

Introduction to Kumihimo

Noble Anne of Østgarðr, 238825@members.eastkingdom.org

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Quick summary

- Kumihimo is a traditional Japanese braiding art, dating from around 600 CE.
- There are many types of braids; the ones I did were historically made of silk on a wooden stand called a marudai, though I make them of cotton on foam disks.
- The braids in my exhibit have been adapted to modern sensibilities; they are in colors and patterns that I like rather than what would have been done in period, and I make them on modern tools for portability.

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What is kumihimo?

Kumihimo is a Japanese style of braiding which began in the Nara period, about 600 CE, and was used through the Edo period, 1600-1800 CE (Domyo). In this time frame, it was used in Buddhist temples, to decorate royalty, to hold together armor and swords/scabbards for samurai, and to hold together kimonos. (“みひもの歴史”).

Types of braids in period

When I was first starting out, I found a lot of modern sources, like “Shelly’s Kumihimo Links”, that refer to a 16-strand braid as “Kongo gumi.” That site provides links with instructions on how to braid, but doesn’t provide any historical context or source for the name. Some modern secondary/tertiary sources on kumihimo, like Tada via the Kumihimo Companion, say that there are many types of braids on a marudai, as well as braids on other types of looms. “Kongoh gumi” is used as the Japanese name for a specific braid, in addition to there being other braids with different names in that family, possibly with different patterns. I don’t own a copy of that book, unfortunately, so I can’t yet verify my conjecture that “kongoh gumi” is a specific pattern as opposed to a family of patterns with the same technique.

Another source, “Taito City Culture Guide Book”, confirms that there are many types of braids of different complexities, and provides names for some of the techniques:

There are various traditional patterns for Kumihimo, including "Kikkogumi," "Kamakuragumi," composite braiding method called "Itsukushimagumi" that was dedicated to Itsukushima Shrine and used for "Heike Nokyo" sutra scroll, "Karakumi," "Kanmurikumi," "Naragumi," "Mitakekumi" and "Koraikumi." There are also about 20 major braiding methods. It is considered that there are hundreds of braiding methods if their offshoots and methods derived from the major ones are included. For the most complex "Ryomen Kikkogumi," 144 silk balls are needed, which is three times as many as the standard Kumihimo.

Another source, Raskin-Schmitz, writes: *Most Japanese marudai braids, both flat and round, are made with 8, 16, 24 bobbins.*

Materials required for period kumihimo

- Marudai: a round stand for braiding on and holding bobbins in place
 - “Kumihimo” appears to be an umbrella term for several types of braids, not all of which are on a marudai (Fujinami no Kaede).
- Tama: weighted bobbins, one for each thread

- Center counter weight, connected to the braid, to counterbalance the weight of the tama. Raskin-Schmitz writes:
 - Fine silk threads are bundled and wound around wooden bobbins that are weighted with lead to reach 85 g (3,5 oz) or 100 g (4,2 oz). When braiding on a marudai or kakudai, balance is achieved by the addition of a counterweight that weighs roughly half of the combined weight of all the bobbins used.*
- Silk thread to braid

Modern kumihimo tools & how they differ

Instead of marudai, foam disks are an inexpensive and portable modern alternative. The bobbins and center don't need to be weighted because the foam holds thread in place with appropriate tensioning.

Instead of round wooden bobbins held in place with knots, I tried a variety of plastic bobbins, both flat and clamshell shaped.

I used embroidery floss and cotton thread instead of silk thread. The fibers I used don't stick to each other and prevent slipping on the bobbin in the same way that silk thread is reported to. I worked around this by using clamshell plastic bobbins which hold the thread in place.

Traditionally, kumihimo patterns were kept a closely guarded secret (Raskin-Schmitz). Websites now exist to share and design color patterns - I used "Craft Design Online" to design a 32-strand pattern.

My kumihimo display

My display consists of three braids, which are all still in progress:

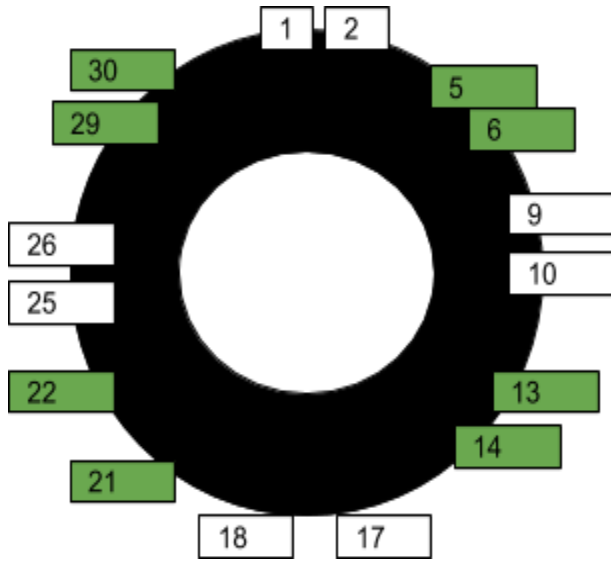
- 16 strand braid: stripes (green and white)
- 28 strand braid: Philadelphia Pride Flag inspired colors (rainbow + brown; I didn't have room on the disk for black stripe as well)
- 32 strand braid: pattern inspired by my arms (green, white, black)

