

BANANAS FOR FIBER AND FOOD: TWO TYPES OF BANANA LINKING JAPAN WITH OTHER PARTS OF ASIA

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There are two types of banana in Japan: bananas for weaving and bananas for food. In the Ryukyu Islands (Okinawa), which are at the southern end of Japan, bananas have long been cultivated and utilized for clothes and food.

The first bananas in the Ryukyu Islands were grown to obtain fiber. “Ito-Basho” was one of the *Musa* species (*Musa ryukyuensis*) that became common in the Ryukyus during the 13th and 14th centuries. It is thought that Ito-Basho originated in either the Malay Peninsula or southern China, and was brought to Japan through the wide trade-network in Asia controlled by the Ryukyu Kingdom. The clothes woven from Ito-Basho fiber are called “Basho-fu”. Compared with Abaca (*Musa abaca*), Ito-Basho needs more labor during cultivation and harvest, but it produces finer, softer fiber. Up until the beginning of the 20th century, Basho-fu was a popular cloth for ordinary people. Other products made from Ito-Basho include a kind of paper (Basho-shi). In this presentation, I will introduce the remaining forms of production of Basho-fu practiced by local people.

The introduction of the banana for food into the Ryukyu Islands dates back only about 120 years. These bananas of Southeast Asian origin are called “Shima-banana” and are valued by the local people.

The history of the banana in the Ryukyu Islands is closely related to that in Taiwan, which was once colonized by Japan. By looking at the life stories associated with the banana in the Ryukyus, we can understand various features of Japanese tradition, including the culture of food, and become aware of a hitherto little-known linkage between Japan and other parts of Asia.

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