

How to do *Karakumi*: Early Period Japanese Flat Braids

By Fujinami no Kaede

From a re-enactors point of view, there is frustratingly little information on period Japanese braiding techniques. We know that the braids existed and that they were elaborate and sophisticated. In addition to references in art, such as paintings and pottery (nic Dhuinnshleibhe, 2009), and in the diaries (such as Sei, 1991), some extant braids have survived to today (Owen, 1995; Owen, 2004; Makkiko, 2004).

Unfortunately, we know little about how these braids were actually made. We know that a number of different *dai* were used over the course of the SCA period, with the *karakumidai* being the oldest, dating back to Heian Japan (Zayd al-Andalusiyyah, 2010). Braiding was a closely guarded secret passed down from master to apprentice, and was not written down (Coyle, 2006). We have few depictions of any kind of braiding techniques, especially in early period, though we know the braids exist from the few remnants that have managed to survive (Owen, 1995; Owen, 2004; Makkiko, 2004). The extant braids are limited due to the fragility of the fibers and it makes sense that only the most protected of the braids have survived. Scholars have attempted to figure out how these braids were built by closely examining these fragments and trying to reverse engineer them (e.g. Kinoshita, 2002).

It was not easy figuring out how to braid using the *karakumidai*. There are places online where you can purchase a *karakumidai* or the directions to make one, but there is very little information even now on what to do with one once you have it. I have many books on *kumihimo*; not a one discusses making *karakumi*. I bought my *karakumidai* last Pennsic from a merchant who showed me the basics on how to use it. From there, I was pretty much on my own to figure out how to make it work and how to

create different patterns. At this point, I am still experimenting with combinations to see what I can do with this technique.

The basic concept of *karakumi* is that you work in pairs. If you have symmetrical pattern, then, you will have 2 strands of one color on the left side of the *karakumidai* and 2 strands in the mirror image position on the right. The left-most strand of any given pair is the strand that is coming from the bottom of braid; the right-most strand of the pair is the one on top. Pairs are then picked up and braided through the other pairs in one of two ways. You can move it invisibly by picking up the left member of each pair you are passing it through, then “twisting” or flipping the stationary pair so that the left bobbin is once again the one on the bottom, or you can make it the visible one by lifting the left bobbin of the moving pair, passing the non moving pair through it, and then flipping the moving pair (see figure 6).

While *karakumi*, like all other forms of *kumihimo*, is classified as a braiding technique, it has almost as much in common with weaving as it does with braiding (see Goslee, 2004 for a discussion on tablet weaving techniques for example). At any given time, you have pairs that are acting like the weft in tablet weaving or inkle loom, while the other pair passing between the first pair acts as the warp. Each time you “flip” or switch places of the bobbins in the pair, it is like turning a card in tablet weaving—the warp that was on the bottom is now on the top and vice versa. The difference between *karakumi* and weaving, and what makes it braiding instead, is that every strand alternates between being the warp and the weft. For example, when working the bottom of the diamond, I pass each moving pair through the pairs on the other side invisibly (so taking a pair from the left hand side and passing it through the pairs on the right, and vice

versa); once I have moved every pair, I start with the first pair I moved and it comes back, this time weaving it visibly over the other colors. The pair started as warp; now it is acting as the weft. The end result is a braid that looks the same on both the front and the back.

