

A Touch of Japanese Tradition

Welcome to A Touch of Japanese Tradition, published by the Japan America Society of St. Louis and the Japan America Society Women's Association. This newsletter highlights our programs and events on traditional Japanese culture.

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Some Thoughts on Kimono

Dave Lowry

The classic woman's kimono of Japan, rich, lustrous brocade, sumptuously hued, was not meant to be appreciated, as Junichiro Tanizaki points out in his long essay, *In Praise of Shadows*, under the direct and flat illumination of modern light. Instead, he suggests, the kimono achieves its real beauty admired, as it was historically, by the flicker and bedimmed glow of candle or lantern, within the confines, largely, of a traditional Japanese home.

A woman's kimono viewed under museum glass or in broad daylight is florid, grandiose. Worn in the mellowed and shadowy lulence of a paper-screened, lattice-windowed Japanese room and its beauty becomes layered, textured, nuanced. An object of marvel.

Tanizaki could be overwrought in his gushing admiration for pre-modern Japan and its aesthetics. He has a point, however. All too often, enthusiasts of Japanese culture assume they can pluck some element of that culture from its native environs and indulge or display it, without attention to the context in which it developed. The kimono is a product of that culture. An awareness of, an appreciation for the wider facets of Japan are useful, maybe even necessary to really comprehend its true

value. Kimono, in cultural isolation, are objects of lavishness, fashion hyperbole. Placed in context, they take on an entirely different meaning, one with remarkable resonances.

I wore a kimono the first time when I was barely in my teens. It was a man's version, of course, one given me by my budo teacher. I wore it to a ceremony that commemorated the ancestors in our lineage. The thick, black silk was adorned only with the crest of his family, a maple leaf against a full moon, repeated on both sleeves, both breasts, and at the *mondokoro*, the spot high between the shoulder blades. The garment itself was more than a century old, handed down through his family to me. What captured my attention first, though, was not an awareness of the age or the provenance of the kimono. Rather it was that the attire immediately caused me to alter my posture and more so, my movement.

Kitsuke is the word to describe the correct way to wear a kimono; to move in it. It is a skill taught, supposedly, in academies now in Japan. And there are those vulgar enough to think they can learn in such a manner. They cannot. *Kitsuke* is transmitted by accretion, by spending time with someone who knows, and by copying their manners. The learning of wearing kimono is organic rather than academic. And as with so much of Japanese art and culture, it is as much utilitarian as it is aesthetic.

A kimono encourages a man or woman wearing it to move in a way different from the posture and gait most of us in the modern world use. It constricts. You cannot make a wide, swinging stride wearing a kimono. John Wayne's rolling

cowboy walk would have had him, in kimono, flat on his face. Your center of motion, in the shoulders for most of us, shifts down, to the hips. Strength goes into the lower legs. Balance changes. There is a feeling of connection to the earth.

Take a dozen strides, wearing kimono, across a length of tatami and you will learn much. Your steps cannot be heel to toe. Your feet, bare or, more likely, in soft cotton socks, slide. There is a gentle susurrantion, one that changes in tone according to the weave of the tatami beneath you.

You cannot slouch in a kimono. Slump in any way and you'll look like a puddle. A silky puddle. Instead, the spine must stretch erect. Worn correctly, there is a gap at the rear of the kimono neck maintained by strict posture. The region of the neckline, the *tabo*, is the subject of numerous feminine hairstyle variations, all meant to accentuate this opening.

Sit, wearing a kimono. You cannot spraddle,



legs akimbo; you must drop to the floor or onto a chair with a modicum of extra movement. You can sit on the floor only one way with any kind of grace while wearing kimono: legs folded, with your heels beneath your bottom. All becomes compacted, reduced to their basic elements. The left foot (it is always the left knee that goes down first, a result of the influential Ogasawara ryu of courtly etiquette), can step back less than its own length as you drop to your left knee to sit. The wrapped-around folds of the kimono don't allow for anything larger. Rising is the same. You cannot take up more than the space of half a tatami as you come to a kneel, then stand.

Wearing kimono, you are suddenly, acutely aware that using your arms too much at all will cause the lapels of the garment to gape unattractively. Reaching for something in a kimono

requires you to keep your elbows close to your sides. To move from the hips rather than stretching the arms. (You can see this most dramatically in the restrained motions of the tea ceremony. Or in classical Japanese dance. Notice, though, that *sumotori* keep their arms similarly close in the ring as they fight. And wringing out a towel, Japanese will usually turn palms up and make the *oshibori* twist with the elbows tucked. Did Japan's early predecessors to the kimono create these dynamics? Or did the kimono develop because of them?)

