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Sharon Sadako Takeda

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

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OFFERTORY BANNERS FROM RURAL JAPAN: ECHIGO-CHIJIJI WEAVING AND WORSHIP

by

Sharon Sadako Takeda
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

INTRODUCTION

Unlike luxurious silk cloth that was carefully cut and sewn together in a prescribed manner, banners that were offered to rural, syncretic Shintō shrines and Buddhist temples in the Uonuma-gun region of Niigata Prefecture were lengths of locally produced ramie cloth inscribed with *sumi* ink and dedicated primarily by the women weavers who produced them. Whether observed in situ in a neighborhood shrine or temple or viewed in a museum setting, these ramie offertory banners, called *hōgake*, *hōnōbata*, or *hōnō nobori*, are exemplary artifacts. The environmental, social, and economic aspects of the lives of their rural makers are literally woven into an efficient, creative, and whole cloth.

JAPAN'S SNOW COUNTRY

Formally known as Echigo, Niigata Prefecture is a northern province located in Japan's legendary "snow country." In the winter, cold winds from Siberia blow down across the Sea of Japan, pick up moisture, and drop it as snow when they reach the mountains that encroach upon the alluvial plains of Niigata from the east. The mountain valleys of Uonuma-gun can receive as much as six to ten feet of snow within twenty-four hours.¹ Uonuma-gun is one of Japan's snowiest areas and, for its latitude, one of the heaviest snow regions in the world. For nearly eight months of the year, a blanket of snow covers the landscape. Strong wooden barricades are erected around homes to protect windows and walls from violent winds and snowfall. The snow must be shoveled off of rooftops before its weight collapses buildings. Literally buried in snow, inhabitants must carve stairways out of the frozen precipitation in order to exit their homes. In some areas, snow-packed pathways are at rooftop level.

The immense snowfall incapacitated the agrarian society of Uonuma-gun. In olden times, men went off to cities such as Edo (modern-day Tokyo) to look for winter employment. Confined to their dimly lit homes, the villagers who remained behind worked diligently to supplement their incomes by producing subsidiary handicrafts. Rice straw was plied into useful items such as shoes, hats, and household articles, and grass-bast fibers (*asa*) such as ramie were processed into thread and woven into cloth.²

The snowy climate of Echigo created an ideal situation for producing *asa*

textiles. Stiff ramie threads, which ordinarily break easily if manipulated in an arid environment, remained soft and pliable in the damp atmosphere of Echigo winters.³ "Thread is spun and twisted in the snow, the cloth is woven in the snow, it is washed in snow waters and bleached on snow fields. There is [ramie] crepe because there is snow," wrote an Echigo textile wholesaler in the early nineteenth century.⁴ In his book entitled *Hokuetsu seppu* (Snow country tales), Suzuki Bokushi (1770-1842) described the life and customs of Echigo inhabitants, including their involvement in ramie thread and cloth production.⁵ He credited the development of the exceptionally fine ramie crepe textile known as *chijimi* to the talent, unyielding patience, and perseverance of snowbound craftspeople.⁶ "Echigo crepe," he wrote, "owes its fame to the combined powers of man and snow, working hand in hand."⁷

ECHIGO TEXTILES

The origin of asa weaving in Echigo is unclear but assumed to be extremely old. The earliest extant piece of Echigo cloth (Echigo *nuno*) was discovered in the collection of the Shōsōin, an imperial repository for treasures built in Nara over 1,200 years ago. The asa cloth, originally given as tax payment and inscribed with the name of an Echigo village and its leader and dated 731, the third year of the Tenpyō era (729-749), was later made into a storage bag for a folding screen (*byōbu*).⁸ The first historical reference to Echigo cloth was made during the Heian period (794-1185) in the *Engi shiki* (Procedures of the Engi era), a code of laws completed in 927. It recorded a decision made in the year 785 about collecting cloth as tribute from producing areas and documented the receipt of one thousand *tan* (bolts) of cloth from the Echigo region.