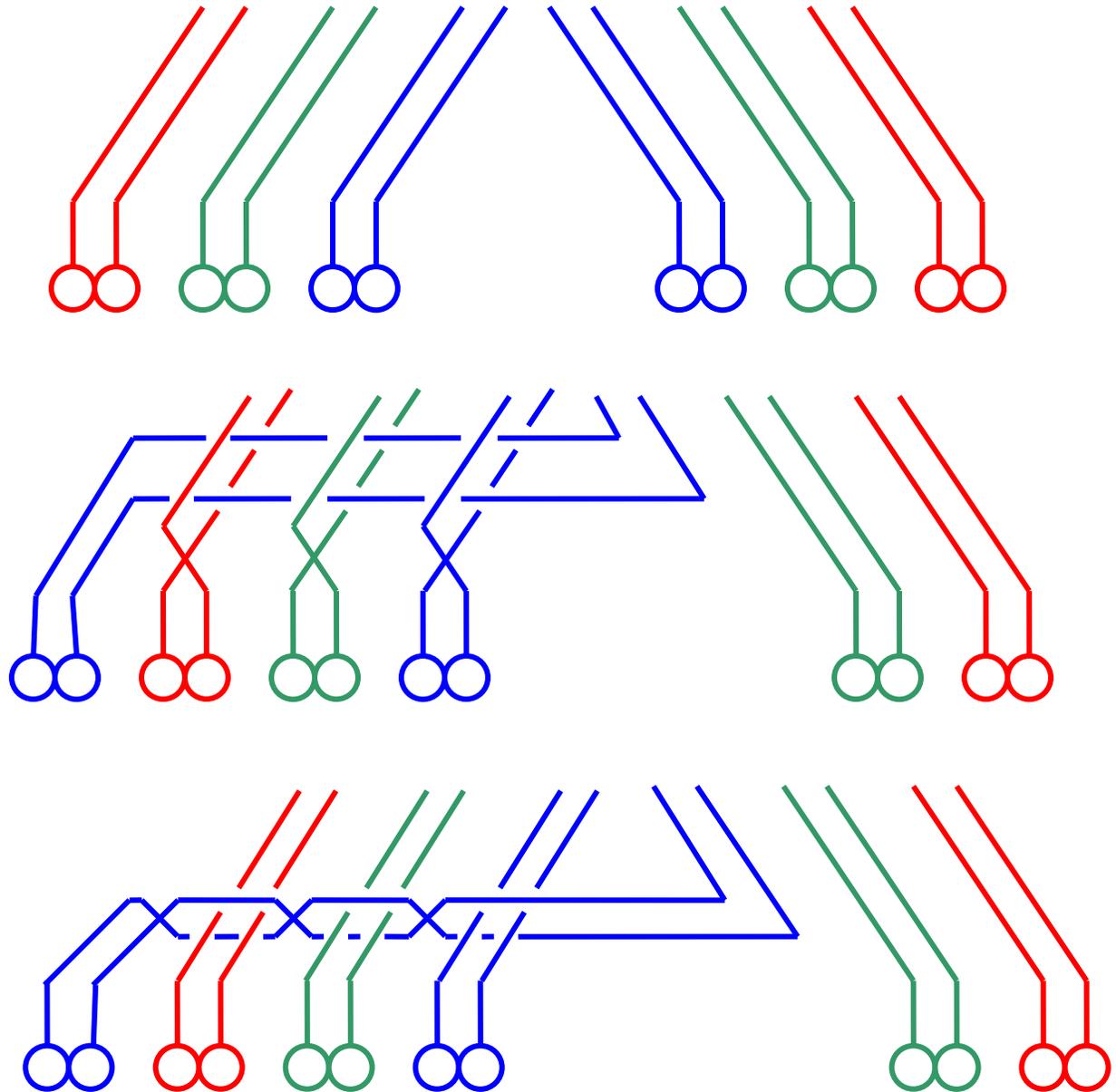


Figure 6: The top drawing shows the starting position of the pairs of strands. The second drawing shows the blue pair on the right passing toward the left invisibly. The third drawing shows the same pair passing to the left visibly.

It is pretty obvious that anyone working on *karikumi* would need to wrap the strands around bobbins of some kind to make it manageable, especially when making braids that are more than 8 feet long, as some of the ones from period are. I have not, however, seen any kind of documentation on what was used for bobbins with the *karakumidai* in period.

Later period braids made on other *dai* were made using *tama*, a wooden bobbin with its center drilled out and filled with a weight, like lead (the modern version are made from molded plastic filled with lead). On a *marudai*, the bobbins are weighted and then a counter weight is placed on the braid section just below the opening, which creates the tension for working the braid. The other *dai* similarly used the weight of the *tama* to create an even tension.

On the *karakumidai*, however, this is not how tension is created. Instead, you pass the strands between the pairs on the other side and use a combination of pulling on the end and pushing it into place with your fingers (or fingernails) to get it to lie properly in place. My best educated guess is that the early period *karakumidai* bobbins were similar to the *hira-dama*, the bobbins used traditionally with the *karakumidai* and still often used today. *Hira-dama* are very light weight cards of wood wrapped in paper. I used plastic bobbins for ease and convenience, however, since I travel a lot with the *karakumidai* to SCA events, including camping events such as Pennsic, and the bobbins keep the threads contained and protected.

One trick I learned early on is that I can slide old hair bands over the pegs to lock my bobbins down when I am storing or moving my *karakumidai*. One of the things that frustrated me about the *marudai* at events is that every time I moved it, the *tama* would slide around and I would have to untangle them and figure out which ones went where. With the hair bands on the pegs of the *karakumidai*, my bobbins do not move, even when I take it to events. This probably was not a concern for braiders in period Japan, but it certainly made my life easier as a SCAdian.

Another trick I found was marking the middle peg in the front, which my husband did for me shortly after I started the second braid. I have never seen another *karakumidai* with that marking, but with it marked it saves me a lot of time because I do not have to count over when I bring my threads down to the front, nor do I have to worry about getting the sides confused. It really sped things up a lot for me.

Most *kumimo* ends are finished one of two ways. The most common is that it ends in a tassel, made by wrapping a strand of floss around the loose threads at the base of the braid. Some of the tassels are short; some are longer. I have seen a few braids that just left the loose threads as a kind of fringe, especially on the wider belts, though I do not know the threads are secured to keep them from unraveling; perhaps they are stitched down. It is also fairly common for one end to have a loop, especially on short, narrow braids. To create the loop, you put bobbins on both ends of the strand to be braided. Once all the bobbins are wound, gather them together and find the center of the strands. You then wrap the middle, creating a loop. The loops are particularly common with braids used to fasten clothing (the looped ends are sewn onto the garment while the tasseled ends are used to tie) or for hanging up things like pendants (Owen, 2004).

