

Kumihimo

Kumihimo is a Japanese braid-making technique which dates to about 550 C.E., when the Buddhist religion spread in Japan and people began to use decorative cords in religious ceremonies (1). Later, people used brightly colored braids to decorate clothing, to hang banners, to lace samurai armor together (esp. in late SCA period, 1400-1600), and to hang knives (2).

Although kumihimo is particular to Japan, other cultures in history have used similar braids or braid 'stools', including the sling braiders of the Andes (see source 11) and hair-braiding stools from Scandinavia. Research is ongoing into the origins of kumihimo and similar braids. There are some similarities between kumihimo and the fingerloop braiding practiced in western Europe during mid- to late-SCA-period.

Except for those who aspire to putting together a set of period Samurai armor, most people who make kumihimo in the SCA use it for decorative purposes. Oddly, it is not usually used in Japanese garb in the SCA, possibly because we don't have much documentation as to how it was used in costume. (The modern practice of using a kumihimo belt with an obi (sash) on a kimono does not date back to SCA period.)

Some uses I have seen kumihimo put to in the SCA include: site tokens, laces for pouches, trim on Mongolian or other garb, a lacing to keep a hat on or to lace up clothing, closure for a box or instrument case, or as purely decorative pieces for gifts (a piece of kumihimo looks nice tied onto the handle of gift baskets). They can also be given to Royalty to be used as part of Their gifts to individuals or other Royal couples.

There are several different stands used to create kumihimo braids. They are of varying price, complexity and SCA "periodicity". Source (3) has pictures of the various stands, as does the online store Braidershand at <http://www.braidershand.com/>. Due to its simplicity and comparative cheapness, most braids done by SCA members are made on a wooden stand (a [marudai](#) or "round stand"), allowing the threads to be draped over a flat doughnut-shaped top called a kagami (Japanese for "mirror"). The individual threads are weighted with wooden bobbins called "tama", and a bag of weights is tied to the finished braid to produce a balanced tension. Although it is not known how long the Japanese have been using the marudai to create braids, most estimates place it very late in SCA period (around 1575) or later.

In the SCA, many people also use a cardboard disc loom to make maru dai braids. While not a documentable period tool, this disc has the advantages of a) obviating the use of weights, since tucking the threads into slots on the edge of the cardboard maintains adequate tension, and b) being portable. Instructions for a cardboard loom, as well as a homemade cardboard/wire maru dai, can be found in source (1). I often draw a compass star on the top of my cardboard discs, both for patriotic and practical reasons: with many braids, you need to know which way is up.

With cardboard looms so cheap and easy to make, and so portable, why buy a marudai? My opinion is that you miss out on the tranquillity of this art if you never use a marudai. Unlike the jerky rhythms of moving threads in and out of cardboard slits, the flow of braiding on a marudai is very fluid and relaxing. Your body quickly memorizes the movements for your particular braid, and braiding goes much faster. During a two-hour movie, I can easily braid several feet of a simple 8 or 16-strand braid. There is no danger of fraying your threads when they are not abraded by cardboard slits. Marudais are also fairly ergonomic; you can hold them between your legs, put them on the floor or on a table or stool, or purchase an adjustable one so you can shift your position as you go.

Traditionally, untwisted silk threads, in bundles of a certain number of threads or “ends”, would be used in making kumihimo braids. It is possible to buy prepared kumihimo silk, packaged to be unloaded from the pack onto winding posts attached to your table, for minimum accidental twisting. Cotton embroidery floss is a good solid substitute for the silk for our purposes, but you can experiment with other fibers too. Cotton will work well with a cardboard loom; rayon will fray. Sources (4) and (8) are especially strong on creative fiber use in kumihimo.

There are hundreds of different kumihimo stitches, some simple and some very complex, using different numbers of strands from 4 to 100. Source (1) is the closest to being encyclopedic of marudai stitches, but it also includes non-Japanese stitches such as Peruvian, seafaring, and stitches invented in the author’s workshops.

The stitch I was first taught was the simple 16-thread rotating stitch, kongo gumi, directions for which were published in *Handwoven* magazine (6). This is simple enough for small children, especially if you cut it down to 8 threads as in source (7), and creates a smooth, even-looking braid without much effort. I have taught this in classes and given away many kits with the stitch pre-set so the recipient can simply pick it up and braid. The recipients are often seen braiding all the way through Court that evening.

For visual learners, there is a video by teacher Rodrick Owen, available from Braidershand (see link below), or you can seek out someone to teach you in the SCA. Pennsic is a good place to do this, as several kumihimo enthusiasts attend and teach every year. Northshield, Ealdormere, the East, Calontir, the Midlands region of the Midrealm, and Aethelmearc have members who teach classes in kumihimo. Many of these people can be reached through the Kumi2 Yahoo list (see below).

Glossary:

Kagami: “mirror”, the name for the top braiding surface on a marudai.

Kongo gumi: one of the easiest marudai stitches. Easy to do on a cardboard loom. Literally, kongo = hard, gumi = braid.