Conducting yourself wearing a kimono

properly refines your sense of space. Extravagant gestures are impossible in one. The theatrics of an Italian arguing, hands fanning and jabbing? Not in a kimono. The wide sleeves would be flapping grotesquely. You'd look like a fool. In a very real sense, the way of wearing a kimono reifies the Japanese sense of self, classically. Contained. Subtle. With an attention to form so studious it can, at times, be stultifying. To wear a kimono is to literally be put in your place, to know it, be comfortable with it, and to respect that of others.

Kaenai, tatamenai, kirarenai goes an old

saying about kimono. Can't afford them, can't fold them, can't wear them properly.

We can manage our budgets, generate enough income to buy kimono, particularly now that secondhand shops all over Japan are offering them. And we can learn to fold them. Get online and

you'll probably find a dozen tutorials. But wearing a kimono, gently, correctly, confidently? That is another matter.

Today I rarely see Japanese under the age of sixty who look comfortable in kimono. I wonder if, as a culture, theirs can revivify the art, the technique, the sensibilities? It will be regrettable if the kimono becomes a museum object. Or a mere costume. It would be wonderful to see it as the kimono could be, once was: a beautiful reflection of much that is worthwhile in the culture of traditional Japan.

In a very real sense, the way of wearing a kimono reifies the Japanese sense of self, classically.

Women's Clothing in Early Japan

Laura Miller

When I think about "traditional" Japanese clothing, a gorgeous woman's kimono immediately comes to mind. But that iconic ensemble, composed of a narrow robe held closed by a thick ornate sash, only dates to the early Edo period (1600 CE). So if not kimono, what sort of clothing did women wear in ancient Japan?

Scholars reconstruct clothing styles from early Japan using a variety of sources. Analysis of textile fragments, paintings, carvings, pottery figurines, tomb artifacts, and written records allow costume historians to visualize garments worn by people in ancient times. During the Yayoi era (usually 300 BCE to 250 CE, but possibly earlier) immigrants from the Korean peninsula arrived in successive waves carrying advanced weaving, spinning and dyeing technologies. Yayoi archeological remains include looms, shuttles, and spindle whorls, indicating vibrant domestic textile production. The *Wei zhi* (Record of Wei), one of the earliest written accounts of Japan compiled by the Chinese historian Chen Shou (233 CE to 297 CE), describes the people of Japan as expert weavers.

Most early clothing was made of hemp, flax, mulberry fibers, and ramie. Ramie, an ancient textile plant that likely originated in China, was also used in



Egypt for mummy wrapping. Cloth woven from ramie is called *karamushi-ori* からむし織. Non-elite Yayoi women wore a type of ramie poncho called *kantōi* 貫頭衣 (Figure 1). It was worn alone or over a simple wrapped skirt, and was tied with hemp yarn or a linen strap. There is no evidence



Figure 2. Reconstruction of Queen Himiko.

Source: http://www.iz2.or.jp/fukushoku/f_disp.php?page_no=0000003

that Yayoi people wore footwear. According to the *Wei zhi*, Yayoi commoners tattooed or painted their faces.

Sericulture, the techniques for raising silkworms and making silk, arrived from mainland Asia during the Yayoi period. Because of the expense, only high ranking people dressed in attire and accessories made of silk. Prominent women also adopted continental-inspired fashion, such as wide sleeved robes worn under vest-like garments together with underskirts called a *mo* 裳. The accessories included striped woven belts and *uroko* (alternating light and dark triangles) patterned

sashes. During the Kofun period (250 CE to 538 CE) the *mo* skirt was often pleated and multihued. Later, by the Heian era (794 CE to 1185 CE), it had evolved into a sheer white, pleated apron attached to the back as a sort of train. Figure 2 is a reconstruction of the third century shaman ruler named Himiko, who lived from 175 to 248. Based on tomb artifacts and Kofun era *haniwa* (clay cylinders implanted around the burial mound), we know that high status women and female shamans also wore crowns, gold-plated earrings, and necklaces.

Yayoi and Kofun fashions only hint at the kimono styles that appear centuries later. Even so, they are notable because they reflect East Asian globalization and an enduring regard for clothing texture and design. For example, we still find *uroko* designs popular in contemporary woven obi. For more information and reconstructions of historical Japanese clothing styles, visit the Kyoto Costume Museum

website: <http://www.iz2.or.jp/>. There is a village in Fukushima where you can learn about weaving, buy hand-loomed products, and visit a ramie museum: <http://www.vill.showa.fukushima.jp/sato.stm>

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Uchikake : The Happiest and Heaviest of Days...

