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# Premium *Bashōfu* and Rough *Bashōfu*: Producing, wearing, and discussing *bashōfu*, a traditional banana fiber textile from Okinawa

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## Abstract

*Bashōfu* is woven from threads of fibers extracted from the *Itobashō* wild banana plant (*Musa balbisiana* var. *liukuensis*). Because clothing made of *bashōfu* is light and breathable, all classes of people of the Ryukyu Kingdom (1429 - 1879) favored it in the highly humid summer. *Bashōfu* was roughly classified into two quality levels: premium *bashōfu* for high-class people's clothing and for trading, and rough *bashōfu* for the masses.

Nowadays only premium *bashōfu* is produced as a sophisticated traditional craft in Okinawa, and attracts both academic and public interest. We have, however, proceeded with scientific research into rough *bashōfu* to investigate the potential of rough *bashōfu* as a wearable textile. Why has rough *bashōfu* been overlooked up to now?

Some attention was paid to *bashōfu* by the *mingei* (folk craft) movement and the Japanese kimono market, but only in general, which led to rough *bashōfu* for the common people being neglected or forgotten. In 1942, during the Pacific War, the Japanese philosopher and the *mingei* movement leader Sōetsu Yanagi published *The Story of Bashōfu*, in which he praised its beauty and authenticity. However, he did not distinguish premium *bashōfu* from the rough type, and simply stated that the best place for *bashōfu* production was the former capital, Shuri, because clothing for the royal family had been produced there. After the collapse of *bashōfu* production following the 1945 Battle of Okinawa and the subsequent US military occupation, Toshiko Taira, who was encouraged by the the *mingei* movement, succeeded in re-starting *bashōfu* production in Kijoka, Okinawa around 1950. Thereafter, she and her colleagues met the demand from US soldiers, and in the late 20th century, from the Japanese kimono market. The Japanese government designated *Bashōfu* in Kijoka as an Important Intangible Cultural Property in 1974, two years after Okinawa's reversion to Japanese administration from the US military government.

In this study, we will examine reasons why rough *bashōfu* had been neglected in Okinawan and Japanese history and look at its potential as a future textile.

**Keywords:** *bashōfu*; banana fiber; Ryukyu; the folk craft movement; Important Intangible Cultural Property

## Introduction

*Bashōfu* is woven from threads made of fibers extracted from the leaf sheaths of the *itobashō* wild banana plant (*Musa balbisiana* var. *liukiuensis*). Because clothing made of *bashōfu* is light and breathable, all classes of people of the Ryūkyū Kingdom (1429 - 1879) favored it in the highly humid summer. *Bashōfu* was largely classified into two quality levels: premium *bashōfu* for high-class people's clothing and for trading, and rough *bashōfu* for the masses (Fig. 1).

Nowadays only premium *bashōfu* is produced in Okinawa using sophisticated traditional techniques, and attracts both public and academic interest. As a result, rough *bashōfu* for the common people has tended to be neglected or forgotten. We have, however, proceeded with scientific research into rough *bashōfu* to investigate the potential of rough *bashōfu* as a wearable textile.

In this paper, we will examine why rough *bashōfu* came to be neglected in Okinawan and Japanese history and look at its future potential as a textile from the viewpoint not only of design history but of human life sciences.

