

WARAJI

Rice Straw Sandals of the Japanese

A brief history

In a country subsisting on rice, it should come as no surprise that many uses were found for the omnipresent rice straw that built up. Straw was woven into ropes, hats, and even rain gear. It was a cheap and abundant material for crafts of all kinds. To this day, sandals made of rice straw are still made and worn in some rural areas.

Of the types of footwear the Japanese were known to wear, waraji are perhaps the most plentiful of all. The tougher boots and shoes of the nobility were hardly in the range of the common people, and in no way suitable for traveling long distances. Wooden geta--the wooden platform sandals in which monks are often depicted--are nice for avoiding mud, but the flat wooden sole is hardly a comfort on the feet. The constant slapping motion can quickly numb the sole, and it is hardly the most stable of footwear.

So we see the waraji emerge in daily life and on the battlefield. Long distance travels were often measured in the number of waraji that a person went through on the trip. However, since they



Some of the houses at the village of Shirakawago.

were cheap and easy to make, this wasn't much of a problem.

The techniques I will describe herein are based on the techniques taught to me in Shirakawago, Japan--an old village that preserves many of the traditional arts of Japan. These waraji were simple, like modern sandals, but I believe that the techniques are applicable to the full waraji that we see more often in paintings and the like.

Materials

Waraji, as their name implies, require rice straw to be made properly. Unfortunately, rice straw is not easy to come by in some parts of America.



Waraji on display.
Courtesy of Terebess Online
<http://www.terebess.hu>

Furthermore, in the modern production of straw, it is often cut and dried, and not very useful for these types of projects, as I found to my dismay when preparing for my first class.

I have experimented some, and believe that raffia may prove an acceptable

substitute. It is the proper shade and appropriately flexible for this task, however there is something missing from real rice straw, which I recommend over any other building material. People in states such as California may wish to look into their local 'California Rice Commission' (<http://www.calrice.org>) for more information on the commercial availability of rice straw.

It is interesting to note here a passage from the Matt Garbutt's 1912 English translation of the *Tanki Yoriaku*¹, a work

¹ The passage as written is taken from its reprinting in Dr. Stephen Turnbull's The

first published in 1735, but detailing quite precisely the arms and armour of a Japanese soldier and as such quite pertinent to the Sengoku Period.

"Waraji (sandals)

Waraji are of various materials, such as hemp, stalks of myōga (a kind of ginger, Zingiber mioga), palm fibres, cotton thread, rice straw, etc., and all the materials named last very well. There are also various ways of arranging the cords which tie the waraji to the feet. It is very important to use a nakagukuri or extra tie across the instep, as this will be a great help in marching on steep, snowy or muddy roads, and in crossing swamps or rivers, in any case you must not forget the nakagukuri when marching on hard roads. It is better to have 6 tabs on your sandals than 5, for then you will not catch pebbles between your sandals and feet when crossing rivers, or marching on rough roads. An extra pair of sandals must be carried at your waist; this is quite as important a thing as carrying provisions."



*Two different methods of tying waraji.
Courtesy of Terebess Online
<http://www.terebess.hu>*

Method of Construction

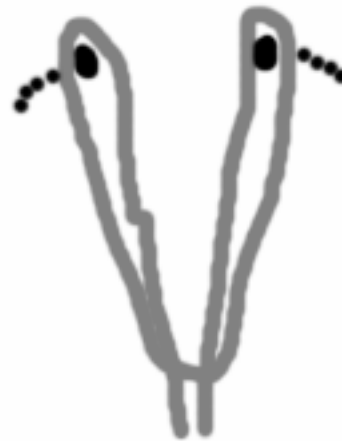
The actual construction of the waraji is based mostly on constructing a sole, weaving the straw between supporting cords, with the loops woven into the sandal itself. The tabs that you add, and

[Samurai Sourcebook](#), including his comments.

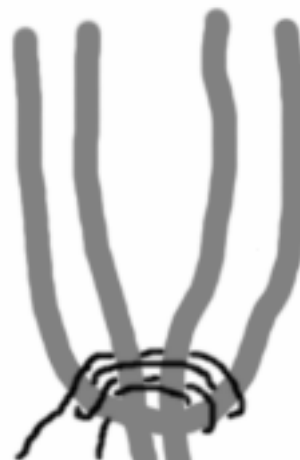
where, vary on the type of waraji you are making. The sole, however, appears to be the same no matter what.

To begin, sit down with your materials around you. You will want one long cord (preferably of straw, but cotton or other materials will do as well) that you can loop around each of your big toes.

Loop it around, making a 'U' shape, with the bottom towards you as shown below:



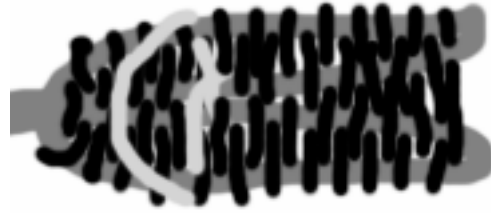
Now, take some of your straw--or whatever material you are using, and start by binding the toe of the sandal--that is where the two loose ends of the sandal intersect the bottom of the 'U'. Remember that the more straw you grab, the thicker the sandals will be.



Only do enough to secure the toe--and make sure you pull it tight! Holding the waraji in one hand while you pull the straw towards you best accomplishes this; put

your two middle fingers in between the middle cords, and your outer fingers between the middle and outer cords. It should be noted that as you do this, the width you hold the cords apart will reflect on the width of the sandal in the end.

Once the toe is secured, you want to just start weaving the straw in and out between the cords.



Or, it may have multiple 'tabs' for the more complex knotting seen in the pictures at the beginning of this article.



Please forgive my poor graphical skills. I hope you can get the basic picture here. You don't want to see any white space, however--the sandal should be as compact as you can make it. If you don't, it will shrink dramatically at the end.

When you run out of one bunch of straw, try to end in the middle of the sandal, with the end towards the bottom. Then, start the next bundle from the middle and continue the trend. If all of the straw ends are in the middle on the bottom, they can be trimmed off later, and they won't be seen as they are on the sole.

Eventually you will come to a point that you will want to put tabs. These can either be zori-style waraji, with only one strap over the top of the foot, like so:



Essentially, weave the cords for the tabs into the sandal going over and under the loops. Next, weave the straw over and around them, incorporating them into the sandal.

Once you have a sandal that is slightly longer than you want, with the straw being very compact, take it off of your toes, and pull the two loose ends of cord out the toe of the sandal. Do this and pull the sandal as tight as you can--this will cause the sandal to shrink in size, which can be a problem if you wove it to the size you felt was 'just right'.

At that point, if you are doing a waraji with multiple tabs, you are done--just weave the cords through the tabs like you see in the pictures earlier, and you are ready to go. If you are going for the zori-style sandal, there is one more step. Take the strap that would go over your foot, and tie it with the loose ends of your sole cords. It should come out looking much like a modern beach sandal made of straw.

On either one, trim the excess straw and cords as necessary.

Thanks to Terebess (<http://www.terebess.hu>) for use of their pictures.