

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB122227542827371715>

## STYLE & FASHION

# My Kimono Education

After months of classes, a young wearer faces her tricky debut

By Yukari Iwatani Kane

Updated Sept. 26, 2008 11:59 p.m. ET

Tokyo

Whenever I put on a kimono, I set aside at least an hour to dress, even after nine months of lessons. There are three layers, each of which must be tucked in just so, and an ornate sash that needs to be tied into a complex knot behind my back.

People around the world admire Japan's national costume, with its elaborate designs and elegant wide sash, called an *obi*. The pop star Madonna is a huge fan. But for many Japanese, kimonos are a leftover from long ago. A new silk kimono outfit can cost thousands of dollars, and it can take months -- if not years -- to master how to wear it.



See the 13-step process for putting on a kimono.

I spent two months just learning how to correctly put on the layer underneath the actual kimono -- a floor-length robe of thin silk that is wrapped around the body. All wrinkles in the robe must be smoothed out to prevent their showing when the outer layer is put on.

The earliest type of kimono, which means "something to wear," first appeared in the 8th century. Its design can be traced to traditional Chinese clothing of that time. This style of dress, which evolved over the years into the kimono and obi you see today, dominated men's and women's fashion in Japan for centuries. Not until the Meiji Restoration of the late 19th century -- when Emperor Mutsuhito set his culturally and economically isolated country on a path of Westernization -- did the kimono began to wane. Nobles and government officials, taking

their cue from the emperor, began to wear Western-style clothing. By World War II, kimonos were worn only for special occasions and rarely seen on the street.

In recent years, however, interest in this style of dress has been rekindled among women of all ages. After decades of idolizing Western music, literature, movies and luxury goods, Japanese men and women are taking more pride in their own traditions and culture, from contemporary films and modern art to *taiko* drum concerts and Kabuki, a traditional style of theater.

Japanese pride, of a sort, played a role in my learning to wear a kimono: I wanted to show off my heritage. I was born in Japan 34 years ago, but raised in the U.S., and I married an American. For years, I felt I was between cultures: not a true Westerner, not fully Japanese. But working and living in Tokyo since late 2003, I've developed a new appreciation for my ancestry -- and its distinctive fashions.

Some of my Japanese girlfriends wear kimonos to parties and dinners in Japan as well as on vacations and business trips overseas. "You get a lot of attention and much better



CORBIS

service” at restaurants, says my 43-year-old friend Noriko Toyoda, a Tokyo native who has worn kimonos on trips to Europe as well as to restaurants in Japan.

Casual cotton kimonos, summertime garb known as *yukata*, are hugely popular. (The single-layer, unlined robes are easier to put on than the heavier, lined-silk kimonos for winter.) Even some fashion designers, such as Anna Sui and Junko Koshino, have joined the fray with

modern yukata designs.

The trend is fueling a cottage industry of retailers in Japan selling spruced-up used formal and casual kimonos. Among them is former kimono-fabric wholesaler Tokyo Yamaki Co., which has built a national chain of 110 stores, called Tansu-ya, that sells refurbished kimonos at prices from \$30 to nearly \$1,000.

Traditionally, a kimono was custom-made for a woman, who chose the fabric and had it tailored. The fanciest kimonos were almost always handed down by mothers as heirlooms to their daughters, who would have them altered to fit. That’s still largely the case.



At Tansu-ya, a second-hand kimono store, offerings include vintage formal robes that were made before World War II, such as the three shown here. KIMONO PHOTOS FROM TANSU-YA

A new, custom-made kimono and obi can cost between about \$500 and \$10,000. Of that, tailoring accounts for \$300 to \$600, including \$100 or so for the obi. (To lower costs, some kimono shops have outsourced sewing to China and Vietnam.) The rest is for the fabric, whose cost ranges widely depending on quality and the intricacy of the design.

Ready-to-wear kimonos in washable wool or polyester are available for less than \$100. New ready-to-wear yukatas sell for \$30 to \$200.

Before my lessons, I purchased a used winter kimono, called an *awase*. I chose one in a solid yellow-gold silk and paired it with a black obi embroidered with colorful flowers and birds. The cost: \$300 each. (I learned later the obi was a bargain: Such high-quality, hand-embroidered sashes are rare.)

There are scores of rules on the acceptable colors, fabrics and designs to wear, depending on occasion, season and age. Yukatas, for instance, are worn only in summer; the season for *awase* stretches from autumn to spring. Young women wear bright colors; married and older women, more subdued shades. Even sleeve styles are dictated by marital status.

In formal wear, the fabric usually bears a pattern of a single big picture -- a wintry mountain scene, for instance -- that spreads from sleeve to sleeve and down the back and front of the kimono. (Fabric that is solid-colored or finely patterned is used for informal kimonos.)

The obi, which can be close to four meters long, is usually wrapped around the waist and tied on the back into a big square called a drum knot. There also are fancier ways to tie the obi, particularly for the type of kimono that single women wear.

---

READ MORE

---

A kimono-industry scion makes a business out of recycled kimonos.