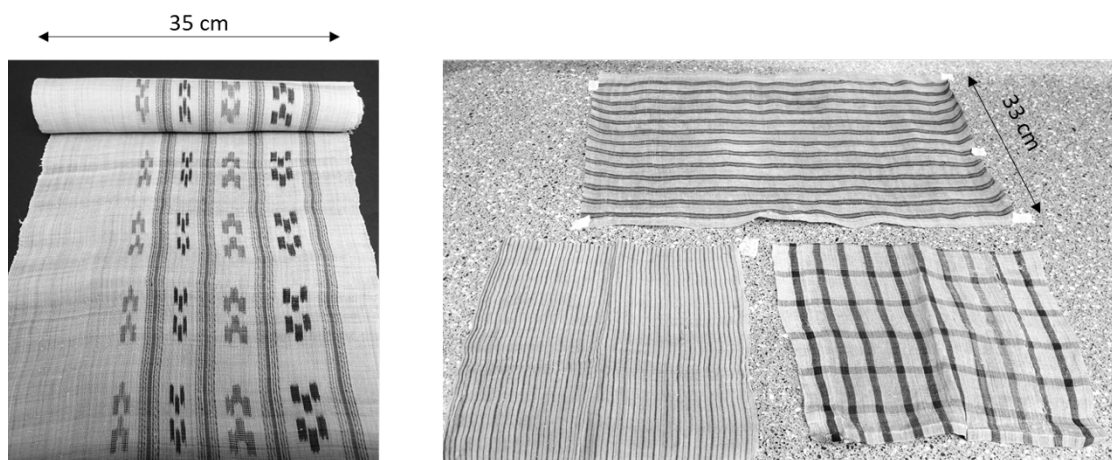


Figure 1. Pieces of *bashōfu*

Left: Premium *bashōfu* for Kimono sash; Right: Old *bashōfu* for ordinary people

## History of *Bashōfu*

### The Ryūkyū Kingdom era

The Ryūkyū (Okinawan) islands are located southwest of the Japanese archipelago. The Ryūkyū Kingdom reigned there from the 15th century until 1879, when Japan militarily annexed it and created Okinawa Prefecture. The kingdom's prosperity derived from trading international products and local specialties, including textiles (1). Premium *bashōfu* has been prized in mainland Japan since the premodern era. Premium *bashōfu* was called *Nīgashī* or *Nīgashī basā*, and *bashōfu* for common people was called *Yanbaru basā*. *Yanbaru* refers to the forested northern part of Okinawa Island. *Basā* is the old name for *bashōfu*. *Nīgashī* is the bleaching or whitening step of *bashōfu* threads, a process that enhances dyeing.

In the Ryūkyū Kingdom, the royal family members and aristocrats wore clothes made of premium *bashōfu* as well as ramie, silk, and cotton. They sometimes wore clothes made of mixed woven textiles such as *bashōfu* and silk, *bashōfu* and cotton, or silk and cotton (2). On the other hand, the common people made and wore rough *bashōfu*, an easily-obtained type of fiber, the raw material of which was easy to grow around their houses.

In terms of fabric design, most premium *bashōfu* had varieties of stripes and plaid with *kasuri* ikat patterns on red or yellow backgrounds. The finest quality plain green *bashōfu* was worn by the princes as the highest grade formal costume (3). Rough *bashōfu* for common people, on the other hand, appeared to be unbleached and have simple and narrow stripes (4).

### Under the rule of the Japanese empire

The Japanese government unilaterally absorbed the Ryūkyū Kingdom into one of their domains in 1872. They then sent military troops to the Shuri Royal Palace and compelled the Ryūkyūan royal family to move to Tokyo, and in 1879 designated Okinawa as a Prefecture (5).

The Ryūkyūan people continued producing and wearing *bashōfu*. While rough *bashōfu* was still made and worn by common people, premium *bashōfu* was produced for exporting to the Japanese mainland and Taiwan (6). This was when varieties of patterns, such as *kasuri* and *hanaori*, were developed for export (7).

The Japanese philosopher and *mingei* (folk art) movement leader Sōetsu Yanagi published ‘*Bashōfu* in Okinawa’ in 1939, during the second Sino-Japanese War (1937 - 45), and *The Story of Bashōfu* in 1942, during the Pacific War (1941 - 45). In these writings, he praised its beauty and authenticity. However, he did not distinguish premium *bashōfu* from the rough type, and simply stated that the best place for *bashōfu* production was the former capital, Shuri, because clothing for the royal family had been produced there (8) (9).

The Okinawan Islands were required to act as ‘shields’ for mainland Japan during the 1945 battle of Okinawa. They were attacked fiercely by the Allies, and one-fourth of the population of the main island of Okinawa were killed.

### Under the occupation of the US Army

After Japan’s defeat, the Ryūkyū Islands remained under occupation by the US Army until they reverted to the Japanese administration in 1972. Most of the *itobashō* plants on the Okinawan islands were supposedly burned during the fighting and as part of the army’s countermeasures against mosquitoes. The US Army did in fact establish a community workshop for producing *bashōfu* in Kijoka in July 1945, but it was soon closed down (10). Kijoka was a village in the northern part of the Okinawa mainland that had prospered from *bashōfu* production since the mid-19th century.

