



LEFT: Kazuyusugi: rinsing kozo bast fiber in the Abukuma River before boiling. CENTER: Cleaned kozo bast fiber being taken up the hill for beating. RIGHT: Kamisuki: Anzai Gen'i making double sheets of paper for shoji screens.

Washi Memories

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WASHI MEMORIES

Eleanor Burkett. *Cliff Edge*, Beer Hill, Seaton, UK: The Old School Press, 2023. 115 pages, 11.25 x 8.25 inches (hardcover). Black-and-white photographs throughout. Text hand-set at The Old School Press. Cover is suminagashi paper by Sarah Amatt with title in reproduced calligraphy originally written by Hashimoto Yōko. Binding by Ludlow Bookbinders. Includes thirteen tipped-in paper samples. Text by Sidney E. Berger, Eleanor Burkett, and Anzai Kōichi. Edition of 150. Available on the publisher's website, theoldschoolpress.com, £250 plus shipping.

There is a section in Eleanor Burkett's *Washi Memories* where she recounts a diary entry that she wrote in 1981, while observing craftspeople as they painstakingly removed specks of debris from kozo fiber in a bath of cold water: "There is nothing romantic about papermaking." This one line stood out to me—flanked by black-and-white photos of Japanese papermakers in the 1950s and the fruits of their labor—and is a good encapsulation of the ethos embodied within the pages of this book.

At first glance, *Washi Memories*—to an acquainted papermaker—will seem a bit like a repeat. Burkett describes the various stages of processing kozo and making washi, as countless authors have done before. However, as I read the text, I was struck by a crucial difference, which I see as the greatest strength of *Washi Memories*: Burkett approaches the subject as an unabashed realist, informed by her deep relationship with papermakers in Kamikawasaki, Japan.

A small village in Fukushima prefecture, Kamikawasaki is the setting of this narrative. Three individuals in particular are highlighted in the introduction: papermakers Anzai Kōichi and Anzai Yasuhiko, and paper wholesaler Anzai Yasuo.¹ *Washi Memories* contains the imprint of each of these individuals in powerful ways. There are paper samples from the papermakers Anzai Yasuhiko and his son Yasuyuki, as well as samples from Anzai Kōichi; and lines from haiku written by Anzai Yasuo pepper each section of text, providing lyrical punctuation for the descriptive, process-oriented sections.

There is an unmistakable romanticism that permeates literature on Japanese papermaking, from Dard Hunter to the present. It is worth noting that this romanticism exists also in Japanese literature on papermaking, particularly when the mission is to revitalize a region or its craft industries. While Burkett's prose is well-written, thoughtful, and at times beautiful, it is not what I would call romantic. This, however, is why *Washi Memories* shines. In her introduction, Burkett writes, "[This book] is a tribute to [the papermakers'] toil and celebrates the beautiful papers

they have produced at such pain.” Pain can also be read as romantic, but the amount of detail Burkett goes into, and the papermakers’ anecdotes that she provides, steer the reader away from a rose-tinted picture.

Burkett shares with us the realities of hardworking, struggling individuals in a craft industry. Let us not forget that, throughout time, papermakers have been a class of overworked artisans, laborers who ended each day with cracked and calloused hands, sore knees, and throbbing shoulders. I appreciate that *Washi Memories* does not romanticize the profession of production papermaking. Burkett goes into detail on the bleak economics of papermaking in Kamikawasaki in the 1980s: “[The paper] was sold by the wholesaler for about 100 yen a sheet, and [the papermaker] received about 35 yen a sheet.”² Fittingly, one of Anzai Yasuo’s haiku lines in the text reads: “The livelihood of a papermaker is hard.”

The interspersing in the text of black-and-white photographs of the Kamikawasaki papermaking community from the 1950s accentuates these sometimes-harsh realities of papermaking. There are photos of the papermaking process, homes of papermakers, scenes of the village. In tandem with Burkett’s writing on the importance of water, the transformation of material to paper, and the people involved in every step of the process, these photos are a powerful form of time travel, showing the reader scenes that would be near-impossible to find today.

One photo shows a hunched-over woman walking from the Abukuma river, a wooden basket strapped to her back filled with massive clumps of freshly cleaned fiber. The Abukuma river is another character in Kamikawasaki, and in Burkett’s narrative. The river once served to whiten and wash the fibers, and was the medium within which the fibers were dispersed and paper made. The laborers were close, physically and emotionally, to their most essential elements. Another photo shows a closeup of scraping bark on a compressed straw mat. Burkett accompanies this photo with a line from a song in the region from the 1920s: “I don’t want to marry into a family in Kawasaki. At night I would have to peel kozo.”³

Despite the challenges associated with their production routine, the makers within *Washi Memories* clearly had an immense pride for their craft, and those who continue to practice still maintain this pride. In Anzai Kōichi’s introduction for *Washi Memories*, which follows Burkett’s own, he writes: “Although making paper by hand is an extremely hard way of life, I am proud of the lifestyle of a bygone era that these photographs represent and I trust that insight into a thousand years of Kamikawasaki papermaking history will be passed on through these pages.”

And how might this pride and hard work manifest? In the paper, of course. And *Washi Memories* contains a thoughtfully curated selection of paper samples made by all of the makers mentioned in the book. The largest paper samples are roughly 8 x 6 inches each, allowing the reader to thoroughly inspect and handle a large surface area. I especially love the walnut-dyed paper by Anzai Yasuyuki, Yasuhiko’s son; the paper was dyed by his mother, Yasuhiko’s wife Noriko, who (as Burkett mentions) has long been a stalwart preserver of Kamikawasaki’s papermaking heritage. The samples, with the names of their makers, further root the reader and sharpen our view of Kamikawasaki.

Within the last pages of *Washi Memories*, Burkett writes, “[These papermakers’] legacy is mirrored in each strong sheet of paper that I fashion from the other side of the globe.” The idea of a “global” papermaker is, of course, not new; for two millennia papermakers have adapted the practice to a variety of ecosystems and cultures. However, in our current social climate, where the expedient and fast-paced are prized over the slow and deliberate—be it in the arts or other aspects of life—Burkett’s words here of a “mirrored” legacy gives me joy and hope.



The tipped-in paper sample is kurumi-zome: kozo paper made by Anzai Yasuyuki and dyed with walnut (kurumi) by Anzai Noriko. All photos courtesy of the Anzai family and the publisher.

There has been a marked decline in the number of distinct hand-papermaking communities in Japan over the last century. We could simply lament this loss, or we can view the decentralization of papermaking activity as more of a dispersion of skill and production than an end. With books like *Washi Memories* to guide us, we can appreciate the toil of makers and the obsessive care they put into their product. We can also use this as a blueprint for our own practice: not taking shortcuts, seeking to be attuned to our surroundings and environment, and bonding with each maker through our trials and efforts. Embedded in this book is a remedy, inspired by this village and its people, for our puzzling contemporary lifestyle of isolating contradictions—and I thank Eleanor Burkett for bringing it forward.

NOTES

1. Japanese names are in Japanese name order with family name preceding given name. Burkett is careful to inform us in the book that there are many with the Anzai surname in the Kamikawasaki region, and that every Anzai is not necessarily related.
2. In the text, the papermaker here is Anzai Yasuhiko; 35 yen in 1983 would have been 14 cents USD (with inflation, 44 cents USD today—a paltry sum for a sheet of high-quality handmade paper, bark-to-finish).
3. Kamikawasaki and Kawasaki refer to the same region.