

浴衣の着こなし史 1 – 江戸時代 –

The History of Yukata Fashion: Part I Edo Period

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Abstract

Although for the older generation the yukata is still considered to be little more than a bathrobe, for the younger generation the yukata is an “one-piece” easy-to-wear summer kimono for going to festivals, fireworks, and parties with friends. Nevertheless, as can be seen in Ukiyo-e prints, even in the Edo period the yukata was worn not only as bath-wear or sleepwear, but also as fashionable summer dress, the latter made of more elaborate patterns and dye techniques—to the extent that the fashionable yukata were often designated by their dye techniques (momen-shibori, momen-komon, or chūgata), rather than being simply dubbed a yukata. When exactly the yukata lost its status of fashionable summer garment is unclear, but is likely related to various factors such as the end of the sumptuary laws forbidding commoners to wear silk, coupled with the kimono dying out as everyday wear, and the yukata then becoming only regularly worn for bed or bath. In an attempt to trace the changing fashion and attitude in regard to yukata, this essay addresses the first part of yukata history, the fashion of yukata in the Edo period, with later developments to be addressed in a following essay.

Origins—Yukata 浴衣 and Yukatabira 湯帷子

The colorful summer robe of today, called yukata, was once a simple asa-hemp robe worn for bathing. Yukata and the word itself derives from the yukatabira. The “yu” in yukatabira means hot-water and “katabira” means a thin plain unlined robe. In the Heian period (794-1185), the katabira was made of asa-hemp or raw-silk and worn next to the skin as the innermost layer of clothing, basically underwear. Baths were not taken nude, rather the katabira was worn while in the sauna-style bath (Nakae 1987: 121,411-412). In the *Tale of Flowering Fortunes*, when the regent Michinaga hears that his daughter Lady Kenshi is dying, he rushes to her side from his bath still wearing his “yukata,” which in the text is written phonetically in *hiragana* script.

(McCullough 1980: 747).

In the Edo period (1600-1868), *katabira* came to refer to unlined summer robes made of *asa-hemp* or raw silk, in distinction to unlined robes, called *hitoe*, made of silk or cotton, and unlined informal robes called *yukata* (Nakae 1987: 121,411-412). During this period the *yukata* likewise developed a distinct form and function from the original *yukatabira* undergarment, to the extent that it is even arguable how much the two are actually related. The literal meaning of *yukata* is “bathing robe,” but already in the Edo period the *yukata* developed beyond a simple bathrobe to become a fashionable informal garment of summer.

Katabira 帷子: unlined fabric of *asa-hemp*

Hitoe 単 or 単衣: literally “one layer” or “one layer garment,” sometimes translated as “singlet”

Awase 袷: literally “garment matched with a lining,” a double-layer or lined garment

Asa 麻: generic Japanese term which includes several different species of hemp fiber

Suzushi 生絹: “raw silk,” silk that has not been degummed, often woven in a simple gauze weave

Edo Period—From Bathrobe to Fashion

In the Edo period, several things contributed to the development of the *yukata*, primarily the introduction of cotton, the public bath, new sumptuary laws, and the increasing wealth of the merchant class.

Although cotton had originally appeared in Japan as early as the 8th century, it never caught on as a popular fabric until it was reintroduced in the 16th century. Until then, the commoners had worn *asa-hemp* fabric, cool in summer but hardly warm enough for winter. It had to be worn in layers or sewn together in layers often stuffed with rags or the ears of reeds for warmth in the cold winter months. Cotton was cheaper, warmer, and more durable and soon became popular among the commoners. Stripes and simple tie-dyeing were used on *asa-hemp*, but the *kasuri* (*ikat*) dyeing technique was first used on cotton and only later applied to *asa-hemp* and silk. The wealthy merchant class who could afford more expensive and gorgeous materials often wore silk, until they were forbidden to wear regular silk by the sumptuary law of 1842, after which they too wore either cotton or *tsumugi* silk.

Ken'yaku-rei 儉約令: Sumptuary laws passed to prevent extravagance

Kasuri 緋: a type of woven design, with the threads dyed prior to being woven

Tsumugi 紬: a nubby silk woven from the broken threads of the hatched silk-worm cocoons

Sentō 銭湯: public bath

Yuna 湯女: “bath girls,” women who provided services in the public baths

Yumoji or yumaki 湯文字 or 湯巻: loincloths worn in the bath by women, which became underwear for kimono called *koshimaki* 腰巻, “waist wrap”

