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TRADITION EMBRACES “THE NEW”: DEPICTIONS OF MODERNITY ON JAPANESE KURUME  
E-GASURI (PICTURE IKAT) FUTON-JI (BEDDING COVERS)

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**Figure 1.** Five panel Kurume *tate-yoko-gasuri* (warp and weft ikat) *futon-ji* (bedding cover). Early 20<sup>th</sup> c. Cotton. Formerly in the Horiuchi Izuho collection. Currently in the Krauss Collection at The Fowler Museum, UCLA. 59 ¾ x 46 in. (152 x 117 cm.). (Photo: Bill Landes.)

It is a rare twenty first century bride who begins her life of marital bliss with an image of the industrial age like a battleship on her nuptial bed. Figure 1 is a Japanese hand woven cotton *futon-ji* (bedding cover) from the early twentieth century. The warship was created by Kurume *tate-yoko-gasuri* (warp and weft ikat). This technique required both warp and weft threads to be resist dyed in predetermined places before weaving. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Kurume and surrounding towns on Kyushu Island were famous for producing *tate-yoko-gasuri futon-ji* with pictorial images that spread across four or five panels of cloth.<sup>1</sup> These were expensive,<sup>2</sup> prized trousseau<sup>3</sup> items for well-to-do brides.<sup>4</sup> Kurume *futon-ji*, patterned with large cross-seam images of the industrial age will be examined here. These are a subset of *e-gasuri*<sup>5</sup> (pictures created with the ikat technique, *e* meaning “picture”) weavings which, at first glance, seem like surprising dichotomies to a Westerner. Creating such textiles required a great deal of

<sup>1</sup> Horiuchi Izuho, “*Kurume-gasuri*: Horiuchi Izuho Collection,” *Daruma* 44 (2004): 18, 19.

<sup>2</sup> Ichimichi Kazutoyo, “San’in *Kasuri*,” *Daruma* 34 (2002): 19.

<sup>3</sup> Horiuchi, “*Kurume-gasuri*,” 17.

<sup>4</sup> E-mail correspondence with Ichiro and Yuka Wada, Osaka, Japan, owners of the Ichiroya online store of antique and vintage Japanese textiles who have dealt with Kurume *kasuri* for many years.

<sup>5</sup> E-mail correspondence with Yuka Wada.

human labor and precision yet they depicted images of the machine age that could readily be found on cheaper mass produced cloth.<sup>6</sup> The paper will explore the cultural context of this genre of Kurume *futon-ji* and add to the inventory of published examples.

Local lore records simple *kasuri* (*kasuri* becomes *gasuri* in compound words) production beginning in Kurume at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Around 1890 some weavers began creating complex images that spread across *futon-ji* usually made from four segments of fabric. Five panel examples became more common in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most production ended during the Asia Pacific War (1931-1945) when cotton was predominantly used for the war effort.<sup>7</sup> After the war there was little demand since much of the wartime generation had lost the appreciation of handmade cloth<sup>8</sup> and fashion tastes changed.<sup>9</sup>

As many as thirty separate steps could be involved in creating cross-seam patterned futonji.<sup>10</sup> The following seven paragraphs describe the basic procedures.<sup>11</sup>

First, a full sized picture of the *futon-ji* image was drawn on paper. The *futon-ji* would be woven as a single length of cloth usually around 12 meters (approximately 13 yards) long which would be cut into panels that were sewn together at the selvages. Therefore the picture was drawn on paper panels the width, commonly about 35 cm.<sup>12</sup> (approximately 14 inches), of the cloth.

A guide thread (*tane ito*), usually thicker than the threads that would be woven,<sup>13</sup> was stretched out on a rack in the configuration that the warp threads would eventually form on the loom. Using the paper panels as a pattern the picture was painted on the guide thread. (A pattern could also be stenciled on a guide thread.) This process was repeated for a guide thread in the weft thread configuration.

The warp threads to be woven were then stretched out next to the extended warp guide thread. Where paint showed on the guide thread the corresponding warp section was wrapped tightly with hemp fibers. The bound areas would eventually resist liquid dye in the dye vats, keeping the underlying thread white. Weft threads were bound in the same manner. The guide threads were kept for the production of more *futon-ji* with the same pattern.<sup>14</sup>

Kurume *tate-yoko-gasuri futon-ji* are famous for the square shapes (*tofu*)<sup>15</sup> produced when resisted areas of warp and weft threads are woven together. These squares create the “mosaic” patterns of the *futon-ji*

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<sup>6</sup> For numerous examples of mass produced textiles printed with images of the industrial age see Jacqueline M. Atkins, editor, *Wearing Propaganda: Textiles on the Home Front in Japan, Britain, and The United States, 1931-1945* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005) and Inui Yoshiko, “War Design Kimono,” *Daruma* 66 (2010). Some techniques used to pattern the fabrics are mentioned in Atkins, 159,171.

