



New Ways to Wear Kimono

Sheila Cliffe from the UK is a researcher and lecturer on the history and culture of the kimono. Through her lectures, books, exhibitions and other means, Cliffe is not only helping to keep the kimono culture alive, but also leading it in new directions.

SATO KUMIKO

The kimono, the national dress of Japan, has a long and fascinating history. Sheila Cliffe, a professor at Jumonji Gakuen Women's University in Niiza City, Saitama Prefecture, is a kimono researcher known for her work exploring the history of the kimono and its rela-

tionship with Japanese culture.

Cliffe first encountered kimono on moving to Japan in 1985 to learn *shintaido*, a modern martial art. She became attracted to the possibilities in the energy of Tokyo, where old and new are mixed together, and soon made visiting antique markets a hobby,

■ Sheila Cliffe,
kimono researcher

having noticed there were often eye-catching kimono to be found there.

“The first thing I bought at an antique stall was a bright red *nagajuban*,” says Cliffe. “I was surprised when a Japanese friend later told me that it was an undergarment. What started my research was my increasing interest in kimono as I wondered why such a bright and beautiful thing would be worn under a kimono where it couldn’t be seen.”

Since then, Cliffe’s research has expanded to the history of kimono and its cultural background, kimono production areas, and the traditional craftsmanship of weaving and dyeing, while she also holds kimono shows and exhibitions both in Japan and abroad.

According to Cliffe, there are many kimono lovers outside of Japan and even some who purchase kimono through the Internet. However, people overseas have little opportunity to learn about the history of kimono or how they are made.

“I often say that kimono ‘have roots.’ The fabrics are woven and dyed using locally grown plants as the raw materials. Kimono have a very deep connection with the place they are made and the surrounding nature,” says Cliffe.

Currently, Cliffe is putting most of her effort into the Kimono Closet project, in which she interviews women about their kimono. Cliffe investigates the kimono and the human events surrounding them and records the information for the next generation.

Cliffe on the street wearing kimono



The level of skill involved in making kimono is very high, which is one reason why the garments are highly durable. A single kimono can be passed on and worn for more than three generations.

Japanese people started to wear Western clothing during the Meiji period (1868–1912), when modernization began, but it was not until after the Second World War that wearing Western clothing became mainstream. Nevertheless, many young women still own and wear a quality kimono for ceremonies.


According to Cliffe, these kimono are often inherited from mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers sometimes going back over 100 years.

“Kimono can throw light on a family’s history,” says Cliffe. “When a family member passes away and that person’s belongings are dealt with, many people cherish first and foremost the kimono from their mother’s closet. When I heard about this, my heart was filled with warm, yet sorrowful thoughts.”

It is true to say however that besides special ceremonies, such as Coming-of-Age ceremonies and weddings, there are few Japanese people in modern Japan who wear kimono on a daily basis, even though some young people do wear them as a fashion statement. Cliffe, who wears kimono every day on the street, argues this is because there is a belief that kimono cannot be worn in any way other than the traditional,

formal way. In an effort to change this, in 2018 she published *Sheila Kimono Style*, a style guide suggesting new ways to wear kimono that could be incorporated into everyday life in modern Japan. Cliffe herself was the model for the book, in which she introduces a style of wearing brightly-colored kimono with hats or other accessories that match the kimono’s colors or patterns.

“First you match the *obi* (belt), and then the *zori* (sandals), bags, and other small accessories, and then you put on the kimono,” Cliffe explains. “As you do this, you combine colors that match the season or decide on a thematic color for the day, and then decide how to coordinate everything while imagining your favorite story. This process is a sheer joy for fashion lovers.”

By suggesting new ways to wear and enjoy kimono, Cliffe is helping to bring Japan’s treasured national dress back into daily life. 



A kimono exhibition in England organized by Cliffe