

NIBUTANI ATTOUSHI
WOVEN BARK CLOTH

北海道・平取町
BIRATORI・HIDAKA

In the far north of Japan, shredded tree bark is used to create a durable and comfortable textile.

Nibutani is a district in the small town of Biratori, on the island of Hokkaido. The word Nibutani comes from the indigenous Ainu language, and means “place where trees grow in abundance.” Even now, a majority of the 395 residents are Ainu or descended from Ainu. It is an isolated town with barely any amenities—just one drive-in restaurant, mostly filled with truck drivers on the way to somewhere else. The most abundant thing in Nibutani—apart from the trees—is culture. There are stores filled with locally made folk handicrafts, as well as the Ainu Culture Museum, where one can see various ancient relics recovered from the Saru River basin. An Ainu *kotan*, or village, has been recreated to allow travelers to experience the living conditions of the people in ancient times, and Ainu craftspeople have gathered in this locality as well.

One of these craftspeople is Yukiko Kaizawa, 78, who is a *Nibutani Attoushi* craftspeople. *Attoushi* is a unique textile, in that it is made out of extremely thin shreds of tree bark taken from Manchurian elm, or *Ulmus laciniata*, a species of tree common in Nibutani. The process of harvesting the bark and turning it into a fashionable, wearable textile is complex and time consuming, but over the 60 years Kaizawa has

been making it, she has only grown more fond of the material. “When I’m away from the *Attoushi* string, I just can’t relax,” she says with a smile. “My hands just can’t get enough of working with it.”

The exact history and origin of *Attoushi* is difficult to pinpoint, as the Ainu people have no written language and, therefore, no records. The first Japanese written documents to mention *Attoushi* as a craft emerged in the later part of the eighteenth century during the Edo period (1603–1868), when the Japanese and Ainu began to trade. The Ainu, realizing that *Attoushi* was a valuable item that could be traded for items not readily available in their inland villages, poured effort into producing it, with men pitching in on what was traditionally a women’s craft. Kaizawa believes the origin of *Attoushi* goes much further back than anyone imagines, however. “The type of bark used in *Attoushi* was first used in rope for building houses, as well as [carrying] firewood or slain animals,” she says. “*Attoushi* is the same thing, essentially, just more refined.”

The bark, harvested from elm trees during the summer, must be boiled and washed before the inner layer is peeled off. It is then left outside to dry; exposure to the sun and rain bleaches the bark, making it



Yukiko Kaizawa is one of several *Attoushi* weavers in Nibutani but, with more than 60 years of practice, her experience is second to none. Her love for the craft can see her working for 12 hours straight without realizing it. She likens the feel of the string in her hands to an addiction.