

The Beauty and Charm of Japanese Traditional Hairstyles

By Murata Takako

“A woman's hairstyle is the most important element of her beauty.” The renowned writer Ihara Saikaku wrote these words in his book *Koshoku Ichidai Onna* (The Life of an Amorous Woman) in 1686, during the early Edo Period.

Saikaku probably described so because, from the Heian Period (794-1192) through well into the Edo Period (1603-1867), long, black hair was very important for Japanese women; indeed it was a key criterion in the assessment of feminine beauty. When we follow the changes in women's hairstyles, it reflects the changes in women's own image of the beauty.

Hairstyles Indicated Age, Occupation and Marital Status

The Edo Period was the most gorgeous period in the history of Japanese woman's hairstyles, with hundreds of different styles existed. They differed according to a woman's age, occupation, regional background and social or marital status.

For example, a single woman wore her hair in such styles as the *momo-ware* or the *shimada-mage*. After getting married, the *maru-mage*, *ryowa-mage* or *sakko* styles took over, and a widow's hair was cut short to indicate her status (*kiri-gami*). The most well-known hairstyle for courtesans was the *yoko-hyogo* style, resembling a butterfly with its wings spread open. The feudal lord's waiting maids used the *katahazushi* style, synonymous with their position itself.

Four Basic Hairstyles

Hairstyles before the Edo Period were mainly of the *suihatsu* or *sagegami* type in which the hair was worn long down the back, but during the Azuchi-Momoyama Period (1573-1600) – possibly because this style was troublesome for working women – styles gradually changed to tie up the hair. This may have been due to increasingly frequent contact with China and Korea, a hairstyle copying women in China, named *kara-mage* became popular. Women with higher social status used a *kogai* (a long, thin hairpin type of

accessory made of tortoiseshell or ivory) to wrap up their long hair around, which was known as a *kogai-mage*.

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Kushi (upper left) and kogai



Utagawa Toyokuni III, "Edo Meisho Hyakunin Bijo (Sights and 100 Beauties in Edo) Hanakawado," 1857

In the early Edo Period, the ladies of the court noble or warrior class still kept their hair long, but by this stage, actresses from women's kabuki and courtesans were starting to tie their

hair up in the *hyogo-mage*, *shimada-mage* or *katsuyama-mage* styles. Each of these three styles became popular with the public.

1. The *hyogo-mage*, a simplified form of the *karawa-mage*, appeared in the early Kanei Period (1624-1643). It was said to be named after the courtesans of the Settsu-Hyogo area, or a *hyogo-tub* (a tub with one handle) possibly because of its resemblance. It was a rather casual, unruly manner akin to male styles. This subsequently became popular among women in general.

2. The *shimada-mage* is a variant of the male *wakashu-mage* and is one of the most traditional Japanese hairstyles. The commonly accepted origin of the term is from the courtesan of the Shimada station on the old Tokaido road, but there are other theories. One says it was based on the name of Shimada Hanakichi, a famous kabuki actress, or Shimada Jinkichi, a kabuki actor; another is that it actually was derived from the term "*shimetaganeru*," meaning to tie up tightly. Various variations of this style developed through the Edo Period, and become popular among young women to indicate that they were still unmarried.

3. The *katsuyama-mage* is said to have begun in the Joo to Meireki Periods (1652-1657) based upon the way the Yoshiwara courtesan Katsuyama arranged her hair. There are other theories too: it was started in the Hoen Period (1704-1711) in Osaka by the kabuki actor named Katsuyama Minato who specialized in young female roles, another says it originated by actors Katsuyama Senretsu or Katsuyama Senshu.

The courtesan Katsuyama, an innovative character known for wearing her kimono in a masculine way, was always in the limelight for her fashions. Particularly in her hairstyles – possibly because she was from a warrior family – her habit of twisting her long hair at the back into loops and using the white *motoyui* string to tie it up when passing through the street in a formal procession with a retinue of servants became

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extremely popular. In the late Edo Period, this style evolved to grow in size adopting the same shape as the maru-mage worn by married women. As a result, during the Tenmei and Kansei Periods (1781-1801), there was some confusion over the term and people called it as a maru-mage or a katsuyama-mage.

