

2008

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Barbara Kawakami
ftoyama@hawaii.rr.com

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Kawakami, Barbara, "“Pride and Practicality”" (2008). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 107.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/107>

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“Pride and Practicality”

Barbara Kawakami
ftoyama@hawaii.rr.com

Aloha! Today, I would like to take you on a vicarious journey back to the good ole’ plantation days through “Textiles As Cultural Expressions.” More than anything, clothing reflected the pride and keen sense of practicality with which the immigrants endured their hardships. This was nowhere more apparent than in Hawaii at the turn of the century, where new immigrants from China, Portugal, Spain, Japan, Korea, Philippines and other countries came to work on the sugarcane and pineapple plantations. Each ethnic group was easily distinguished by their native costumes.

From 1885 to 1924, more than 200,000 Japanese immigrants came to Hawaii to work on the sugarcane and pineapple plantations. The *issei* men and women, the first generation Japanese, brought with them a rich cultural heritage; their traditional clothing was an important part of that heritage.

During the Restrictive Immigration Period of 1908 to 1924, also known as the picture bride period, more than 20,000 picture brides came to Hawaii to marry *issei* plantation workers. The mass influx of picture brides marked the transition from a society of single male transients to one of permanent residents. It was during this period that many varieties of hand woven cotton *kasuri* (ikat), sturdy cotton kimonos, fine silk kimonos and obi sashes were introduced to Hawaii.

Men’s Work Clothes

At first, the *issei* men and women began working in the fields in the rustic hand woven cotton kimonos they had brought with them from their villages in Japan. The men wore their *momohiki* (fitted pants); shirts with long sleeves worn underneath their kimono.

As the *issei* men worked alongside the Hawaiian, Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish and Filipino laborers, they noticed the practical advantages of the work clothing worn by the men of other ethnic groups. They soon learned that the kimono was not suitable nor strong enough to withstand the hard work in the fields. Obviously, some changes had to be made to protect themselves from the tropical sun, the serrated edges of the sugarcane stalks, and the sharp spiny leaves of the pineapple plant. So the *issei* men readily accepted the standard work clothing worn by men of other ethnic groups that was the *ahina* (dark blue in Hawn.) referring to the denim fabric jackets and pants. Straw hats, and colorful bandanas completed the men’s work attire. As long as the outfits were affordable, comfortable and served its purpose, the *issei* men were satisfied.



Figure 1. Men's Work jackets (*sensuji*, denim, *palaka*).
Photo by Fay Toyama.

Mrs. Kaku Kumasaka, who came as a picture bride in 1922 had sewn her husband's denim jacket with the first Singer Sewing Machine she bought in 1922 for \$100.00. She was still using the same machine until 1985 when I interviewed her. Note the hand-bound buttonhole, blanket stitched with #10 thread. Bone buttons were commonly used for most of the garments because they were strong and outlasted the garments. The bone buttons could be used over again.



Figure 2. Singer sewing machine used by issei woman.
Photo by Fay Toyama.

Another type of jacket worn by the issei men was the heavy striped canvas jacket with long sleeves. This was the most expensive type of fabric because of its fine quality and durability to withstand the heavy manual labor done by men in specific kinds of work, especially men who were in charge of irrigating the cane fields. Because of the many lines that ran lengthwise, the issei named the fabric by its lines, *sensuji* (thousand stripes) or *mansuji* (million stripes). It was too difficult for them to learn to say "canvas." This jacket was worn by an issei, Ryogen Matayoshi, who worked for the Hakalau Sugar Plantation until the 1930s. His daughter Elaine, sewed this jacket when she was still in her teens. Many *nisei* (second generation) girls were trained to sew at an early age.

The *palaka* jackets became popular among men of other ethnic groups in the 1920s, and the issei men quickly adapted to the new fashion. The name *palaka* is a transliteration of the word, “frock” which referred to the loose-fitting long-sleeved work shirts worn by the early American and British whalers who frequented our Hawaiian shores. The fabric was not as heavy as denim, but it was durable and practical. The issei referred to the *palaka* fabric as *gobanji* (Japanese term for check or plaid). The blue and white plaid *palaka* called “*gobanji*” reminded them of the plaid design on the cotton *yukata* they had worn in the summer months in their villages back home in Japan.



