

Kumihimo (Japanese braiding)

By Lynnette de Sandoval del Valle de los Unicornios

Kumihimo is the Japanese word for braiding (kumi = to braid, himo = cord). It encompasses many types and shapes of braids done in many different methods with the aid of many different tools. Traditionally Kumihimo is done with dyed silk threads, although current Kumihimo braiders use everything from silk thread to metal wire.

Braiding has a long history in Japan; it can be traced as far back as 7,500 BC. During the Asuja era (552-645) Korean silk braiding techniques were introduced into Japan, by the Nara era (645-784) the Korean style braids were in use for religious and secular purposes. During the Heian period (784-1184) the “braids became truly Japanese, complex in structure and sophisticated in design”¹.

During the Middle Ages -- the Kumakura (1185-1333), Muromachi (1333-1573), and Monoyama (1563-1614) eras – the rise of the Samurai warriors created a great need for Kumihimo, 800-1,000 ft of braid (in 8 ft lengths) was used for each suit of armor! The braids were also used for wrapping sword hilts, horse harnesses, tea ceremony accessories, obi ties, and more. These braids were many different shapes, textures, designs, and widths

Kumihimo as it is currently practiced is worked on several different stands. The most common and “traditional” is the marudai (maru = round, dai = stand) where the braiding is done on round top of the stand, the finished braid is weighted to descend through a center hole. Others include the kakudai (kaku = square) the braiding is done on the square top, but often the finished braid is suspend above the stand rather than descending through the center hole; the ayatakedai (aya = design, take = bamboo) is more like card weaving then braiding, the stand has notched bamboo slats designed to hold the “warp” threads at different levels as the “weft” threads are passed between them; takadai (taka = high) braiding is a cross between weaving and braiding, the stand provides many positions in 2 levels on 2 sides to move the threads, any thread can be warp or weft at any time.

Although the stands listed above have been believed to have been of early origin and the traditional tools used for producing Kumihimo braids, current research is leaning toward fingerloop braiding as the as the primary method of historic Japanese braid production.

In a recent E-mail on the Kumi2 list Michael Hattori had this to say about the history of the marudai: “because there are so few documents surviving, the exact history of Kumihimo is very difficult to ascertain. One book that I am reading now (Kumihimo no Sekai) suggests that the marudai may have existed during the Nara period (710-794); they arrive at this conjecture by saying that the examples of Sasanami-gumi [braid] in the Shosoin have selvages that curl inward, which is typical of this braid when done on marudai. The same braid can be done on the takadai, but the selvages are flat and do not turn in. But there is no documentation to support this. Masako Kinoshita's research shows that many of the braids in the Shosoin may have been made by loop manipulation [finger loop braiding]. Makiko suggests that something like the Karakumi-dai may have been used to do Sasanami [braid], since karakumi braids dating from the Asuka period (552-645) exist. Of the Japanese texts I have read so far, all only agree on one thing: no one really knows exactly when the marudai came into existence; I think the 17 century is as far back as consistent references and documentation about the marudai can be traced”.

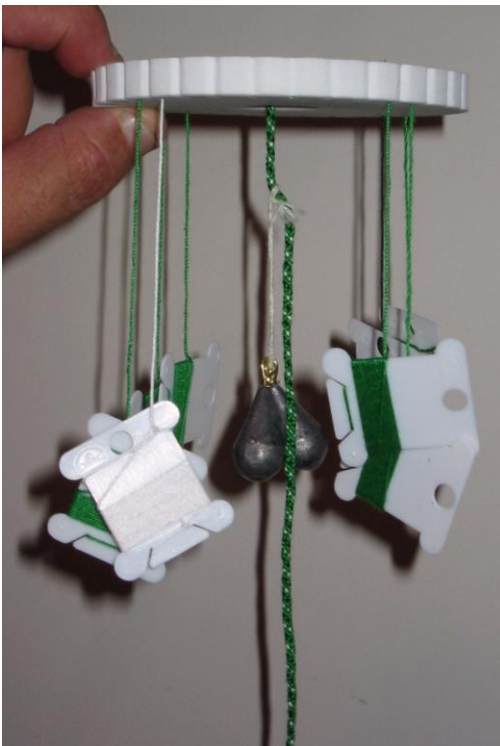
¹ Roderick Owen, Braids: 250 Patterns from Japan, Peru and Beyond

Kumihimo is becoming very popular among weavers and other textile enthusiasts in American and England. The most common (and easiest to start with) Kumihimo method is the marudai -- an open sided stand with a round top (called a "mirror").



- The threads lay on top of the mirror, with one end of the threads hanging through the center hole, and the other end wound on bobbins (called "tama") hanging off the outer edge of the mirror.
- To provide tension for the working braid, the tama are weighted and a counterweight bag is hung from the center threads to pull the braid through as it's woven.
- The threads are moved around the mirror two at a time (one per hand) based on the braid pattern. These movements create the braid that descends through the mirror's center hole.