Echigo cloth became a product of great renown during the Kamakura (1185-1333) and Muromachi (1333-1568) periods, when the military elite favored it as a trading stock and tribute. As recorded in the historical account *Azuma kagami* (Mirror of Eastern Japan) and *Muromachi no kojitsu sho* (Book of Muromachi customs and manners), in the seventh month of 1192 Minamoto Yoritomo, after receiving the title of *sei-i-tai shōgun* (supreme commander), presented representatives sent by the imperial court with a gift of horses, mulberry thread, printed indigo cloth, and one thousand bolts of Echigo cloth.⁹ In numerous other Muromachi-period records, Echigo *nuno* is mentioned either as tribute items or as regulated clothing restricted to certain months unless permission was given by the military government.

The reputation of Echigo textiles was further bolstered early in the Edo period (1600-1868) by advances made in design and production techniques. Up to this point, Echigo weavers produced a plain, coarse asa cloth known as *kojiri nuno*.¹⁰ In the seventeenth century a lordless samurai who had emigrated with his family from Akashi (near present-day Kobe in Hyōgo Prefecture) to Echigo transformed asa weaving there. It is widely believed that it was Hori Jirō Masatoshi (1620-79),¹¹ his wife, and two daughters who promulgated the idea of weaving with tightly twisted weft threads, which produced the refined crepe fabric known as *chijimi nuno* or, simply, *chijimi*.¹² They also encouraged the production of patterned *chijimi nuno*, colored with natural dyes and woven into such designs as stripes or ikat (*kasuri*)

patterns.

As chijimi production techniques improved, so did its quality and reputation. Chijimi nuno became known to the ruling Tokugawa shōgunate, who began to requisition chijimi in special measurements and designs during the Genroku (1688-1704) and Hōei (1704-11) eras of the Edo period. Chijimi ordered for use in Edo castle was called *honmaru goyō chijimi*.¹³ To be chosen to weave for such an order was a great honor for a woman. As it became widely known that Edo castle was ordering chijimi, demand for the celebrated cloth increased. Daimyō and samurai were required to wear ramie garments for certain formal and ceremonial occasions, and aristocrats ordered chijimi to make summer clothing. (Ironically, ramie fibers processed and woven by women during the coldest winter months were used primarily for clothing worn on the warmest summer days.) Production surged, and according to one village's records, 5,062 bolts of chijimi were made in 1682, more than twice as many as the previous year.¹⁴ Production peaked during the Tenmei era (1781-89), when 200 thousand bolts were woven annually.¹⁵

ECHIGO WEAVERS

Skillful weavers were highly valued in Echigo, where textiles were an important commodity and the source of great revenue. Weaving knowledge was passed down from generation to generation. As women earnestly worked at their looms during the winter, their young children played at their sides with spinning and weaving equipment. When girls reached the age of seven or eight, they performed simple weaving tasks; by the age of twelve or thirteen, they wove simple coarse cloth.¹⁶ Prior to sitting at a loom to begin weaving cloth for the very first time, young girls made a pilgrimage to a shrine to pray to a weaving deity. This practice was called *joji no ju-san mairi* (shrine visits by thirteen-year-old girls).¹⁷ As they reached their mid-teens and twenties, their weaving skills were expected to improve and reach maturity, coinciding with their arrival into womanhood. Traditionally, the finest chijimi was woven by young women in this age group. Cloth woven by older women was considered to lack luster and therefore be of inferior quality.¹⁸

Bolts of fabric sold at yearly chijimi markets bore tags that identified the weaver and the price she agreed upon for her work.¹⁹ Women competed with each other and vied for the privilege of being chosen to weave the highest quality cloth or textiles ordered by elite clientele. Excellent weaving skills not only brought individual fame within the community but also were considered more important than appearance when it came to acquiring a husband (an accomplished weaver's output added a cash income to a household). Parents, therefore, paid close attention to their daughters' weaving education, and young women placed great pressure upon themselves, working tirelessly at their looms. Extremely high technical standards were maintained, which made both Echigo weavers and cloth legendary.