Kumihimo or kumi himo: literally, kumi = coming together, and himo = string, cord or rope. This term refers to all the forms of Japanese braiding, made on several different types of stands including the marudai.

Marudai: “round stand”, a round braiding stool or stand, usually made with a “donut” of wood and three or four dowels connecting the donut to a square bottom. It’s possible to make the square bottom a braiding surface too, by putting a hole in it and by balancing the whole stool so it can stand on either end.

Obi: a sash used with modern traditional kimono dress in Japan. A kumihimo belt is tied around the obi. Unfortunately this is not a period costume ensemble, but it does provide a modern use for kumihimo.

Omori: the counter-weight attached to a marudai braid. Usually this is a bag containing weights; you can improvise with large metal nuts tied to the braid.

Tama: a specially made, weighted wood bobbin for use with a marudai. These can get expensive, but there are many ways to improvise them.

Books, articles, and websites of interest to the kumihimo learner:

1. Owen, Rodrick. [Braids: 250 patterns from Japan, Peru & beyond](#). Published by Interweave Press in 1995. ISBN: 1-883010-06-3. Out-of-print in hardcover; the softcover version is available from <http://www.braidershand.com/>. Very user-friendly, this is considered the best all-around book for learning new braids.
2. Kliot, Jules and Kaethe. [Kumi himo: techniques of Japanese plaiting](#). Published by Lacis in 1977; 6th printing in 1999. ISBN: 0-916896-11-0. This small booklet is only available from Lacis (see link below).
3. Martin, Catherine. [Kumihimo: Japanese silk braiding techniques](#). Published by Lark Books in 1986. ISBN: 0-937274-59-3. This is “the black book”. Many people find the diagrams hard to follow, but there is lots of good information.
4. Carey, Jacqui. [Beginner's guide to braiding: the craft of Kumihimo](#). Published by Search Press in 1997; reprinted in 1998. ISBN: 085532828-2. A few simple 8-strand braids. Carey’s books are especially well-photographed and always include a “point of braiding” photo to help keep you visually on-track with how the braiding process is supposed to look.
5. Carey, Jacqui. [Creative kumihimo](#). Published by Unicorn Books & Crafts in 1994. ISBN: 0952322501. This is a bit more advanced than Jacqui Carey's beginners book, but introduces a novel way to plan the color patterns of your braids.
6. Berlin, Shirley. “Kumihimo, the easy way”. *Handwoven*, May/June 1999, Volume XX, Number 3.
7. Irwin, Alison. Eight’s Great! 2004-2005. <http://handspINNers.com/mar2005/alisonirwin2.html> Instructions on how to make a simple cardboard kumihimo loom and do a kongo 8 braid.

8. Berlin, Shirley and Carol Goodwin. *Sixty Sensational Samples: a Kumihimo Collection*. Published by the authors in 2004. ISBN: 0-9733734-0-7. This is a collection of “swap” items, marudai braids that individuals have made and traded with others to give everyone new ideas. Great for those who feel they are running out of kumihimo ideas. With photographs and instructions.
9. Tada, Makiko. *Kumi Himo: the essence of Japanese braiding*. Published by Lacis in 2004 (a translation of a 1980 Japanese book). ISBN: 1-891656-52-X This has marudai braids, plus many braids for other stands. Many adventurous many-stranded marudai braids, plus a great glossary.
10. Adam, Paulette. *The Heart Braid*. July 2000.
<http://www.qvade.dk/paulette/Swap4.htm> This was the second braid I learned. Excellent diagrams and photos are very helpful for the beginner, and the result is gorgeous.
11. Cahlander, Adele. *Sling braiding of the Andes*. Published by Colorado Fiber Center, Boulder, in 1980. ISBN: 0-937452-03-3. This is a related art, practiced with woolen fibers in South America, done with elaborate finger braiding.
12. Robbins, Melanie. “Kumihimo: the art of Japanese cord making”. *Tournaments Illuminated*, Issue 149, Winter 2004/A.S. XXXVIII, pp. 12-13.

Sources for purchasing kumihimo books and supplies:

Braiders’ Hand: <http://www.braidershand.com/>

Carey Company (Jacqi Carey’s website/business) <http://www.careycompany.com/>

Finniwig <http://www.finniwig.com/kumihimokits.htm>

Lacis <http://www.lacis.com/>

Mailing list: Currently, the most active discussion list about kumihimo is

Kumi2@yahoogroups.com . You can sign up for it at

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/kumi2/> . Two of the main researchers/teachers/writers on kumihimo, Rodrick Owen and Makiko Tada, are active on the list. The list owner is an SCA member, but this list is about 30% SCA and 70% not, so please refrain from undue SCA jargon use.

A club for those who do braiding/weaving of various kinds is the Complex Weavers organization, based in the UK, at <http://www.complex-weavers.org/index.htm> . There are tons of specialized study groups, including Kumihimo on the Marudai at <http://www.complex-weavers.org/study12.htm> . It costs money to join, but there are swaps and newsletters and other benefits to membership. This organization is not SCA-related.

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