



Mishima Basketry

Mishima, Fukushima

Brand Highlights

- The area's long history of woven handicraft: basketry for fishing and agricultural use has been traced to the prehistoric Jomon period
- A colorful calendar of festive rites and rituals honoring the old ways
- A community of artisans in tune with seasonal cycles, living off the land and crafting works of all-natural materials

The town of Mishima in western Fukushima prefecture lies in an area known as Oku-Aizu, where the old mountain-village traditions of the Tohoku region still hold sway. The Tadami River runs in a rushing torrent through these highlands; in winter the area receives heavy snowfall of up to 2 meters.

Amikumi-zaiku, or plaited basketry, is the local craft. About 10 percent of the town's 1,600 residents weave baskets, sieves, cushions, and other items, turning locally sourced plant materials into functional designs of simple, uncontrived beauty.

Each autumn these weavers fan out into the hills to gather their materials: *yamabudo* crimson glory vine, *matatabi* silver vine, and *hiroro* sedge. They cure and dry these gifts of nature and then devote the snowbound winter months to their weaving.

In the local dialect these basket weavers are called *kojin*—"makers of things." Few Mishima residents engage in *amikumi-zaiku* as their livelihood; many turn to it as a post-retirement pastime. They report happily on how they become absorbed in the work. Following the whims of their creative muse is a satisfying way to pass the long winter months, they say.

Mishima's *kojin* use their works in their own homes, give them away as gifts, and display them at the living crafts center in town, where they are also sold.

The craft tradition of basketry is nearly as old as these Oku-Aizu hills. Beautifully plaited fragments of *amikumi-zaiku* that are believed to date back 2,400 years have been unearthed in Mishima. From the outside, the slower pace of life, in step with the cycle of the seasons, makes retirement here look attractive indeed.

Symbolic rites to honor mountain deities and various ceremonies related to farming are still faithfully observed by Mishima's citizens. As with many rural communities in Japan, depopulation is a pressing concern. Residents of Mishima welcome young people with a desire to relocate and help carry on its traditions.

At two places in town the Tadami Railway crosses the river on a picturesque bridge. Visitors and photography buffs come from near and far to capture these Instagrammable scenes.



Opposite page: Tomeko Funaki lives in the Magata area and works with *hiroro* sedge to make beautiful items like this backpack by her own hand. Her baggy *sappakama* trousers are traditional farming wear. Made of cotton, they are comfortable and easy to move around in.

Top left: The Tadami Line crosses the Tadami River. **Top right:** Baskets crafted of *matatabi* silver vine by Seiichi Wakabayashi, a *kojin* from Asamata.

Above left: Statues of Jizo Bosatsu, guardian deity of travelers and children.

Above right: An Oku-Aizu mountain hamlet in the Kawai district presents a scene of rustic beauty.





Bungo Igarashi
A leading light of Mishima basketry, this late master of *amikumi-zaiku* made of *matatabi* silver vine was one of the first in Mishima to be certified as a traditional artisan.* His teachings have had a profound influence on those who knew and studied under him.



Hiroshi Kodaira
Kodaira turned to *amikumi-zaiku* when illness ended his former job as a carpenter. He works mainly with *matatabi* silver vine. "I don't mind whether my pieces sell or not," he asserts. "I'm happy to give them away or use them myself."



Masaei Meguro
Meguro took up *amikumi-zaiku* after retirement; he is now a certified traditional artisan with 20 years of experience. He learned *matatabi* weaving styles from Bunko Igarashi. His rice baskets sell out fast at regularly held craft fairs.



Junkichi Komatsu
As a young boy Komatsu watched his father weave items from straw; he didn't take up basketry himself until after turning 60. A former certified traditional artisan, today he receives a steady stream of orders for his *matatabi* baskets.



Mitsuyoshi Igarashi
A recipient of many prestigious awards and accolades for his work with *yamabudo* crimson glory vine, Igarashi insists that beauty in shape and appearance alone is not enough. "A truly well-made piece," he says, "must exude warmth."



Motoshige Aoki
Aoki grew up watching his mother make farm tools. He began weaving baskets in earnest at the end of a long teaching career. A certified traditional artisan, he enjoys the full cycle of working with *yamabudo* vines, from gathering the material to shaping it.



Tokichi Kanke
Kanke says his former job at the Mishima-machi Living Crafts Center opened his eyes to the appeal of basketry. This all-around expert on mountain living works with *yamabudo* vines and enjoys applying traditional techniques to meet contemporary needs.



Tomeko Funaki
Funaki, a certified traditional artisan, learned to plait *hiroro* sedge from her mother-in-law. In their farmhouse the year was split by field work and indoor crafts. Always one to try out some new design idea, she says, "Making things is fun. I love it."