OFFERTORY BANNERS

With stories of the incredible struggles of Uonuma-gun craftswomen documented in literature and local folk tales, it is not difficult to understand why the practice of worshipping at both the start and finish of each weaving season would continue throughout a woman's creative life.²⁰ Weavers would cut a narrow strip of their fabric (*kogire*) or the last woven part of a warp, with warp ends intact (*kirisen*), and offer it along with prayers of thanksgiving. These cloth fragments were often tied to the shrine or the shrine bell cord. Longer lengths of cloth were made into banners by attaching them to wooden hangers and inscribing them with the word *hōnō* (offering) or *hōgake* (offertory banner), the date of its dedication, and the name, address, and age of the donor(s). These banners were offered by weavers who hung them on the walls of shrines and temples, often several layers deep, and prayed for good health during the winter season, the improvement of their weaving skills, and the safety of their households.²¹ The banners also indirectly advertised the weaving talents of their makers.²² Recognized now as objects of great historical importance, a number of banners have been designated important cultural properties, by either the Japanese government or Niigata Prefecture, and are kept in museums, textile cooperatives, and private collections.²³ The survival of these banners is remarkable given that they were exposed to the elements while hanging in open shrines and temples. Many were rescued by chijimi wholesalers. These offertory banners, the earliest dating to 1806, the third year of the Bunka era (1804-18), together with dated chijimi swatch books (*mihon-chō*) and pattern books (*hinagata-chō*) are invaluable resources for scholars.²⁴

THE DECLINE OF ECHIGO CHIJIMI

The widespread use of cotton, which had been introduced to Japan during the fifteenth century and came into widespread use during the mid-eighteenth century, contributed to a decline in chijimi production during the late Edo period. This was further aggravated by the eventual dissolution of the Tokugawa shōgunate. From 1854 to 1867, chijimi output dropped by 50 percent. During the Meiji period (1868-1912), machine-made thread began replacing handmade thread, and in the mid-Taishō period (1912-25), power looms were introduced. The textile industry began switching from a cottage industry (*kanai kōgyō*) to a factory-based economy. Echigo weavers put their looms away and went to work in local small textile factories.

On the brink of virtual extinction, the traditional hand techniques of Echigo chijimi might have been lost forever had it not been for the combined efforts of concerned Echigo citizens and the Japanese government. A revival of the traditional techniques took place in 1948, and in 1953 the Japanese government placed Echigo chijimi under the authority of the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties. Recognizing the historical and artistic merits of Echigo chijimi and its specific local attributes, the government designated it as an important intangible cultural property in 1955. At that time, two new official names were given in order to clearly distinguish between ramie cloth with highly twisted wefts (*Ojiya-chijimifu*) and cloth with

untwisted wefts (*Echigo-jōfu*). Every bolt of certified Ojiya-chijimifu and Echigo-jōfu must be made within strict production guidelines and meet high standards of workmanship.

KARAMUSHI CULTIVATION

Karamushi or *choma* (*Boehmeria nivea*), commonly known in the West as China grass or ramie, is the raw material used to make Ojiya-chijimifu and Echigo-jōfu. In 1598, as Echigo became famous for both its karamushi cultivation and cloth, Uesugi Kagekatsu (1555-1623), the feudal lord who controlled the area, was transferred to a larger domain at Wakamatsu in neighboring Mutsu (present-day Aizu Wakamatsu in Fukushima Prefecture).²⁵ He introduced karamushi cultivation to the region, which flourished as it became responsible for supplying all the necessary karamushi to the escalating chijimi trade. Records of tolls taken along the roads between Wakamatsu and Echigo indicate that they were heavily trafficked by merchants who transported the karamushi on their backs to threadmakers in Echigo. Today, a few scattered karamushi fields in the small mountain hamlet of Showa-mura in Fukushima Prefecture are the only reminders of the centuries-old ramie trade relationship between these two areas.

