

Japanese Kumihimo Braiding on a Marudai Round Braid (Maru Yatsu Kumi)

By Debbie Coyle

Kumihimo is a traditional form of Japanese braiding. It produces hundreds of different braid types including: flat, round, square, thick, thin, and more!

The braiding is fun and simple, and the hand held disk makes it easy to carry with you and work on while on the phone, during travel, in waiting rooms, and any odd moments of spare time.

The braids can be used for necklaces, bracelets, watch bands, hair ribbons, shoe laces, key chains, curtain or cushion ties, drawstrings, straps for: cameras / binoculars / cell phones, pet leashes, gift wrapping “ribbon”, pull cord for lamps or fans, decorative trim for cushions, clothing, and much more.

This pattern creates a round braid with either stripes, spirals, or diamond spots, depending on how you lay out the cords to braid.

About Kumihimo

Kumihimo is the Japanese word for braiding (kumi = to braid, himo = cord). The Japanese employed many different methods and used several different tools to create a large number of different types and shapes of braids.

Traditionally Kumihimo is done with dyed silk threads, although current Kumihimo braiders use everything from silk thread to metal wire, including crochet cotton, embroidery thread, bead strands, ribbon, and more.

Braiding in Japan can be traced as far back as 7,500 BC. During the Middle Ages the rise of the Samurai warriors created a great need for Kumihimo braids – 800-1,000 ft of braid (in 8 ft lengths) was used to tie together the plates on a Samurai’s suit of armor! The braids were also used to wrap sword hilts, for horse harnesses, tea ceremony accessories, obi ties, and more. They were braided in many different shapes, textures, designs, and widths.



Today the most common method of working Kumihimo on a stand is on the marudai (maru = round, dai = stand):

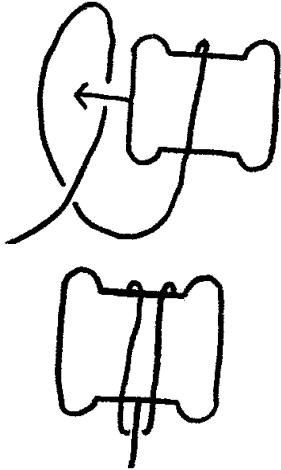
- The threads lay on the mirror (top surface of the marudai), with one end of the threads hanging through the center hole, and the other end wound on bobbins (called “tama”) hanging off the outer edge of the mirror.
- To provide tension for the working braid, the tama are weighted and a counterweight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

Prepare the bobbins (completed in kit)

Cut 8 equal lengths of yarn or thread, such as crochet thread or embroidery floss. See “Marudai Set up” below to determine the cord colors.

Wind each length onto a bobbin. Unlike kumihimo on a disk, the bobbins need to be weighted, they will be providing the tension that will keep your threads straight and even on the mirror. Traditional kumihimo bobbins (called tama) are spool shaped, made of wood with a lead filling. Easily available alternatives are metal bolts bought from the hardware.

Tie off each bobbin thread with a Half Hitch:



- Hold the bobbin with the thread coming down in front of the bobbin (like a waterfall)
- Fold the thread into a loop, with the bobbin end of the thread in the back of the loop
- Put the loop over the left side of the bobbin, the front of the loop behind the bobbin
- When done correctly, the thread will hang down from between a loop of thread
- Tighten the half hitch by rotating the bobbin away from the loop you’ve created. This pulls the thread toward the loop and tightens the loop around the working end of the thread.

Placing the threads on the marudai

Tie the non-bobbin ends of the 8 threads together and place the knot down through the hole in the center of the mirror.

A counterweight is attached to the threads under the mirror to provide the proper tension for your braid. The counterweight keeps the threads straight between the center hole and the mirror edge, and pulls the braid down through the center hole as you work it. A good rule of thumb is for the counterweight to be 1/2 to 2/3 of the combined weight of the bobbins. The weights can be contained in a bag or held together with string or cord.

The weight of the counterweight determines the tightness of the braid. More weight pulls down more aggressively as you work the pattern, and so makes for a looser braid with longer design elements. Less weight pulls down less, and makes a tighter braid with shorter design elements. Therefore it’s important to use the same weight throughout the project.