4. The kogai-mage was a style that gained popularity among the upper classes from the Azuchi-Momoyama Period onwards, eventually spread to the general populace in the Jokyo and Genroku Periods (1688-1704). The name originated from the kogai hairpin used to wrap the hair around to create a bun, but with the passage of time, as the kogai hairpin was used just as an accessory, the term kogai-mage was no longer used even if the hairstyle featured such hairpins.

■ From Buns to Back Hair Knots

Let us take a look at some of the popular hairstyles besides the mage-bun. In the early Edo Period, such mage styles as the shimada-mage and hyogo-mage were the main fashions. This is because the four components of Japanese hairstyles, *maegami* (forelocks), *bin* (sidelocks), *tabo* (back knots) and *mage* (top knots) were yet to be fully established, and only the mage stood alone as a completed style. From around the Empo Period (1673-1680), the *tabo* part hanging down at the back started to become longer, and in the Genroku Period, it began to project out from the back and became popular. This was referred to as a *kamome-tabo* (seagull-backknot) because of its resemblance to the tail feathers of a seagull.

Towards the end of the Kyoho Period (1715-1736), hairpins made from such materials as whale baleen started to be used to lift the *tabo* up from the collar of the kimono in order to avoid hair oil stains on the collar. The hair oil of the day was called *bintsuke-abura* and was a combination of wax and sesame oil spiced with essence of clove and sandalwood. Once the courtesans developed the style, it subsequently spread to the general population.

In the ukiyo-e of Suzuki Harunobu, active in the Meiwa-Anei Periods (1764-1781), beautiful women are depicted wearing their hair in the *kamome-tabo* and *sekirei-tabo* styles in which the back knot was turned up at the bottom. This is particularly evident in works depicting the three renowned beauties of the Meiwa Period, Kasamori Osen, Motoyanagiya Ofuji and Tsutaya Oyoshi, in which these styles appear as the coiffure in vogue at the time. The simple look of the hair in relation to the collar shows the popularity of this style.

■ From Back Knot to Side-Locks

Gradually, women's hairstyles changed from the back knot turned up at the bottom to side-locks protruding outwards. In the Tenmei-Kansei Periods, the *tabo* (back hair knot) that had

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Harunobu-style Shimada-mage (left) and Katahazushi

been so popular earlier almost disappeared and in its place the *toro-bin* – lantern side-locks, named from its see-through nature of the far side of the side-lock arrangement or its resemblance to the top of a lantern – became the predominant style.

This *toro-bin* featured the use of an ornamental accessory called a *bin-sashi*, which was made of tortoiseshell or wire wrapped in *konshi* navy-colored paper. The *toro-bin* hairstyle using these *bin-sashi* often appeared in the ukiyo-e prints by Torii Kiyonaga and Kitagawa Utamaro. No doubt the fact that this style highlighted the beauty of black hair made it popular among women of the time.

Around this time, hair accessories such as the *kushi* (comb), *kogai* and *kanzashi* (hair stick) were in common use adorning black hair. There were hairpins and combs made of tortoiseshell, ivory or wood and adorned with *maki-e*, or “decorated lacquer work,” a technique to scatter adhesive metal or color powder in soft lacquer or directly on wood. There were also *tama-kanzashi* (ball-tipped hair sticks) made of coral or agate and others such as *bira-bira kanzashi* with ornate adornments that swung as the woman walked.

■ Mage Comes Back into Fashion

The popularity of gorgeous hairstyles started to wane in the Bunka-Bunsei Periods (1804-1830) as fewer people used this style. Towards the end of the Edo Period, styles such as *obako-musubi*, *tenjin-mage*, *wari-kanoko*, *icho-kuzushi*, *icho-gaeshi* and *kushimaki* featuring only the mage started to come into fashion, and all were popular among the general populace.

When comparing Japanese hairstyles in the early and later years of the Edo Period, the unruly aspects and the finely crafted hairstyles that used various accessories had disappeared. The popular styles reflected a change towards the *bin* and *tabo* adopting more natural curves.

Later into the Meiji Era, traditional Japanese hairstyles gave way to chignons and Western-style hair, but I certainly think that for many years, women's strong feelings towards the beauty of black hair remained unchanged.

To a woman, her hair is as important as her life.

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