

Chapter 9

Made to Last

Part 1 : The life of a yukata

You hear the word "recycle" everywhere you go these days, mostly in connection with the collection and re-use of unwanted second-hand goods. Given the dearth of places to dispose of waste in present-day Japan, you could argue that recycling as much as possible makes sense, but that doesn't mean to say that it is the best solution.

For example, PET bottles, which are the products of some very sophisticated industrial processes, are used just once, and then recycled by being melted down and converted into fiber. This may be a good way of reducing the volume of waste heading for incinerators, but when you consider the energy that goes into transporting and reincarnating the bottles as fiber, it's a very wasteful process. If possible, it would be far better to re-use PET bottles repeatedly like milk or beer bottles.

In past ages, when manufactured goods were much more valuable than they are now, people used things again and again, for as long as they possibly could, recycling them without even thinking of what they were doing as recycling, long before the present-day concept of recycling came into being. When you live just on solar energy, making the most of anything you have just makes sense.

When I'm at home on summer days, I often wear a yukata, a simple cotton kimono for summer wear. Actually it's become something of a fashion recently to wear yukata for going out and about in summer, and using them as I do as everyday summer clothing seems have gone out of fashion, but in the past yukata were actually used most frequently as an easy thing to fling on after the evening bath rather than as daytime clothing. Edo-period illustrations also depict people wearing yukata mostly when at leisure, for example, when enjoying the cool of evening.

When I came to think about it, I realized that the cotton yukata is a textbook case of the way a resource was once used and used until it was really no longer usable for anything, and so I'd like to focus on the life of a yukata in those days as an example of the way the people of the Edo period used things.

Nowadays most people buy ready-made yukatas, but before WWII and even up to the 1960s, the act of buying a yukata normally meant buying the material for a yukata. There were no doubt places where you could buy ready-made yukatas even in those days, but in an age when most women knew how to make a yukata, a ready-made article had far less added value than it does today, and I suspect that yukatas were rarely sold ready-made except as second-hand clothing.

In households with children, it was usual for the mothers to sew their children's yukatas. After all, it would have cost money to have someone else do it, and but more than that, clothing one's children in hand-sewn yukatas of one's own making was regarded as one of the pleasures of motherhood, and also just the done thing. Children grow rapidly, and since making a new yukata to measure every time a child had grown out of his or her old one would have been out of the question, women made yukatas purposely large at the shoulder and waist, tucking the shoulders and waist up at first. As the child grew, its mothers would let the shoulders and waist out to match growth. When there was no material to let out, and the child really did grow out of a yukata, there were always younger children to pass it on to. I spent most of my childhood wearing the hand-me-downs of my older brother, but it never bothered me.

Yukatas that are passed down from elder to younger siblings tend to show signs of wear, tear, and repeated repair, and in our household, became nightwear when too shabby to wear outside. I was using old yukatas as pajamas until my twenties. The material of a newly sewn yukata still has a lot of body,

making it ideal to wear as a yukata, but lacking the softness on the skin that one wants with nightwear. The old cotton of long-worn yukatas is soft and supple enough to make it ideal for sleeping in.

After being used for a time as nightwear, and becoming even more worn, old yukatas would be turned into diapers. The softness of the cotton of worn-out yukatas makes it ideal diaper material, and it was the custom, when a baby was born, for households in the neighborhood and relatives to take old yukatas apart and donate the material. Even into the early 1960s, it was not uncommon to see rows of diapers made from old yukatas hanging out to dry on laundry poles in residential districts, a telltale sign that there was a baby in the household. There were no disposable diapers as there are now—you just washed and re-used the same diapers time and time again.

A diaper made from old yukata material would frequently go on to serve as a floor cloth. At a time when toweling was still unknown, floor cloths were frequently made of old facecloths or old yukata material, sporting the dark blue patterns of their antecedents. Floor cloths made from old yukatas soak up water and are easy to use, but they are in their final incarnation as material, and don't last long.

However such floor cloths were not just thrown out. Before LPG and town gas became common, every house had a wood-burning oven or bath furnace, and anything and everything that would burn was used as fuel. Old floor cloths that were originally yukatas also ended their lives as fuel, the cotton once more being reduced as a result of incineration into its precursors of CO₂ and water.

The above examples, by the way, are not special case scenarios pertaining just to particularly poor or miserly households. I don't know what really rich people did with old yukatas, since we didn't have any such acquaintances, but even as late as fifty years ago, it was the norm even in fairly well-off households to use things in this way to the very last.

Newly woven cotton cloth had a firmness that lent it to yukatas, but not nightwear, and even less so, diapers. An old diaper, on the other hand, is ideal for reusing as a floor cloth. And even as fuel, cotton cloth doesn't give off any noxious gases. Every stage in the life of a yukata is eminently practical.

===

Copyright(C) 2004 Japan for Sustainability All Rights Reserved.