Fishing weights come in different weights, shapes, and sizes and make great counterweights. But most are made of lead, so you’ll need to coat them with varnish, tool dip, or something else that covers the entire lead surface.

Other items that make good counterweights are: large beads, mechanical bolts, nuts or washers,

Use a Lark’s Head knot to attach the counterweight to the threads under the disk, just above the knot:



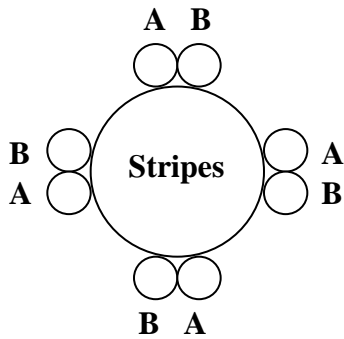
1. Tie a loop of thread to the counterweight (or counterweight bag)
2. Fold the top of the loop down to form 2 rabbit ears
3. Fold the left ear onto the right, with the cross thread outside the 2 folded ears
4. Place the braid’s threads through the rabbit ear loop
5. Tighten the loop, and slide it to rest just above the knot



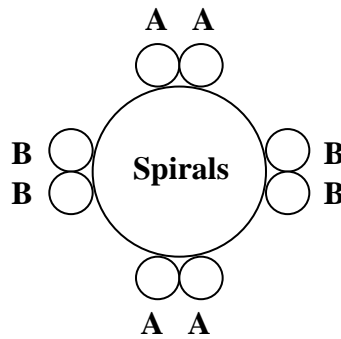
Marudai set up

Place the 8 threads on the mirror as indicated by the braiding pattern -- think of the mirror as being divided into quarters (top/north, bottom/south, right/east and left/west) and keep your thread inside the appropriate quarter as you work.

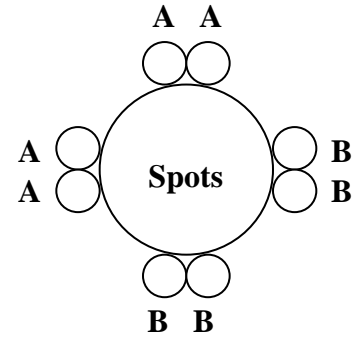
Arrange the thread lengths so that all bobbins hang at the same level, about a 1/2 to 2/3 of the way down the marudai.



Marudai Front



Marudai Front



Marudai Front

Working instructions

Move the threads, step-by-step, **two at a time (one per hand)**, as indicated on the braiding chart. Note that each thread crosses only one thread as it moves to its next position.

The weight of the bobbins and the counter weight provide tension for your braiding that keeps the threads straight and even. When moving the threads, pick them up by sliding a finger under the thread where it hangs over the outer edge of the marudai. Do not grasp the thread between two fingers, just let it hang off of your finger. This will keep the tension consistent as you move the threads.

When you finish braiding for the day, place a stick through the threads UNDER the mirror, and slide the counterweight bag to the bottom of the stand. This takes the pressure off the braid when you've not working it.

Lengthening the bobbin thread

As thread is used to work the braid, the bobbins will move up toward the mirror; lengthen their threads as needed:

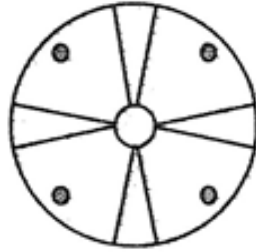
- Holding the bobbin in one hand, and the thread in the other
- Rotate the bobbin toward the half hitch's loop
 - This pulls the thread away from the loop loosening the loop and lengthening the thread
- Reverse the direction of rotation to tighten the loop when the thread is lengthened as needed

Raising the counterweight

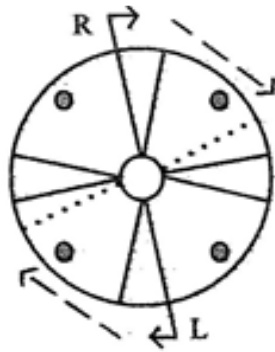
As you braid, the counterweight moves down toward the base of the marudai,

To provide the needed tension, the counterweight **MUST** be hanging free, and not resting on the base. Each time you lengthen the bobbin threads, remember to move the counterweight up by loosening the lark's head knot and sliding it up the braid. Retighten the knot on the braid, below the unworked threads.

