

## Okinawa: Of Kings, Stone and Abaca

Story and photo by Bill Tingey

Despite being within Japan's national borders, the location of Okinawa close to the Asian continent has always given its culture an individuality that sets it apart from Japan proper. Throughout history, however, this collection of islands has often functioned as a series of "stepping stones" for the passage of culture from Asia into Japan.

One of the Ryukyu chain, the main island of Okinawa was for many centuries the seat of the Ryukyu court at Shuri, from where successive Kings were perhaps forced to rule with one eye on each of their powerful neighbors — China and Japan. But, the direct influence of the royal family did much to foster the growth of a distinctive textile culture on the islands.

The laborious process of tie-dying yarn in order to produce a pattern as the warp and weft yarns are woven into a cloth originated in India in the 8th century. Called ikat, it was not until sometime during the 14th century that this technique reached the Ryukyus along trading routes from Southeast Asia.

This dying and weaving process was developed with its own peculiarities and given the name *kasuri*. Now one of a group of cloths called *Shuri ori*, the finely patterned ikat cloths were delivered as a form of taxation to the Ryukyu court from the 17th century and the technique then gradually spread to the mainland of Japan, where local developments were added.

While the Shuri ikats were for court use, a cloth that was much more egalitarian is an abaca cloth called *bashofu*. Woven of fiber obtained from the banana plant, it was indispensable for clothing in the long, hot summer months, and preceded the introduction of cotton to the islands. The

Ryukyu court managed banana plantations in the 13th century but in many cases ordinary people planted their own banana trees so that they could weave cloth for their own use. They were therefore both producer and consumer.

Although the making of this cloth almost died out before the Second World War, it was revived at its birthplace in Kijoka, and the cream-colored abaca cloths with their brown and indigo ikat patterns can still be purchased, but at a price.

The tasteful character of the Shuri ikats and Kijoka abaca cloths reflect certain aspects of the social environment and climate of Okinawa. The strong light and brilliance of these sub-tropical islands, on the other hand, is reflected by the colorful stencil-dyed *bingata* cloths that have no real equivalent elsewhere in the country.

The use of stone and coral in Okinawa, too, is individual and best represented by the tomb of the royal Sho family, and the few examples of vernacular housing that somehow survived the ravages of the Pacific War.

Such uses of stone and color in particular are inconsistent with the generally accepted restrained "wood and paper" image of Japan, and help to give Okinawa its "foreign" atmosphere that is heightened by its food culture. There is almost no part of the pig



Vernacular uses of stone and coral

that cannot be found at the dinner table, including its ears; and even the local venomous sea-snake lends its flavor to dishes of a unique character. Such delicacies, however, may not appeal to everyone. For the mildly adventurous, peanut tofu sampled with the local brew, *awamori*, may not prove to be too much of a challenge. Add colorful tropical fish to the culinary kaleidoscope of Okinawa and the picture is almost complete. Append this image with the all-pervading American presence and the sum total is a fascinating medley of elements that individually represent a process of historical cross-cultural interplay due almost entirely to its geographical location. But just how much of the unique character of Okinawa will be appreciated by the delegates at the Summit in 2000? Enough, it is hoped, for them to realize that there is much to conserve and learn from in Okinawa.



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Fly to Naha from Tokyo or direct from some international locations. Visit the main food market in Naha for some surprises. See Shuri fabrics at the Shuri Fabric Center (098-887-2746) in Shuri, and Kijoka abaca at the Ogimi-son Abaca Center (0980-44-3033) in the village of Ogimi in the north of the main island of Okinawa. These textiles and many other crafts can be seen and purchased at the Japan Traditional Craft Center, Minami Aoyama, Tokyo (03-3403-2460).