<sup>7</sup> Horiuchi, “*Kurume-gasuri*,” 17-18.

<sup>8</sup> Keiko Kobayashi, “The Effect of Western Textile Technology on Japanese *Kasuri*: Development, Innovation, and Competition,” *The Textile Museum Journal* 40- 41 (2001-2002): 8.

<sup>9</sup> Horiuchi, “*Kurume-gasuri*,” 28.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>11</sup> For more comprehensive descriptions of the process see Mary Dusenbury, “*Kasuri*: A Japanese Textile,” *Textile Museum Journal* 17 (1978) and Mary Dusenbury, “*Kasuri*,” in *Beyond the Tanabata Bridge: Traditional Japanese Textiles*, ed. William Jay Rathbun (London: Thames and Hudson in association with the Seattle Art Museum, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> Horiuchi, “*Kurume-gasuri*,” 16.

<sup>13</sup> Dusenbury, “*Kasuri*: A Japanese Textile,” *Textile Museum Journal*, 58.

<sup>14</sup> An almost identical example of figure 8 appears as figure 1 on page 12 of Horiuchi, “*Kurume-gasuri*,” and figure 9 of this paper is only slightly different from figure 8 on page 17 of the same article.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

pictures (fig. 2). Several dozen threads were bound together in bundles during the wrapping process to create the square shapes.



*Figure 2. Detail of figure 5. (Photo: Ichiroya.)*

Once the thread was bound it was usually taken to a professional indigo dyer.<sup>16</sup> Generally the dyer submerged the thread eight to twelve times in indigo dye vats. Thrashing the thread between submersions ensured the successful oxidation of indigo and produced rich, blue hues.<sup>17</sup> Some weavers bound additional sections after a few submersions or unbound sections before final submersions to create areas of lighter blue. After the threads were rinsed of excess dye unbinding the dyed threads took almost as much time as binding them.<sup>18</sup>

Painstakingly aligning the warp thread on a loom was the next step. Positioning weft threads while weaving with the shuttle so that the white resist areas of weft threads crossed the warp threads at the correct position took significant attention and control.

Finally, the finished fabric was cut at the right places and carefully sewn together so that the panel designs matched at the seams. A backing was sewn on the *tate-yoko-gasuri futon-ji*. Once cotton was stuffed between the two pieces of cloth and they were tufted and sewn closed the textile became a futon. Highly decorated futons were used like blankets.

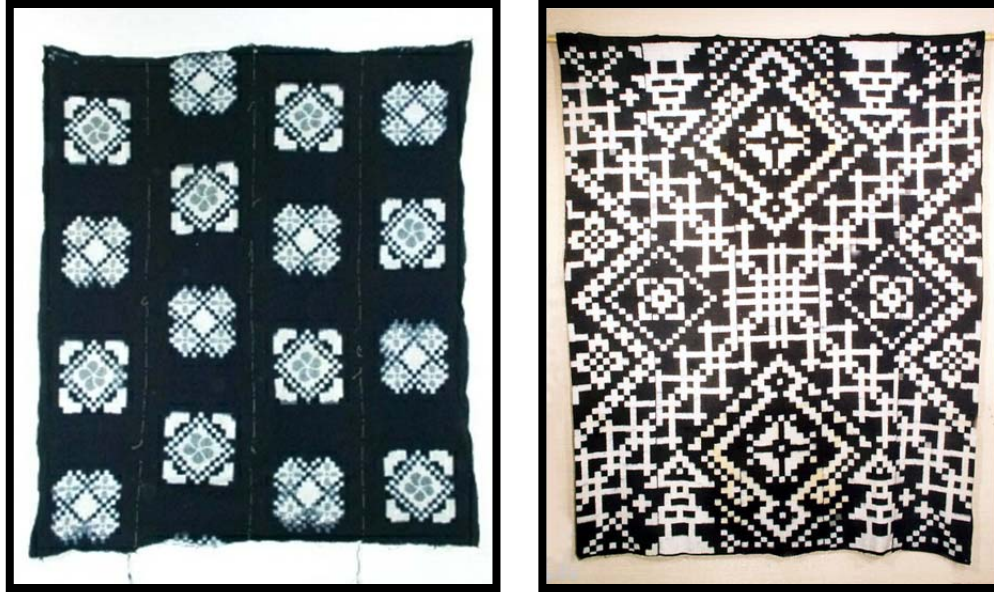
That a bride's family was willing to pay a premium for such skilled hand work highlights the appreciation of sophisticated textile production which was widespread in Japanese society until the eventual austerities of the Asia-Pacific War.<sup>19</sup> One of the desired features of *kasuri* is the intentionally hazy outlines of the fabric designs. This aesthetic is related to "*bokashi*", the shading transition of colors or hues found in many Japanese arts. Part of the skill involved in *kasuri* resist thread binding and subsequent weaving is creating pleasing outline gradations while still maintaining recognizable images. Most *tate-yoko-gasuri Kurume futon-ji* did not have patterns designed to cross at the seams (fig. 3). The complex seam-crossing designs (fig. 4) were products of the most talented Kurume artisans.