---

HOW TO WEAR A KIMONO

---

- Stand up straight, with your legs together. Nothing looks worse than a woman in a kimono with bad posture.
- When walking, take small steps with your toes pointing inward. Large steps will expose your underlayers.
- Always sit on the edge of any chair. Sit too deeply and you will ruin the prettiest part of the obi sash tied on your back.
- As you reach for anything with your hand, hold the sleeve back to keep it from landing in your food or drink.
- Take handkerchiefs with you, so you always have something you can sit on or cover your lap with. Stains on kimonos can be difficult and expensive to remove.

—*Yukari Iwatani Kane*

Many traditionalists insist on following a strict set of rules about details like length, how the kimono is layered and the way the sashes are tied. But a growing number of modern kimono wearers believe women should wear kimonos as they like -- even with if that means with high-heeled shoes instead of traditional Japanese sandals, called *zora*.

A friend of mine recommended an instructor, Toshie Morozumi, who takes the middle road. The 58-year-old teacher often wears kimonos -- and has for the past 30 years. She upholds some basic rules, but also has developed tricks to simplify the process.

To ensure proper attention, Ms. Morozumi offers only private lessons; she charges \$40 for a two-hour session. (I took lessons two to three times a month, on average. But Ms. Morozumi says students can learn in weekly lessons over four months, as long as they practice at home as well.)

A complete kimono outfit has three main garments: the undergarment (basically an undershirt and slip), the *nagajuban* -- the silk robe layered just over the undergarment -- and the outer robe. But in between and around those robes are nine ties and sashes, all of which must be secured at certain spots around the torso using particular knots. All 12 pieces must be properly arranged if you want to be comfortable and keep the robes from falling open.

The key to the undershirt is to get rid of body curves. Unlike many dresses, kimonos are intended to hide a woman's shape rather than accentuate it. For slender women, that means padding the waistline; for full-figured women, flattening the chest -- either by wrapping it in a piece of cloth or by wearing a special, chest-reducing kimono bra.

After the undergarment, the next big step to master is shaping the stiff nagajuban collar, over which the kimono is draped. This determines how the kimono will look from behind. "You'll look dowdy if the collar in the back isn't let out enough, but if you let it out too much, you'll look like a Ginza bar hostess," Ms. Morozumi told me as I practiced pulling the back of the nagajuban just enough to let out the back collar by about four centimeters from the nape of my neck. The front part of the collar needed to be crossed and layered close to the neck to show as little skin as possible, befitting the modesty of a proper young woman.

The most difficult step to master was the obi, which I had to tug and tie behind me while peering over my shoulder at a mirror. In the back, this sash is typically tied in a drum knot. The standard drum knot -- called a *taiko* -- should look like a rectangle whose top and bottom are perfectly parallel with the floor. It can't be too big ("frumpy," deemed Ms. Morozumi) or crooked ("embarrassing"). I placed it as high as possible on my back -- just under my shoulder blades -- because that position is considered the most elegant.

Ms. Morozumi also taught me tricks for wearing kimonos comfortably and for making sure the outfit doesn't come apart when walking -- my biggest fear. (A kimono wouldn't suddenly fall open; it happens gradually.) The most important sash for keeping the kimono together is the one underneath the obi, and it's best tied directly on top of the hip bones. That allows it to be really tight without constricting the body too much. And there's the all-important trick for how to go to the bathroom: Pick up the outer and nagajuban layers one by one and hold them against your chest, and then wrap the bottom layer -- the undershirt -- around the other layers to hold it in place.

In late May, the end of awase season, I finally gained Ms. Morozumi's approval to dress myself alone and go out in public. My husband, Patrick, made dinner reservations at our favorite Japanese restaurant for 7 p.m. one Sunday. I started to dress at 5:30, inspecting myself in a mirror at each stage. I had to retie the knot of the obi a few times to make sure it looked perfect.

Once dressed, we went out to catch a taxi. I climbed carefully into the car, first sitting down on the seat and then swinging both legs inside. And for the entire 25-minute ride, I perched at the edge of the seat so I wouldn't ruin the shape of my obi knot in the back.

Ms. Morozumi said I would know I'd done a good job because I would receive compliments, while if something was amiss nobody would say a word.

I held my breath as we entered the restaurant, an upscale tempura eatery in an old established hotel in eastern Tokyo. The chef did a quick double-take and then the maitre d' hustled over. "You're wearing your kimono so beautifully," he said. My husband beamed at me, and I let out a huge sigh of relief.

—*Miho Inada contributed to this article.*

**Write to** Yukari Iwatani Kane at [yukari.iwatani@wsj.com](mailto:yukari.iwatani@wsj.com)

---

READ MORE FROM WEEKEND JOURNAL ASIA »

---



GETTY IMAGES

- **Jewels From the Crown**
- **City Walk:** Singapore
- **The Dish:** Canh Chua Ca
- **Hit List:** Career Direction
- **Golf Journal:** Out of Bounds
- **Time Off:** Cultural Events Around Asia

Copyright &copy;2017 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.