Figure 3. Kappa (raincoat) made of thick muslin, and coated with persimmon tannin, linseed oil and turpentine to be water repellent. The kappa also doubled as a receptacle for newborns when mothers delivered babies while working in the fields. Photo by Fay Toyama.

***Kappa* (Hawaiian name for raincoat)**

One of the most innovative accessories made by the issei was the *kappa*, a raincoat made of thick muslin, treated first with *kakishibu* (persimmon tannin), then a boiled mixture of linseed oil and turpentine. This mixture was thick and sticky and had to be applied with cloth. After the first application, the *kappa* was hung out of doors in a breezy area to dry. A second coat was needed to complete the process of making it water-repellent. The *kappa* was an indispensable item, especially during a heavy downpour while working in isolated fields.

American made rubber raincoats were available at stores for about \$5.00 but that would mean sacrificing five days of pay. For ten hours of backbreaking labor, the men got paid a dollar a day, and women made 75 cents a day. The issei wife understood that half the paycheck had to be sent to the husband’s family in Japan, so she had to economize. She was the one who sacrificed evening hours and weekends to make the *kappa*. The issei men and women found out that by being creative and innovative, *kappa* could be made from heavy muslin at half the cost of a store bought one.

At Waianae Sugar Plantation, Mr. Shigeo Muroda, a nisei who worked among the issei men had an interesting story to tell. One of the issei men had remembered as a young man how the umbrellas were made back in the villages in Japan. He tried experimenting with the *kukui* nut tree (candle nut tree) that grew in abundance in the Waianae

mountains. He tried extracting the sap from the bark of the kukui nut tree that proved to be just as effective as the persimmon tannin. The persimmon tannin that was used as a base coat for the raincoat was 75 cents for a small bottle imported from Japan.

Besides protecting people from the rain, the kappa was used for another purpose. Shigeo Muroda told me that his mother was the only midwife in the isolated Waianae area and she often had emergency calls to deliver the babies in the sugarcane fields. In the early 1900s, the issei mothers worked until the last days of pregnancy, just to earn the extra bonus of one dollar, if they worked the full 26 days.

In those days, no one owned automobiles except the plantation manager or the camp police. The midwife often walked for miles to the cane fields, to deliver the baby, unless she was lucky enough to borrow a horse or a mule. To deliver the baby in the cane fields, the midwife would dig a large hole in the furrow and place the water repellent kappa, oil side down, and use it as a receptacle to bathe the newborn baby. The water boy loaned his pail to boil the water to bathe the baby. The workmen helped gather twigs and dry cane leaves to start the fire. Mothers who brought their babies to work would share their diapers made from old *yukata* or bleached rice bags.

Women's Clothing

Although the issei women were mainly from farming villages, they were more selective and creative and had a flair for fashion. As they came in contact with the diverse ethnic groups of women on the plantation, they found useful features in the dress of other cultures and adapted them for practical and economic reasons. The issei women ingeniously incorporated clothing ideas from the Chinese, Hawaiian, Portuguese, Spanish women and created a composite fashion that resembled the 1890s French fashion, including the pompadour hairdo and straw boater hat.



Figure 4 and Figure 5. Kin Watanabe's work clothing made of kasuri and American fabrics (left and right, worn until 1921), slat sunbonnet, cloth bonnet, girl's dress made of bleached rice bag. Kasuri fabric is displayed in the background. Photos by Fay Toyama.

In the beginning, the issei women wore their hand woven kasuri or striped kimono with long-sleeves to work but found it cumbersome while working in the fields. They tried tapering off the sleeves that gave them freedom of movement. Eventually, the hand woven kasuri (ikat) kimono brought from Japan were taken apart and made into Chinese style jackets with kimono sleeves and mandarin collar. From the Hawaiian, Portuguese and Spanish women, they learned to fashion the pleated or gathered skirts out of American cotton fabrics usually of stripes, plaid, geometric designs that resembled Japanese fabrics.

The kasuri fabric was another link with their past: it was precious to the issei women in part because it had been favored for work clothing in their home villages. The indigo dye made the fabric stronger and colorfast, and helped repel insects in the fields.

Cummerbund-like Sash

One traditional custom the issei women held on to the very last was the wide, cummerbund-like sash that held their work outfit together. This sash was the counterpart of the obi sash worn with the kimono and it had a symbolic significance for the issei women. They loved the comfort and the security of the wide sash tied firmly around the waist. Some of them said it gave them the strength to endure the 10 hours of hard work on the plantation. And, often when they were hungry, the tightness of the sash around their waist helped them to overcome the pangs of hunger.