Latoya Jackson



One of the happiest days of a woman's life is her wedding day; not only does she get pampered and tailored, but in the end, she is swept away in a carriage alongside her prince. On this day, she is finally able to be the princess that she has dreamed of since childhood. However, there is so much more that goes into a wedding than what is visible to the guests.

To the unfamiliar eye, a wedding may appear to consist only of choosing the venue and caterer, arranging the guest list, designating the bride's maids and maid of honor and the groom's groomsmen and best man, and choosing coordinating attire. However, anyone who has ever been married, or even assisted in the planning that goes into a wedding, knows that things are never that simple. In fact, in Japan, outside of the ceremonial preparations, the donning of the bride's dress alone can take hours. If you honestly think that putting on a

wedding dress is no big deal, then you apparently have yet to encounter uchikake (打掛).

Uchikake is a very formal, full-length outer robe worn by the bride in a traditional Japanese wedding. It can come in a variety of colors but is traditionally white, or even more commonly red and embroidered with gold and other brightly colored stitching. Uchikake are quite bulky and are not meant to be belted (with obi, etc.), but are instead worn open as a sort of coat over the kimono. It also has a thickly padded hem that trails along the floor during certain events such as wedding pictures, but during the actual ceremony or while the bride is walking, the bride carries the extra length in hand or it is clipped at the waist.

However, uchikake is never bound. A more specific type of uchikake is shiromuku (白無垢). A symbol of purity, shiromuku is an all-white uchikake worn during traditional Shinto weddings. Not only is the bride's shiromuku white, but so are her kimono and any accessories (headdress, shoes, etc.) that she may have on. Because white can be dyed with any color, shiromuku is thought to symbolize a bride ready to be dyed with the color of her groom. Albeit the color is limited to white, shiromuku can come in a variety of textures and patterns and, like general uchikake, is also left open without obi.

While uchikake alone can weigh anywhere between 7 and 10lbs, making it the heaviest of the garments, it is, on the other hand, the simplest, especially when considering what all else must be adorned prior to its donning. A majority of the time and energy that goes into dressing the bride is spent putting on kakeshita (掛下), or the kimono that is worn under uchikake. Kakeshita is a very elaborate type of furisode (振袖; long-sleeve kimono) that is worn under uchikake. Typically, a white kakeshita is worn under shiromuku, and a colorful kakeshita is worn under a red or other brightly colored uchikake.



Like uchikake, the patterning of kakeshita is also elegant and complex, exhibiting many auspicious marriage symbols such as 'pine' for endurance and longevity and 'cranes' which are known to mate for life. Also like uchikake, kakeshita has a padded hem. However, while uchikake has a hem ranging in 2 to 3 inches in thickness, kakeshita has a much lighter hem, measuring only about an inch in thickness. Also unlike uchikake, kakeshita is bound by an obi belt; therefore, the patterning of kakeshita is usually sparse around the mid-section where the obi will be situated.

Finally, after kakeshita and uchikake are taken care of, the next thing on the list is the bride's headpiece. Outside of the traditional headdresses, the bride has the options of either wearing a pre-styled wig or having her own hair styled and decorated with clamps and other hair accessories.

However, if she chooses to don the traditional headdress, which is often the case when wearing shiromuku, then there are two choices: first, is wataboshi (綿帽子), large and hood-like, that covers the entirety of the bride's head and drapes down to around the shoulders; second, is tsunokakushi (角隠し) which is not as long as wataboshi and only covers down to the ears with an opening in the middle to allow for the bride's bunkin takashimada

(文金高島田), or traditional bridal topknot, to poke through. Equivalent to the Western veil, there are many different beliefs behind the functions of wataboshi and tsunokakushi. For wataboshi, many believe that its hood-like design is practical for hiding the bride's face from everyone except the groom until the marriage ceremony is completed. As for tsunokakushi, the most popular function, derived from its name (tsuno meaning 'horn' and kakusu meaning 'to hide'), is that it hides the bride's horns of jealousy, ego, and selfishness, and symbolizes her resolve to become a gentle and obedient wife.

No one ever said
that the life of a
princess was easy.

Having donned pounds upon pounds of fabric, the traditional Japanese bride basks deservedly in the attention of her guests as a reward for all of her hard work, both with the wedding preparations and in having to gracefully navigate

her, now at least 15lbs heavier, body around during the ceremony. But it can't be helped. No one ever said that the life of a princess was easy.

This article is based on an interview with Hatsuko Eilers and author's research.

