

## How Ojiya *Chijimi* Is Made

Producing Ojiya *chijimi* fabric involves more than 70 different processes including exposure to snow, which falls heavily in Ojiya. The crinkled, breathable textile, with a texture similar to linen, is produced in winter, when the region's relatively mild temperatures and high humidity allow for the thread to be made and woven without breaking.

Ojiya *chijimi* is made from ramie, a type of nettle plant, the fibers of which are painstakingly transformed into hairlike threads and twisted to produce smooth strands. Patterns are dyed onto the threads prior to weaving using refined tie-resist-dyeing techniques, and weavers then spend hours each day at the loom meticulously aligning the threads as they weave to create the patterns of the fabric. In the final stages, the cloth is hand-washed and laid out on Ojiya's snow-covered fields, where sun and melting snow naturally bleach and soften the material.

### *Making the threads*

The fine white bast fibers used for making thread are taken from the stalk of the ramie plant. After drying, thread makers split the fibers by fingernail into fine strands, which they then ply together into long strands. This labor-intensive process is called *oumi*. Ojiya's relatively mild temperatures and high humidity in winter keep the ramie threads pliable enough to handle without breaking.

### *Adding a twist*

Artisans twist the thread to help smooth over the joints connecting the strands. In the past, the thread was twisted by hand using a spinning wheel or other method, but now it is usually done on a specially designed machine. Threads to be used for the weft (the horizontal threads) are then given an additional, tighter twist, which is key to Ojiya *chijimi*'s characteristic crinkled texture. After weaving, the fabric is washed in hot water. This relaxes the tightly twisted and starched weft threads, creating subtle ripples in the fabric during the final stages of the process.

### *The dyeing process*

Traditionally, patterned textiles in Ojiya are produced using the tie-resist-dyeing technique called *kasuri* (ikat). In this time-honored method, which involves careful planning, the warp and weft threads are hand-bound with cotton string and dyed before

being woven. First the desired patterns are transferred onto a traditional stacked weft ruler, segments of which are used as a guide to mark off pattern areas on the actual threads. These marks indicate areas over which the weft threads are to be tightly bound before dyeing. The tied areas resist the dye and remain white. The patterns of these tie-dyed threads reveal themselves as the cloth is woven.

Ojiya *chijimi* fabrics come in a variety of colors and patterns, from solid colors to elaborate floral or geometric designs. Traditionally indigo was the dye of choice, but nowadays many different colors are used.

#### *Treating the threads*

After dyeing, the fine threads are coated with a starch made from *funori* seaweed, which smooths remaining snags and strengthens them to make the weaving easier. The starch is later removed by rinsing.

#### *Weaving*

Ojiya *chijimi* is traditionally woven on a semi-frame backstrap loom (*izaribata*) at a typical rate of 10 to 20 centimeters per day. The brittle ramie threads snap easily if they become too dry, so they must be carefully monitored and repaired by hand during the weaving process. For patterned *kasuri* textiles, the artisan must pay careful attention to the warp (vertical) and weft (horizontal) threads on the loom. As a single unaligned or broken thread can lead to a flaw in the final pattern, weaving requires immense concentration and dexterity. Today, in addition to the *chijimi* made entirely by hand, the Ojiya weaving industry also produces ramie crepe textiles from machine-spun thread woven on power looms.

#### *Finishing touches*

Once the fabric is woven, it is soaked and massaged in warm water in a process called *yumomi*. This removes the *funori* starch, which in turn relaxes the tightly twisted weft threads, creating the distinctive creped texture. Finally, bolts of fabric are unrolled on snow-covered fields on sunny days from mid-February to March, a step called “snow bleaching” (*yuki sarashi*). The warm sunshine on the surface of the cloth evaporates the snow beneath and releases ozone, which naturally lightens and softens the fabric. One of the striking sights of Ojiya in late February, at the time of the Ojiya Hot Air Balloon Festival, is the ramie cloth laid out on the snow as colorful balloons float above.

The traditional production processes of Ojiya *chijimi*—hand-plied ramie threads with hand-tie-dyed *kasuri* (ikat) patterns, woven on a semi-frame backstrap loom—have been designated both a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage and an Important Intangible Cultural Property of Japan.