

Yale Review Oct. 1994

## A Modern Antique

ANNE HOLLANDER

Like many kinds of traditional dress and ancient custom, the Japanese kimono was invented in the nineteenth century. It was early in that epoch, when Western social change became so swift, that Americans and Europeans began to cherish the thought of expressing age-old assumptions in unchanging customs and traditional costumes. The kimono of Japan has since appeared to modern Westerners as a lovely relic of antiquity somewhat like the Beefeater's outfit — seemingly unchanged in form and laden with wonderfully unmodern rules of wear that have been faithfully observed for centuries. And because kimono is now a female form of dress, it has lately come to look like the very image of an equally ancient tradition of female bondage, something that has been effectively imprisoning Japanese women in its tight, silken grip for hundreds of years.

But all of this is an illusion. *Kimono* is a modern word, and kimono a deliberate modern creation. Its present form and rules have a history little more than two generations old. It also has an active imaginative role to play in the lives and minds of modern Japanese; it does not simply represent the dead weight of traditional culture. Kimono is not a moribund phenomenon only waiting to disappear, perhaps to leave a crippling residue of primitive belief to trouble modern lives. It is a vital and present facet of Japanese self-imagery, unlikely to fall into disuse so long as the Japanese wish to keep their strong, distinct cultural identity. In this kimono differs entirely from the European folk dress that has been fixed into a reduced and crude shape chiefly for tourists to admire,

ANNE HOLLANDER : 93

and that has no inner dynamics and no normal role in anybody's life. Nor is it like common and authentic native clothing, the saris or chadors that women wear as everyday modern dress, or the flowing galabiyahs worn by men in modern Egypt and elsewhere. It is perhaps a little more like the present-day Scottish kilt, which has great importance in Scottish self-awareness, and also dates from the nineteenth century even though it invokes remote times.

Liza Dalby's new book shows, however, the ways in which the modern Japanese kimono is truly unique, just as the history of Japan is unlike any other in the world. In the nineteenth century, while other countries under the threat of galloping industrial modernity were hastening to dwell on ancient traditions in artificial ways, the Japanese were only just becoming aware that their own current usages were ancient traditions, and that modernity itself had left them out. For nearly three hundred years, between about 1600 and 1867, the Japanese had been isolated from other cultures and had no way of considering their familiar, complex civilization against any other standard. When modernity impinged upon them at last, they suddenly saw themselves as a small, static group in a vast and advanced new world.

We are used to the idea of great cultures being constantly fed by and also feeding distant civilizations along the great trade routes and pilgrimage roads, as well as through exploration and various forms of aggression across seas and borders throughout history. Textiles and pottery, cookery and music, works of art and elements of language, modes of war, science, love, and politics have all moved around the world, giving people a steady idea of otherness and of their own relation to it. But for a very long and crucial period, Japan was cut off from all such exchanges. Western fashion had also moved around for its inspirations ever since the Middle Ages. Foreign ways of dress, either reported by travelers or seen at home among newcomers, were obliquely reflected in domestic modes; the tenacious idea of the exotic seized on Western fashion very early. Again, Japan learned nothing and taught nothing in that sphere for hundreds of years.

Liza Dalby is eloquent about Japan's sudden discovery that its own normal clothes, comfortably reflecting the complexity of up-to-date

*Kimono: Fashioning Culture*  
by Liza Crithfield Dalby (Yale University Press, 384pp., \$30.00)

Japanese life, were really picturesque native costumes. Her book offers many treasures, close discussions of special aspects of her subject; but the most striking story is about the impact of Western clothing on Japan at the time of the Meiji Restoration. The nineteenth-century moment of shock eventually resulted in the existence of modern kimono, but not before nearly a hundred years of creative management and psychological modification had to be lived through. What to make of modern Western clothes? Dalby says that "Japanese clothing . . . at mid-century, was compelled to acknowledge itself as merely ethnic clothing in a world ruled by pants and jackets." Modern dress was not simply Other, it was The One. The Japanese clearly had to adopt it without delay, in order to be taken seriously as anything but a colorful tribe; and that was easier said than done.

Nothing could be more different, at every level of society, from Japanese habits. Buttons, for example, standard Western fastenings since the thirteenth century, were unknown to Japan. Cut and fit, also dating back to the European Middle Ages, were quite unknown. All Japanese clothing was formless with respect to body forms, taking its shape entirely from the way it was wrapped and tied. Since clothes weren't fitted, there was no strain on seams; garments were tacked-together lengths of cloth taken straight from the bolt, with other straight pieces attached for the neck band and sleeves. For thin figures, extra fabric was absorbed into the seams, never cut off; clothes were easy to make and easy to take apart for cleaning and reassembly. Suddenly the whole idea of tailoring had to be grasped and digested, along with the idea of Western fashion, which constantly modifies all basic decisions of cut and fit, especially in female dress.