Working Diagram
for Maru (Round) Yatsu (8 strand) Kumi (Braid)

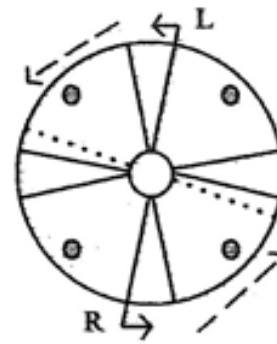


Home Position



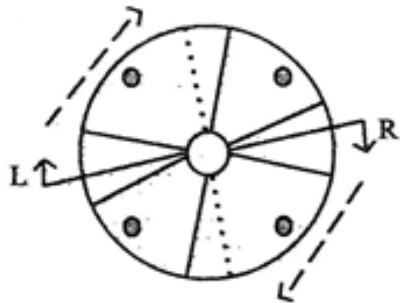
Step A
Moving Clockwise

- 1) Lift up the **top left** and **bottom right** threads
- 2) Move them over their partner thread
- 3) Put them down before the next pair of threads



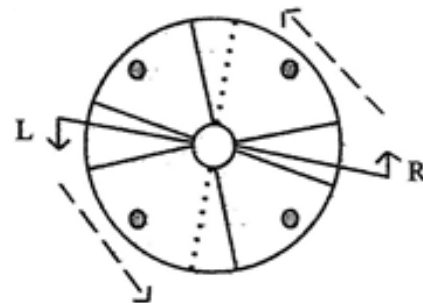
Step C
Moving Counter Clockwise

- 1) Lift up the **top right** and **bottom left** threads
- 2) Move them over their partner thread
- 3) Put them down before the next pair of threads



Step B
Moving Clockwise

- 1) Move your hands to the next threads (the first thread of the next pair)
- 2) Pick them up and move them (clockwise) over their partner thread
- 3) Put them down beside the lone threads at top and bottom



Step D
Moving Counter Clockwise

- 1) Move your hands to the next threads (the first thread of the next pair)
- 2) Pick them up and move them (counter clockwise) over their partner thread
- 3) Put them down beside the lone threads at top and bottom

Finishing the braid

When you've finished braiding:

- Remove the counterweight and pull the finished braid out of the marudai's center hole
- Tie a thread around the unbraided threads, as close to the point of braiding as possible
 - Or tie the unbraided threads in a knot
- Remove the bobbins from the threads ends
- Finish the braid ends as desired -- tassels are traditional

Traditionally, when the braid is complete it's steamed by holding it over the spout of a boiling tea kettle to remove the indentations left by the counterweight thread and to help shape the braid. After steaming, flat braids are rolled flat with a rolling pin, and round braids are rounded by rolling with a block of wood.

Resources

Books

- Carey, Jacqui. **Beginners Guide to Braiding: The Craft of Kumihimo**. Carey Co, 1999). ISBN 0952322528

This is a great beginner's book for kumihimo braiding on the maudai. She provides illustrations and clear explanations of every step.

- Owen, Roderick. **Braids: 250 Patterns from Japan, Peru and Beyond**. Lacis, 2004. ISBN 1891656589

EVERYTHING you want to know about kumihimo on the marudai and on handheld cards! Includes history, info for making your own marudai and cards, 250 patterns, and MUCH more.

- Neilson, Rosalie. **The Thirty-Seven Interlacements of Hira Kara Gumi**. Orion's Plumage, 1998 ISBN: 0966486307

A study of how changing thread color and color position affect the braid patterns.

- Carey, Jacqui. **Beads and Braids**. Search Press, 1997. ISBN: 0855328282

If you want to add beads to your kumihimo, this book is the one for you! There doesn't seem to be a method of attaching beads that she's missed!

Internet

- Weavershand website: www.weavershand.com/#K -- The place to go for Kumihimo on the net.
- My kumihimo web pages: Lynnette.HouseZacharia.com/Kumihimo – Patterns, how to make cheap and easy bobbins and marudai, more book recommendations and internet links.

Suppliers

- Unicorn Fiber Arts: Unicorn-Fiber-Arts.square.site/– my store to sell kumihimo kits, and more
- Berlin Braids: ShirleyBerlin.com
- Braiders Hand: BraidersHand.com