

# Japanese Boro Farmer Garments



**Japanese Women Repurposing, Recycling, Reusing**

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In the 1700 and 1800s, Japanese farm wives in rural regions couldn't afford to purchase commercially made fabrics like their city dwelling sisters. These women had to make due by working at home spinning cotton and hemp strands into threads and yarn, and then hand loomed the fibers into fabric. Their woven cloth was used to fashion clothing (and household textiles) for themselves and their families. The Japanese named homemade, hand-stitched

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farm work clothing “noragi”. Jackets, vests, along with momohiki<sup>1</sup> and monpe<sup>2</sup> pants were the most common types of noragi garments. This home based sewing tradition would be passed down from mother to daughter, from each generation to the next, and was part of the basic homemaking repertoire of every Japanese farm wife.

Japanese rural folks preferred the color of indigo blue to dye their textiles. They felt the indigo color reflected the beautiful dark blue hues of the oceans that



surrounded the Japanese archipelago. To help matters, Japanese indigo plants grew wild and were plentiful throughout most areas of Japan.



In addition, Indigo dye was favored on account of its ability to retain the blue color in cotton fabric after many years of use. Alluringly, indigo cotton progressively faded into beautiful shades

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<sup>1</sup> A type of leggings worn by workers during the 1800s and early 1900s

<sup>2</sup> A type of work pants worn by farm women while working in the fields.

of lighter blue due to washing, wear and time. (Like a faded pair of old jeans)

Furthermore, Japanese firsthand experience held that indigo dye possessed inherent antibacterial properties to fight off infections and was also effective for suppressing disagreeable odors. Beyond those attributes, the Japanese understood that indigo clothing contained beneficial medicinal properties that cured a multitude of common skin problems. Interestingly, farmers were convinced that indigo dyed fabrics could naturally repulse insects and snakes. This insect and reptile repellent characteristic was the primary reason why Japanese farm women chose to wear indigo clothing while

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working in the fields along side their husbands.



Over time, these homemade noragi garments became thread-bare, tattered and faded as a result of constant wear and the farmer's hard labor. As a result, homemakers who resided in remote regions always needed to reuse and recycle the family's work clothing for both financial and practical reasons.

These excessively mended work garments were known as "boro noragi".

Stitch for stitch, scrap for scrap, boro<sup>3</sup> garments embody the long held indispensable Japanese concept of "mottainai". It's

“ ... at one time the Japanese regarded their boro garments and textiles with great shame and disdain.

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<sup>3</sup> Boro is a Japanese word meaning "tattered rags" and it's the term frequently used to describe lovingly patched and repaired cotton bedding and clothing, used much longer than the normal expected life cycle.

the term Japanese use for not wanting to waste clothing by throwing them away if the garment's useful life might be prolonged through recycling and repurposing. A concept that still holds its original value even in today's fashion progressive Japan.

"Mottainai" was first documented in 13th century Japan. The word denotes a state of mind marked by a blending of humility, respect and a sense of gratitude accompanied by profound regret at the thought of wasted



resources. This penny-wise concept was derived from the religious teachings and moral precepts of Japanese indigenous Shinto and externally introduced Buddhism. Shinto believed that each material object possessed a kami (god) and, as such, deserved individual reverence. And, Buddhism held that wastefulness and a self-indulgent lifestyle were the opposite of Buddha's teachings. Each of

these religions had its particular notion about "mottainai" principles that were early on combined to make up the complete concept behind the word as we know it today.

Boro clothing and textiles are blunt examples of the mottainai concept. They illustrate vividly an open narrative about the struggles of a hardy rural people, living in abject poverty, who cobbled together limited resources just to make ends meet.

In order to assemble fabric for use in their sewing projects, farm wives carefully unstitched and pieced out old futon covers, worn-out garments, and other ragged household textiles that were stockpiled for such purposes. Sometimes, the disassembled fabrics were dyed again to give them a refreshed appearance. Often one can see signs of a textile's previous life in

boro clothing, like the faint image on the inside or back of a patched jacket. The homemaker then recycled and remade these usable cloth fragments into hard wearing field-work apparel (boro noragi).

By way of illustration, frigid winters called for farm women to add three or four layers of fabric to their husband's older work coats and pants. Often these garments needed an abundance of sashiko<sup>4</sup> stitches to hold the mismatched layers of old fabrics in place. At the same time, the women mended the thin areas of fabric with patches of scrap cloth and reinforced the repairs with more sashiko stitching. Their homemade pieces of cotton or hemp clothing were characterized by patchwork assembly and mended patched look. All of this was done in order to maximize warmth and to stretch out the garment's usable lifetime.



At the time when Japan was struggling to recover from the devastation of the Second World War, the Japanese regarded their boro garments and textiles with great shame and disdain. Their embarrassment and rejection of boro was due to these utilitarian textiles serving as open reminders of Japan's dishonorable impoverished past. On the opposite side, international textile

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collectors of that same era sought out exceptional boro textile specimens because they treasured the exemplary "mottainai" practices of the rural

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<sup>4</sup> Sashiko is a traditional form of Japanese hand sewing that uses a simple running stitch sewn in repeating or interlocking patterns, usually piercing through several layers of fabric

Japanese lifestyle of the 1800s. Furthermore, they admired the unpretentious Japanese habit of textile thrift, reuse and repurpose.

Today, Japanese collectors who have rediscovered their textile heritage along with international aficionados share a common reverence for boro clothing. Both consider

Japanese tattered clothing as striking illustrations of a bygone and lost folk craft. Now, these boro garments are avidly collected and cherished for the unscripted stories they candidly convey and the individual windows they open into rarely encountered instances of Japanese folk culture and history.



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