weaving techniques.

Conclusion

What kind of techniques shall be passed down hereafter? This is decided by us who live in the present. Today, techniques from the early modern era and techniques invented in modern times are both rapidly dying out. Techniques that are of interest to many people are passed down and techniques that are of no interest gradually fall into desuetude. This is why at Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, we intend to pursue the task of recording dyeing and weaving techniques while implementing activities that would attract the interest of many people. Thank you very much.

Notes

- 1) "Study of Records of Craft Skills: Through 'Records of the Edo Komon Technique'," in *Collection of Materials on the Tradition of Intangible Cultural Properties*, a project report of the Department of Intangible Cultural Heritage, March 2011 <http://www.tobunken.go.jp/ich/wp-content/uploads/95ea599326418004ed9479f90a72660e.pdf>.
- 2) In Showamura, the process of extracting fibers is called *karamushi-biki* (literally, "extracting fiber").
- 3) *Report of the Study on the Tradition of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Traditional Techniques)*, Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, issued September 2015.



Fig. 1 *Ohiki* (fiber extracting) process in Showamura, Fukushima prefecture (photo by Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties)



Fig. 3 *Ohiki* (fiber extracting) process using a *mimigai* (*Haliotis asinine*) (photo by Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties)



Fig. 2 *Ohiki* (fiber extracting) process in Miyakojima using a *mimigai* (*Haliotis asinine*) (photo by Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties)



Fig. 4 Tools made by Okubo Senko (Kumagaya city) (photo by Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties)



Fig. 5 Printing using a stencil (photo by Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties)



Fig. 6 Printing using a screen (photo by Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties)



Fig. 9 Soaking the *aobanagami* in water for use in making Yuzen textiles (photo by Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties)



Fig. 7 *Aobana* (photo by Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties)



Fig. 8 Drying Japanese *washi* paper soaked with the juice from the *aobana* flower (photo by Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties)