

Expert “Kute-Uchi” Japanese Hand-loop Braiding

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This class presents a historical method that can make flat braids using 9, 11, 13, or 15 loops. These flat braids are suitable for use as “odoshi” lacing on medieval Japanese armor.

Braiding in Japan can be documented back to the Jomon Period (14,000 to 1,000 BCE) which is so named because of the “cord marked” (jo mon) pottery that has been dated to this period. We have known about pottery for more than a hundred years, but only in the 1990’s did we learn more about how the braids were made that were pressed into the wet clay to create the marks.

The foam disks and plates used for kumihimo today are modern inventions. They were designed by Makiko Tada, an engineer and braider who desired an affordable way to braid. Braids created on the disk are identical to braids created on the marudai braiding stand, but the marudai only dates back to the early 17th century. Other stands that existed in period, such as the Takadai and Karakumidai, do not produce the same kinds of braids as we see on period armor.

Historical scrolls such as the “Nanajuichiban Shokunin Uta-awase” from the Muromachi Period (1336 to 1573) show a loop-manipulation style of braiding, but the actual techniques were not known until the 1990’s. Masako Kinoshita researched braiding internationally, and rediscovered the Japanese techniques. They had survived as a folk tradition handed down within families. Braids created using these methods matched historical braids exactly. As she published her research, people came forward to pass on the skills they had learned from their grandmothers.

I learned the basics of Kute-uchi hand-loop braiding from Makiko Tada in her studio in Japan. Hand loop braiding requires no equipment to get started, and it is simple and straightforward. It is always obvious which strand is to be moved next, and to where it will be moved. There are only four moves needed for most braids. There is some limitation in that braids must be short enough to be tightened easily, but this can be mitigated with a partner or “ashiuchi-dai” beater stand.

Resources for further study:

Carey, Jacqui; Samurai Undressed;

Torquay, England; The Devonshire Press Limited, 1995

Kinoshita, Masako; Loop-Manipulation Braiding Research & Information Center;

<https://loopbraiding.wordpress.com/> (was <http://www.lmbric.net/>)

Kinoshita, Masako; Study of Archaic Braiding Techniques in Japan;

Ithaca, NY; Masa Kinoshita Weaving Studio Publications, 1994/1995

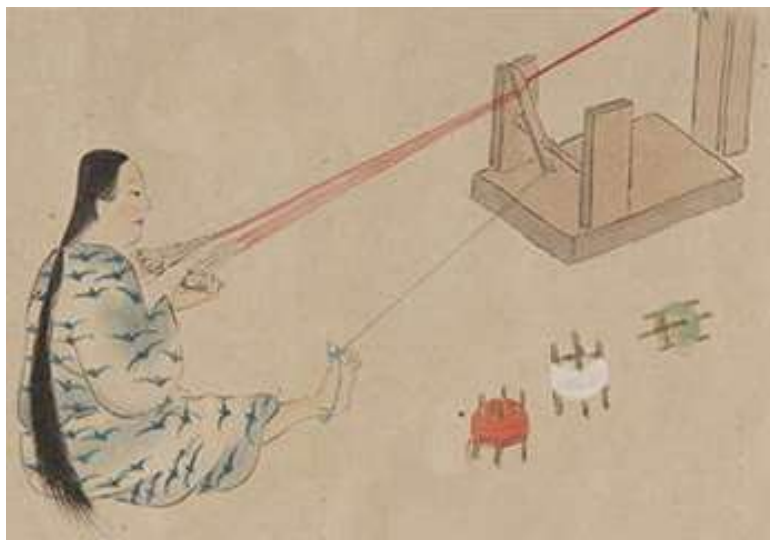
Owen, Rodrick; Braids: 250 Patterns from Japan, Peru & Beyond;

Berkeley, California; Laci/Unicon Publications, 2004 (1995)

Tada, Makiko and Sakai, Aiko; Kumihimo: The Essence of Japanese Braiding;

Berkeley, California; Laci Publications, 2004

Kumihimo Examples



Basic Instructions

Setting Up

Measure out the required number of identical lengths of yarn or cord. Double the lengths over to form loops. Tie or otherwise bind the loose ends of the loops together. Suspend the bound end from a post or peg. Line up all the loops on one hand, using the other hand to reposition loops as needed. Move the appropriate number of loops to the other hand. Hold loops in place using your index fingers.



Movement Basics

- Moves always relocate the outer loop from one hand to the innermost position of the other.
- Most braids are “left to right, right to left” braids.
- There are four basic moves, which are combinations of inside, outside, straight, and twist.
- You can use the starting hand or the destination hand to move a loop, it makes no difference.
- Use both index fingers to clamp the loops in place against the other fingers during movements and tightening.
- Follow every move with a tightening motion.
- Relax, there is no tension between the braid and the suspension point.

Outside Moves

Outside Straight

Use the index finger of the starting hand to raise the top part of the outermost loop above the other loops on that hand. Holding the hands straight, place the working loop at the innermost position of the destination hand. Transfer the working loop to the destination hand, around the outside of the loops on the starting hand. Make sure the loops have not moved out of position, then hold them in place with your index fingers. Tighten the braid by firmly separating your hands.



Outside Twist

Use the index finger of the starting hand to raise the top part of the outermost loop above the other loops on that hand. Twist one hand so that the outer edge is facing the destination hand. Transfer the working loop to the innermost position of the destination hand, around the outside of the loops on the starting hand. Make sure the loops have not moved out of position, then hold them in place with your index fingers. Tighten the braid by firmly separating your hands.



Inside Moves

Inside Straight

Use the index finger of the starting hand to lower the top part of the outermost loop below the tops of the other loops on that hand. Holding the hands straight, transfer the working loop to the destination hand, through the inside of the loops on the starting hand, to the innermost position of the destination hand. Make sure the loops have not moved out of position, then hold them in place with your index fingers. Tighten the braid by firmly separating your hands.



Inside Twist

Use the index finger of the starting hand to lower the top part of the outermost loop below the tops of the other loops on that hand. With the destination hand, reach out through the inside of the loops on the starting hand and in through the working loop to transfer it to the innermost position of the destination hand, through the inside of the loops on the starting hand. Make sure the loops have not moved out of position, then hold them in place with your index fingers. Tighten the braid.



A Pattern for Flat Braids

Odoshige Gumi, aka Hira Gumi

Braid shape: One flat braid

Possible set ups:

- 9 loops, 6 left and 3 right
- 11 loops (A), 6 left and 5 right
- 11 loops (B), 7 left and 4 right
- 13 loops, 8 left and 5 right
- 15 loops, 8 left and 7 right

Movements:

1. L -> R Outside Straight
2. R -> L Outside Straight
3. L -> R Inside Twist
4. R -> L Inside Straight

Starting positions:

- 9 colors in 9 loops: 1, 6, 2, 7, 3, 8; 5, 9, 4
- 5 colors in 9 loops: 1, 4, 2, 4, 2, 5; 3, 5, 3
- 9 loop Nara Sageo: black, green, white, green, white, orange ; purple, orange, purple
- 11 colors in 11 loops A: 01, 07, 02, 08, 03, 09; 06, 11, 05, 10, 04
- 11 colors in 11 loops B: 01, 07, 02, 08, 03, 09, 04; 11, 06, 10, 05
- 13 colors in 13 loops: 01, 08, 02, 09, 03, 10, 04, 11; 07, 13, 06, 12, 05
- 13 loop chidori braid : white, blue, white, blue, white, purple; green, purple, green, purple, green
- 15 colors in 15 loops: 01, 09, 02, 10, 03, 11, 04, 12; 08, 15, 07, 14, 06, 13, 05

