

Hats and Kimonos: Cross-Cultural Dressing in Isabella Bird's *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* (1880)

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Introduction

As George Bigot caricatured the superficial endorsement of Japan's modernisation through his cartoon of Meiji elites aping European fashion, such scepticism towards Japanese adoption of Western clothing was common among Westerners who visited Japan at the time. In her travelogue *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*, Isabella Bird seems to have shared a similar idea. As an explorer who sought authenticity in her travel experience, she wished Japanese people to retain their Japanese-ness, and obviously clothes were the most immediately detectible cultural marker.

This presentation unpacks how clothing acts as an interface for Bird to understand and interpret Japan and its people. While her habit of cross-cultural dressing can be situated within the conventional context of her ambivalence about national identity and gender, I also intend to track how she creates herself in the travelogue as a connoisseur of oriental aesthetics and how she presents herself as a cosmopolitan fashionista through mixed dressing. I argue that the success of her travelogue and her distinctive fame partly owes to her "feminine" interest in dress, strategic usage of clothes as narrative device, and her visual self-fashioning as the protagonist.

What the Japanese Wear

Bird establishes herself as an oriental fashion guru at an early stage of the travelogue by explaining about kimono (1:36-38). Not only describing the kimono as a dressing-gown, Bird also notes the poetical significance of the sleeves for wiping away tears. She quotes a translation of a *hyakunin-issyu* (百人一首) poem, originally by Kiyohara no Motosuke (清原元輔). Bird's exhibit of literary knowledge somewhat elevates her from a mere introducer of commodities to a cultured guide to Japanese aesthetics.

Although Bird generally disdains the Japanese in Western fashion, a few are given good verdicts for their tastes. For example, Arinori Mori (森有礼) is introduced as a progressive politician, "under an Oriental despotism, ... 'an Advanced Liberal'" (Bird 2:202). Bird explains that "He was in America for some years, speaks English tolerably well, and, unlike most of his countrymen, knows how to wear the European dress" (Bird 2:202). In a nutshell, through one's success or failure in Western fashion in Bird's eyes, insinuates the inner assimilation — whether political, philosophical, intellectual, cultural, or spiritual — of Meiji modernisation or Westernisation.

As observed in her travelogue, Bird's discourse on fashion is usually about women. Discussing clothes with Japanese women provides an interesting example of cross-cultural communication of different customs and values. One vivid case is her visit to Miwa with her friend Mrs Gulick. Bird writes of how the hostess and her daughters gathered in their room, somewhat creating a Japanese version of a harem. There they talk about clothes, a characteristically 'feminine' subject: "These [Japanese] women were astonished that we wore our dresses up to our throats, and when Mrs Gulick remarked that, according to our ideas, it did not look womanly or 'correct' to wear them as they do, open to their girdles, they were yet more surprised, and as each new-comer entered, the hostess repeated to her this singular foreign notion" (Bird 2:258). This conversation points to the varying ideas of femininity in different cultures. To some extent, "[h]er self-representation looks like a shrewd marketing strategy, allowing her to exploit the notion that women possess greater expertise in certain areas of ethnographic enquiry (such as the decorative, the culinary, and the domestic)" (Williams & Clark 8). Bird's knowledge and inquiries into fashion in her travelogue, hence, could be seen as a self-branding tactic utilising her femininity.

What Bird Wears

Then, what was Bird herself wearing all the time? One of the characteristics of her own fashion is the integration of Japanese and Western items, a combination which makes her appear visually as a cultural mediator, as epitomised by her combination of tweed travelling dress with a Japanese hat (Bird 1:80). One interesting phenomenon in Bird's mixed dressing is the repetitive appearances of her Japanese hat as a paradoxical marker of her Western culture in relation to the question of gender identity. As Bird herself explains, she "wears a hat, which is a thing only worn by women in the fields as a protection from sun and rain", and as her "eyebrows are unshaven, and my [her] teeth ... unblackened, so these girls supposed me [her] to be a foreign man" (Bird 1:155). Whereas in Victorian England, where hats would have been deemed as a symbol of properness regardless of gender, in Meiji Japan, they act as a mainly masculine commodity. Bird is indeed mistaken for a man several times in Japan for her appearance and attire; Japan somewhat offered her an escape from Victorian social conventions of gender, in which women were oppressed as the weaker sex.

