

Liza Carihfield Dalby, *Kimono: Fashioning Culture*

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"No item in the storehouse of material culture maintains as strong a hold on the Japanese heart, mind, and purse as kimono" (p. 3).

Originally transplanted from China, the kimono has evolved over the centuries adapting perfectly to the Japanese environment. It has become a symbol of the unique Japanese aesthetics, of the very essence of Japaneseness. However, the word *kimono* means literally "things to wear" and initially was used as a generic term for clothing. It was only after Western culture was introduced to Japan (after 1868), that the word came to designate traditional Japanese costume as opposed to the new Western clothes. Interestingly written, highly informative and lavishly illustrated, Liza Dalby's book *Kimono: Fashioning Culture* makes a notable contribution to the study of the national garment of Japan. It is a substantial source of information on the historical evolution of the kimono and, furthermore, provides valuable insights about its uses, and its social, gender, and aesthetic meanings.

Author Liza Dalby holds a Ph.D. in anthropology from Stanford University and in the 1970s spent some time as a novice geisha in Kyoto, as part of her dissertation research on the place of geisha in modern Japan. Based on this unique experience¹ Dalby wrote her first book, *Geisha* (1983), and became interested in how the modern kimono assumed its present form, which is the main focus of her second book, *Kimono: Fashioning Culture* (1993).

This volume is a result of extensive research but the primary objective of the author is not to provide us with a history of kimono or with a catalogue of the Japanese clothing tradition. Dalby seeks to explore in a well-systematized collection of chapters the cultural aspects of kimono that have intrigued her both personally and anthropologically. She is particularly interested in reconstructing the social and aesthetic messages attached to the clothes and in the way in which clothing offers an excellent window to view various aspects of culture and society. The book is very well structured both textually and visually. It is divided into three main parts: "Clothing and

Culture," "Kimono in the Modern World," and "Kimono Contexts." Every part contains three chapters (nine altogether) that in turn comprise a number of short essays, each with a distinctive title.

The introductory chapter to the first part, "Kimono Theme and Variations," reveals the idea and structure of the book as well as the author's personal and professional involvement with the kimono. Dalby wore it intensively during a period of her life, moreover, in the environment of geisha — professional kimono wearers in contemporary Japan — and thus developed an understanding of the required body language that must be evolved to wear it gracefully. The author has a great personal feel for her subject and, simultaneously, as a non-Japanese and an anthropologist, Dalby feels free to criticize the kimono's bourgeois and nationalistic tendencies. She defines clothing as a cultural system that, like language, conveys information, carries messages and reacts to changing social conditions by incorporating new elements and ignoring old. On the one hand, the book explores the way in which kimono are coded for messages regarding age, gender, season, formality, and occasion, social status, wealth, and taste. On the other hand, it discusses how with the increasing dominance of Western clothing the Japaneseness of kimono became more concentrated and argues that the assimilation of the kimono as the national costume is a very significant aspect of the process of defining Japaneseness that continues today. Dalby demonstrates how in the course of modernization particular modes of Japanese dress were elaborated and others ignored in a systematic fashion that illustrates political, social, and aesthetic developments in contemporary Japan.

In the second chapter, "The Natural History of Kimono," the author claims that the biological metaphor of phylogeny is particularly appropriate for discussing the history of the kimono because the shape of the Japanese modern national costume clearly originates in seventh century Chinese court robes, and although the kimono has evolved and adapted throughout the eras, it has maintained a strong resemblance to its earliest progenitor, in contrast to Western clothing, for example. Dalby points out four common "kimonoid" elements that have remained constant characteristics of Japanese dress throughout the centuries: square

sleeves, geometric construction sewn with minimal cutting; an open, overlapping front; and an attached neckband sewn around the front opening.

The third chapter, "The Kimono Discovers Itself," examines the kimono's first confrontation with Western clothes after 1868 and explores how Japanese native clothing created its own ethnicity and how, once found, a sense of Japaneseness gradually became attached only to the kimono. Outlined are the tensions between East and West, old and new, as reflected in the debate on Japanese dress and how in the rise of chauvinism at the end of the nineteenth century women were "rewrapped" in kimono but Western suits became standard working attire for men. The period between the late 1890s up to 1912 was characterized by two clothing distinctions — the divergence of clothing of the workplace (Western) from that of the home (Japanese) for urban men and the concomitant division of Western clothing for men and native dress for women. However, the kimono of this era was marked by a great proliferation of types, patterns, and colours, the last explosion of diversity before being "frozen" into a "traditional" statement.

