Basic Research on Katabira: Changes in Materials From the Muromachi Period Through to the Early Edo Period

SAWADA Kazuto

The katabira is a garment that is commonly known in Japan today. Nonetheless, there has been insufficient basic research on this subject. In redressing this situation, this paper brings to light changes that occurred in the materials used for katabira in the time spanning the Muromachi period through to the early Edo period.

An extensive survey of documents has revealed the following trends.

During the 15th century, katabira were made from plant fiber with hemp by far the most commonly used fabric. Although examples of katabira made using silk are to be found, they are special cases and as such do not point to the universal use of silk.

In the early 16th century there was an increase in the kinds of hemp and also in examples of other plant fibers, leading to an abundant range of cloths. At the same time, silk katabira made using raw silk came to be seen. By the end of the 16th century raw silk had become widely adopted, occupying an important position that took it to the same level as plant fiber.

The beginning of the 17th century saw more or less a continuation of the situation that had existed at the end of the 16th century. Of particular interest are silk katabira with designs and a fabric called Karashima, though the type of material is unknown. These started to appear around the middle of the Keicho period (1596–1615) and they appear in records as a distinctive type of unlined garment known as hitoe-mono. Materials used for these garments were made from silk and cotton. Unlined garments became firmly established in the latter part of the 16th century, and although in the beginning they were recorded in a separate category than that for katabira, by the middle of the Keicho period they began to be included in the same category as katabira. In other words, the genre known as hitoe-mono went through a process where it was amalgamated with the genre known as katabira. We may conclude from this that raw silk played an important role in mediating between hitoe-mono and katabira and achieving their amalgamation.

As illustrated by this, katabira were originally made from plant fiber though eventually came to be made from silk, which threatened the uniqueness of the katabira. The result was that there was no longer a significant difference between katabira and kosode in terms of material, and by extension this meant that the katabira, which had once existed separately, was assimilated with kosode.