

## **Ojiya *Chijimi***

Ojiya *chijimi* is a lightweight, ramie crepe fabric unique to the Ojiya region of Niigata Prefecture, the old province of Echigo. Snow and age-old artisanal lore are essential in producing this delicately crimped textile. From extracting plant fibers and turning them into thread to naturally bleaching and softening the woven fabric in the snow, the process involves multiple techniques that have been passed down for many generations.

Production begins with the harvest of ramie (*Boehmeria nivea*), a perennial plant of the nettle family that, like flax (the raw material for linen) and hemp, produces bast fibers suitable for weaving cloth. The bast fibers from the outer skin of the stalks are peeled off and painstakingly separated into fine strands, then hand-plied together end-to-end to create fine thread. The thread may be further tie-dyed before being woven into a soft, light textile. After weaving, the fabric is washed in hot water and spread across snow-covered fields for several days in the late winter sunshine to bleach the whites and soften the colors. The harmonious colors and patterns of these handwoven textiles laid out over snowy fields resemble works of art.

### *A lightweight, crepe fabric*

Ojiya *chijimi* has a delicate crepe texture resulting from processes that take place both before and after weaving. The fabric is woven in the winter, but designed to be worn in the hot, humid summer—the soft crinkles prevent the fabric from clinging uncomfortably to the skin.

To produce the creped texture in the final product, artisans must first tightly twist and starch the wefts (horizontal threads) before weaving, and then later knead the woven fabric in water to remove the starch. Washing the fabric by hand causes the flattened starched wefts to release and shrink, pulling the warps (vertical threads) closer together, which creates a distinct wrinkled effect. The word *chijimi* in Japanese means “shrink,” referring to the subtle crinkles that make the fabric appear to have been shrunk. These ripples define Ojiya *chijimi* and distinguish it from other ramie fabrics such as Echigo *jofu*, a similar textile produced in Minami Uonuma, south of Ojiya.

### *A gift from snow and water*

Ojiya’s climate and environment are essential in the production process. Ramie fiber breaks easily in arid environments but stays soft and pliable in the snowy, humid

winters of Ojiya. The stems of the ramie plant are dampened in tepid water, traditionally from snowmelt, then split into fine, hairlike strands.

These threads are coated in a boiled *funori* seaweed starch, making them smooth and easier to weave. The weaving is done in the humid environment of winter, a season of frequent snows. Even then, the brittle threads are continually wetted down to prevent them from snapping.

After the textile is woven, it is once again soaked and kneaded in warm water in a process called *yumomi*. In the final step, the fabric is carefully laid out on snow-covered fields for several days. The sun and melting snow bleach the fabric and soften the woven fibers.

#### *The heritage of Ojiya chijimi*

Ojiya *chijimi* weaving techniques have been passed down through generations since before the seventeenth century. Kimono made of the fine fabric were in high demand during the Edo period (1603–1867), and provided both men and women of the samurai class with cool, lightweight attire for summer. *Chijimi* was traditionally used for kimono, but today artisans make other types of clothing with it as well, such as shirts, dresses, and scarves.

Ojiya *chijimi* is very closely related to Echigo *jofu*, a fabric produced in Minami Uonuma, located south of Ojiya, also in Niigata. The production techniques are almost identical, except that the texture of Echigo *jofu* is smoother. Together, these textiles are designated a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage.