

# TRADITIONAL TECHNIQUES: KIMONO CARE 1 – WASHING KIMONO (ARAI-HARI)

## 洗い張り

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### **Cleaning and Caring for Your Japanese Textiles**

I've received many inquiries regarding how one goes about taking care of kimono and other Japanese garments. I will approach this in two segments. This first section will deal with cleaning, and the next installment will treat general care and storage.

### **In Japan, traditional garments were disassembled to launder.**

At first glance, this may seem like a very peculiar practice, however, let's look at it in its historical context: The Dominican school I attended as a child was attached to a convent, and as it happened, in first grade I sat next to a glass door that lead to a sunny courtyard. One day I noticed an elderly nun sitting in



*This looks like way too much fun!*

the sun with her sewing. She was taking apart a huge black habit – it seemed to be a mountain of midnight yardage. I wandered out and sat next to her watching for quite some time before asking her why she would take apart her clothing. She explained that her style of dress dated back to medieval times and in those days all the women dressed just as she does today.

They didn't have sewing machines, and once or twice a year had to carry all their laundry down to the river to wash.

A wet "dress" would be far too heavy for any of them to handle, and so they had to take everything apart, wash it, lay it out on the grass to dry, and then sew it all back together again by hand. Sometimes, if a part became worn, they would need to re-arrange some of the pieces, and in this way, they would be delighted with a "brand-new" garment as a reward for their efforts.



*Washing Fabric in the River*

Kimono have a similar history. Once disassembled, the parts are put back together, much like a jigsaw puzzle, into the original bolt form. Did you happen to see the movie *Memoirs of a Geisha*? If so, you'll remember the segment, just after the war

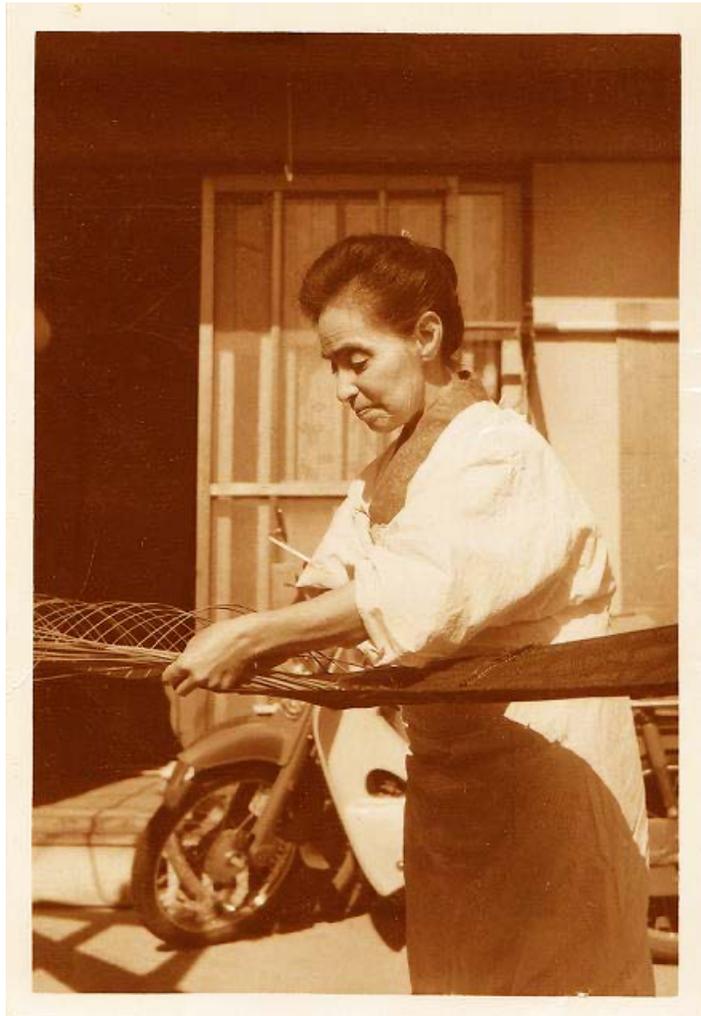
ended, in which people were working along the river. They were washing kimono fabric.

By clamping one end of the bolt with [\*harite\*](#), secured with a stake in the center of the river, the fabric was allowed to float in the water, with the gentle agitation of the shallow flow loosening accumulated soil and dust.



*Starching Fabric Pieces to Drying Board*

During the laundering process, the fabric is inspected, spots removed, holes repaired, and perhaps the entire bolt over-dyed. Everyday items, such as *nemaki* (kimono worn to bed) and *juban* (underclothing), would be washed at home and dried by straightening the weave on boards placed in the sun.



*Stretching Clean, Reassembled Bolt with Harite and Shinshi.*

Finer fabrics or longer pieces were stretched mid-air using *harite* and *shinshi* – the same equipment used to stretch them when they were originally dyed.

When it came time to re-assemble the garment, a worn cuff would be turned to the inside shoulder seam, the body itself could be cut at the waist and the ragged hem flipped up (this sewing line would later be concealed by the *obi*), and the stained *kake-eri* (false collar) replaced if necessary.

