# JEANS ON

*The spiritual roots of Japanese denim*

**Takumi – from Japanese 'artisan' or 'skilled'**, *can also come from taku; 'expand, open, pioneer' combined with (mi) 'sea, ocean' or (mi) 'truth'...*

So begins the opening credits of *Weaving Shibusa*, a documentary by Devin Leisher on the almost spiritual cult of Japanese denim and indigo culture. 'I was just fascinated by the whole thing about denim and Japan, especially as there was so much speculation about the history,' says Leisher. According to David W Marx's 2015 book *Ametora*, the Japanese denim story began with prayers at a shrine on the island of Kyushu.

Kojima had become the centre of Japan's cotton industry in the 1930s, and while searching for inspiration for the future of their company, Maruo, in the late 1950s, two executives from the town visited the Dazaifu Tenmangu shrine. When asked by Maruo's founder what divine inspiration they found there, the two executives replied in unison 'jiipan', meaning GI pants.

The Japanese love of denim grew from necessity rather than aesthetics. 'During the occupation, American soldiers often paid Pan Pan girls in old clothing (including jeans) rather than cash, and the streetwalkers went straight to Ameyoko (in Ueno, downtown Tokyo) to stores like Marasura, the American vintage specialist, to sell it off,' writes Marx in *Ametora*. Old Levi's jeans were also sold by GIs through the black market. A thriving trade in second hand 'jiipan' denim soon took off through vintage stores with names like Amerika-ya. In the early sixties the two Maruo executives finally convinced their boss to make Japan's first blue jeans.

Using denim imported from Canton Mills in Georgia, Maruo manufactured its first jeans under the Canton brand at the Kurabo Mills in Kojima, followed by its most famous jeans, Big John. By the mid-seventies Big John was joined by brands like Bobson, Nerry Smith, Bison, John Bull, and Edwin as Japanese youth started to swap their vintage jeans for homegrown versions. To feed the demand, Kojima's old cotton mills, indigo dyeing factories and sewing operations were revitalised.

And today Kojima remains the heart of Japan's denim industry. It's where you'll find many of the most innovative brands mixing ancient techniques with contemporary aesthetics. 'Kojima is a place with a long history in the textile industry; Japanese tabi socks, uniforms, and then the denim industry,' explains Toshikiyo Hirata, who founded the brand Kapital in 1984, taking its name from Kojima, the town widely regarded as the denim capital of Japan. 'This great history naturally cultivates many skilled craftsmen,' Toshikiyo adds. 'Today we have many craftsmen in Kojima continuing that history and we are grateful to have our roots here.'

Toshikiyo was working for a jeans brand in the early eighties, but was tired of simply churning out copies of American jeans and wanted to bring a more Japanese sensibility to the design of denim. And with his son Kiro as head designer, Toshikiyo has continued to reach deep back into the history of Japanese denim and indigo to create the brand.

The creative use of indigo dye ('aizome' or 'Japan Blue') in Japanese clothing goes back to the Edo period. In the 17th century cloth was bound, folded, stitched, twisted, and compressed before being dyed to create beautiful and intricate designs. Kiro, who has used shibori techniques on a number of pieces for Kapital, explains the folk roots of the craft, and how the old traditions continue to influence him. 'Aizome is originally the colour for people in the lower social classes,' he says. 'They mastered techniques like shibori dye and the sashiko stich. These creative skills came about from their wisdom and passion. This history is always in my mind and my creative process.'

Like shibori dye, sashiko stab-like stitching began out of necessity in rural Japan but developed into an artful craft. In the 18th century the wives of farmers and fishermen developed the running stitch technique to reinforce and repair old battered clothing. It was soon being used for decorative purposes; the stark white naïve stitches contrasting with the dark blue indigo of the material. By the 19th century, sashiko became far more elaborate with patterns taken from Japanese culture and nature in a similar way to Aloha shirts in Hawaii.

Kiro has also used sashiko on many pieces for Kapital and continues to study the ancient craft. 'There are sashiko stich techniques from Kogin Zashi of northern Japan to Hishizashi of the south,' he says. 'These beautiful patterns of sashiko stiches are created with meaning and functionality by craftsmen, and they are hand-stitched with love

and care. This kind of care in hand crafting is so important to us.'

Sashiko is perhaps most associated in today's fashion world with Japanese boro. Throughout the Edo period when southerners discarded their indigo-dyed clothing, seafaring traders would also sell the fabrics to these impoverished peasants in the north. There, the woman of the villages used sashiko stitching to create patchwork farmers' jackets (noragi) and futon covers (futongawa) that became ever more elaborately layered as they were passed down through the generations. Not unlike the geometric quilts made by the African American craftswomen from the Gee's Bend community in Alabama, boro clothing became known as an abstract work of art.

Kapital has produced various boro pieces such as beautifully battered jackets, jeans and hats as part of its *Kountry* remake collection. 'We were not purposely trying to make boro initially,' says Kiro. 'But because we were always experimenting and developing our denim processing techniques, what we were doing just became boro naturally, over time. We mastered the skills and techniques needed to make boro about ten years ago. Dyeing techniques, sewing skills and hand-stitching skills are vital for making it. You have to be persistent, and all of our craftsmen need to have a strong determination to make it.'

What was it that drew Kiro to boro? 'I get inspired by old things,' he says. 'I especially found boro beautiful because of its patchwork and sashiko

techniques, the beautiful blue gradation from the aging indigo, and importantly the sense of mottainai; non-waste and re-appreciation.'

Kiro goes on to elaborate on the meaning of mottainai, explaining that 'the Edo period in Japan respected recycled culture and nourished the philosophy. Mottainai means taking good care of things with respect, making it last long, not wasting and re-appreciating it. Through food, clothing and shelter, mottainai is always with us, every day.'

The sense of mottainai also resides in the way denim obsessives treasure a favourite pair of jeans. 'The jeans themselves have history. When they get torn, I think you will feel something,' says the founder of Full Count, Mikiharu Tsujita in *Weaving Shibusa*. 'By wearing them everyday, having them when you go out somewhere travelling, dining, dating, the jeans will eventually become part of your life. The vintage jeans are cool because they are dwelled in not only in a physical aspect but also in terms of emotions.' It's what drove Devin Leisher to make *Weaving Shibusa*. 'What I really wanted to show was that these jeans have a heart and soul,' he says. 'In my mind, these garments are kind of like organisms in themselves.'

And in these days of mass consumption and waste, the Japanese denim and indigo obsessives have much to teach the world. 'Since ancient times in Japan, it has been believed that spirit and life reside in everything,' says Kiro. 'And the Mottainai philosophy will always reside in our culture at the Kapital factory.' ••• **Andy Thomas**

Images courtesy of Kapital