

## Local Crafts

### Tortoiseshell Weaving (*Kikko-ori*) and Shizukuishi Asa-no-Kai

Japan has a rich weaving tradition and various styles have developed around the country. One unusual textile, *kikko-ori* (tortoiseshell weaving), comes from Shizukuishi. This intricate technique is used to create fabric from hemp fibers. The name is derived from the raised hexagonal pattern, resembling the shell of a tortoise, that is produced on the fabric.

Even in its heyday (the late nineteenth to early twentieth century) *kikko-ori* was not widely produced in the region due to the time and skill that it required. As a result, a limited number of weavers became proficient in making *kikko-ori* fabric. Around the turn of the twentieth century, manufacturing methods that could produce other fabrics with greater ease were introduced, bringing about the decline of *kikko-ori*. In recent decades, however, efforts to reestablish it as a local tradition have led to a renewed appreciation for this unique style of weaving.

In 1968, two local women, Kato Kiwa and Kato Mitsue, teamed up to try to recreate *kikko-ori* based on Kiwa's experience of weaving in her youth. Mitsue went on to lead further efforts to bring back the craft in Shizukuishi, working with other interested citizens to set up a study group and using traditional techniques to cultivate and prepare hemp to make the thread.

Mitsue served as the first chairperson of the Kikko-ori Study Group, set up in 1985, which was renamed the Shizukuishi Asa-no-Kai, or Shizukuishi Hemp Society, in 1988. The craft was awarded special status as an important historical technique in 2005. Current members of the Shizukuishi Asa-no-Kai continue to preserve and pass on their skills. Weavers from the group give demonstrations for visitors to Shizukuishi, and even offer them a chance to try weaving *kikko-ori* with them.

In the past, one of the major uses for *kikko-ori* fabric was for making undergarments called *ase-hajiki*. (An example of *ase-hajiki* can be seen at the Shizukuishi History and Folklore Museum.) The fabric absorbs sweat readily, helping to keep the wearer comfortable during the warmer months—a major advantage in a region where most people were farmers. It is said that *kikko-ori* cloth was of such high quality that it was even presented as a gift to members of the Nanbu family, who ruled most of northeastern Japan from the Kamakura period (1185–1333) through the Meiji Restoration of 1868.

*Kikko-ori* is woven using a backstrap loom—another unusual aspect of the craft. In most areas of Japan, this style of loom was replaced by easier-to-use floor looms, which appeared in the late nineteenth century. With a backstrap loom, the threads of the warp, which run lengthwise in the finished fabric, are strapped directly to the weaver's body. This means the operator can control the tension of the vertical threads while weaving the weft, or horizontal thread, over the warp to create a strong, tightly woven fabric. In this sense, the weaver uses her entire body, so both physical strength and a high level of skill are required.

Today the Shizukuishi Asa-no-Kai carries out demonstrations and workshops for locals and visitors at the Shizukuishi Agricultural Training Center. The entire process is still performed by hand, beginning with the preparation of locally grown hemp for the thread. After picking the hemp, members of the Asa-no-Kai remove the leaves and steam the stalks before drying them. Next, they soak the hemp in a liquid fermented from hemp scraps saved from the previous year. This process facilitates the removal of the outer layers, which are peeled off and dried. Finally, the weavers twist the fibers to create the thread and dye it using natural materials, after which it is ready for use.

Members of the Shizukuishi Asa-no-Kai produce and sell handmade *kikko-ori* items, both practical and decorative, which make ideal gifts or souvenirs. These include bookmarks, various kinds of bags, table runners, and place mats, which are available at the Tourism and Produce Center in Shizukuishi Station as well as other locations around the town. Visitors who would like to watch a demonstration or try *kikko-ori* should make a reservation in advance through the Tourism and Produce Center.