How I braid

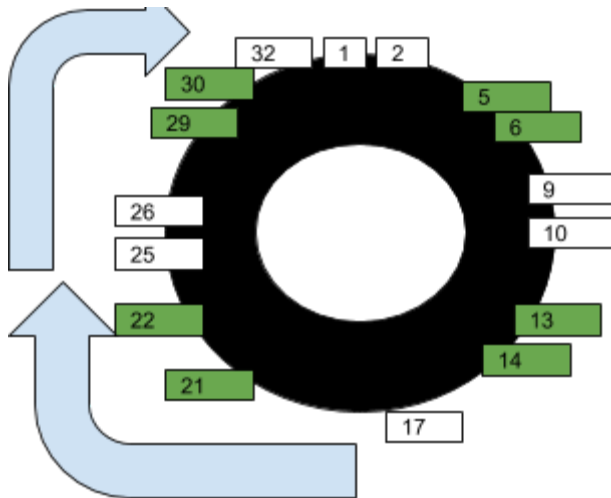
Instructions follow to set up and braid a 16-strand braid on a 32-slot disk. This particular braid technique works with 8+ strands as long as the total number of strands is divisible by four, and it is the technique I used in all three samples.

1. Knot all strands together at one end, put in center. Assign threads to slots:
 - a. Put white thread into slots: 1, 2; 9, 10; 17, 18; 25, 26

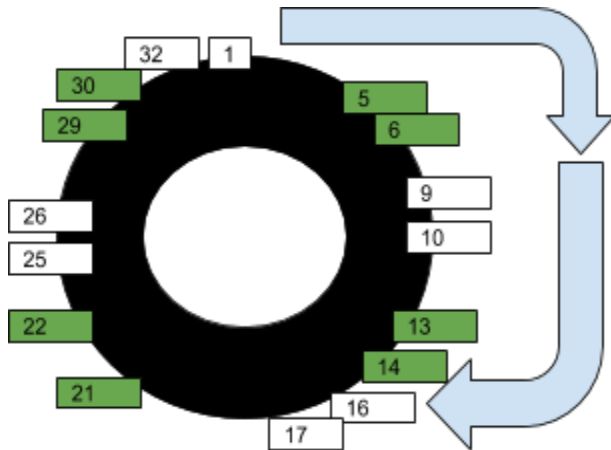
- b. Put green thread into slots: 5, 6; 13, 14; 21, 22; 29, 30
- c. Leave other slots empty



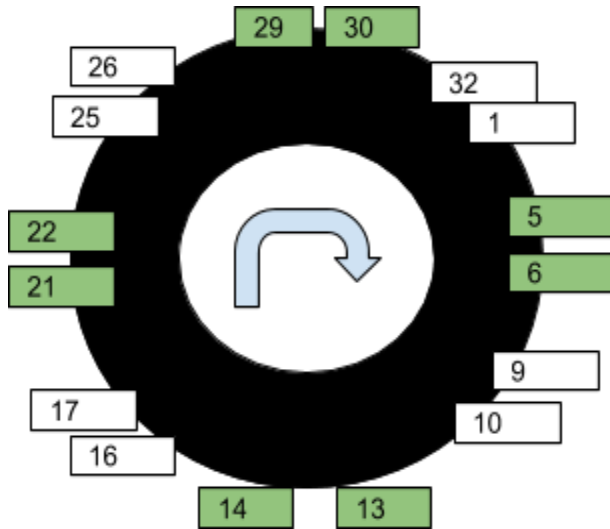
2. Move thread in slot 18 to slot 32 (bottom-left to top-left)



3. Move thread in slot 2 to slot 16 (top-right to bottom-right)



- Turn disk clockwise by one pair of threads, so the pair of threads in front of you is slot 13 and 14 instead of 17 and 18



- Repeat moving the bottom-left thread so it's next to top-left thread, top-right thread so it's next to bottom-right thread, and rotating the disk to the next thread.

