

My Love-Hate Relationship with Kimono

By Margaret Price

I don't know whether to let this out. People might think I'm strange. But I wear kimono. A foreigner wearing kimono in Japan is definitely strange and invites many second-looks and stares – sometimes even praise. I was once accosted on a bus by an old lady, also in kimono, who took a great interest in mine and proceeded to tell me the intimate details of how she keeps hers on – by one cord round the hips, nothing more. I have even been tapped on the shoulder to be told where I made mistakes in tying my *obi* (the wide silk sash). By the same token, I have had older ladies come up and thank me for wearing their national dress, because nobody else does any more. And on one memorable occasion a man even stood up for me on the train, as if just wearing the robe made me a higher being.

If I make it sound as though I wear kimono every day, and that Japanese people don't wear it at all, this is incorrect. I wear it about six times a month when I am involved in tea ceremony – my time-consuming hobby – and there are plenty of Japanese ladies who still wear the robe, whether they be involved in one of the traditional arts or just for the fun of it. I even know of one group of kimono lovers who communicate via the internet, and hold regular "Kimono Paradise" gatherings where they show off their own latest finds.

Of course, nowhere near as many women wear kimono now as before World War II. And one of the reasons is that kimono is perceived as being expensive and impractical in daily life. Silk kimono are indeed so, and the prospects are quite sad for the conventional kimono and *obi* makers of Japan whose buying audience has dwindled to the very idle rich or professionals in the traditional arts or restaurant business. Take a stroll in the Ginza, Tokyo, and I

wonder how many kimono you would see? Maybe two or three out of several hundred, and they may only be on the assistants of kimono shops, or waitresses at a *kaiseki* restaurant. In Shibuya young people's town, you're even less likely to see kimono. Your best bet would be to go to a wedding hall on a



The author making tea outdoors

Photo : Seki Masako

weekend to ogle the wedding parties, where there are bound to be a majority in kimono – the married ladies all in black, and the unmarried ladies flamboyantly decked out in colorful robes that have sleeves almost to the ground. Or perhaps you could sneak a peek inside a famous garden with tea ceremony huts, like the Nezu or Goto museums or Chinzanso. Lots of ladies still do tea ceremony and enjoy tea gatherings as a rare chance to show off their silks.

Until about 30 years ago, a young

Japanese woman would have received a package of kimono from her mother as part of her dowry. But I know Japanese young women now who don't have a single one in their wardrobe, their mothers before them probably having already dumped their own at the used clothes dealers or with relatives.

As a visible kimono-wearer I am frequently at the receiving end of such pre-loved or never-wanted kimono. Just the other day I was in my local dry cleaner's when I was presented with a package of them from another customer: would I take them because they were just going to be thrown away and the kids weren't interested in them. Of course I was. Sometimes I feel like a kimono refugee camp.

It is a sad fact that most of my kimono are either refugees or second-handers that I have picked up at the weekend flea market. This may sound unsavory, but the designs and silks and weaves of an earlier era have something that is missing from the modern ones. And if I have been able to pick up something for 3,000 yen I don't have to be nervous about its care. Remember that a silk kimono cannot just be thrown into a washing machine. In earlier times women performed themselves what is known as *arai-hari*, a time-consuming process of unpicking the whole robe, washing and then stretching the separate pieces out between bamboo pegs dug into the ground to dry, and then re-sewing the lot. Now this job is done by professionals and it is not uncommon for it to cost 30,000 yen a kimono or more. To avoid this cost I just send my second-handers to the dry-cleaners who do an ordinary cleaning job for a tenth of that cost. I once wrote a newspaper column in a Japanese daily describing these kimono economies of mine, upon which I received an irate letter from a reader

addressed to “Margaret Price no baka” (that idiot Margaret Price) berating me for doing anything as irreverent as using dry-cleaning for a kimono. “Well, I just can’t afford it and neither can most people today, which is the big reason that people don’t wear them any more!” – is what I wanted to reply but of course, I did not.