The handheld Kumihimo disks are a modern adaptation of the marudai that allows for portable braiding. Many Kumihimo patterns, including Maru (Round) Yatsu (8 strand) Kumi (Braid) are easily adapted to these disks.



- The threads lay on top of the mirror, with one end of the threads hanging through the center hole. The end of the thread hanging off the outer edge of the mirror is not weighted. The slots in the card hold the threads tight and provide the needed tension. The threads should be wound around something to keep them from tangling as you work.
- A counterweight is hung from the center threads to pull the braid through as it's woven.
- The threads are moved around the mirror, one at a time based on the braid pattern. These movements create the braid that descends through the mirror's center hole. Because two threads can not occupy the same slot, there are often "housekeeping" moves added to the pattern to a compensate.

Kumihimo Info Sources:

Publications:

There are many Kumihimo books available, check www.braidershand.com/bhbooks.html, lakis.com, and amazon.com for current available titles.

- Ashley, Clifford W.
 - The Ashley Book of Knots. Doubleday. ISBN 0385040253
Chapter 39: Solid Sinnets is Kumihimo work. Not for beginners, but very fascinating. Roderick Owen has diagrammed several of these patterns in his “Braids” book.
- Carey, Jacqui
 - Beads & Braids. Devonshire Press, 1999 ISBN: 0-9523225-2-8.
 - Beginners Guide to Braiding: The craft of Kumihimo. Search Press, 1998. ISBN: 0-85532-828-2
Good place to start, lots of pictures!
 - Creative Kumihimo. Devonshire Press, 1994. ISBN: 0-9523225-0-1
- Martin, Catherine.
 - Kumihimo: Japanese Silk Braiding Techniques. Lark Books. ISBN 0-937274-59-3
Good historical and procedural information. Very Japanese approach to Kumihimo.
- Owen, Roderick
 - Braids: 250 Patterns from Japan, Peru and Beyond. To be republished in June 2004.
A wealth of braid patterns. A modern approach to Kumihimo. Includes lots of card woven patterns.
- Handwoven magazine. May/June 1999.
 - “Kumihimo The Easy Way” by Shirley Berlin
 - “Design Your Own Kumihimo Patterns” by Alison Irwin

Internet:

There are a wealth of Internet sites related to Kumihimo. They include sites showing braid examples, and selling Kumihimo supplies and Kumihimo books. They can be found by searching Google for: “*Kumihimo OR “kumi himo”*”

There are currently very few sites with Kumihimo how-to diagrams; so far I’ve found these:

- Beginning Kumihimo. Class handout by Lady Eliane Halevy
www.gflower.org/kongo.htm – history and how-to
- A Seasonal Study in Thick and Thin Elements / CHRISTMAS HEARTS design
www.qvade.dk/palette/Swap4.htm -- Diagrams and pictures for a braid with a heart pattern
- Mike’s Braids: Mitake-Gumi with 16 threads
www.merthymike.free-online.co.uk/patterns.htm
- Eight’s Great! By Alison Irwin
handspinners.com/archives/mar2005/alisonirwin2.html
- Kumihimo on a Card by Shirley Berlin
handspinners.com/archives/summer2004/berlin.html

Kumihimo Info Sources:

Some other Kumihimo Internet sites of interest are:

- Weavershand: “An information page for weavers! Specifically for those interested in Tablet Weaving, Kumihimo, and Ply-splitting, but peruse the links if your interests lie elsewhere.”
www.weavershand.com/#K -- The place to go for Kumihimo on the net!
- The Iga Hakuo School of Japanese Braiding and Hirai Kanezo Store website
www.dento.gr.jp/hirai/en/e-seisaku.html and **www.dento.gr.jp/hirai/en/e-dai.html** -- Still photos of Kumihimo and Kumihimo stands, and VIDEOS of Kumihimo braiding, silk processing, and silk work culture. Go there, view the videos, they're wonderful!
- An Informal Glossary
www.weavershand.com/makiko.html – Kumihimo terms defined.
- Crafts Forum Kumihimo articles by Ruth MacGregor's
www.forumsamerica.com/site/features/feature.aspx+Forum+Crafts+ArticleCode+353
www.forumsamerica.com/site/features/feature.aspx+Forum+Crafts+ArticleCode+354
-- Overview of Kumihimo, the equipment and uses for finished braids.
- Kumihimo Links and Info page on Squidoo
www.squidoo.com/kumihimo/
- Kumihimo Book List on Weaver's Hand
www.weavershand.com/kumihimobooks.html

E-mail groups that discuss Kumihimo:

- Kumi2: **groups.yahoo.com/group/kumi2** -- Discussion of Kumihimo and techniques
- NarrowworkGuild: **groups.yahoo.com/group/NarrowworkGuild** -- “This is a discussion group for the Worshipful Company of Narrowworkers in the SCA. We cover a range of narrow textile arts, including tablet weaving, fingerloop braiding, netting, knotting, Kumihimo, and much more.”

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