Bashofu and Ryukyu-Kasuri

Bashofu has the oldest textile history in Okinawa, beginning in the 12th century. The banana plantain that produces bashofu fiber grows well in the tropical climate of Okinawa. The bashofu fabric was particularly popular in the summer months because it was cool, comfortable and easy to care for, which made it ideal for the tropical climate in Hawaii.

The kimono on exhibit is colored a light tan with natural dyes, and the bashofu fiber is almost translucent. The little kasuri patterns of dark brown and indigo, are stylized representations of birds and feeding boxes.

Matsu Miyashiro Kiyuna

Toiling for 10 hours a day with her husband in the sugarcane fields of Kohala Sugar Plantation on the Big Island, Matsu Miyashiro Kiyuna never made use of the exquisite hand woven bashofu and *Ryukyu kasuri* fabrics she brought from Okinawa as a picture bride in 1909. These are rare early Okinawan textiles. Many precious belongings and clothing were destroyed when Okinawa became a battleground between Allied Forces and Japan in World War II. Many of the issei women had sent home to their villages whatever clothing they had brought with them to Hawaii as young brides.

Kurume Kasuri - Futon (comforter) Cover

The rare *Kurume kasuri* fabric was hand-dyed and hand woven in Kurume City in Fukuoka, Japan as part of a wedding dowry in 1893 for a relative in Kumamoto. To this

day, the fabric remains strong and has retained the vivid and crisp quality of the indigo dye. Donated to the exhibition by Hamako Maebuchi, Kumamoto, Japan.

Rice Bags for Clothing

As the issei women fashioned the new style of clothing to meet the needs of their new environment and lifestyle, economic necessity dictated some of the changes. They began a grueling cultural adaptation process as well. At times, clothing was a crucial part of assimilation especially in the case of children.



*Figure 6. Girl's dress made of bleached rice bag.
Photo by Fay Toyama.*

Immigrant children were sent to public schools and mothers were faced with sewing unfamiliar western dresses. Many nisei children remember being ridiculed by friends for wearing odd-looking clothes. Frugal mothers saved rice bags, which they bleached and cleverly turned into underwear, children's clothing, and baby's diapers.

Rice was imported from Japan during the postwar period, packed in 100 pound cloth bags with colorful designs. Before they were made into clothing, they had to be bleached. The issei women had learned the grass-bleaching method that worked miracles and didn't cost a penny. They had learned that ozone in the Hawaiian atmosphere aided in the bleaching process. The rice bags were spread on the grass and exposed to the sun, air and moisture. The slow bleaching process did not weaken the fiber.

Taniyo Tanimoto's Slat Sunbonnet

Another interesting accessory used by an issei woman is the slat sunbonnet that was made by Mrs. Taniyo Tanimoto, a picture-bride who settled on the island of Maui. She needed a slat sunbonnet to protect her delicate skin from the tropical sun, but couldn't afford one. She made her own adaptation by learning from a Spanish neighbor. Once a year, she came to Honolulu on an inter-island steamer to shop at a Chinese grocery store on King Street, to stock up on items difficult to obtain in isolated Paia. The kindly proprietor always gave her the straw matting that was used for wrapping tea, exported from China. The matting was very crinkly so she had to sprinkle it with water to smooth it out. Out of one straw mat, she fashioned four brims to make four slat sunbonnets, and sold it for 75 cents each, that was equivalent to 10 hours of field work!



*Figure 7. Taniyo Tanimoto's slat sunbonnet made from straw matting used for wrapping tea.
Photo by Fay Toyama.*

Despite the language barrier, with patience and determination, the issei men and women learned the necessary skills to survive in the new land. These skills were not learned from books, but through observation, sharing and exchanging ideas as they worked alongside with other ethnic groups. By retaining some of their unique traditional cultures, the issei women ingeniously designed a practical and composite fashion that was distinctively their own. Thus, the intermingling of cultural elements occurred more on the plantations where the immigrants worked together, or lived in nearby camps. Because these women of diverse ethnic groups were far away from their homeland and families, they were compelled to turn to each other for help. The issei women's stories exemplify the importance of friendships and familial networks in coping with poverty and economic security. The history of plantation clothing is truly a history of immigrant life.