In the town of Edo (now Tokyo), the heavy punishment imposed by the government for being the source of a conflagration prevented commoners from having a bath in their home. The townspeople would either go to a public bath or those wealthy enough to have gardens could fill a large wooden tub with hot water for bathing in summer. In 1591, the first public bath (which was actually a sauna) was established in Edo with an entrance fee of one copper coin called a *sen*, a hundred of which made one yen. The term for public bath in Japan is *sentō*, *sen* referring to the coin for the entrance fee and *tō* being an alternative reading for the character for hot-water. Men and women were permitted to bath together until 1791, and women commonly wore light coverings around their loins in the bathhouse for decency. These were called yumoji or yumaki, described in the early 19th century text *Ukiyo buro* (The Floating Bath) as “a double-width (72 cm) white cotton wrap that does not descend below the knees.” The yumoji then developed into the underwear worn below the kimono to cover the private area from waist to upper thigh.

Once the law changed and the sexes were separated at the bath houses, yukata were worn to and from the public baths. Public baths also often had refreshments and entertainment provided on the second floor were one might lounge in yukata. In addition, until prostitution was relegated to Yoshiwara pleasure quarters in 1657, there were “bath girls,” called *yuna*, available at public baths to provide everything from back-scrubbing, hair-washing, musical entertainment, and other services.



The Ukiyoe print above by Torii Kiyonaga (1752-1815) of 1787 illustrates the interior of the woman's bath. The woman to the far right is wearing a robe dyed with the kasuri technique, quite likely an asa-hemp or sha-gauze silk garment because of its transparency seen around the legs. The woman beside her is wearing a pink robe again with a kasuri pattern and is holding the ends of her red koshimaki in her hands. Next to her can be seen the legs of a woman stepping out of the bath area proper, through the low doorway that kept the heat from escaping from the bath. The women in front are in the washing area, where then as now, one washed first before entering the shared bath. The man seen in the window is likely the attendant who oversees the bath house and receives the entrance fee. The woman in the center foreground is wearing a yukata with the "asa-no-ha" hemp-leaf design and the woman to the far left is wearing a yukata with an Arimatsu-style tie-dye pattern resembling stylized morning glories.

Ukiyoe 浮世絵: "pictures of the floating world," prints and paintings of everyday life in the Edo period

Tenugui 手拭: cotton hand-towel approx. 90 cm in length, dyed with the same techniques as yukata

Asa-no-ha 麻の葉: stylized hemp-leaf pattern

Arimatsu shibori 有松絞: style of shibori tie-dye developed in Aichi prefecture and popular in the Edo period



Even in snow or rain, the people of Edo loved their baths, and of course it was scintillating for the male viewer of Ukiyoe prints to imagine the young beauty fresh from the bath with her clean dewy complexion. The print on the left by Utagawa Toyokuni (1769-1825) has a courtesan carrying her checkered-pattern yukata under her arm and her *tenugui* hand-towel on her shoulder as she makes her way through snow to her first bath of the year. The print on the right by Okumura Masanobu (1686-1764) has a beauty just out of the bath, covering herself with her yukata which has a design of carriage wheels and waves.

Kabuki Yukata

Several kabuki actors of the Edo period had signature designs for their yukata, which then became fashion in the Edo period and adapted into kimono designs as well. Many of these designs are still popular today for men's yukata, such as “yokikotokiku,” “kamawanu,” and “rokuyatagōshi.” The print by Kasentei Kunitomi (early 19th c.) has the actor Ichikawa Danjurō VII wearing his signature yukata with rows of alternating bats and gourds between three narrow stripes, paired with an obi of peonies, and a *tenugui* towel draped on his shoulder. The peony was

Danjurō VII's crest and the bat symbolizes good fortune because the character for bat and good fortune are very similar. Three gourds are an metonym for “good all around,” perhaps represented here by the combination of three strips with gourds. Such plays on words were highly enjoyed by the people of Edo. Another association between the gourd and Danjurō is the “gourd-legs” style first used by the print artist Torii Kiyonobu to portray the tensed muscles of Danjurō II's legs in his *aragoto* acting roles, which can be seen in the famous print *Ichikawa Danjūrō as Gorō Uprooting a Bamboo Tree* by Torii Kiyomasu (Nagai 1995: 90).



