

“Kute-Uchi” Japanese Hand-loop Braiding

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Braiding in Japan can be documented back to the Jomon Period (14,000 to 1,000 BCE) which is so named because of the “cord marked” (jo mon) pottery that has been dated to this period. We have known about the cord marked pottery for more than a hundred years, but until recently very little was known about how the braids were made that were pressed into the wet clay to create the marks.

The foam disks and plates used for much kumihimo today were not invented until the late twentieth century. They were designed by Makiko Tada, a mechanical engineer and braider who desired more affordable braiding equipment. Braids created on the disk are almost identical to braids created traditionally on the round “marudai” braiding stand, but even the marudai only dates back to the early 17th century’s Edo Period. Other braiding stands that existed in the medieval period, such as the Takadai and Karakumidai do not produce braids that match the structure of many braids that have survived from that time.

Historical scrolls such as the “Nanajuichiban Shokunin Uta-awase” from the earlier Muromachi Period (1336 to 1573) show a loop-manipulation style of braiding, but the actual techniques used were not known until fairly recently. Masako Kinoshita began researching loop braiding around the world, and rediscovered the Japanese techniques. They had survived as a folk tradition handed down within families. Braids created using the methods she rediscovered matched historical braids exactly. As she published her research, more people came forward to pass on the skills they had learned from their grandmothers.

I learned the basics of Kute-uchi hand-loop braiding from Makiko Tada in her studio in Japan. Hand loop braiding requires no equipment to get started, and it is simple and straightforward. It is always obvious which strand is to be moved next, and to where it will be moved. There are only four moves needed for most braids. There is some limitation in that braids must be short enough to be tightened easily, but this can be mitigated by having a partner or “ashiuchi-dai” beater stand.

Resources for further study:

Carey, Jacqui; Samurai Undressed; Torquay, England; The Devonshire Press Limited, 1995

Kinoshita, Masako; Loop-Manipulation Braiding Research & Information Center;
<http://www.lmbric.net/>

Owen, Rodrick; Braids; 250 Patterns from Japan, Peru & Beyond; Berkeley, California;
Lacis/Unicon Publications, 2004 (1995)

Tada, Makiko and Sakai, Aiko; Kumihimo; The Essence of Japanese Braiding; Berkeley, California;
Lacis Publications, 2004

Kumihimo Examples



Basic Instructions

Setting Up

Measure out the required number of identical lengths of yarn or cord. Double the lengths over to form loops. Tie or otherwise bind the loose ends of the loops together. Suspend the bound end from a post or peg. Line up all the loops on one hand, using the other hand to reposition loops as needed. Move the appropriate number of loops to the other hand. Hold loops in place using your index fingers.



Movement Basics

- Moves always relocate the outermost loop from one hand to the innermost position of the other.
- Most braids are “left to right, right to left” braids.
- There are four basic moves, which are combinations of inside, outside, straight, and twist.
- You can move the starting hand or the destination hand during a move, it makes no difference.
- Use both index fingers to clamp the loops in place against the other fingers during movements and tightening.
- Follow every move with a tightening motion.
- Relax, there is no tension between the braid and the suspension point.

Outside Moves

Outside Straight

Use the index finger of the starting hand to raise the top part of the outermost loop above the other loops on that hand. Holding the hands straight, place the working loop at the innermost position of the destination hand. Transfer the working loop to the destination hand, around the outside of the loops on the starting hand. Make sure the loops have not moved out of position, then hold them in place with your index fingers. Tighten the braid by firmly separating your hands.



Outside Twist

Use the index finger of the starting hand to raise the top part of the outermost loop above the other loops on that hand. Twist one hand so that the outer edge is facing the destination hand. Transfer the working loop to the innermost position of the destination hand, around the outside of the loops on the starting hand. Make sure the loops have not moved out of position, then hold them in place with your index fingers. Tighten the braid by firmly separating your hands.



Inside Moves

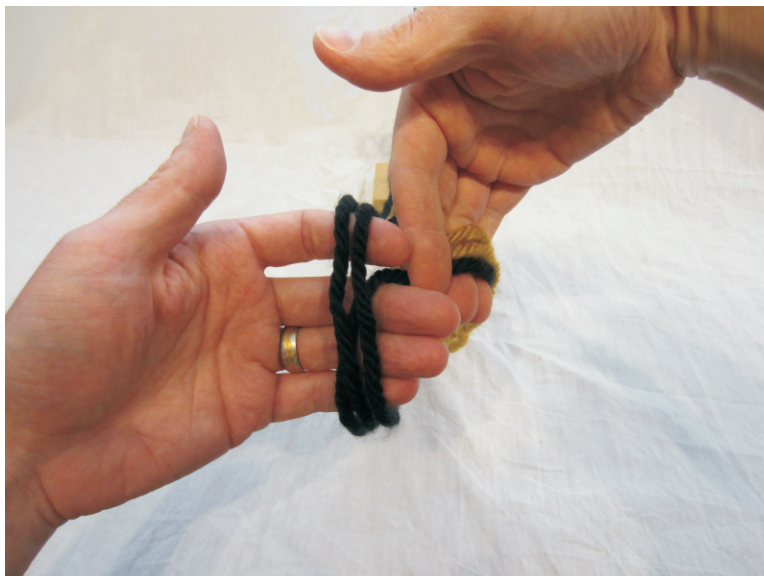
Inside Straight

Use the index finger of the starting hand to lower the top part of the outermost loop below the tops of the other loops on that hand. Holding the hands straight, transfer the working loop to the destination hand, through the inside of the loops on the starting hand, to the innermost position of the destination hand. Make sure the loops have not moved out of position, then hold them in place with your index fingers. Tighten the braid by firmly separating your hands.



Inside Twist

Use the index finger of the starting hand to lower the top part of the outermost loop below the tops of the other loops on that hand. With the destination hand, reach out through the inside of the loops on the starting hand and in through the working loop to transfer it to the innermost position of the destination hand, through the inside of the loops on the starting hand. Make sure the loops have not moved out of position, then hold them in place with your index fingers. Tighten the braid.



Three Basic 5-loop Braids

Itsutsu-gumi

Braid shape: Two flat braids

Set up: 5 loops, 3 left and 2 right

Movements:

1. L -> R Outside Straight
2. R -> L Outside Straight



Kaku-gumi

Braid shape: Square braid

Set up: 5 loops, 3 left and 2 right

Movements:

1. L -> R Outside Twist
2. R -> L Outside Twist



Shigeuchi-gumi

Braid shape: Flat braid

Set up: 5 loops, 3 left and 2 right

Movements:

1. L -> R Outside Straight
2. R -> L Outside Twist