<sup>16</sup> Dusenbury, "Kasuri: A Japanese Textile," *Textile Museum Journal*, 55.

<sup>17</sup> Horiuchi, "Kurume-gasuri," 19.

<sup>18</sup> Dusenbury, "Kasuri: A Japanese Textile," *Textile Museum Journal*, 56.

<sup>19</sup> Kobayashi, "The Effect of Western Textile Technology on Japanese Kasuri," 8.



**Figure 3, left.** Four panel Kurume tate-yoko-gasuri (warp and weft ikat) futon-ji (bedding cover).  
Late 19<sup>th</sup>, early 20<sup>th</sup> c. Cotton. 57 x 50 in. (145 x 127 cm.) (Photo: Ichiroya.)

**Figure 4, right.** Five panel Kurume tate-yoko-gasuri (warp and weft ikat) futon-ji (bedding cover).  
Early 20<sup>th</sup> c. Cotton. 75 x 6 ½ in. (190 ½ x 153 cm.). The Krauss Collection, The Fowler Museum, UCLA.  
(Photo: Bill Landes.)

The majority of cross-seam Kurume picture futon-ji depicted traditional images of stone lanterns, temples, shrines, or castles. The buildings on the futon-ji in figure 4 are most likely castles although they could be pagodas. A castle is featured on figure 5.



**Figure 5.** Four panel Kurume tate-yoko-gasuri (warp and weft ikat) futon-ji (bedding cover).  
Late 19<sup>th</sup>, early 20<sup>th</sup> c. Cotton. 67 ¾ x 59 in. (172 x 150 cm.). (Photo: Ichiroya.)

Occasionally Western style buildings are the main design element of Kurume *futon-ji*. Japanese flags on the *futon-ji* in figure 6 proclaim the building to be Japanese. However, the supporting arches of the façade are not traditional Japanese architectural elements. They suggest classical rounded arches and signal that this is a Western style building. Adopting Western styles of architecture and dress were common features of the *Bunmei Kaika* movement promoted by the Meiji government (1868-1912) in its drive to modernize Japan. *Bunmei Kaika* is a slogan usually translated as “Civilization and Enlightenment” but it came to refer to the Japanese adoption of many aspects of Western culture.



**Figure 6.** Four panel Kurume tate-yoko-gasuri (warp and weft ikat) futon-ji (bedding cover). Late 19<sup>th</sup>, early 20<sup>th</sup> c. Cotton. 64 ¼ x 48 ½ in. (163 x 123 ½ cm.). The Krauss Collection, The Fowler Museum, UCLA. (Photo: Jeff Krauss.)

The trousseau nature of the Kurume *futon-ji* in figure 7 is evident from the highly stylized characters for crane (above) and tortoise (below) that flank the war ship. The pairing of cranes and tortoises automatically refers to the congratulatory phrase “Tsuru wa sen-nen, Kame wa man-nen” commonly associated with weddings. It literally translates to “Crane a thousand years, Tortoise ten thousand years”. Each animal was said to have the respective lifespan in East Asian folklore. “May you have long life and unending happiness” gives a sense of the sentiment in English.



*Figure 7. Five panel Kurume tate-yoko-gasuri (warp and weft ikat) futon-ji (bedding cover).  
Early 20<sup>th</sup> c. Cotton. 84 ¼ x 69 in. (214 x 175cm) (Photo: Ichiroya.)*

The Kurume *futon-ji* in figure 8 provides historical context to the warship category of *futon-ji*. The stylized characters translate to “Fuji has no equal in the world”. The Fuji was an important warship in the Russo-Japan war of 1904-5.



