

## MEET THE ARTIST

### Rice paste and soy beans powder

As part of the WHO Art Gallery project<sup>1</sup> the organizers arranged a series of lunchtime sessions “*Meet the Artist*”, I was invited to present my **Japanese Folk Textile Dyeing** at WHO Headquarters on 11 February. This gave me the opportunity to meet former colleagues, some of whom I had not seen for decades, as well as many serving staff members interested in this subject.

In the 1980’s, while preparing for my PhD in Medical Sciences in Japan, I was also attending a *Katazome atelier* regularly. Once retired in 2016, I returned to the *atelier* to continue with *Katazome* and at the same time I am now preparing for a PhD in Art and Cultural Heritage.



Maria Santamaria enjoying her work at the dyeing basin.

Photo: Maria Santamaria

I specialize in *Somemono*, and more specifically in *Katazome*, which is basically a folk textile dyeing technique, in which designs are converted into patterns that are repeat-applied to the tissue, to create the composition. Generally, these compositions will be made into a kimono, or kimono sash (*obi*). A pattern can also be created using a large design that is applied just once to the tissue to create the single motive of a *noren*, a Japanese curtain, or a *furoshiki*, a dyed cloth used to wrap luxury gifts, usually square, and in various sizes depending on the object to be wrapped.

The *atelier* I attend adheres strictly to the many-centuries-old traditional Okinawa-technique of folk textile dyeing. We use only natural products (rice paste and soy beans powder) to fix the patterns and mineral colours, aligning ourselves to the cycle of nature and its seasons, since temperature, humidity, and sunlight are all important elements in the dyeing process.

The world of *Katazome* is, in my opinion, simultaneously eternal and ephemeral. Eternal, because it is part of the cultural heritage and national identity of Japanese people. Ephemeral, because the traditional products (*kimono*, *obi*, *noren*, *furoshiki*) are becoming a symbol of a nostalgic elite, and because the traditional *Katazome* technique is labour-intensive and time-consuming, unable to compete with industrial textile dyeing.

My research includes initiatives across Japan to preserve traditional *Katazome* by making it more sustainable, culturally and economically. These include making it more widely known, teaching *Katazome* to younger generations, documenting the life of craftspeople through oral history and cataloguing their work, and finding new commercial niches for these products.

I am particularly interested in initiatives elsewhere that could become worthy options for *Katazome* in Japan. If you are aware of any such initiatives, please let me know at [mastamaria@hotmail.com](mailto:mastamaria@hotmail.com).

#### **Maria Santamaria**

<sup>1</sup> See *Quarterly News* No. 118 January 2020.

The author worked in WHO as a medical officer from 1989–2016 in several departments including the Office of the Director-General, Health and Emergencies, Epidemic Preparedness and Response, and Internal Oversight Services. A Kimono made from one of her *Katazome* is shown on the inside back cover.

Further examples of the author’s work can be viewed at <https://maria-santamaria.art/>

### Japanese Folk Textile Dyeing

A kimono made from fabric created using traditional *Katazome* dyeing techniques

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