Mishima residents who gather and process natural materials for their handmade *amikumi-zaiku* works consider themselves neither craftspeople nor artists. They prefer to be thought of as *kojin*, makers of things. The Kojin Matsuri is an annual crafts fair that's been held in Mishima each June since 1987. More than 150 exhibitors gather from all over Japan to sell their wares, which range from basketry to pottery and even glassware, at an outdoor location. A destination in its own right, the event now draws some 20,000 people. The individuals introduced on these pages are just a few of the talented *kojin* who call Mishima home.

Amikumi-zaiku: A living craft

The Japanese government named the *amikumi-zaiku* basketry of Mishima a Traditional Craft Product in 2003. But the movement that led to this recognition began two decades earlier, in 1981. Amid concerns about depopulation, then mayor Nagao Sato identified *monozukuri*—the art of making things—as a way to both preserve the old mountain ways and stimulate the local economy.

Subsequent projects to boost interest in *monozukuri*, including the 1987 launch of the Kojin Matsuri crafts fair, inspired more and more Mishima residents to take up basketry, a swell of interest that eventually prompted the government designation.

It would be misleading to suggest that *amikumi-zaiku* has since developed into a full-fledged local industry. On the contrary, for the residents of Mishima the point has rather to do with deepening one's enjoyment of life. What better revitalization scheme could there be than the very joy of living itself? At the end of the day, it's this attitude that will do the most to keep the old ways intact. The fact that 10 percent of its population are *kojin* is one of the most valuable assets this spirited mountain community has.

Visit Mishima and you will see handmade basketry everywhere. Neither decorative pieces of art nor casual souvenirs, they are living works of natural beauty, used and appreciated daily.



From top left: *Matatabi* silver vine baskets used for washing rice, a popular choice of visitors (Hiroshi Kodaira); flat *hiroro* sedge cushions (Tomeko Funaki); *yamabudo* crimson glory vine baskets (Motoshige Aoki); *matatabi* basket (Junkichi Komatsu); *yamabudo* clutch purse (Mitsuyoshi Igarashi).

Opposite page: A *hiroro* sedge shoulder bag (Setsuko Kubota) rests atop a *yamabudo* basket (Taijiro Itabashi), a delightful contrast in colors. Plaiting the naturally curvy and twisted *yamabudo* vines into a desired shape without leaving any gaps in the weave demands years of practice.

*National certification as a traditional artisan is bestowed upon those who endeavor to preserve a traditional craft native to their area. Holders of this title are devoted to the study of the craft's techniques and skills, and play an active role in transmitting the vocation to the next generation.



Women of Mishima model *amikumi-zaiku* bags and baskets. Most of the residents shown here are *kojin*, although the pieces they hold may not have been made by their own hand. *Yamabudo* baskets and *hiroro* bags are as natural a part of the landscape here as the fields and trees that are their source.

In the olden days *amikumi-zaiku* was a winter activity performed when the rural settlements were snowbound. People used those long months to fashion the household tools and other implements they needed for farming and working outdoors—thus the emphasis on functionality. The woman at bottom right is holding two *matatabi* silver vine baskets made with a *yotsume* cross pattern, a basic weave that's strong and durable and well suited for the handling and storage of produce. The photo above that one, at far right, shows a *yamabudo* rucksack made 100 years ago for use in the mountains. Its well-conceived cord design, handy size, and simple beauty are clearly evident.





On an autumn day in mid-November, students of the Seikatsu Kogei Academy head out to gather *matatabi* silver vine, which grows profusely on sunny hillsides beside streams. They take only what they need, leaving two buds on each first-year-growth branch for the following season. The academy was launched in 2017 by Mishima as a way to help the younger generations become familiar with mountain ways. Its students live in Mishima for one year, learning *amikumi-zaiku* techniques and practicing farming. Those who wish to stay on after completing the program may sign on as apprentices for an additional two years.



Amikumi-zaiku time slip

The three base materials used in *amikumi-zaiku* are the bark of *yamabudo* crimson glory vines, the woody part of *matatabi* silver vine, and *hiroro* sedge. *Akaso*, a species of the nettle family, and *mowada*, the inner bark of the basswood tree, are used to provide accents in *hiroro* works. Sturdy *yamabudo* is hard-wearing, while supple *matatabi* repels water. *Hiroro* is lightweight yet strong. Mishima's *kojin* gather these materials in the nearby mountains themselves and process them as required.

Fragments of *amikumi-zaiku* like the one shown below have been discovered at the Arayashiki archeological site in Mishima; they are now held by the Fukushima Museum. This one, woven of bamboo, is believed to have been made in the late days of the Jomon period—nearly two and a half millennia ago. The bamboo was meticulously split into extremely fine strips of uniform width, then interlaced in a chevron twill to yield a distinctive zig-zag design. Nothing at all to do with function or enhanced durability, this was purely an aesthetic choice by an obviously skilled weaver.

