

Suikan, and So Can You!

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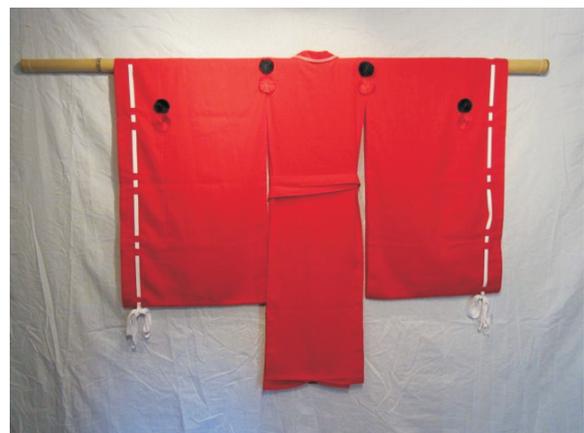
The Suikan was everyday wear for men and boys of higher class warrior families. It is an unlined upper-body overgarment. It is worn over kosode, tied shut at the neck with a cord, and held shut at the waist with an "obi" belt or by tucking it into the "himo" ties of the pants. Several other garments are similar to the suikan, like the lined "kariginu" formal over-robe and the "hitatare" semi-formal jacket, so learning to make and wear the suikan is a good skills-builder.

Most properly, the suikan is worn as part of a "suikan sugata". That outfit consists of white kosode robe, one or more additional kosode robes as desired, suikan over-robe, long-legged "sashinuki" pants, and a "tate eboshi" or "kanmuri" hat. Less formally, you could wear it over a single white kosode and "hakama" pants with a soft eboshi hat. Never wear a suikan in public without a kosode, pants of some kind, and a hat. When not engaged in formal activity, the neck can be left open and the sleeves pulled back for comfort.

Descended from a hunting robe, earlier period suikan display cords at the sleeve ends that could be used to draw up the sleeve openings, but these are seldom used. The draw cords pass through slits in the fabric or through "belt loop"-style holders. In later period, the cords devolved to decorative fringes at the bottoms corner of the sleeve.

The suikan is embellished at several points with "kikutoji" (chrysanthemum flower) decorations. These are said to reinforce the seams where they are attached

I like the suikan because it is easy to wear over an informal outfit to quickly turn that outfit into a semi-formal outfit for visiting or court. It is open at the sides, which allows for ventilation and comfort. Except for the neck opening, it is one-size fits all, so it is easy to lend to others.



Suikan Examples



<http://www.iz2.or.jp/english/fukusyoku/busou/14.htm>



Heiji Monogatari (13th Century)