The cultivation of karamushi begins dramatically in mid-May, when fields of sprouting two-year old karamushi plants are covered with dry miscanthus reeds and set on fire. As the fiery ring engulfs a field, uneven karamushi growth is reduced to the ground, leaving hearty roots intact underground. While the blackened field is still warm, it is doused with a natural fertilizer of human feces mixed with water and then covered with straw. From the burnt, alkali-rich soil new growth emerges. To ensure the uniform growth of straight stalks, the new karamushi is protected from the wind by a miscanthus fence built around the perimeter of the field. A soft buffer of hemp keeps the karamushi from adhering to the fence.

By late July or early August, karamushi stalks have reached a height of two meters, and a timely harvest must occur before the skin of the stalks matures and thickens. With a sickle, each stalk is cut on a slant about forty centimeters from ground level and stripped of its leaves.²⁶ Then, bundled together, the stalks are weighted down in either dammed streams or man-made tanks filled with clear mountain water.

After five to seven hours of soaking, the skin of the stalks is soft enough for decortication.²⁷ Starting at a point about one-third the length, the stalk is pierced by fingernail and bent open. A thumb is inserted into the break between the outer bark and core and, with one quick and agile longitudinal movement, the core is extracted. The outer skins are retied, washed, and returned to the water to soak for twenty or thirty minutes.

Next comes the tedious but important chore of scraping the karamushi skins away from their inner woody tissue. For several weeks after harvest, women busily work before wooden troughs that are set up in the entryway of their homes. Each wet skin is placed individually between a flexible wooden board sitting in the wooden trough and a hand-held metal blade. As the skin is pulled with one hand, the blade is

pushed with the other, scraping off the green surface and revealing a lustrous fiber called *aoso*.²⁸ Both sides of the *aoso* are repeatedly scraped in order to even out the surface and give it a polished sheen. Because the fiber cannot be dried in direct sunlight (it will harden and discolor), small bundles are hung indoors, with care being taken to avoid mold. The dried fibers are stored until autumn, when buyers from Uonuma-gun arrive to inspect and carefully select the best *aoso* for the production of Ojiya-chijimifu and Echigo-jōfu.

THREADMAKING

The traditional threadmaking process, known as *oumi*, is the most time-consuming task in the production of *chijimi*. Every year, after the autumn harvest is finished, women prepare to make enough thread for one kimono length before spring. A skilled woman can prepare enough thread for three kimono.²⁹ Like the weavers, threadmakers also visit shrines and temples to pray for the improvement of their *oumi* technique and product, offering *aoso* fiber and/or thread.³⁰

The process begins by boiling and/or soaking the *aoso* in lukewarm water to make it soft and pliable. It is further manipulated and moistened by the hands and mouths of the threadmakers. The strands, rather flat like tape, are systematically split by fingernail and shredded into very fine threads. The ends of each strand are then twisted together to form a continuous thread. The intended use of the thread as the warp or weft determines how the ends are patched together. As the thread is made, it is collected into a bucket called an *oboke*.

To put this painstaking labor into perspective, one day of diligent *oumi* work produces only about six or seven *momme* (nearly one ounce) of top-quality thread.³¹ It can take one hundred days to produce enough thread for one kimono.³²

An additional tight twisting of the weft threads gives Ojiya-chijimifu its characteristic crepe texture. The thread is twisted by a hand spindle that is whirled between two pieces of wood. It is critical to the finished product that all the thread is evenly twisted.

CHIJI MI WEAVING

A weaver begins her work by measuring out the warp using a floor-seated warping board (*hedai*). She stands next to the *hedai* holding a pair of long, hollow, bamboo sticks (*hebashi*) that have been threaded with one thin ramie thread each. The *hebashi*, resembling a pair of oversized chopsticks, are swiftly and deftly maneuvered to measure the thread and order the correct sequence of warp threads on the *hedai*.