Recently, I have seen a few braids, particularly ones that it looks like they used twisted silk rather than stranded silk, where the ends are twisted together and sometimes even tied into Chinese knots (see Figure 3 as an example).



Figure 7 Double *Karakumi* by Kazuko Kinoshita (Kinoshita, 2008)

From looking at pictures online of people making *karakumi* (such as figure 8), the *hishi* diamonds are rarely larger than the ones in my braid but there are multiple sets of them (for an example of modern *karakumi* in a Heian design, see figure 7). Each diamond is worked individually, and the strands for the diamonds not currently getting worked on are tied together in groups and set out of the way, often at the top of the *karakumidai* where the pegs are spaced farther apart. In this regards, working *karakumi* is a little like bobbin lace, in that while the project may use a great many strands, you are only working only a limited number of bobbins at any given time. I have not tried this

yet and I do not know yet how the diamonds interconnect with each other. So far I have experimented only with the very basic technique.



Figure 8: Double *hishi* pattern in progress (Kinoshita, 2008)

I have not yet seen evidence that they did this in period, but it should be possible to vary the design by alternating passing a pair invisibly and visibly—for example, if I am carrying a white pair toward the left mostly invisibly (passing between the pairs to the left) but for two pairs switched and passed it visibly, it would create a dash of white. However, the traditional patterns that I have seen so far have not done this.

Another challenge for recreating period *karakumi* patterns, besides the fact that we do not have access to very many of them, is that most of the patterns I have seen are translated for the *marudai*. Figure 4 shows a *Hirao* pattern, used in Heian era for making

long, wide sashes, done on the *marudai*. The circles on each braid indicate how to set it up for that pattern. After looking at the braids and mentally figuring out which pairs went where, working from the center of the diamond out, I noticed a pattern that allows a short cut. If you eliminate one side of the circle, assume each remaining dot represents a pair, and inverse them so that the outside colors are in the middle and the middle ones are on the outside, it shows how they are lined up on the *karakumidai*, (see Figure 9).

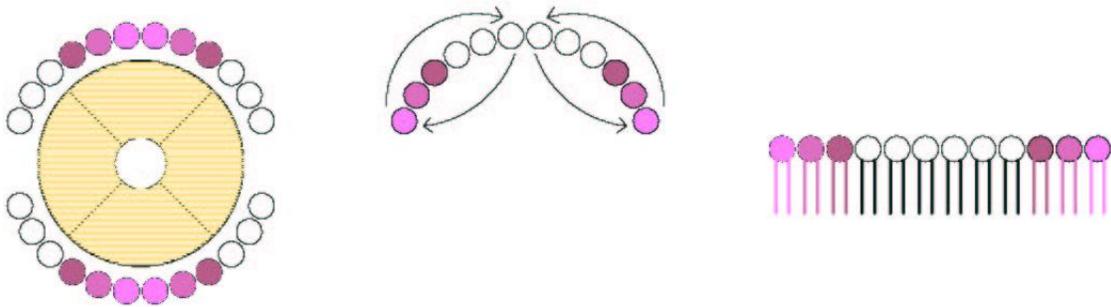


Figure 9: Translating patterns for the *marudai* to the *karakumidai*

As you can see from my braids, the *marudai* patterns are only 24 strands, and my resulting braid is only about a half inch wide, not the 4 to 10 inches wide belts described in the literature. Based on descriptions I have read and examples of both recreated period braids and modern variations, in order to make the wide belts, you have repeating sets of diamonds rather than larger diamonds, sometimes with the center plain or graduated dyed center with *hishi* borders. I have figured out how to translate these patterns back into patterns for the *karakumidai*, but I have not yet made a sash that is 4 to 10 inches wide. My ½ inch braids, however, would be suitable for many other purposes, such as decoration for a *mo*, trim for cushions and mats, or as handles.

Appendix: Glossary

Dai: “a stand,” or braiding loom.

hira-dama: light weight flat bobbins, traditionally wrapped with paper used with the *karakumidai*.

Hirao: Long, wide braided sashes worn by high ranking men. The *Hirao* for the highest court ranks were 6-10 inches wide and 8 feet long and decorated with *hishi* patterns.

Karakumi: “Chinese braid,” a type of flat braid, typically in a distinctive diamond pattern, that is worked on the *karakumidai*.

Karakumidai: a square braiding loom with wooden pegs; creates flat braids

Kumihimo: “braided cord” or, literally, “gathered threads;” refers to a wide range of Japanese braiding techniques.

Marudai: “round stand,” a round braiding stand, sometimes with one end square for easier flat braids, with a hole in the center that the braid goes down; creates all shapes of braids, and including solid and hollow, square, oval and flat braids.

Tama: The weighted spools or bobbins used with most *dai*

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