

都城大弓

MIYAKONOJO DAIKYU
LONGBOWS

宮城県・都城市
MIYAKONOJO · MIYAZAKI

The castle town of Miyakonojo has the largest population of traditional longbow makers in Japan.

The Japanese longbow is the largest of its kind in the world, measuring a minimum of 212 centimeters from tip to tip for the shortest of adult archers. It was the samurai's key weapon in the Sengoku era of Japanese history, and is capable of flinging an arrow with great accuracy over hundreds of meters. The form of the bow is strikingly beautiful, with its graceful curvature and polished bamboo surfaces, and its basic construction has not changed since the design stabilized in the seventeenth century. Modern *kyudo* (Japanese archery) competitors use bows that are largely unchanged from those of 200 years ago. Many of these bows are produced in Miyakonojo, a town famous for making 80 to 90 percent of the nation's traditional bows.

"My ancestor was a very good archer, so his lords said 'why don't you try making bows?'" says Sumihiro Kusumi, a seventh-generation bow craftsman from Miyakonojo. According to Kusumi, his great ancestor was the originator of the type of longbow for which Miyakonojo is known today. Official records of the exact origin of the Miyakonojo longbow are incomplete, but it appears from court documents of the ruling Shimazu clan that archery was a popular martial pursuit in this area from the seventeenth

century, and that the Shimazu clan were indeed great sponsors of martial arts and weaponry. Miyakonojo became a thriving bow-making area due to the high quality of the bamboo harvested in the area.

The production of a Japanese longbow is extremely difficult and time consuming. The core of the bow is constructed out of two outer layers of dried sumac wood glued around five strips of carbonized bamboo. Then, bamboo for the surface is shaved flat before being applied on the outside of the core using an adhesive made out of boiled buckskin. In order to ensure the layers of wood stick fast to one another without risk of coming apart again, the bow is bound tightly with a length of rope. Following this process, roughly 80 to 100 bamboo wedges are hammered into the binding, helping apply even more pressure to the glue while the artisan slowly bends the bow into a crescent shape. After the glue has dried, the rope and wedges are removed and the bow is then recurved over a set of shaping blocks. The recurve process is what gives Japanese longbows their accuracy and range, as well as their sleek, beautiful shape.

"My father never taught me how to make bows," says Kusumi. "I had to learn what I could while watching, and apply what I could glean in my own time."



Tetsuro Ogura stands in his front yard with a longbow he has crafted. In Miyakonojo there are 10 artisans making longbows, and four of them are nationally recognized Master Artisans; Ogura is one of the four. There are fewer than half a dozen bow artisans outside of Miyakonojo.