Connections between Jomon-era weaving and the Mishima *amikumi-zaiku* lineage are still the subject of scholarly research. But what is clear is that more than two millennia ago, people who lived and breathed on this same ground were expressing their artistic talents through basketry. Mishima is that kind of place.



Each winter Mishima hosts a *monozukuri* seminar attended by non-residents and citizens alike. Participants learn *amikumi-zaiku* weaving techniques and make their own basketry. The women shown here are making cords of *hiroro* sedge by twisting the raw material. At bottom right is the finished product, beautifully rendered by traditional artisan Tomeko Funaki.



A Year in Mishima

	Nature	Basketry	Daily Life	Ceremonies
Jan.			  New Year's offering	    
Feb.			 	  
Mar.	  		 	 
Apr.	  		 	 
May	 	 ▼ The outer layer of yamabudo vines can be stripped off easily for a very short window of just two weeks in mid-May.	   	 
Jun.	 	  	  	 ◀ Stands of 400-year-old beeches and 500-year-old horse-chestnut trees cover the slopes of this sacred mountain.
Jul.	 		 	
Aug.	 ▼ Juicy Mishirazu persimmons, an Aizu specialty, ripen.		 	
Sep.	 	 	 	 
Oct.	 		  	 ▼ Prayers are offered for the repose of insects exterminated to protect crops (Hayato).
Nov.	 	 ◀ Matatabi silver vine can be harvested for more than one month—the longest-lasting supply of all amikumi-zaiku materials.	   	 
Dec.	 ◀ On crisp clear mornings after the first snowfall, the landscape sparkles with swirled patterns of frost. 		  	 

❶ Guests who visit at the New Year "eat" a special offering of food by making a sign of thanks with their right hand. ❷ A ritual is performed to give thanks to farm tools and other implements. ❸ Dogwood branches are decorated with colorful balls of steamed rice flour to wish for a good harvest. ❹ Rice straw is "planted" in a bed of husks on the snow, symbolizing the first planting and expressing wishes for a bountiful year. ❺ Children walk through the village singing songs to protect the fields and rice paddies from birds. ❻ On the first day of spring, roasted soybeans are scattered to ward off evil spirits and bring good luck. ❼ Residents guard others from misfortune by moving from house to house with a giant string of prayer beads while chanting the Nembutsu, a Buddhist devotional prayer. ❽ Fragrant sasamaki rice wraps steamed in bamboo grass are enjoyed. ❹ After the rice paddies are planted, people celebrate and give thanks with a sanaburi picnic. ❿ Plump round dumplings are served, and silver grass displayed, at moon-viewing parties. ⓫ Natto is prepared by wrapping boiled soybeans in straw and burying the bundles in snow to promote slow fermentation. ⓬ The complete Heart Sutra is recited. ⓭ A shimenawa rope marking the bounds of a sacred place is made and presented to Takao Jinja, the local shrine.



Top: An offering of thanks is made before felling the tree to be used for the *sainokami* effigy.

Above: The tree is wrapped in straw and stood upright in the snow.

Right: Residents carry pine torches lit with divine fire from the local shrine to the *sainokami* site.

Left: The bonfire begins at 7 PM. A close to the New Year celebrations, it lights the way for the new year ahead as onlookers pray for good health and abundant harvests.



Mountain living

Throughout Japan, any number of deities, from mountain kami to those who protect the fields, are venerated in rites and rituals that have carried on over the centuries, observed in a variety of ways from one community or household to the next. The old mountain ways remain especially strong in the Oku-Aizu region. Mishima in particular is unusual for the sheer number of ceremonies that are observed throughout the calendar year.

The biggest annual event for residents here is *sainokami*, a ritual recognized by the national government as an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property. It is observed in a few locations during *koshogatsu* ("little New Year"), a short span of days around mid-January. A tree cut from the forest is wrapped in straw, set upright in the snow, and topped with paper decorations. After sundown it is set on fire while those gathered around it pray for sound health and bumper crops in the coming year. Many visitors come to Mishima to see this event.

Like an archetypal image of a not-so-distant past, the rhythms of daily life in Mishima unfold in concert with nature, in step with the cycling seasons from month to month throughout the year. Those with an interest in "getting back to the land" and living more simply would do well to start their explorations here.

Local foods of Nishikata

Mori no Kosha Katakuri, a poetic name evoking spring in the woods, is a hotel that operates in an abandoned school. Women of the Nishikata district show their hospitality here with foods they have made themselves, using vegetables from their own fields. The photo at bottom right shows a tray of celebratory foods eaten at the New Year. It includes *obira*, a dish of simmered vegetables, tofu, and kombu seaweed; and *kozuyu*, a hearty soup made with scallop stock. In the photo at top left are a jelly made from *egogusa*, a type of seaweed; dried and simmered cod; and herring cooked with Japanese *sansho* pepper.