Today there are still a few specialists to whom you may take precious garments, which may be found through an online search. Typically, as of this writing, cleaning fees for a *tomesode* start at around \$150 and a *furisode* at \$120; kimono with linings \$100, and those without linings \$80.



***What happens to all the threads that have been removed over time from all the kimono that have been taken apart?*** Actually, something quite beautiful is made...click on the [temari](#) above to read more!

***So, you don't live in Japan? What can you do? Below are a few cleaning tips, but please be forewarned – if your heart can't bear the risk of ruining a piece, be content with your treasure and don't gamble on your attempt to clean it.***

Let's start with the easiest: Often a brisk rub-down with a clothes-brush will take care of the problem and give your *kimono* or *haori* a fresh look.

If there is a spot sitting on the surface, say a little caked oatmeal as a souvenir left from feeding Junior, make sure it is completely dry. If you look closely and see that it is sitting on the surface of the fabric (the schmutz will cover and block the

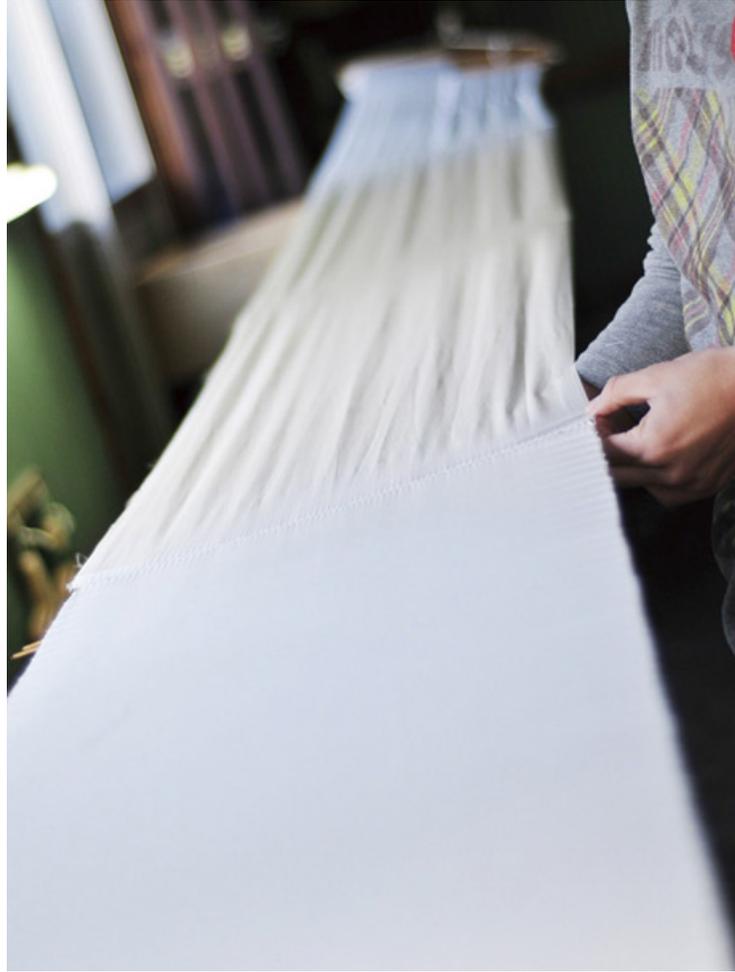
weave) then you are in luck. Removing surface debris is fairly easy. *But don't try this if the fabric is weak or brittle!*

Grasp the fabric to either side of the soiled area and pull-snap briskly on the diagonal. Move your hands and repeat this operation on the opposite diagonal. This will normally cause any caked-on spot to pop or flake off. If there is still a little dusty residue, grab another segment of the garment (same weave, same color) and rub it vigorously over the spot.

I emphasize using the same color and same weave. If a different weave is used, it will sometimes “polish” the spot causing it to be clean but shiny. Using the same weave will prevent this from happening. If you use fabric from the same garment, but of a different color, you run the risk of having the new color transfer (*crock*) to the soiled area.

If you find you have oil-based spots, they won't rub out. You will need something to dissolve the spot before it can be removed. Often, in Japan, benzene (lighter fluid) will be used.

Dry cleaning fluid also works well. ***Be careful while doing this – both fluids are highly volatile, toxic to breathe, and toxic when absorbed through your skin.***



*Notice how the shinshi (on the underside) stretch the fabric selvage to selvage giving a nice flat, taught surface without ironing.*

Prepare a small piece of cloth, preferably the same color as the area to be cleaned, by placing a cotton ball in the center and bringing up the edges to form a “tissue ghost” or *teruteru-bozu* shape. Add a little cleaning fluid. The ball should be damp, not wet, with fluid. Gently, lightly, begin by rubbing the ball against the center of the spot, working in a circular motion toward the outer edges and beyond. Return to the center of the spot and repeat this action until all of the fluid has been used up and it is starting to dry on the fabric. Keep working outward

until it seems as if the ball is dry, return to the center and repeat several times if necessary, until only the faintest haze of moisture may be detected on the outer edges of the circle. Rubbing and working in this circular manner will keep the cleaner from forming its own liquid stain line. If it is a small enough spot, it may help to stretch that area in an embroidery hoop to make it easier to rub.