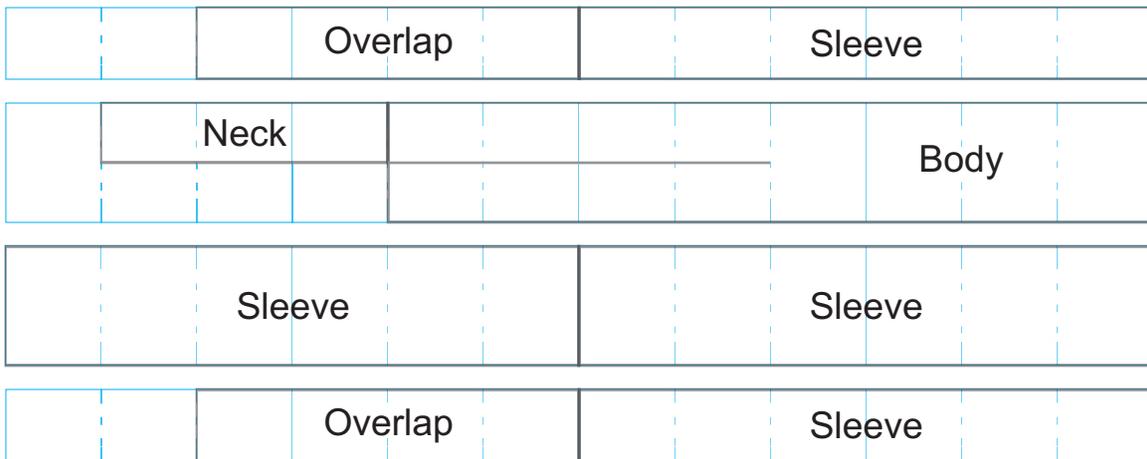


Crown Prince Isenwulf, Pennsic 2011

Suikan Cutting Pattern

Buy four yards of fabric. If you can get 60"-wide fabric, and you are willing to have slightly less luxurious sleeves, making the sleeve panels 60" long instead of 72" means you can get away with only three yards of fabric. I recommend getting the heaviest-weight linen you can, in a bright solid color. Begin by cutting the fabric into panels to simulate the 14-16 inch width of period Japanese looms. Several half-panels are needed, and I tend to put them at the edges to take advantage of modern selvages. If your fabric's width is not an even multiple like 45" or 60", you can make the panels wider to use up the extra or just cut it off and use it for something else. Serge or zig-zag the cut edges of the panels to create false selvages and prevent fraying. Once the panels are cut, cut the necessary pieces from the panels as shown below.

45" Fabric - 4 yards

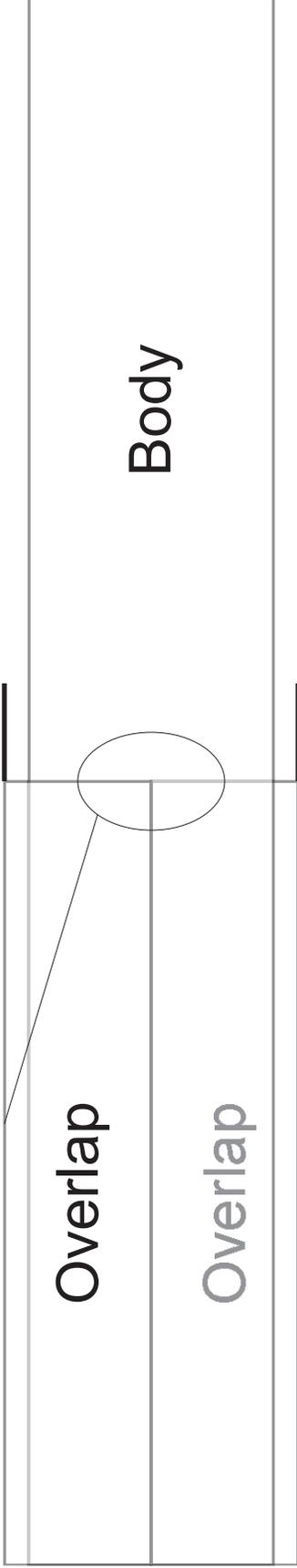
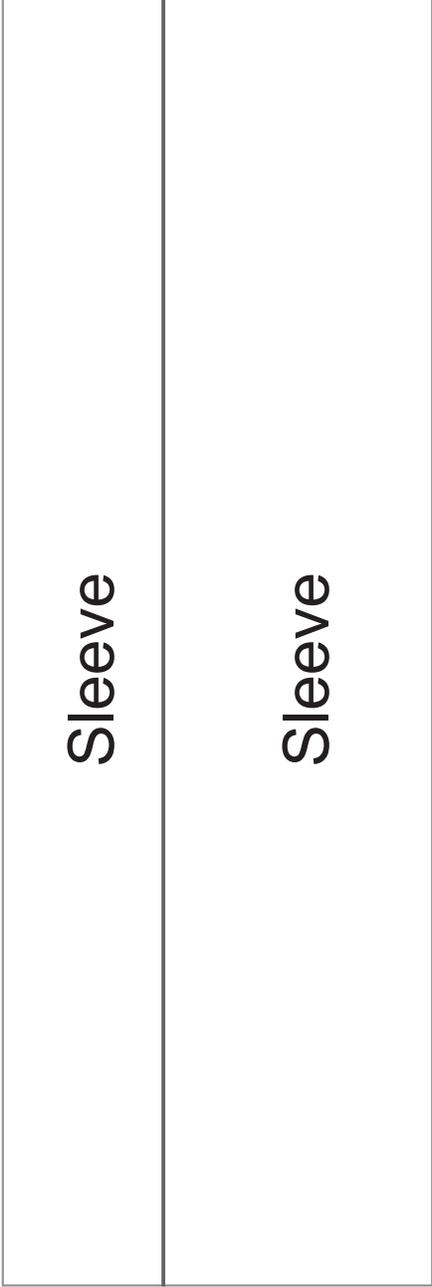