The second part of the book, "Kimono in the Modern World," is intended both to trace a history and to analyse kimono as a system of meanings. The first chapter, "Women Who Cross Their Legs — Kimono in Modern Japan," explores the question of how the modern kimono was distanced from the pragmatic concerns of everyday life by conceding to the dominance of Western clothing and clinging to the realm of high ceremony and formal sociability. Thus, the kimono has stopped being merely "something to wear" and has turned into a "statement," an expression of mainstream Japanese culture.

The roots of the official kimono can be traced back to the early modern high-city mode of bourgeois propriety, but its full manifestation is largely a post-Second World War phenomenon. The kimono's cultural mission is to reflect the traditional notion of femininity. It has embodied the characteristics deemed most desirable in a Japanese woman — sweetness, chastity, compliance, and conventionality. Dalby claims that wearing kimono today combines Japanese pride, traditional sensibility, cultural connectedness, and conspicuous consumption. In her view it is nearly impossible to challenge the established notion of the kimono for it is intolerant of variation and experiment. This chapter discusses as well functionalist and feminist critiques of the kimono as impractical and oppressive to women and the female body, glorifying a feudal ideal of woman as powerless and immobile. However, Dalby argues that modern

kimono is not the prototypical one throughout history and that when it was not a "traditional statement" but simply clothing, more relaxed versions were worn for everyday activities. The next chapter, "The Other Kimono," discusses this neglected side of native dress, the numerous regional types of work clothing² worn until about the middle of the twentieth century.

The last chapter of the second part, "The Structure of Kimono," explores the modern kimono as a complex system of social meanings organized around the distinctions of the categories: life/death, gender, formality of occasion, season, age, taste or class. The kimono conveys its messages through a vocabulary of colour, fabric, pattern, and form. For example, the younger the wearer, the brighter is the kimono and the higher the hem pattern reaches towards the waist, and so on. Some kimono elements are more saturated with meaning than others: sleeves, for instance, distinguish gender and age, and proclaim formality.

The third part of the book, "Kimono Contexts," brings us back to the study of the past modes of kimono and examines two historical eras that have exerted a formidable influence on its evolution. These are the Heian period³ and the early part of the Tokugawa period.⁴ The chapter entitled "The Cultured Nature of Heian Colors" discusses the emergence of an authentic Japanese sensibility⁵ after an epoch of extensive borrowing from China (sixth to eighth centuries), a sensibility which found expression in literature, painting, and in clothing. The first Japanese version of the modern kimono appeared in this era in the form of a plain white undergarment hidden beneath the multiple layers of coloured silk robes worn by ladies of the court. The type of silk and number of layers were decided by season, and the colours and weaves were assigned by rank. Dalby has included in her book the first translation in English of a twelfth century manuscript entitled "Colors for a Court Lady's Dress" written by the courtier Minamoto Masasuke as part of his "Masasuke's Notes on Court Costume." This document describes the appropriate colour combinations occurring over a yearly cycle of robes and presents an example of how nature was fashioned into culture during Heian.

The next chapter, *Moronobu's Fashion Magazine*, translates a kimono pattern book of the seventeenth century — the other important period for the development of modern kimono, when the garment called *kosode* (small sleeves) crept out from under all the layers of Heian costume to become standard clothing for men and women of every social stratum and a forerunner of the modern kimono. On its own

term, kosode represented the kimono's golden age of exuberant design and dramatic display. Numerous fashion "magazines" such as Hishikawa Moronobu's⁶ *Kosode Full-Length Mirror* were created for and aimed at townspeople — the new class of commoner that now was gaining wealth, leisure, and culture to demand its own arts and fashions.

The final chapter of Dalby's volume, "Geisha and Kimono," connects the past and the present, for both geisha and kimono can be seen as projections in the modern world of the Japanese past. Geisha and kimono share as well a strikingly similar fate. Both have experimented by incorporating aspects of western style early on, and both have

rejected the novelty of the foreign in favour of tradition. Both are not part of everyday life but are considered symbols of the Japanese nation. The author concludes that it is no accident that geisha dress professionally in kimono because their history, fate, and current status have much in common. This last chapter establishes as well an intertextual relation with Dalby's first book, *Geisha*, that has provoked her interest and research in the making of the modern kimono.

Kimono: Fashioning Culture is as rich in meanings as its topic, it is well structured and elegantly constructed as kimono itself, both scholarly and entertaining, and very feminine...

NOTES

1. Liza Dalby was the first and, probably, only Western woman to be accepted as a member of a geisha community.
2. Mainly for women and in a two-piece style, in contrast to kimono.
3. Ninth through late twelfth centuries.
4. Seventeenth century. The Tokugawa period itself is from 1603 to 1867.
5. By the ninth century.
6. Moronobu is considered the consolidator of the Japanese artistic tradition of ukiyo-e, woodblock prints and paintings depicting the fashionable ephemera of contemporary life.