Roughly 1,300 threads make up the 36-40-centimeter-wide warp for top-quality *chijimi*. Special high-quality *chijimi* can have over 1,800 warp ends.³³ Each thread is drawn through the dents in a reed (*osa*) prior to the warp being wound on the beam and before a unique split-bamboo measuring device is used to create consistently-sized string heddles for every other thread.

Traditional Ojiya-chijimifu and Echigo-jōfu are plain woven in solids, stripes,

checks, and ikat patterns on a body-tension loom called an *izaribata*. The weaver sits on a wooden plank raised just inches off the floor with legs outstretched underneath the loom. Her right big toe or entire right foot is slipped into a sling that manipulates a bent, wood lever attached to the string heddles. A cloth beam (*chimaki*) is then placed against the weaver's abdomen and secured by a strap that is brought around the small of the back. In this position the loom becomes an integrated extension of the weaver's body. She can achieve subtle adjustments to warp tension by simply shifting her weight.

A unique oversized wooden shuttle (*hi*) shaped like a large blade carries a moistened bobbin of thread through the shed and also doubles as a beater. The weft is further compressed with the *osa*, which acts as both a warp spacer and weft beater. Approximately 920 hand and body movements are necessary to weave one foot of *chijimi* cloth.³⁴

After the finished cloth is removed from the loom, it is cleaned, softened, and given its characteristic surface texture through several stages of soaking, washing, and manipulation. The cloth is further conditioned in the unique process called *ashibumi*, where the fabric is massaged and washed with the feet. With the aid of two rope slings suspended from the ceiling, a man stands over a trough of water and dances on the cloth, creating rhythmic sloshing sounds as the cloth is rotated and stomped on. The fabric is then rinsed thoroughly with water and tightly twisted to remove excess water.

SNOW BLEACHING

In late February/early March the dark gray winter sky begins to lighten up over Uonuma-gun. Snowfall turns into sleet and then intermittent rain. Finally, blue skies with billowy white clouds prevail, and it is time for the long winter's yield of thread and fabric to be carried outdoors and bleached. One by one, the wet lengths of cloth, which have been soaked in a weak lye solution, are placed out on top of glistening snow-covered fields. Two people unfurl and carefully stretch kimono lengths of fabric out in neat parallel rows that resemble planted furrows. For ten to twenty days this surreal crop of cloth is exposed to the bleaching properties of the spring sunlight, which is intensified by the white snow. The cloth is further lightened by the penetration of ozone ions from the melting snow.

The sight of length after length of beautiful cloth set against the backdrop of snow, mountains, and blue sky is stunning and magical. All memories of the long, dark, cold winter and the painstaking toil of producing ramie thread and cloth are cleansed from the mind. With the warmth of the spring sun upon their faces, threadmakers and weavers march through the receding snow carrying thread, cloth fragments, and banners to their neighborhood shrines and temples. Offering these samples of their winter labor, they give thanks and pray for continued good health and the improvement of their textile skills.