I must say that buying from the flea market has its hazards. Though kimono appear to be the same size for all, there are in fact differences in width and length because ladies usually get them made to order. As a result I have had the embarrassment of them opening up at front because of being too narrow, or being wide enough to wrap round me twice, or being too short to tie the *obi* in the conventional way. And there’s always the smell – of mustiness or mothballs.

But what is a poor foreigner to do? I could never contemplate having a kimono made to order for myself because of the great cost. I have only had one made and that was by chance. My kimono horror story started when I was invited to a 20,000 yen-a-head Christmas dinner show held by a group of lady philanthropists and I had my name drawn out of the hat at the end of the evening to receive a prize donated by one of the members, a Kyoto (read “expensive”) kimono maker. It was all very well receiving this 300,000 yen roll of silk – a fabulous prize, but now I had to get it made up. So I turned up at the establishment’s Tokyo branch for measurements and since this was going to be my first real made-to-order, even asked to have my husband’s family crest embroidered on it. When the bill came it was 85,000 yen – the crest alone had cost 10,000 yen. Cheaper places, I learned later, would have done it for a third of that price, but this was Kyoto.

It was all very well to have a gorgeous silk kimono made just for me, but this kimono makes me nervous just to look at it. While I don’t have to worry about spilling my *kaiseki* dinner on my 3,000 yen flea market finds, I certainly do with this one. Needless to say, I have since reverted to my

favorite used kimono dealer, where an almost brand new kimono can be bought for 5,000 yen. Japanese people take very good care of their kimonos, folding them in a specific way and couching them in paper envelopes tied with cotton bows and storing them in paulownia chests to keep out the damp and the insects.

The kimono is a fun garment. It may not appear so on the majority of conservative tea ceremony ladies today or even the 20-year-olds tightly cocooned in their once-in-a-lifetime kimonos for Coming of Age ceremonies, but like the old European gowns with low-cut bodices these are garments that give you a chance to show off bits of your underwear – at the neck or inside the sleeves – and entertain onlookers with alluring glimpses of brightly colored linings that only appear when your kimono flaps open at the ankles or you raise your arm to answer your cell phone. The Japanese have a word for the aesthetic of sexy glimpses – *chirarism*, which comes from the Japanese word “*chirari*” (“did I see it or did I not?”) and kimono makers cater to it with delightful surprises built into the design. In summer, when one can wear gossamer-thin robes, there is even a chance to show off daring designs on under robes that will show through the top kimono at certain angles. A sexy friend of mine has a pale blue silk underrobe with a daring pattern of huge red goldfish with flowing tails that looks amazing under transparent black silk.

The secret to dressing well in kimono is getting the undergarments right. I’d love to take you on a tour of the kimono underwear section of a department store to see all the gadgets they sell. Here you will find there are no such things as pads to boost the size of bosoms, for in the world of kimono the object is to flatten out the chest. To do this, women used to wrap a long length of cloth round them. Now there is a range of bosom-flattening bras. The other handy item for the modern-day kimono dresser is an underrobe that has



Young women wear elaborate kimono with long sleeves

Photo: Saki Masako

a cord attached to the back of the collar to pull it down to sexily reveal the nape of the neck and keep it there, a job that used to be done by very tight cords round the waist.

As I am involved in introducing traditional culture to non-Japanese people I am occasionally asked to help with demonstrations of tea ceremony, flower arranging and dressing up in kimono. Getting a group of foreign ladies trussed up in this Japanese outfit is as fun as getting ready for a fancy dress party. One lady said: “Gee, I feel powerful! Now I know why Japanese women are so strong – they are forced to keep their spines straight by wearing these things.” She was referring to the stiff, wide *obi* sash that is used to keep the whole kaboodle in place. I don’t know what keeping your body upright has to do with being strong but I can tell you from the experience of teaching tea ceremony all day in a kimono that forcing your spine straight by means of an *obi* is often a test of endurance that can be torture, and in spite of all the fun I have getting dressed up at the beginning of the day, I am even happier when the lot is finally lying in a heap on the floor at the end of it all. **UJI**

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