Similarities and differences between my project and a period kumihimo project

Most of the differences between my examples and period examples come from the different materials I had available and some ahistorical choices I made when designing patterns that I thought would look nice to my modern eye.

Fibers

I braided with cotton embroidery floss and 10/2 cotton thread instead of silk. While I found a source (KimonoBoy) claiming that cotton production in Japan began in the 1600s, many of my other sources stated that kumihimo predates this by 1000 years, and that silk is the standard fiber for kumihimo. However, cotton is both cheaper to purchase and easier to clean as I carry it around to work on it during my train commute.

Techniques

The number of slots in a foam disk is limiting factor for me (my 64-slot disk is the largest I own). On a marudai, which doesn't have slots, you can work with arbitrarily large sets of threads. However, it doesn't appear that 32-strand round braids were common in period.

In some of my work, I knotted each strand individually at the start of the project instead of folding half as many strands over, as I was having difficulty with my strings tangling before they were wound onto bobbins.

I work on my disk while traveling, marudai aren't as portable and can't be carried onto a train. However, the structure of the resulting braid is the same.

Colors and patterns

The color and pattern choices I made in two of my examples were not the choices period makers would use.

The Philadelphia pride flag colors date from 2017, according to Philly Mag, and the modern, Western concept of LGBTQ+ activism would not have been recognizable in early Japan.

I designed a 32-strand pattern (based on my arms) myself. I don't know if a period artisan would do that, or just pair colors into patterns from pattern books or other sources.

The pattern I designed myself was asymmetrical in coloration and used odd numbers of each color. If I was using traditionally folded over strands this wouldn't be possible (e.g. I had 5 strands of one color and 7 of another color in the design), and I have not yet found any period examples of patterns like this.

Conclusion

The kumihimo I have on display is not that similar in appearance to the kumihimo that would have been created in period due to the color choices I made, though it's moderately similar in construction technique to some simple styles of kongo gumi. I'm excited to learn more about period kumihimo, as I was not able to find primary sources on it online.

Sources

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<http://domyo.co.jp/en/history/>

“How to do Karakumi: Early Period Japanese Flat Braids” by Fujinami no Kaede. Retrieved July 2019.

Arts & Sciences report by another SCAdian on a related type of kumihimo, done on a different type of loom than mine. Secondary source, sources cited.

https://sayyidajahanara.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/how-to-do-karakumi2_rdv.pdf

“Japanese Kumihimo, the Art of Silk Braiding” Juliana L. Raskin-Schmitz. Retrieved July 2019.

German site with summary of kumihimo history. A secondary source which cites primary sources in pictures.

<http://www.englisch.kumihimo.de/html/history.html>

“Kongoh-gumi (Friendship Bracelets)”. Craft Design Online. Retrieved July 2019.

Pattern maker for round kumihimo on a disk or marudai.

<https://craftdesignonline.com/kumihimo/kongoh-gumi-friendship-bracelets/>

“Philly’s Pride Flag to Get Two New Stripes: Black and Brown”. Retrieved July 2019.

2017 article describing the Pride flag which is the inspiration for one of my kumihimo braids.

<https://www.phillymag.com/news/2017/06/08/philly-pride-flag-black-brown/>

“Pride Cord.” Alienor Salton. June 2018. Retrieved July 2019.

Fingerloop example by a SCAdian of a Philadelphia pride cord. I was taught how to make this cord in fingerloop at the East Kingdom Queer History Schola in March 2019, and it inspired me to get started with kumihimo.

<http://arts.piglet.org/index.php/2018/06/07/pride-cord/>

“Shelly’s Kumihimo Links.” Retrieved July 2019.

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“Short History of Japanese Textiles.” Kimonoboy. Retrieved July 2019.

Online store for Japanese folk textiles, history page on use of cotton. Secondary source, doesn't cite sources.

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“Taito City Culture Guide Book.” Retrieved July 2019.

An English-language Japanese city guide for the city Taito, which contains the Domyo kumihimo factory and store; contains some history on kumihimo. Does not cite sources on history.

http://www.taito-culture.jp/craft/kumihimo/english/page_01.html

“みひもの歴史” / “History of Kumi String.” Retrieved July 2009. Japanese-language informational site for a kumihimo museum, contains a timeline of kumihimo history in Japanese eras.

Translated with Google Translate. Secondary source at best, doesn't cite sources, but I trust it more because it's a museum.

<http://www.kumihimo.or.jp/igakumihimo/kumihimorekishi/index.html> via

<https://translate.google.com/translate?sl=auto&tl=en&u=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.kumihimo.or.jp%2Findex.html>