Hatsuko Eilers is a certified kitsuke (kimono dressing) instructor and a seamstress. She has coordinated a popular Kimono Show at the Japanese Festival in the Missouri Botanical Gardens for 29 years and contributed to many other local events.

Clothing of Japanese Dance

Alex Lancaster

Traditional dance has played a role in Japanese society for hundreds of years, being used to celebrate as well as to pass down stories to younger generations. After receiving her teaching certificate in Japanese dance thirty years ago, Yoshie Motgomery has spent the past twenty four years passing on her knowledge of dance to her students in America. The primary types of dance she teaches are *bon odori*, *nihon buyou*, *shin buyou*, and *kayou buyou*.

Bon odori means a style of dance performed during *obon* season. *Bon* is a Japanese Buddhist custom celebrated to honor ancestors in the summer. People dance around *yagura* (high wooden scaffold) in a circle with traditional folk music. Each region has a local dance, as well as different music. The songs can range from showing appreciation for the harvest or enjoyment of summer



Yoshie Montgomery performing *shin buyou*

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_traditional_dance). For example, *Tairyō bushi*, a song popular in fishing villages is a famous *bon odori* song in celebration of harvest fishing and the St. Louis Bon Dance group dances this song along with such popular *bon odori* songs as *Tanko-bushi* (coal miner's song) and *Tokyo ondo*.

Yukata, a casual garment that literally translated as (after) bath clothes, is usually worn for *bon odori*. Generally made of cotton or synthetic fabric, *yukata* is light and easy to wear, and it helps the dancer stay cool. *Yukata* has straight seams and wide sleeves like *kimono* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yukata>). A complete outfit would consist of undergarment (*juban*), *yukata*, sash (*obi*), and sandals (*geta*). Although indigo is traditionally used to dye *yukata* clothes, you can find a wide variety of colors and designs nowadays.

On the other hand, *nihon buyou*, *shin buyou*, and *kayou buyou*, and *nihon buyou* are intended to be performed on stage. *Nihon buyou* is a classical Japanese performing art which emerged in the early Edo period (early 17th century) from earlier traditions (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buy%C5%8D>). It has been influenced by Kabuki, Noh, folk dance, and western region of Japan. *Shin buyou* and *kayo buyou* are more contemporary dances that have developed from *nihon buyou*. *Shin buyou* has started by artists such as Shoyo Tsubouchi during Taisho period (1912-1926). *Kayo buyou* is choreographed based on popular *enka* (country song). *Kimono* is usually worn for such dances. According to Sachiyo Ito, an artist and choreographer of Sachiyo Ito and Company who performed at the 2014 Annual Japanese Festival in St. Louis, dancers in a kimono tied by an obi “become graceful as their bodies learn to remain straight while expressing a variety of emotions.” Dancers use fans to express complex



Yoshie Montgomery performing *bon odori*

emotions.

During the Edo period, *kimono* often had prominent bright colors with black designs on the sides, which today would be considered very formal. The *kimono* is very colorful, and intricate patterns help bolster the beauty of the dance, and dances in general have more colorful or shiny designs than those worn at other occasions. Around the waist, the *obi*, a sash, is worn, with the wider sash being considered more formal. Over *obi*, a string called the *obijime* is worn, and it is usually colorful and creates juxtaposition with the colors underneath. The *obi* is attached to a pillow on the back called a *makura* that is covered and creates the bow on the back of the wearer. To prevent the collar from wrinkles, a stiff *eri shin* is worn underneath it. Just as important as knowing how to put on the *kimono* is knowing how to properly fold it – they are always folded along the seams to keep from getting wrinkles in the dress.

Fuji musume (wisteria maiden) is one of the famous *nihon buyou*. Wisteria is personified as a young woman and expresses her unrequited love. The dancer holds a wisteria branch on her shoulder and wears a black lacquered hat. Her *kimono* and *obi* have lavish wisteria patterns. This dance consists of several segments. If



Yoshie's student performing kayou buyou

several dances are to be performed, the kimono can be layered and worn with snaps at the shoulders to easily shed the outer layer in preparation for the next dance. A dancer uses *furisode* (long sleeves) to imply sentiments or specific objects such as letter. Therefore, *kimono* is an essential part of Japanese dances and a dancer must master using her/his *kimono* effectively.

The article is based on an interview with Yoshie Montgomery and the author's research.

Yoshie Montgomery is a certified Tozan-Ryu (school of nihon buyou) dance instructor. She coordinates Tozan-Ryu performance and Bon Odori performance for the Japanese Festival at the Missouri Botanical Garden and other venues in the St. Louis area.

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