If you prefer to use water on a spot, approach it as outlined above.

If you have spots caused by water on your silk (sometimes a spot of water will change the way fiber reflects light, causing it to appear to be a stain), try lightly spraying the area with more water. Be frugal. Only moisten the area, and be sure to allow the sprayer to do its job in “feathering” out the spray along the outer edges of the affected area. If you go at it with too heavy a hand, you’ll simply create a larger spot.

The greatest risk in laundering is presented by the dyes, not the fabric itself. I’ve often heard, “Oh! You can’t wash silk!” Nonsense. Silk is very durable and easy to wash. It is the dyes you have to watch out for. Having said that, almost all modern Japanese dyes are of a quality such that bleeding shouldn’t be a concern. This doesn’t hold true for vintage pieces.

There is no way that a layperson can know which dyes were used, and how well they have been set. The first red flag you

should monitor is *bleeding*. This is especially common among synthetic dyes. Bleeding is when excess dye, or ill-set dye, comes out into the wash-water. If you are not careful, this can stain other areas of the garment. Have you ever accidentally thrown a red shop rag in with the white laundry? The red *bled* onto the whites making everything pink.



*Red Dye Bleeding into the Wash Water*

If you are bound and determined to wash your piece without un-stitching it (this is called *maru-arai*) then be prepared to use lots of water.

Choose a vessel that can hold enough water to allow your garment to fit without crowding. A bathtub works well. A bathtub with a drain in the bathroom floor works even better, as does an outdoor horse-trough or kiddy pool.

Fill the container to the top with cool-to-warm water while adding a little cleaning solution. Orvis® or Mane 'N Tail® (horse/sheep shampoo) work quite well. Baby shampoo will also work well.

Gently lower your kimono into the water trying not to trap bubbles. As you do so, keep vigilant to spot any bleeding as soon as it starts to occur. Red linings are especially notorious for bleeding. If bleeding is noticed, continue adding water until the dye bleeding into the wash-water is carried away from the fabric. This is why it is good to have large vessel and a drain in the floor (or work outside) – you can allow the water to overflow the top. Keep flushing the container with fresh water until the bleeding stops or the well goes dry.

With gentle care, lift the clean kimono out of the water and arrange it in the drum of a washing machine to spin out the water.

Replace the water in the wash basin and rinse the kimono. Do this several times if necessary – until the water runs completely clean.

Never wring the fabric. Many pigments used in Japanese dyeing that otherwise are quite stable, will *crock* if great pressure is applied to them while wet. *Crocking* is when a dye transfers through contact (as when the blue rubs off an indigo dyed piece).

After the final spin, the kimono may be hung to air dry. If you have a long pole that you can run from cuff to cuff along the shoulder line to hang the garment, you will avoid the stretch

marks at the shoulder that arise from drying wet clothes on a hanger.

Some older types of gold leafing used a water-based binder (*nikawa*). This may dissolve away and the gold with it when doing *maru-arai*. I don't recommend washing older *uchkake*, or other gold-leafed textiles, for this reason. Opulent textiles were never intended to be washed.



*Professionals use a steamer with many drums to stretch and flatten the laundered fabric without actually ironing it. This process is called yunoshi.*

Do not throw your kimono in the dryer unless it is machine sewn. The stress of the tumbling action will weaken the stitching in all hand-sewn garments. In addition, if you are working with a lined piece, you may cause the various fabrics employed to shrink unevenly. Since traditionally constructed kimono are not intended to be washed as a whole garment, the fabrics are not “pre-shrunk”. Each weave has its own rate of

contracting when wet. *Chirimen* (crepes) can shrink up a great deal, and over-all *kanoko-shibori* may even sag.

Without sufficient care you may wind up with a very disconfrumpulated garment – fabric sagging, fabric shrunk, and seams puckered.

To help avoid this, with your still damp garment hanging from a pole with arms spread in a large “T” shape, gently tug at the weft by grasping the seams to either side and pulling until the outer fabric and the lining have flattened and stretched to an even width. Repeat this action for every panel of your kimono. Next address the collar by pulling gently along its length – taking care not to stretch out the top of the *okumi* panel. Lastly, gently pull and stretch, if necessary, along each of the vertical seams to straighten them out completely.

All this activity will help your garment to dry more quickly and evenly, avoid some shrinkage, and make it much easier if you choose to iron it.

Once your garment is entirely dry, remove it from the drying rod and gently iron it on low steam setting and barely touching the surface – in other words, don’t actually *press*. DO NOT iron any folded seams or edges completely flat. This will ruin the grace of your kimono. Instead try an old tailors’ trick for ironing men’s neckties – lay a thin yardstick, or piece of cardboard, butt up against the fold and then steam iron. The thickness of the ruler or cardboard will prevent the iron from creasing the fold, while at the same time giving you a clean line.



If you'll indulge my tastes, click on the image above to view a Japanese YouTube movie  
- my favorite laundry related clip! [THE COLOR OF LIFE 歌う六人の女「まな板」](#)

I hope my pointers have helped.

***Time to get gussied up!***