

Japanese Warriors' Surcoats (*Jinbaori*) in the Age of Exploration

Aki Yamakawa

Senior Curator of Costume and Textile, Kyoto National Museum, Japan

Abstract:

Textiles in the form of material or bolts of cloth have accounted for an important portion of trade merchandise for a long time. Created within the culture and aesthetics of the land of their production, textiles are deeply infused with the cultural background of their country of origin. This article investigates how textiles were used in novel ways when brought to a totally different culture. Focusing on the Japanese *jinbaori* surcoats from the Age of Exploration, it questions why foreign-made fabrics were favored for military garments and sees them as one form of cultural fusion.

The *jinbaori* was born in Japan during the latter half of the sixteenth century when former social strata collapsed and lower classes rose to replace them. Oddly, the time when this shift in social classes occurred in Japan corresponds to the Age of Exploration. The new elite, having gained power through civil war, were freed from the preexisting garment codification that signified social rank. With a new sensibility, they adopted the magnificent foreign textiles as their military garb. In this way fabrics that were produced for carpets and interior decoration in their home countries were converted into popular garments for the battlefield in Japan.

This phenomenon might be seen as a typical case: because the imported textiles carried a different cultural background, they were not incorporated into everyday life circumstances, yet many of the foreign fabrics colorfully enhanced space that was out-of-the-ordinary.

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New outfits for new ways of fighting

Easily transported, textiles in the form of material or bolts of cloth have accounted for an important portion of trade merchandise since long ago. Created within the culture and aesthetics of the land of their production, textiles are deeply infused with the cultural background of their country of origin.



This article investigates how textiles were used in novel ways when brought to a totally different culture. Focusing on the Japanese *jinbaori*, warriors' surcoats from the Age of Exploration from the 16th to early 17th century in Japan, it questions why foreign-made fabrics were favored for military garments and sees them as one form of cultural fusion. At this time Portuguese and Spanish missionaries came to Japan, followed by the English and Dutch. They carried goods from Europe and also other areas of Asia and Southeast Asia, which they traded for Japanese items. These ships facilitated an intermixing of various textile cultures. No equivalents of the cloths and garments they brought had existed previously in Japan, so these textiles were reconstructed into extra-ordinary garments for special use like the newly emerging *jinbaori* surcoat.

Figure 1. Mounted Warrior wearing ōyoroi type armor. Kyoto National Museum

Before the gun's introduction to Japan, most of the warriors were mounted archers. Here the mounted warrior wears a *ōyoroi* type Japanese armor. He is not wearing a helmet, carries a naked blade over his shoulder, and a broken arrow in his quiver. This nameless warrior looks as if he is returning in triumph from a battle.

Japanese armor is constructed out of narrow rectangular slabs of lacquered leather or iron that are laced together with cords of silk or leather. This type of *ōyoroï* armor developed around the 11th century especially for mounted archers. The large armholes allowed for easy arm movement, and the movable upper arm guards and wide skirt panels protected the wearer from the enemy arrows



Figure 2. Portrait of Kuroda Nagamasa wearing *tōsei-gusoku* type armor,
Fukuoka City Museum

Guns were introduced into Japan sometime in the 1540s. The first documented purchase was from Portuguese riding in a Chinese ship, and took place on Tanegashima Island. This matchlock gun totally changed the way people fought. The portrait of Kuroda Nagamasa (1568-1623) wears a new type of armor called *tōsei-gusoku*. The arm guards have become smaller and narrower and the protective skirt is divided so as to be easier to move about in. As a result, the warrior covers this with a coat that protect him from rain and cold. This is the beginning of the *jinbaori*. An armor identical with that worn by Kuroda Nagamasa still exists. ⁽¹⁾

The *ōyoroï* has broad arm protectors and wide skirts. The *tōsei-gusoku* follows the shape of the body more closely, so that warriors could wear a *jinbaori* over their armor. Therefore, the *tōsei-gusoku* and *jinbaori* was born in Japan during the latter half of the sixteenth century when the former social strata collapsed and lower classes rose to replace them. Oddly, the time when this shift in social classes occurred in Japan, corresponds to the Age of Great Exploration. The new elite, having gained power through civil war, were freed from the preexisting garment codification that signified social rank. With a new sensibility, they adopted the magnificent foreign textiles as their military garb.

Various textiles used for Toyotomi Hideyoshi's *jinbaori*

Now, I will introduce you to typical examples worn by a great man of Japanese history.

This man is Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598), the unifier of Japan at the end of a century of civil war. He comes from the farmer class to reach the top status. There are various materials used for the *jinbaori*. The first example was made in a Chinese silk pattern weave, a very familiar item for the Japanese upper class at that time. It was presented by Hideyoshi to the Mōri Family and is still stored in the Mōri Museum in Yamaguchi prefecture. ⁽²⁾ The second one was made from Persian kelim with a tapestry weave. It probably dates from the time when the Safavid Empire was at its height. You can see the animals hunting and prowling: big cats' faces, deer, and peacocks. The close-up image tells us that it has a feature of Safavid royal textiles: it is totally covered with silver foil rapped silk wefts.



Figures 3 and 4. Jinbaori in Kelim worn by Toyotomi Hideyoshi (back and close-up), Kodaiji Temple, Kyoto



The third example is a cape-style *jinbaori* made in silk velvet. It has an embroidered design of flower arabesques. We can see on the border there are people holding onto the vines of the arabesque. The design is rendered in chain stitch, knots, and couching

Figure 5. Cape-style Jinbaori in Silk Velvet worn by Toyotomi Hideyoshi (front), Nagoya City Hideyoshi & Kiyomasa Memorial Museum

The fourth example, a *jinbaori* with a large gourd design is done completely in feathers. Hideyoshi presented this surcoat to his retainer Igi Tadatsugu.⁽³⁾ We don't have a historical feather costume brought from abroad at that time, but there is no tradition of using feathers for costume in Japan. I think probably some feather costume made somewhere around Polynesia was brought by sea. In this *jinbaori* the main shaft of each feather is stuck into the lining, folded and sewn one by one.

The fifth example is a wool *jinbaori* with Mt. Fuji pictured, and is stored in the Osaka Castle Museum. It is said to have been owned by Hideyoshi.⁽⁴⁾ There were no sheep in Japan at that time. The Japanese encountered woven wool with the coming of Europeans. It was prized for its warmth, fabric integrity and bright colors. The greatest number of *jinbaori* are made of woven wool and it became the main textile for *jinbaori* throughout the Edo period.

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The variety of *jinbaori* are good examples of the intermixing of cultures inspired by the triangular trade practiced by seafaring Europeans. Not only are the textiles of many kinds from many lands, but also the shapes the Japanese chose to tailor their garments express an imaginative playfulness freed from standard Japanese styles.

This phenomenon might be seen as a typical case: because the imported textiles carried a different cultural background, they were not incorporated into everyday life circumstances, and many of the foreign fabrics colorfully enhanced space that was out-of-the-ordinary.

Reference

- (1) cf. Nobuhiko Maruyama [1994] *Clothes of Samurai Warriors*, Kyoto Shoin Co., Ltd., pp24.
- (2) cf. op. cit., pp 43.
- (3) cf. op. cit., pp 39.
- (4) cf. op. cit., pp 48.