Japanese women of elegance, from the empress to the geisha, attempted to import and adopt Parisian bustles and corsets in the 1880s, not fully realizing that all such effects were essentially ephemeral – that shapes of sleeves and bodices changed every year, along with the level and bulk of bustles. Japanese fashion had never been a matter of changing basic shapes, but of shifting surface effects. The physical character of elegant difficulty was entirely different, too. At the time, Western female finery fastened up the back, and was laced or hooked; all Japanese clothes wrapped over in front and were tied on. Tight-fitting leather

shoes were required with European clothes; no Japanese had ever worn any.

A great deal of official Japanese rhetoric was generated about the superiority of Western clothing, especially male clothing, as efficient and functional by comparison to Japanese dress. The sudden need to be efficient required clothing that signified efficiency, even if it was tremendously awkward. Hybrid effects were very common, as Dalby's illustrations piquantly show; a man would wear a Western overcoat over his Japanese clothing; with Western shoes below it, or he might wear only a Western hat and umbrella with it, or Western trousers below and Japanese garments above, or the opposite.

On the international scene, however, it became obvious that the exquisite ceremonial robes in which Japanese diplomats and statesmen had been accustomed to appear on state occasions would look like theatrical costumes among Westerners in formal morning dress; and striped pants and cutaways of perfect cut, fit, and taste had to be adopted forthwith, with no compromises whatsoever. The profession of tailor had to be imported and established in Japan for the first time, since Japanese clothes had been made at home during the whole of Japan's history. Artisanal expertise had gone into the creation of fabrics, not garments.

Newly emancipated Japanese women at the turn of the century gave up trying to adopt the dress-over-petticoats-and-corset system, and took to using bits and pieces of Japanese dress, some of them masculine, that would approximate the dashing look of European fashions, along with Western hairdos and accessories. It was only in the 1920s, when Western feminine fashion became radically simplified, that Japanese women took it up consistently and successfully. At the same time, Japanese effects – loosely wrapped coats and robes – became fashionable in the West, and Japan permanently joined the international fashion exchange. It had all taken fifty years, partly because our great modern visual media had not existed, by which eyes may be swiftly trained without conscious will.

Meanwhile, what about kimono, the subject of Iiza Dalby's book? The word is generic, meaning something that hangs from the shoulders; but

Dalby makes it clear that no clothing terms were ever generic in Japanese. Every garment had its own name, depending on which part of the body it covered and what sort of function it had – there was no such thing as kimono until the Japanese began to adopt Western dress. The Japanese wardrobe had many specific pieces of clothing, and they might all be worn with considerable ease and carelessness, flexibility and invention. All the delicate gradations of social class and personal status we now associate with Western dress were expressed by its vast range. These might be figured in differences of general flavor such as we know very well in Western dress – careless simplicity, sober correctness, ostentation both splashy and heavy, imitation poverty, imitation lawlessness.

The rigidity and formality that characterize modern kimono were developed in deliberate contrast to the informality and variability of modern Western clothing, and all its Western schemes for registering class, status, and taste that the Japanese had absorbed. Kimono came to have one name, one form and one function, which is to signify a self-aware “Japaneseness”; and for that purpose, kimono is being constantly refined within prescribed limits, which only intensify the immense significance of its internal distinctions. In the nineteenth century, the only momentous distinction to be created was between *wa-fuku*, or Japanese clothes, and *yo-fuku*, which meant Western clothes. In the beginning, *wa-fuku* contained the whole universe of dress; *yo-fuku* was the single foreign monster to be grappled with. Gradually, the position was reversed: *yo-fuku* became the normal modern universe of dress, and *wa-fuku* became kimono, period.

The costume itself – the straight, wrap-over robe with neck band and sleeves, now tied around with a formal sash, or obi – is indeed of great antiquity. It was once the inmost garment worn under the huge, multi-layered court robes of the tenth century; and it is authentically Japanese, not a Chinese borrowing. It was originally called *kosode*, which means narrow sleeves, since its own rather wide sleeves were tiny by comparison with the sweeping outer glories of court dress.

