

## Yumigahama and Beyond

Story and photos by Bill Tingey

The Shimane Peninsula never really lives up to its name. Unlike any other peninsula, it does not jut out resolutely into the sea but skirts the mainland from where tenuous links reach out, as if trying to prevent its final break-away. Close inspection of a large scale map, however, proves that it is actually a peninsula.



The issue is confused by what appear to be two lakes along the southern flank of the peninsula. The one in the west is called Lake Shinji and is filled with fresh water. Despite its name, it is connected to the sea by the more easterly tract of water, called Nakaumi. Literally meaning a "middle sea," it is in fact a saltwater lagoon.

But Nakaumi would not be a lagoon at all were it not for Yumigahama. This 20-kilometer spit of sand swings out from the mainland in a long bow shaped arc to fall just short of reaching the peninsula. Its eastern edge is bounded by a continuous sandy beach backed by protective pines which not only contribute to arresting the movement of the sand but also help to characterize this stretch of coastline and make it a well known landmark. It is not surprising, therefore, that the locally woven cotton *ikat* takes its name from this beach. Weaving began in earnest some 250 years ago using cotton which was being grown on the poor sandy soils of this spit fertilized with sardine and seaweed from the omnipresent sea. Later, locally produced indigo gave



Left: Glowing examples of prime Yumigahama ikat; Upper: The pine backed sands of Yumigahama; Above: The rustic elegance of Meimei-an

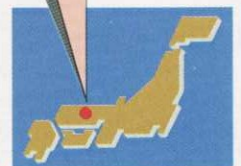
this cloth its main dyestuff and this "cottage" craft started off down a very personal road of invention.

Being a simple form of ikat, the pattern is generally only in the weft, which traditionally is first bound with ramie before being dyed. In the past, there were specialists who produced and sold marked up threads ready for binding and dyeing. When woven the designs were often pictorial, depicting flowers, farm life, or auspicious symbols such as cranes and turtles. Simple geometric designs were also popular. Sometimes the motifs were more topical. At the turn of the century, for instance, cloths depicting the trappings of Westernization were not unusual; and when Japan scored a victory over the Russian Navy, the looms in Yumigahama were soon weaving their own tribute to the Imperial Navy, proving how much of a true folkcraft it had become, reflecting the life and times of the people.

The cloth was not only used for kimono. In the past, girls of fourteen or fifteen would start weaving cloth to make futon covers as part of their dowry. Regrettably, now such luxuries cannot be found.

Fortunately, however, the Museum of Asia located halfway along the spit retains something of the ikat culture of

Matsue is west of Yonago from where Yumigahama can soon be reached. By rail take the San'in main line from Kyoto, or fly to Yonago Airport. The Museum of Asia (Tel: 0859-25-1251) is 25 minutes by taxi from Yonago Station, but only 5 minutes from the airport. Sadly, good Yumigahama ikat is now difficult to come by, but can sometimes be bought at exhibitions. Some is also available at the Japan Traditional Craft Center, Minami Aoyama, Tokyo; Tel: 03-3403-2460. The Warrior House (0852-22-2243), Meimei-an (Tel: 0852-21-9863), the Lafcadio Hearn House (0852-23-0714) and Memorial Museum are all very close together and can be reached by bus or taxi from Matsue train station.



Yumigahama. There are indigo vats, too, as well as a collection of plants used for making natural dyes.

Further west across the waters of Nakaumi lies Matsue, situated where the waters of Lake Shinji flow out into Nakaumi. Unlike Yumigahama, the culture of this castle town is more cerebral.

This soon becomes apparent when we visit the old quarter hard by the castle moat. First, there is an old warrior's house built in 1730. Here we get some idea of how well a high-ranking military official lived in feudal times.

Nearby is the former home and

memorial museum of Lafcadio Hearn. He lived in Matsue during 1891 teaching at a local school. Later he moved on to Kumamoto and Kobe before becoming a well-known lecturer in Tokyo. Originally a journalist, he wrote much which influenced the Western view of Japan and the house and memorabilia here are useful hints of how he must have seen the country then, when it was more refined and composed.

Up on the hill behind and something Hearn would have valued, stands Meimei-an, a teahouse of considerable charm. First built in 1779, it is an

epitome of the rustic and a most contrived form of the uncontrived, so characteristic of the cult of tea much loved by warrior and intellectual alike.

Yumigahama and beyond is therefore well worth visiting, not only for its geographic delights but also for its swings of the aesthetic barometer: from people's folkcraft to intellectual pursuits.



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Act, which replaces the old Staple Food Control Act, needless to say, foodstuffs control reform has received both positive and negative reviews, both of which were incorporated into the new act. Furthermore, the new law leaves concrete measures to be laid out by governmental and bureaucratic orders, so there is the potential to move in either a positive or negative direction depending on how the law is applied. However, drastic change from the political status quo is always unlikely. It is unclear whether structural policies will be pushed forward through price-cutting policies or whether the advancement of price-cutting policies will await the realization of structural reform. To summarize, the new act does not take an aggressive approach to moving forward on reorganization of the aforementioned price system. In fact, the only hope for price reform is a breakthrough in the realm of technological innovation.

## Technological breakthrough

Limitations on space make a full explanation impossible here, but I believe that the only way to lower rice prices is to quickly introduce U.S.-style rice cultivation to Japan. That is to say, regroup existing rice paddies into large fields of several hectares and introduce rice cultivation based on direct seeding rather than transplantation. The land

will have to be leveled to achieve a fixed water depth, requiring laser-guided land levelers. These machines are expensive; most American rice growers lease the machines from machinery dealers, but do the earth-moving work themselves.

At the end of last October, in keeping with an agreement between the government and the opposition, a Cabinet meeting decision set a supplemental budget of ¥6 trillion over six years to deal with the aftermath of the Uruguay Round agricultural agreement. Sixty percent of the budget was earmarked for public works, mainly land reform and land consolidation. This is a move in the right direction. The problem is whether steps will be taken towards implementing U.S.-style rice cultivation.

With the adoption of U.S. cultivation methods, production costs in Japan will approach U.S. levels. Is this just theory? No, there is the success story of the Inba Marsh Land Reform District in Sakura, Chiba Prefecture. Here fields were redrawn to a scale of 2.5 to 10 hectares and irrigation works were buried under the soil, giving the rice paddies and dry fields even more multifaceted uses than U.S. fields. Rice is direct-seeded and labor required per hectare is 10 to 20 man-hours, equivalent to U.S. figures. Under the leadership of an authority with brilliant qualifications in the area of technology to increase yields, after numerous trials,

yields have been stable since 1993. Although there are still few other examples of this kind of rice agriculture, the trend is spreading. These examples show how producers can secure a large income and landowners can secure high rental fees. They also show that the basic conditions for price cutting have been laid.

Japan should import laser-guided land levelers from the United States (also thereby helping to alleviate trade friction) and distribute them throughout the country. Farmers could train in their operation during the winter off-season so they can operate the machines to level their own fields. This proposal would result in both higher incomes for the farmers and lower land costs.

As for the difficult issue of landowners' rights, providing information about how other landowners have maintained high land rents should stimulate their cooperation in this method of farming. There are advantages to both the grower and the landowner and if these components of American-style rice cultivation spread, it will set the stage for the lowering of rice prices. Perhaps this will provide the breakthrough to escape the labyrinth of reorganization of the price system.

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