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Ingenious and practical; parallels in the making of Arimatsu trade cloth and contemporary designers' production

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Yoshiko Wada introduced me to shibori in 1976, and for over 40 years I have worked with shibori techniques based on the concepts of Arimatsu shibori. I had been aware of the Congo trade era and often peppered Yoshiko with questions about this curious chapter in the Arimatsu history. When I saw the textiles that Yoshiko has displayed here, I became very excited.

There is an old axiom that nothing is ever really new. I love to see textiles that connect to my own decision making as a dyer, and where I can totally empathize with the artisan's hand and eye. When I was creating accessories and fabric for fashion I became very conscious of creating small tricks to save time. Cost and size of the cloth are critical in making a product that is affordable as well as unique and appealing.

Arashi pole wrapping has probably been the most popular of Arimatsu shibori technique that has been adapted to contemporary production, particularly in the US. Curiously, Arashi was not one of the techniques used for the Congo trade, even though Arashi had been a time and money saving process at the beginning of the industrial revolution in Japan around 1860. The process of wrapping kimono cloth around a pole is easy as the kimono fabric width is about 14 inches. Wide and heavier fabrics which were in demand in Africa were technically not feasible for wrapping around a 6" diameter pole.

When the Japanese artisans were offered this commercial opportunity they were challenged in a variety of ways. The African market called for very wide and heavier fabric. The aesthetic of the market called for bright colors in non-traditional combinations, as well as larger graphic images. Itajime Sekka shibori was more adaptable than intricate stitching, so Itajime folding and clamping can be found in the trade cloth.

Folding and clamping has also been embraced by many American and European designers and artists. It can be adapted to wider and heavier cloth and can be suitable for textile surface techniques such as resist scouring silk. US designers Angelina De'Antonis and Amy Nguyen have developed sophisticated and practical fabrics for contemporary fashion using this process. Not surprisingly, itajime has also been revived in Japan and is exemplified in the youthful and modern products of Sou Sou.

One way to create unusual patterns is to combine techniques. Doing shibori over a printed fabric or woven striped fabric can be found in the collection of African trade cloth.

Similarly, Swedish artist, Elsa Chartin, has created art textiles with a signature look. By first screen printing fabric, then folding it and clamping it she uses dye remover and then over dyeing in another color.

When I teach I often have a student who uses a string that leaves dye on the fabric. I was delighted to see the exploitation of that accident in one Japanese sample piece, adding touches of red against the dark blue. It is the only example from Arimatsu that I have ever seen.

Creating cloth for commercial business often calls for clever use of the tools available. It is only natural to think of the sewing machine as a substitute for hand stitching although the hand running stitch cannot be duplicated by a machine. The top thread and bobbin thread prevent the kind of gathering achieved with a running stitch. But using sewing machine stitches in a way to clamp fabric, creating channels that either prevent or invite the dye to flow is a brilliant twist to the practice of sewing. It is certainly faster and makes for a larger graphic pattern. Who thought of this first? Had the Japanese craftsmen used this for their own use? Or did they decide that this was a way to handle large fabrics quickly to make bold geometric designs for this African market? Or were there already machine stitch resist textiles in Africa that inspired the Japanese?

It is not surprising that western artists would choose the machine too. Daniel Graffin's indigo dyed cotton pieces have a look of the African textiles both from the Congo trade and later with machine stitched cloth currently produced in Africa.

I have used the sewing machine using dye remover and over dyeing. I love how the needles leave small holes where the dye seeps in. The surface of the cloth effectively reveals the process.

One piece in the Congo collection is an industrial print of sewing machine resist. They even replicated the small dots that resemble the dye penetrating the needle holes.

There are many questions to be answered in this history of trade cloth. There seem to be no records or archives. Much can be investigated from these samples, and I hope to replicate some of these patterns in the future.