Bird is a great admirer of Japanese kimonos and what she seems to have wanted to clarify was that her Japanisation was authentic. Bird describes an instance in Kuroishi (黒石) where she even considers that she has surpassed her national or racial identity and passes as a Japanese woman in her disguise (Bird 1:290). Bird thus boasts of her capability in fashioning herself in a kimono, a curious and unfamiliar costume in the eyes of her Anglophone readers. In Kubota (久保田), she was exclusively invited to a wedding ceremony of the house-master's

niece. She notes of the third wife of the house-master, "from her limitless stores of apparel" (Bird 1:317), picking an outfit especially for Bird: "an under-dress of sage green silk crêpe, a kimono of soft green, ... with the family badge here and there upon it in gold" (Bird 1:317). So, Bird wearing a kimono is not a mere cosplay infatuation of a white tourist, or a reversal of a Japanese uncritically copying Western fashion. She hints that her cross-cultural dressing comes with class, tradition, quality in taste, and the Japanese's respect towards her.

What the Ainu Wear

In the 19th century, the Ainu people of Hokkaido were rumoured to be racially close to the Europeans for their strong built bodies, fairer skins, and chiselled features in contrast to the Wajin (和人) Japanese. Several scholars have already engaged in studying how Bird examines the bodily features of the Ainu like an anthropologist, but not much has been discussed in terms of their well-known unique fashion culture. In fact, Bird's attention to Ainu's clothing comes with her effort to reconcile its refinement in romanticised expressions with the Ainu's savageness that she emphasises throughout the narration. Intriguingly, as she tries to depict Ainu fashion, her descriptions turn out to be cross-cultural, for example, observing similarities with "Panama canvas" (Bird 2:82) and "Greek frets" (Bird 2:83). Bird thus identifies the Ainu with another culture of a colonised region (in this case, Panama is under Spanish control) that has already been recognised in European society. Moreover, by associating the Ainu motif with Ancient Greece, Bird infuses a sense of antiquity and civilized sophistication that complicates the text with her reference to the Ainu as "savages" or more like the "noble savage."

Though she may not be an expert of Ainu fashion (for instance, Bird fails to see through the cultural significance and historical context of Ainu accessories), there is an instance in which Bird's use of clothing allows an attempt at sympathetic communication: "The [Ainu] women have a perfect passion for every hue of red, and I have made friends with them by dividing among them a large turkey-red silk handkerchief, strips of which are already being utilised for the ornamenting of coats" (Bird 2:83). Through Bird's act of sharing, it is divided into fractions for further border-crossing distribution and the strips of it ends up intermingling with Ainu coats. In other words, not only does Bird herself dress cross-culturally, but she also realises a kind of cross-cultural dressing on the bodies of cultural others.

Conclusion: What Ito Wears

Let us divert our attention to the other main character in the travelogue: Ito, Bird's interpreter. This young man, who was about twenty years old when he met Bird, is recorded to be Tsurukichi Ito (伊藤鶴吉). When choosing her travel companion, Bird originally had three candidates, and she carefully observes them, taking notice of their garments. At the very last minute, however, Ito jumped in without any recommendation letter. Curiously, Bird does not make any remark whatsoever about the clothes he was wearing, but instead observes his face, bodily features, attitude, manner, and what he seemed to be like on the inside. Throughout the travelogue too, Ito's fashion is hardly taken notice of (partly perchance because he is not wearing anything worth mentioning, but even so); Bird's depiction of Ito is inclined to delineate his personality, actions, and words. Although her early commentary on him is harsh (calling him "stupid-looking" [Bird 1:47] and so on), he gradually grows on her and becomes an indispensable companion for her journey.

Although this presentation has so far investigated how clothing acts as an interface for Bird to come into contact with Japan and its people, the tendency is that she writes more eloquently about the clothes of the people about whom she does not know much as an individual on the inside. The fact that her eyes are drawn to clothes, or the surface, may lead her to a better understanding of the couture and culture, but it may also signify the general difficulty for Bird, as a temporary guest to the places she visits, especially with her limited linguistic ability, to penetrate into what is deep inside of the wearer or the locals. Some may criticise such limits of her travelogue in a postcolonial light. Nonetheless, the text and the image of a Victorian woman in a mishmash of a Western dress, boots, and a Japanese hat, sometimes in kimono, roaming through Meiji Japan including the northern interiors, fascinates the reader to this day. In other words, she was very successful at creating her self-image via cross-cultural dressing and her work has endured the test of time.

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