

GRASS ROOTS

The Making of Indigo Dye

The Japanese character for 'Sukumo', written by combining 'grass' and 'dye', describes the traditional indigo dye made by composting the dried leaves of *Persicaria tinctoria* plants. The start of the 100 day composting process, as still practised in the Tokushima Prefecture on Japan's Shikoku island, is called nese-komi; literally the 'putting to sleep' of the indigo leaves.

This term was already used in the 14th century, when the records of Tō-ji Temple in Kyoto documented the existence of a Ne-Ai-Za, or 'Indigo Sleeping Guild', and possibly the beginning of the Japanese fermenting process; sukumo. By the 15th century indigo was being farmed on a large scale throughout the country, including Tokushima, and shipped as dried leaves to Kyoto's Ne-Ai-Za for composting. Soon, the Kingdom of Awa, as Tokushima was historically known, would establish itself as Japan's largest producer of sukumo. This designation continues today through the work of the 50 families who still grow indigo in Tokushima and in the hands of the five families who continue to ferment that indigo every autumn, transforming it into some 85% of all sukumo produced annually in Japan.

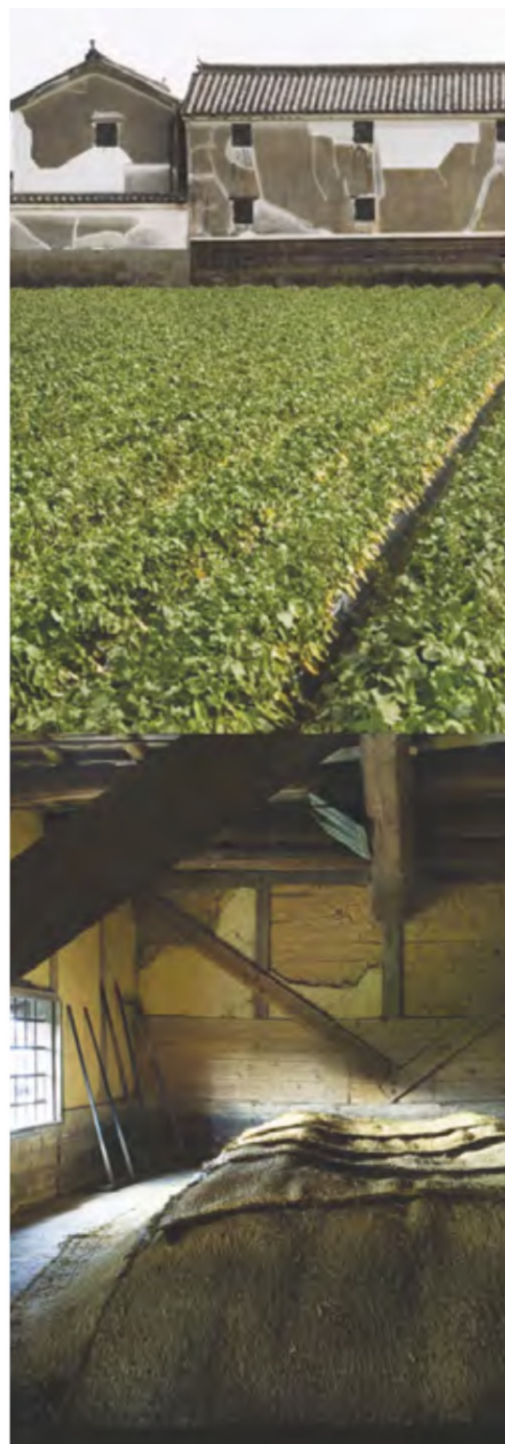
The Yoshino River is at the heart of Tokushima and is central to indigo history there. The river's annual flooding created the fertile plain which has supported indigo cultivation for well over 500 years. It also repeatedly destroyed the local rice harvest, devastating the region at a time when rice was both a staple crop and the only form of tax payment to the head of Japan's

feudal government. So when the Hachisuka family was awarded the Kingdom of Awa Indigo in 1585 for their loyalty to Japan's rulers, they quickly decided to replace rice with indigo which could be harvested before the flooding.

At the time, demand for sukumo was growing nationally, thanks to the rapid expansion of cotton production throughout Japan, so Awa's rulers recognised the opportunity to trade the indigo dyestuff for the rice they desperately needed. Fortunately, they didn't stop there, but went on to pursue a national monopoly on sukumo production. They established schools in Tokushima that bred plants with high dye content, and refined the composting process to yield the highest quality dyestuff possible. Graduates of these schools were sworn to secrecy, and anyone caught carrying these secrets from Tokushima to other regions of the country faced the death penalty.

These investments in research and development by the region's rulers are still evident today, and shaped tools such as the hane and kuma-de, still used in the composting process. They determined the basic layout of the traditional indigo farmhouses still seen along the Yoshino River, with their east-facing gates to catch the wind for winnowing the indigo-bearing leaves and their open courtyards for drying them. They developed the nedoko, or sleeping room, where the dried indigo leaves are composted into sukumo on a clay-surfaced floor that is designed to wick excess moisture away from the ▶

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composting leaves through its two-metre deep layering of rice hulls, sand, pebbles, and gravel. Most importantly, they honed the understanding that the amount of water added to piles of composting leaves with each turning, determines the quality of the final dyestuff. The schools licensed Mizu-shi, or 'Water Masters', who travelled from farm to farm in the region, adding just the right amount of water to the piles of composting indigo being turned by the farmers. The knowledge of the Mizu-shi has been passed down to today's indigo processors, now known as Ai-shi, or 'Indigo Masters'. In the hands of these five families, the indigo grown in Tokushima is still being processed into sukumo.

The *persicaria tinctoria* plant is the source of indigo dye, so each March, on an auspicious day on the Buddhist calendar, seeds are planted and the year's production begins. The seedlings are then transferred to the fields in April and tended until fully grown. Harvesting begins at the end of June and continues throughout the summer. Plants that have been cut once grow again and are ready for a second cutting in about four weeks.

The cut plants are brought back to the farm where they are run through cutting machines and then winnowed using the wind from fans to separate the indigo-bearing leaves from the stems. The leaves are gathered and spread on the ground for drying. Some farms supplement sun-drying with converted tobacco or herb dryers in order to keep up with the volume of plants being harvested each day. The harvesting continues throughout the

summer and into the early autumn, and the plants are eventually left to blossom so that seeds can be collected for the following year's planting.

Once the harvest is completed, the indigo is 'put to sleep', and the 100-day composting process begins. Over that time, the indigo is slowly concentrated by burning off excess plant material. The dried leaves are piled and mixed with enough water to moisten them on the nedoko's special clay-surfaced floor. The piles heat up quickly, and as winter temperatures drop, the composting indigo leaves are kept at a constant 70°C, in their beds with layers and layers of rice straw mats. In order to ensure even decomposition, the piles are turned every day, exposing them to oxygen in the air and adding just the right amount of water necessary to create the best sukumo possible.

Finally when the process is completed, the indigo is bagged in 56kg bales and shipped to dyers throughout the country, as it has been for centuries. Compared to the 15,000 hectares under cultivation at Awa Indigo's peak in 1903, the 18 hectares grown in 2017 may seem minuscule, but there is much to be hopeful about.

The number of farms growing indigo has in fact increased from a low of 33 in 2012 to a total today of 50. Together with the global resurgent interest in natural dyes, this may just make the collective knowledge of Awa Indigo, carefully cultivated and put to bed with each year's composting, a sleeping giant. *** Rowland Ricketts with special thanks to Mr. Sato

Rowland Ricketts & Mr. Sato