Kōmori 蝙蝠: bat, a good luck symbol since the second character resembles the one meaning good fortune

Fuku 福: the character for good luck

San-byōshi-sorou 三拍子揃う: literally means a complete set of three musical instruments in rhythmic harmony, metaphorically used to mean good all around, pictorially symbolized by three gourds

Hyotan 瓢箪: gourd

Aragoto 荒事: a style of acting developed in Edo kabuki plays to portray “rough and ready” characters

Ki キ: Japanese katakana phonetic symbol pronounced “ki”

Ro 呂: Sino-Japanese character meaning musical scale pronounced “ro”

A similar play on words can be found in the signature design of Onoe Gorō III depicted in the print by Utagawa Kuniyasu (1794-1832). The actor is depicted on stage in the role of Tamaya Shinbei. His kimono has a design of four vertical stripes and five horizontal ones, and in between the hiragana character for “ki” and the Sino-Japanese character pronounced “ro.” Five is pronounced “go” in Japanese and the stripes added together make nine, pronounced “ku.” Combined together this rebus reads “ki-ku-go-ro” forming the actor’s name. This design too, called “Kikugorō-kōshi,” is now commonly seen in men’s yukata (Nagai 1995: 91).

Aizome Indigo Dye

Along with cotton another technical achievement that contributed to the popularization of yukata was *aizome*, literally “indigo-dyeing.” *Aizome* has a long history in Japan. The indigo plant was introduced from China

around the second century, but the early dyeing techniques were very rudimentary, either the indigo leaves were directly rubbed on the material or the material was soaked in a liquid made from indigo leaves. The fermenting of indigo for a better dyeing process occurred in the Nara period (710-794), but this too was a relatively simple practice of



placing indigo leaves in a earthenware jar and leaving it in the sun to ferment naturally. It was not until around the 15th century that heat was applied to cause the fermentation and *aizome* dyeing could be carried out all year long and not just in the summer months. By the mid-Edo period, *aizome* became popular among the commoners, produced in nearly every region of the country and even at home. Its popularization was in great part due to being an excellent dye for use on cotton, which also became common at this time, the two forming almost a perfect combination. The typical commoner’s kimono was indigo-dyed cotton with either a stripe or *kasuri* pattern, and stencil-dyeing was used for yukata. From the late 19th century, synthetic

indigo became common and there are only a few workshops left today that still use indigo vegetable dye. The firmer texture of the cloth and the fresh clear color of the blue when dyed using true vegetable indigo is noticeably different from synthetic indigo (Nakae 1987: 9-11).

Shibori Yukata

The dashing young man in the print by Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797-1861) is wearing an indigo yukata dyed in two colors of blue using the shibori tie-dye technique for a design of stylized flowers and broad-leaves, probably bellflowers and elephant's ears or tobacco leaves. Shibori is a highly labor-intensive technique of resist-dyeing. The parts to remain un-dyed are sewn with thread and then pulled tight to prevent the dye from seeping in to those sections of the fabric. The *kanoko* "fawn spot" shibori of many fine round or square dots favored in the Edo period was especially labor-intensive and extravagantly expensive, so much so that a sumptuary law was enacted prohibiting its use on silk. Thereafter, the design on silk was made using a stencil. Part of the attraction of shibori is the texture that remains after dyeing from having parts of the cloth tied. The stencil-dyed patterns of course lack this texture. Shibori when applied to cotton fabric for a yukata creates a gorgeous design that is yet cool and refreshing.

Aizome 藍染: indigo dyeing

Takeda Shōkurō 竹田庄九郎: man who originated Arimatsu style of shibori in the late 16th century

Shibori-zome 絞染: Japanese style of tie-dye

Kanoko 鹿子: literally "fawn spots," shibori tie-dye pattern of many tiny circles or squares

Bōshi-shibori 帽子絞: literally means "hat tie-dye," because the stuffed fabric not to be dyed resembles a hat

Maki-age shibori 巻上絞: one of the Arimatsu shibori designs, dyed in bands for an appearance similar to Western tie-dye

Seigaiha 青海波: repeating wave pattern of concentric arched lines

Uchiwa 団扇: round Japanese-style fan

The type of shibori used on yukata was typically the Arimatsu shibori popular among the commoners for under-garments, decorative collars, and yukata because it was both less

expensive than the Kyoto-style of shibori used on silk and also trendy. Developed primarily for use on cotton, the Arimatsu shibori made use of a shibori-stand and other tools to simplify the tying for shibori allowing for a somewhat less labor-intensive production. Arimatsu shibori started in the Arimatsu section of Nagoya around the late 16th century by Takeda Shōkurō who developed the technique for use on *tenugui* hand-towels and sold them to the travelers who came along the Tōkaidō, the famous highway stretching from Edo (Tokyo) to Kyoto. In 1641, when the domain lord passed through Arimatsu on his way home, the townspeople presented him with horse reins dyed with Arimatsu shibori, which then became famous and was subsequently promoted by the domain. Arimatsu shibori became popular for yukata in the Genroku era (1688-1704). After the Meiji Resurrection of 1868, when the Tokugawa military government was overturned, Arimatsu-shibori producers lost their exclusive protection from the domain, but Arimatsu shibori continues to this day (Nakae 1987: 32-22).