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NOTES

1. Suzuki Bokushi, p. 11.
2. The Japanese word *asa* is a generic term for bast fibers. The most common Japanese bast fibers used at the time were hemp (*taima* or *honasa*; *Cannabis sativa*) and ramie (*karamushi* or *choma*; *Boehmeria nivea*).
3. The average annual humidity in this region is 79 percent. See Diamond, Inc., p. 120.
4. Suzuki Bokushi, p. 66.
5. *Hokuetsu seppu* was published in Edo in 1835. It is Japan's oldest scientific essay. See Hikida, p. 540.
6. A common demonstration of extremely fine Echigo cloth is to pull a standard cloth width through the seven-millimeter square hole of a Japanese Tenpō-era (1830-44) coin. See Tairyūsha, pp. 18-19, and Watanabe, p. 74.
7. Suzuki Bokushi, p. 66.
8. The Echigo bast-fiber cloth made into a storage bag was discovered by Ōga Ichirō in 1953 (Shōwa 28) while the scholar was reorganizing the Shōsōin collection. See Suzuki Torajurō, pp. 34, 38; Kitamura, p. 32; and Takizawa, p. 39.
9. Watanabe, p. 20.
10. Ibid., p. 110. During the Heian period Echigo paid its tribute with *kojiro nuno*. See also *Genshoku senshoku daijiten* (Illustrated textile dictionary), s.v. "kojiro nuno."
11. There are conflicting birth and death dates for Horii Jirō Masatoshi (also known as Akashi Jirō). See Watanabe, pp. 109-12, and *Genshoku senshoku daijiten*, s.v. "Akashi Jirō."
12. It is thought that the name *chijimi nuno* is derived from *shijimi nuno* (crimped cloth) and that over time *shijimi nuno* was abbreviated and slurred to *chijimi*. See Suzuki Bokushi, p. 63. The term *chijimi* was used to refer to all ramie cloth produced in the region, whether it had crinkles or not. It is also possible that the term *chijimi* is from the verb *chijimu* (to shrink).
13. Also known as *omeshi chijimi* and *goyō chijimi*. See *Genshoku senshoku daijiten*, s.v. "goyō chijimi."
14. Diamond, Inc., p. 112.
15. Watanabe, p. 110.
16. Suzuki Bokushi, p. 67.
17. Tōkamachi-shi hakubutsukan 1987, p. 146.

18. Suzuki Bokushi, p. 67.
19. Ibid., p. 77; Yamazaki, p. 168.
20. Suzuki Chobōan, p. 40.
21. Bunka-chō bunka-zai hogo-bu, p. 104; Tōkamachi-shi hakubutsukan 1987, p. 146.
22. Hauge and Hauge, p. 250.
23. The largest collection of chijimi offertory banners designated as important tangible cultural properties by the Japanese government (*jūyō yūkei minzoku bunka-zai*) and Niigata Prefecture (*Niigata-ken shitei yūkei bunka-zai*) are in the collection of the Tōkamachi City Museum (Tōkamachi-shi hakubutsukan).
24. A sample book dated 1782 and containing swatches of ramie ikat produced in the Uonuma region is the earliest proof of Uonuma kasuri. See Diamond, Inc., p. 120.
25. See *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan*, s.v. "Uesugi Kagekatsu."
26. Watanabe, pp. 143-44. The best-quality fiber comes from stalks that are 6 millimeters in diameter and 1.5 meters in length. If the plant has not grown to a sufficient height to harvest a stalk 1.5 meters in length when cut 40 centimeters above ground level, it can be cut at ground level, but the quality of the fiber is not as good.
27. Ibid., p. 144.
28. During the skinning process a green juice emerges that seems to tint the fiber a faint green. The Chinese character for *green* (青; *ao*) was combined with the character for *karamushi* (葎; [*s*]*o*), thereby distinguishing the fiber (*aoso*) from the plant (*karamushi*). The plant, however, is also occasionally referred to as *aoso*. See Watanabe, pp. 15-16, 144-45.
29. Ibid., p. 146.
30. Tōkamachi-shi hakubutsukan 1987, p. 146.
31. Watanabe, p. 150. One momme equals .1325 ounce or 3.75 grams.
32. Horiuchi, p. 89; Watanabe, p. 182.
33. Warp thread counts are calculated by *yomi*. One *yomi* equals eighty warp threads. Special high-quality chijimi is 20-23 *yomi*; top-quality chijimi is 16-17 *yomi*; mid-quality chijimi is 10 *yomi*; and low-quality chijimi is 6-7 *yomi*. These counts are based on a standard kimono-cloth width measuring approximately 36-40 centimeters. See Nishiwaki, p. 236; Watanabe, p. 173; and Tōkamachi-shi hakubutsukan 1983, p. 20.
34. Watanabe, p. 175.

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