

Oshima Tsumugi and Mud Dyeing

Tsumugi is one of the world's great textiles. It is a labor-intensive, finely-woven pongee—a soft, matte fabric made from threads of raw silk. The origins of the technique used to make *tsumugi* go back over 1,300 years, and the fabric is believed to have been first developed in India. Amami's version of this fabric, known as Oshima *tsumugi*, is one of the most highly prized, and historically was used for elegantly designed, subtly dyed kimono. Traditionally, women would do the weaving at home, in between their chores, to contribute to the family income. By the latter half of the Edo period (1603–1867), Oshima *tsumugi* had become a specialty of Amami Oshima and, like sugarcane, islanders had to supply the fabric to the Satsuma domain as a kind of tax. This ended in 1879, when Amami Oshima became part of Japan. While production has decreased in recent years, many weavers still work at home.

Mud Dyeing

The process of making *tsumugi* is time-consuming and complex, with numerous, often repetitive steps. It starts with plotting a pattern that will guide how the 100 percent silk threads, both vertical and horizontal, are dyed before weaving. Many of the patterns are traditional designs that have been used for centuries, but there are also new versions created to suit modern tastes.

The threads are bound according to the pattern, and then dyed. One set consists of dyeing 20 to 80 times with a dye from the Yeddo hawthorn shrub (*techigi* in local dialect, and *sharinbai* in Japanese), and once with mud, traditionally from rice paddies. This is repeated three or four times. The combination of tannin from the Yeddo hawthorn and iron in the mud produces the traditional shade of black for which Oshima *tsumugi* is known. Indigo is used for blue shades.

The Weaving

The threads are separated and prepared in a three-day process. When the bindings are removed, the dyed lengths of the threads and the white, undyed lengths form what will

be the woven pattern. Then manual weaving begins, with the weavers carefully lining up the threads on the looms. This process requires intense concentration and skilled handiwork: one *tan*, the 13-meter-long roll of fabric needed to make one kimono, takes even the most experienced weaver 40 or 50 days to complete, at a rate of about 30 centimeters per day.

Certified Excellence

Every roll is inspected in detail before it receives the labels certifying that it meets strict levels of quality, was dyed in mud, and produced on the island. A label with an illustration of a globe certifies it is authentic Amami Oshima *tsumugi*, distinguishing it from Oshima *tsumugi* made in other parts of Kagoshima Prefecture. Oshima *tsumugi* is used not only in traditional kimono but also in products and souvenirs such as wallets, phone cases, coasters, card cases, face masks, men's shirts and more. The price depends on the intricacy of the pattern and the skill of the weaver. Visitors can watch the process of producing Oshima *tsumugi*, and workshops in mud dyeing and simple weaving techniques are available.