Arimatsu shibori had a plethora of designs, really too numerous to count. As many as three or four different shibori designs can be seen on the young man's yukata in the print above. *Kanoko* shibori is used for the small dots forming the stems of the flowers, *bōshi* shibori to make the outline of the flowers, and *maki-age* shibori for the small leaves of the flowers. The *kanoko* shibori is made just as it appears, the outlines of the small dots are bound in thread to resist the dye. The *bōshi* shibori is made by sewing the outline, stuffing wadding in the interior, and then covering the part of the design not to be dyed. Often the edges of the outline of the *bōshi* design bleed making an attractive graduated color, as is indeed depicted in this print. The *maki-age*



design is made by sewing the outline, making ridges in the fabric, and then banding it together in rings, for an effect much like Western tie-dye done with rubber bands. Of course, since this is a Ukiyo-e print and not the actual fabric, the texture cannot be seen and it is possible that it actually depicts a stencil-dyed design made to look like shibori.

However, since the subject is a handsome young dandy in the latest fashion, it is likely that it is meant to depict genuine shibori.

Less it be thought that only men wore shibori yukata in the Edo period or that women's yukata were any less spectacular, the woman's yukata is just as gorgeous in the fan-shaped print also by Kuniyoshi. Likewise a shibori-style yukata, it has a design of waterwheels, scattered flowers, and *seigaiha* waves. Her yukata is paired with what appears to be a cotton obi with a geometric design and large abstract flowers.

These fan-shaped prints of handsome men and beautiful women in the latest styles were meant to be cut out and pasted over the bamboo spines of the fan to renew it for the new season. These round-shaped fans are called *uchiwa* and remain an emblem of summer even today, and are all but a de rigueur accessory for yukata. One would imagine that the fan print of the handsome young man was made for a woman. Images of fashionable young men about town were just as attractive to women as pictures of beautiful women were to men. One ponders whether an image of a dandy young man really cooled down a woman who purchased the fan, or perversely merely heated her up.



Like today, even in the Edo period, yukata were worn out and about for summer activities such as fire-fly catching, watching fireworks, river-boating on pleasure crafts, or strolling along the banks of the river to enjoy the evening cool. In the print to the left by Eishōsai Chōki, a mother is out with her son on an early summer night as can be seen from the fireflies and the irises blooming in the background. The son is trying to catch some fireflies to bring home in the small cage held by the mother. The mother is wearing a yukata with an abstract leaf design in brown quite likely dyed with the Arimatsu shibori technique, paired with what looks like a black velvet obi. In the print to the right by Utagawa Hiroshige, a courtesan is out to enjoy the summer fireworks seen in the background above the Sumidagawa river at Ryōgoku in Edo. The courtesan is wearing a yukata possibly also an Arimatsu *kanoko* shibori with the “asa-no-ha” design of stylized hemp leaves, paired with an obi with a design that appears to be stylized waves and turtles.

Chūgata Stencil-Dyed Yukata

Possibly even more popular for dyeing yukata in the Edo period was the stencil-dyeing technique called “naga-ita” or “chūgata” aizome, meaning using a “long board” for a “mid-size stencil” for dyeing with indigo. For this technique, a bolt of fabric was laid on a long board and paste-resist dyed using a mid-sized stencil made of compounded Japanese paper with a cut-out design. The stencil would be laid on the fabric and then coated with a layer of rice-paste spread with a wide brush. Since the design was mid-size, it had to be laid on the bolt of fabric repeatedly section after section to cover the entire bolt of fabric. Once the paste was applied and dried, the fabric was then placed in a dye-bath of fermented indigo for dyeing. The parts covered with the paste were protected from the dye and remained the color of the ground fabric. The print to the left by Utagawa Kunisada of a mother washing her child in a tub has the mother wearing a typical



example of a yukata dyed using the “chūgata” stencil-dyeing technique, with a design of what is most likely grapes and leaves. Today, this stencil-dyeing technique is mostly commonly seen on traditional tenugui hand-towels and expensive high-end yukatas.

Naga-ita 長板: “long board,” used to lay the fabric for to apply rice-paste with a stencil
Chūgata 中形: “mid-size stencil,” used for the stencil resist-paste technique

As can be seen, there were a number of different types of yukata even in the Edo period. Yukata were not just worn as robes for the public bath and loungewear around the house, but also for various summer events and evening strolls. There was also a plethora of designs and different dyeing techniques, and many gorgeous and extravagant yukata. How and when this profusion of yukata fashion was erased in the popular consciousness of late is a mystery that remains to be resolved in a forth coming essay.

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