Such simple inner garments were unisex; but Dalby is careful to point out that it was the women of that remote imperial epoch who were creating the new purely Japanese aesthetics of clothing, just as women

were making the first serious artistic experiments in Japanese vernacular literature. Men were staying with conservative, classical Chinese forms of elegance in both dress and verse that had been essentially borrowed. There is, therefore, an ancient precedent for kimono as a predominantly feminine aesthetic province. In the Middle Ages women were inventing the uniquely Japanese possibilities of dress, not being constrained by them; and the same is true now.

The *kosode* gradually came out on the surface to become a primary form of Japanese dress for both sexes, and eventually to become the kimono. For men it was worn in cities for civil pursuits, but during the rise of feudalism and the creation of a noble warrior class, much nonurban male dress took on military flavors, with a short, wrapped kimono worn above a form of pants, and emphatic shoulder extensions for formal outer garments – the samurai effect, totally masculine, often utilitarian and extremely prestigious, but not exactly elegant. During the early seventeenth century, however, among urban elite societies of various different kinds, the *kosode* was often worn in captivating ways by the male stage performers playing female parts. They might set its fashion even among women, and also set a fashion for playing crossover games.

One remarkable thing about the entire Japanese sartorial scheme is the absence of sexual suggestion in the forms taken by garments – except, perhaps, for those big shoulders. The similarity of shape among all the wrapped and tied robes throughout history shows a colossal lack of fantasy about two-sexed human morphology. No anatomical exaggerations and distortions for the two sexes, of the sort so common in the West for so long, have characterized Japanese clothing. A man in drag, that is, does not have to pad his bosom, nor a woman compress hers.

Female erotic suggestions have been made by different adjustments of the same garments – dragging the kimono on the ground, lifting it, or wearing it tucked up; wearing the obi low or high, dipping the collar low in back. This suggests that men, wearing the same essential garment as women, could give feminine airs to their clothing with the tiniest changes; and women could do the same the opposite way. The actual body underneath was essentially unexpressed by the form of the clothes, with regard to its sex or to anything else. The theater of dress was entirely a surface show, and kept the body's secrets.

Utsuna, like actors, were also all men in the early seventeenth century, which saw such a flowering of art, literature, and theater. Fashion became a thoroughgoing enterprise at the end of the century, with commercial establishments seeking custom through the publication of attractive pamphlets; Dalby prints some illustrations from a few of these. Since the fashion business was simply the fabric business, new style in dress depended on the inventive weaving, dyeing, printing, painting, and embroidering of silks; the kosode was a standard shape. How to get thrilling effects in wear had to be suggested by fashion leaders, some of whom were undoubtedly the inspired fashion-magazine illustrators of the seventeenth century, along with male actors and cultivated urban ladies.

A hundred years later, the geisha were all women, and had formed the wonderfully fluid and poetic element in Japanese urban society that they still sustain. They were always different from the licensed prostitutes, who had a rigid style of dress and behavior based on ancient Chinese models, and who were also formally trained in sexual arts. By contrast the geisha, like the court ladies of the Middle Ages, were the advanced poets of dress; kimono fashion was one large arena for their imaginative talents, the display of which was the geisha's whole value and purpose. Geisha were trained in conversation and musical performance, not sex. The sexual possibilities geisha offered were oblique, never open or even legal; the geisha's function was to be interesting and delicious, not available. Dalby shows how geisha, to that end, became professional kimono-wearers and still are, even though they now represent tradition instead of fashion. Their imaginative choices are still freer and their effects more dashing than those of other modern kimono-wearers.

Dalby is most eloquent about the geisha, because she has been one herself. The force behind this excellent book is Dalby's personal passion for the whole cultural realm she discovered while learning to wear kimono with the exacting perfection of a professional, which meant learning to feel natural in it. She wrote a doctoral thesis in anthropology based on her personal researches, and published a book on it in 1983 under the title *Geisha*; but the physical and moral education she received in the process clearly moved her to undertake the much greater scholarly effort that created the present volume.

The author came to kimono at its current stage of development and was obviously struck with its vitality and importance, its difference from the preserved "folk costume" of other modernized and Westernized cultures. The kimono derives from the dress of one group in upper-middle-class urban society, not from the peasantry; it was always sophisticated, and it still is. But when it first "discovered itself" in the nineteenth century, as Dalby puts it, the kimono began to formalize its more fluid sophistications and to give itself rules it had never had before it found a national role and a name. The new rules were in keeping with very ancient ideas, and they helped to provide a sense of what it meant to be Japanese — a thing nobody had ever needed to consider since the seventh century. Men and women could now feel inscribed by kimono's multiform signals. Since the undad body had no special integrity of its own, a body clothed in meaningful kimono could now take on its peculiar native moral strength along with its shaping rules for color, sleeve form, pattern, and texture.