*Figure 8. Four panel Kurume tate-yoko-gasuri (warp and weft ikat) futon-ji (bedding cover).  
Early 20<sup>th</sup> c. Cotton. 75 ¼ x 57 ½ in. (191 x 146 cm.). (Photo: Ichiroya.)*

Japan’s victory over Russia in 1905 was extremely significant to the Japanese as it signaled to them that they had become a “great power”. In five decades the country had gone from a preindustrial economy and military, unable to defend itself against Western powers and vulnerable to colonization, to defeating a European imperial power. Designs celebrating the Japanese Navy, which had played a crucial role in the

victory, became popular textile patterns<sup>20</sup> and Kurume weavers developed the large warship designs. The inscription on this *futon-ji* can also be interpreted as a reference to Japan, Mt. Fuji being a symbol of the country. That this is not a particularly accurate representation of the real warship which had two, not three, masts and was not the Admiral's flag ship suggests that there is a strong reference to Japan itself.

Textiles combining themes of industrialization, nationalism and militarism are logical manifestations of the phrase "*Fukoku Kyohei*" which can be translated as "Wealth for the Country, Strength for the Military".<sup>21</sup> This was one of the National Slogans first promulgated by the Meiji government and linked industrialization with a modern military in order to propel Japan into becoming a "great power".



**Figure 9.** Five panel Kurume *tate-yoko-gasuri* (warp and weft ikat) *futon-ji* (bedding cover). Early 20<sup>th</sup> c. Cotton. 68 x 69 in. (173 x 175 cm.). ( Photo: Ichiroya.)

In figure 9 the top two characters form the word for "Japan". "*San Goku Ichi*" is written within the central rectangle. Although the literal translation is "Best of Three Countries", "Best in the World" more accurately conveys the meaning of the phrase in this context. Telegraph poles, complete with a perching bird, enclose characters for Mt. Fuji which rises at the top of the textile. A train and a modern bridge strong enough to support it are above the Naka River, identified by the bottom two characters. A motorized boat with dissipating exhaust travels along the river. Pride in Japan's successes mastering Meiji Period engineering, transportation and communication technologies is evident in this *futon-ji*.

Most Kurume *futon-ji* with large cross-seam images of industrialization incorporate an aspect of nationalism into the design. Japanese flags are almost always depicted on these *futon-ji*.<sup>22</sup> Japan used two flags when these textiles were made. The *Hinomaru* simply had a red circle representing the sun. The *Kyokujitsu-ki* had rays of light emanating from the circle of the red sun. There are four *Hinomaru* flags on

<sup>20</sup> Horiuchi, "Kurume-gasuri," 18.

<sup>21</sup> Wakakuwa, "War-Promoting Kimono," 192; Inui "War Design Kimono," 35.

<sup>22</sup> This observation comes after looking at The Krauss Collection, published examples and *futon-ji* for sale on the internet.



figure 9 (the weaver squared off the sun circles on this textile). The flags, along with the references to Japan and Mt. Fuji, make clear which country is being declared the best in the world.

Twenty first century world citizens are cognizant of the enormous cost of twentieth century militarism in lives and treasure. This hindsight creates a challenge to understanding the use of Japanese nationalistic and militaristic images on marriage bedding. In addition, the lack of contemporary romantic associations with industrial images is an impediment to comprehending their use on trousseau futon-ji. To put these textiles in context it is helpful to review several aspects of Japanese history. Many Japanese viewed their late nineteenth century and twentieth century wars and occupations as positive events which enabled Japan to secure its rightful role as a world power with colonies like Western powers and which gave them a protective sphere of influence.<sup>23</sup> The country had made unparalleled advances in modernization since the 1860's when the Japanese government instituted policies designed to catch up with Western countries. Before the 1868 Meiji Restoration Japan was a preindustrial, feudal society with rigid class distinctions. Japanese wealthy enough to purchase the *futon-ji* discussed in this paper would likely have been cognizant of the trajectory of material and social progress possible in the country at the time. Japan had gone from being a likely target of colonization in the 1850's and 60's to having wealth producing colonies of its own. Having industrialized and become a military power so quickly was a great source of pride and promise in the country.<sup>24</sup> The Japanese government's home front propaganda regarding its Asian conquests was that it was liberating the continent from Western colonists.<sup>25</sup> It described itself as the "elder brother"<sup>26</sup> of Asian countries having stayed true to Confucian ideals while mastering modern technologies and would nobly enable its Asian neighbors to do the same.<sup>27</sup>

These *futon-ji* with images of the industrial age reflect the patriotic nationalism and militarism linked with modernity that was pervasive in Japan when they were made. They were also symbolic of security and progress – universal aspirations for couples embarking on a new life together.

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<sup>23</sup> Dower, "Japan's Beautiful Modern War," 94-95; Inui, "War Design Kimono," 23,27,35.

<sup>24</sup> Dower, "Japan's Beautiful Modern War," 100.

<sup>25</sup> Wakakuwa, "War-Promoting Kimono," 199.

<sup>26</sup> Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1946), 53.

<sup>27</sup> Dower, "Japan's Beautiful War," 99-100.