In December 1946, Toshiko Taira, from a distinguished family in Kijoka, came back to Okinawa from mainland Japan, where she had been encouraged by the *mingei* movement to revive *bashōfu* in Okinawa (11). She succeeded in re-starting *bashōfu* making in Kijoka around 1950, and thanks to her hard work, production increased gradually, with products catering to the demands of the US soldiers and of Japanese people (12). Taira and her colleagues produced tablecloths and cushion covers to be sold at souvenir shops for US soldiers, and *zabuton* (floor cushion) covers and *obi* sashes for the Japanese market (13).

### After reversion to the Japanese administration

In 1974, two years after Okinawa’s reversion from the US military government to the Japanese administration, the Japanese government designated *bashōfu* in Kijoka as an Important Intangible Cultural Property, with the Kijoka *Bashōfu* Preservation Society, headed by Toshiko Taira, as the holder group. Some of the conditions for its designation were: [1] The fibers must be extracted from *itobashō*; [2] the threads must be dyed with plant dyes; [3] *kasuri* (*ikat* dyeing) must be done by hand; and [4] the material must be hand-woven (14). As a result of this designation, *bashōfu* in Kijoka was officially and publicly recognized as possessing major historic and artistic value. Consequently, premium *bashōfu* achieved fame and high prices in the Japanese kimono market.

In spite of Yanagi’s claim that *bashōfu* had been produced for the common people as well as the royal family and aristocrats, the focus since the mid-1960s has been on making it a high-quality fine craft, particularly after its designation as an Important Intangible Cultural Property. It was stressed that thinner the fiber, the better the quality, and weaving it together with other fibers is strongly discouraged. Today, only premium *bashōfu* is produced as a very high-level traditional craft and attracts both public and academic interest. Typical designs of today’s premium *bashōfu* consist

of fine *kasuri* ikat patterns such as crosses or swallows on light yellow or indigo blue backgrounds.

Meanwhile, the production of rough *bashōfu* for ordinary people was rapidly declining, and knowledge of its production techniques was mostly lost.

### Experimental Demonstration

The premium *bashōfu* production process is considered fully traditional, as it requires a high level of skill and intuition on the part of the artisan at each step (15). It must also use high quality material, harvested only from 2-3-year-old plants, well-trimmed in the traditional manner. Premium *bashōfu* is made using a complicated and time-consuming production process.

As we mention above, the production of rough *bashōfu* for ordinary people declined rapidly, and full knowledge of the method used was lost. How was *bashōfu* for ordinary people made? We have engaged in scientific research into rough *bashōfu*. Our investigation of local historical records suggests that all methods used the same alkali degumming process for the extraction of *itobashō* fibers; however, variations in the process were found (16). Sometimes unregulated *itobashō* plants were also used as raw materials. We were aware that Ryūkyūan people had developed sophisticated conditions to make premium *bashōfu*. On the other hand, they might have sought the simplest techniques for making *bashōfu* for personal or family use. This prompted us to use scientific methods to study how *itobashō* fibers for *bashōfu* are affected by the extraction method.

Because our investigations of local historical records describing *bashōfu* suggested that ordinary Ryūkyūan people had simplified the conditions at each step of the process for making *bashōfu* for their personal use, we extracted *itobashō* fibers using a simple method that did not depend on the special skills or intuition that artisans currently use for premium *bashōfu* making, such as by employing materials harvested from *itobashō* plants that are too young or too old to be used for premium *bashōfu* making (17). We boiled the stiffest and least usable materials of each harvested plant, called *waha* in *bashōfu* craft making, in an alkali solution of pH 11.5 (e.g., 0.5 %  $K_2CO_3$ ) without any adjustments for 15 minutes. The boiled materials were then thoroughly rinsed with tap water, and the fibers were separated from the clean materials for morphology observations (Fig. 2).

The average thickness of our fibers exceeded 90 micrometers, whereas that of the fibers made by artisans is 76 micrometers. In traditional premium *bashōfu* making, thick fibers are unpreferable and worthless to make kimonos due to their undesirably high stiffness. Our fibers could therefore not match the quality needed for fine craft making.