Kimono is now worn only by women, who undertake to keep expressing the beauty of the principles its details convey — consideration for marking the separate stages of human life, the progress of the seasons, the symbolic importance of occasions, the relations between generations, and the integrity of families. But kimono is never obligatory; it is always a choice. Whenever women wear it, kimono is conveying these things with delicacy and nuance and of course with beauty, while Western clothing is simultaneously speaking in its own complicated medium. It is the combination that satisfies modern Japanese souls.

Although men wore kimono privately for a time after the inauguration of Western dress for all public purposes, the male version is now reduced to one form, the cotton *yukata* of utmost informal home use. Japanese of both sexes now seem to feel that kimono's cultural importance is rightly managed by female imaginations and manifested on female bodies at certain times: weddings and funerals, opening ceremonies for schools and institutions, formal public occasions of all sorts. Modern young Japanese girls who lead the same lives as their Western counterparts will nevertheless wish to have at least one kimono for their trousseau, and will spend the fortune they cost to have one made. Geisha relish the opportunity to collect many, and rich women, says Dalby, may

take up kimono-wearing as a kind of hobby, selecting the silk and patterns for numerous subtle ensembles appropriate for different activities, different times of day, and different states of mind.

Another moving chapter in Dalby's book is called "The Other Kimono." By this she means the actual peasant dress that might very well have become the national costume of Japan, in the manner of the Tyrol or Ukraine, if upper-class city clothes had not won out. It isn't the fabulous robes of the medieval Heian period nor the sumptuous kosode of the baroque Edo period that are truly past and lost – those are amply preserved in museums. It is rather the entire range of indigenous lower-class clothing that has vanished from Japan, the wonderful, convenient garments in striped and padded cotton or rough silk, the many cotton kimono in modest but striking woven patterns. All these once shared in the general high level of Japanese talent for perfect visual balance; there was never any crudity in their simplicity. They were also ingeniously remade, patched together of different stuffs in vivid combinations.

After Western clothing had swept the country at all levels of society, there was an effort to preserve or at least to classify this huge segment of Japanese dress; and it did last a long time in some rural areas. But jeans and T-shirts and the rest have swept it all away by now, despite the obvious fact that the native versions were eminently practical and needed no improvement – besides being beautiful, of course. Dalby shows some photographs and prints from earlier in this century and from the late nineteenth, showing women working in neat, wrap-over tops and pants tied around with handsome full-length aprons, for example, the whole ensemble dyed with indigo in various patterns. This sort of female dress was in the ascendant during World War II, and kimono went into eclipse; the present "traditional" silk kimono, with its suggestions of antiquity and nobility, is (as we said earlier) a modified invention of the sixties.

Liza Dalby has written a splendid work of costume history, the kind that rarely comes along. Her descriptions are specific, her pictures apt and thoroughly documented, her notes enlightening; and she deals with her subject out of personal engagement with it, not to prove a point about

something else. She has also explained the relation of Japanese dress to the culture at large in graceful and intelligent language, which is very welcome. I find myself wishing, however, that Dalby had kept her remarks about *Western* fashion entirely neutral and general, or even had made none.

I don't understand how she could say, for example, that we are unaccustomed to thinking about dress as political – it seems to me we are doing nothing else. When she wants to make Japanese effects clear in Western terms, her comparisons go lame when a lack of attention to fashion permits her to speak of a "cocktail dress" as something currently modish, or to assume everyone knows that white linen may not be worn in September and that beehive hairstyles are unqualifiably ridiculous. Also, she shouldn't sneer at "Heidis in dirndls" – Heidi was Swiss; dirndls are Austrian or Bavarian, and they are still unselfconsciously worn in those countries.

Never mind. Dalby has conceived a true love of Japanese dress and its history; all other kinds of clothes seem uninteresting to her; and she doesn't care if it shows. In fact, it makes her book a real treat. The subject is dauntingly immense, and Dalby has managed to encompass it with admirable skill, skipping back and forth through time by necessity, speaking broadly and focusing closely by turns, but with care, so that the reader can end by feeling possessed of a true grip on things. Two more points: I would have welcomed more about the specific role of religion in the cultural history of Japanese dress; and I really needed a table of historical periods with all their names and dates.