60" Fabric - 3 yards plus 1 foot



Sewing the Suikan

- Attach thinner sleeve pieces to wider sleeve pieces. This is a simple running stitch seam. Keep the selvedge out at the edge.
- Sew bottom seam of sleeves. This can be a simple seam, but it is best as a French seam to hide any serging and keep the ends from fraying.
- Hem all the sleeve openings. A narrow hem is sufficient. If the selvedge is attractive enough, you might be able to skip hemming the outer edge of the sleeves.
- Now is the best time to add buttonholes or loops to the sleeve ends, before you're wrestling with the whole garment.
- Cut along the center line of the body panel from one end to the very center of the piece. Serge or zig-zag this new cut edge to prevent fraying.
- Attach the overlap pieces to the cut openings of the body. These are simple running stitch seams. Keep the selvedges out as before.
- Fold under the outer edge of the left-hand overlap at an angle and sew in place. The angle should start at the neck just a few inches right of center, and go down to just below the waistline of the wearer.
- Lay out the body panels flat, with the overlaps layered correctly, and mark out (don't cut yet) the neck hole. I usually do an ellipse that is wider side-to-side than front-to-back in a ratio of about 3 to 2. Size this to fit the wearer. I also place this farther forward than backward, with about one third back of the center line. the exact size and placement will need to fit the intended wearer if possible.
- Mark another ellipse one half inch or so inside the first ellipse all the way around. This is your cutting line. Cut out this ellipse through all layers and discard the scrap before you are tempted to do something with it.
- Fold the neck piece in half along the long axis and iron. Fold the two edges into the center crease and iron again. Unfold the neck piece, fold in a half inch of fabric at one of the ends, refold the neck piece, and iron the whole thing again.
- Unfold the long folds of the neck piece and place the "third crease" on the neck hole outline, right sides together. Starting with the folded end at the folded edge of the overlap, begin pinning the neck piece to the body. Keep the crease on the outline as much as possible. use as many pins as you need.
- Sew along the crease to bind the neck piece to the neck hole outline. Leave excess neck piece to hang down later.
- Clip the seam allowance of the neck hole, all the way around, approximately every inch. Cut to within about 1/8 inch of the neck seam.
- Fold the neck piece over the seam allowance and inside the neck opening. Pin it in place all the way around, then straighten out the neck piece and top-stitch the neck to bind the neck hole seam allowance inside the neck piece.
- Hem the long edges of the body, and possibly the edges of the overlaps if the selvedge is not attractive.
- Hem the bottom edges of the body.
- Attach the sleeves to the body panels, starting at the center fold at that top and extending down the back only six inches or so. I recommend sewing this by hand with heavy-duty thread.
- Thread braid or ribbon through the sleeve ends, and tie at the bottom in a decorative knot.
- Sew kikutoji at relevant points.
- Tack stitch a longer decorative cord around the neck, leaving a loop at the right side of the neck and tying a large button knot at the other end of the collar.



Kikutoji

The kikutoji embellishments are basically just flattened pom-poms. Supposedly, they serve a dual purpose on the garment. In addition to their decorative purpose, they allegedly reinforce the seams at the stress points where they are attached. This makes sense for the kikutoji at the shoulder seams, but there is not really significant stress on the other seams where they are attached. I prefer to think of them entirely as decorative. They enable you to add a personalizing touch in contrasting colors to an otherwise fairly monochrome garment.

The suikan has ten kikutoji mounted in pairs at five locations. Two are located in the center front, on the seams with the overlap and just below the collar. Four are mounted where the sleeves are attached to the body. The last four are also mounted on the back of the garment, where the narrow piece of fabric joins to the wider piece in the sleeve, and few inches down from the top.

To make the kikutoji, I recommend using lace-weight silk yarn. Wrap the yarn around a credit card or other stiff spacer approximately 250 times for lace weight yarn, fewer times for heavier yarn, and more times for lighter yarns or threads. Bind the bundles at the edges of the card where they are drawn tightest, then cut them free in the center of the front and back. Open each bundle out around the long axis, and place them on an ironing board with that axis pointing up. Press down with a hot steam iron for as long as necessary to completely flatten it. Allow the kikutoji to cool, then put a drop or two of fray-check or super glue in the center to keep it together. If the outer edge is ragged or uneven, trim carefully with sharp scissors.

To attach the kikutoji to the suikan, place it where you want it, then use matching thread to stitch through fabric, up through the center hole, then down just outside the binding. Three to five stitches are probably sufficient. Tie the stitches securely inside the garment.

This process will leave you with one extra kikutoji in each color, in case you lose one.