Textiles combining *itobashō* and other types of threads were used for clothing for high-class and ordinary people in the past (e.g., *itobashō* threads as the weft and silk threads for warp for high-class cloth, and *itobashō* and ramie for lower-class cloth).

Using this historical adaptation (e.g., simple extraction process) and some modern skills (e.g., enzymatic treatments to enhance the softness of fibers), we have potential to make new textiles in the future.

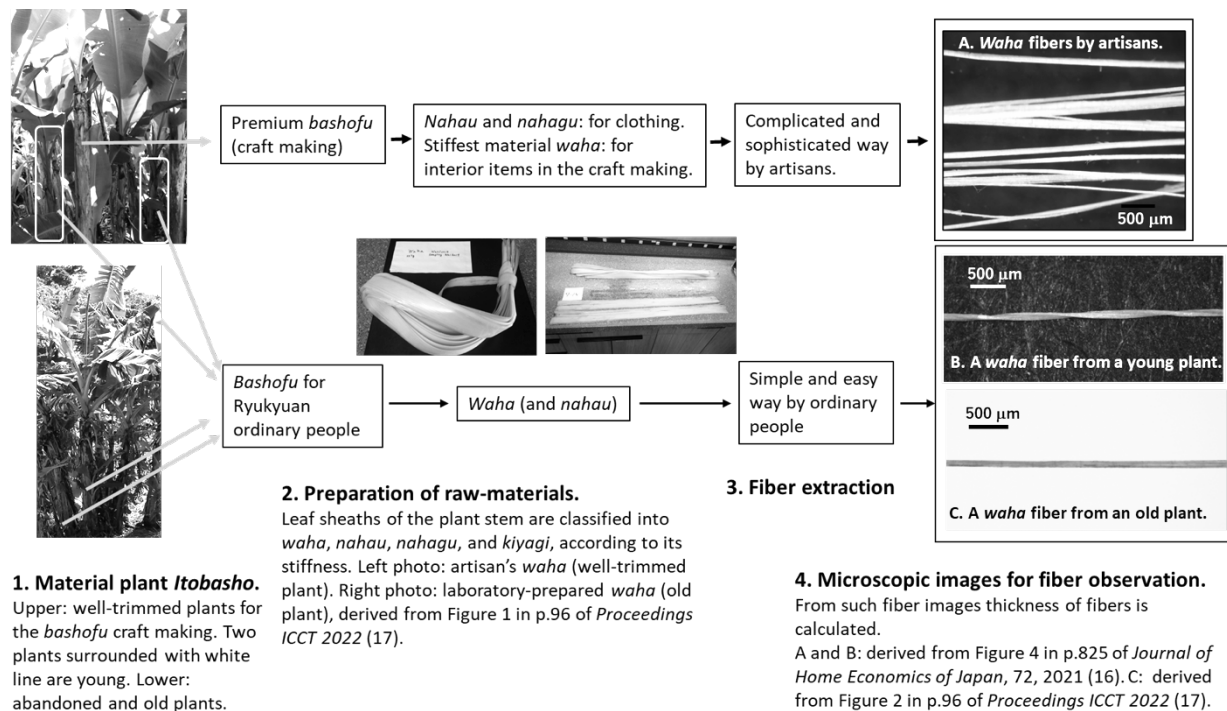


Figure 2. Scientific investigation of *bashōfu* fibers: Materials and extracted fiber observations

## Conclusions

The Okinawan Islands, reigned over by the Ryūkyū Kings, were annexed to Japan in 1879, attacked by the Allies in 1945, occupied by the US military until 1972, and ultimately reverted to Japan. Throughout these years, *bashōfu* production met the demands of the Ryūkyū Kingdom, Japanese connoisseurs, the Japanese kimono market, the US military, and local Okinawan people. The conditions of the *bashōfu* production method were varied to meet these different demands.

Because our research is based on human life sciences, the re-creation of *bashōfu* used by ordinary people was a strong research motivation. Human life sciences is an academic field that focuses on the everyday lives of ordinary people, in which scholars aim to solve the problems we face daily and enhance overall quality of life. In Okinawa, rough *bashōfu* had long been used by ordinary people for everyday and work clothes. Research and discussions on *bashōfu* through collaboration between human life sciences and design studies is potentially fruitful for both fields.

## Notes

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