

# Roundtable Talk by Geiko and Maiko, the Flowers of Kagai

Tradition is still alive throughout Kyoto. However, nowhere, even in Kyoto, exists today where old customs and local manners are more strictly preserved and respected than in the five Kagai districts. The modern world is changing every minute more rapidly than ever before, but the Kagai remain timeless as if the flow of time has stopped. Kagai cherish the old and good traditions and hand the culture of Kyoto over to the next generation. This time, geiko and maiko, the elegant successors of Kagai culture from all five areas, talk about the wonders and charms of their districts and their visions for today and for the future.

— How did you make the decision to become a geiko or maiko?

**Fukuyuri:** My first encounter with the world of Kagai occurred at a Kyoto Fair held at a department store in Tokyo. There was a display of maiko’s splendid kimono, hair ornaments and accessories and I fell in love with them at once. Fortunately, there was a person who could introduce me to Miyagawacho and my dream came true. **Ichिया:** The same as Fukuyuri, I first saw a maiko at a Kyoto Fair held in Nagoya and was fascinated with her immediately. I had always been interested in kimono and the history of maiko. **Toshisumi:** I was born in Kyoto, so I have always felt close to kimono, Japanese dance, shamisen and the world of traditional Japanese performing art forms. It has been said in recent years that the number of geiko and maiko who are originally from Kyoto is decreasing. I decided to become a maiko with the hope that I can become an example of a maiko born in Kyoto. **Mamesumi:** I’m from Tokyo. I had a chance to visit Kyoto with my mom and watched a Miyako Odori dance show. The stage was just extraordinary—What an elegant dance they performed! I was stunned with the dance of the Inoue School and wished to learn it for myself. **Hinayu:** I’m originally from Osaka. I saw a maiko for the first time when I visited Kyoto with my family. I came across a maiko on the street and she smiled at me. It was absolutely lovely. It was around the time when I was in the latter grade of my elementary school and I couldn’t help wishing to become a maiko who could impress people with such a beautiful smile. **Mitsuhana:** I fell in love with maiko, too. Unlike Hinayu, I didn’t have a chance to meet a maiko in person but I was deeply impressed with maiko when I watched a TV documentary program during my elementary school time. The maiko was extremely pretty and the Kagai world looked so fascinating. I had no hesitation and went on to contact Pontocho.

**Umehina:** Me, too. I watched a documentary program about Kamishichiken and started to become interested in traditional Japanese culture. The more I learned about it, the more I found Japanese culture is so beautiful. I wanted to learn Japanese dance and shamisen so I moved to Kyoto from Hyogo.

**Umeha:** I’m also from Hyogo. I have been told that I always wished to become a maiko when I was very little, even before I can remember, however, my father never accepted my dream. Because of this, I had to kept my dream a secret until I finished university. When I started to look for a job, my wish to become a maiko was still very strong so I had to have a big disagreement with my father. Finally, I was allowed to come to Kamishichiken and started my career as a geiko.

**Masanao:** Luckily, I had no objection from my family when I decided to become a maiko. Probably because of the effect of my older sister’s love of history, I was also interested in Kyoto and the world of maiko since I was a little girl. But I had no idea how I could become a maiko since I lived in Nagoya. I had no connection with anyone in Kyoto, either. In the end, I contacted “Ookini Zaidan (Kyoto Traditional Musical Art Foundation)” and was able to be accepted by Gion Higashi.

**Mametama:** I also got in touch with “Ookini Zaidan.” I am from Gunma. When I was in the third grade of junior high school, I wasn’t really sure what I wanted to do in high school. During the summer holidays that year, I happened to find a photo book featuring geiko and maiko. Then, my intuition told me instantly that this is what I wanted to be and where I would live!

— What is your impression about Kagai? What have you found difficult here?

**Fukuyuri:** I’m really grateful that I could become a maiko. I love beautiful kimono but it was difficult at the beginning to sleep with nicely arranged hair as I had to be careful not to destroy the arrangement. **Mametama:** I’m enjoying my life as a maiko very much because I can meet many people and visit various places which I couldn’t experience if I were an ordinary student. The difficult part is language. I was born in eastern Japan, so I still have to practice how to speak with a Kyoto dialect. **Ichिया:** I love traditional Japanese performances but it seems I need a longer time than other girls to learn them. During our Shikomi (trainee period before becoming a maiko), we have to remember “Gion Kouta” song first but it was really challenging for me. The older maiko helped me a lot. I just had my Eri-kae (※1) last year and became a geiko. Today, I cherish every single day I spend as a geiko. **Umeha:** Unlikely many geiko, I didn’t have an experience as a maiko since from the beginning I started my career as a geiko. In the early days, I struggled hard to catch up with other geiko. Although I was a geiko, I knew that I couldn’t satisfy my customers’ expectation of a geiko.

— It seems that being a geiko and maiko is not an easy life. On the other hand, what do you find to be fun and joyful?

**Masanao:** I really enjoy my life at the Okiya (※2). Maiko come from different areas of Japan and I like to live with older maiko as a real family. Learning manners and how to perform is not easy, but the more I try, the more progress I make – that is my joy. **Hinayu:** Gion Higashi is smaller than other Kagai, but everyone in the area, such as the neighborhood of Okiya and surrounding restaurants, are close. I like this intimate atmosphere that is just like a big family. **Mitsuhana:** I enjoy Ozashiki very much. Sometimes I can meet VIPs and special people in Ozashiki. I have such special experiences to meet and speak to those people only because I am a maiko. **Umehina:** Practicing for performances is fun for me. For example, I learned there is a wide variety of songs, such as Naga-uta and Kiyomoto, after I became a maiko. The more I learn, the more I can enjoy my practices. **Mamesumi:** I determined to live as a geiko in Kagai when I watched Miyako Odori, so I feel the most joyous

when I’m on stage. I think I’m good at learning choreography and I never found it difficult. **Toshisumi:** Since I became a geiko, I have been able to learn a more difficult level of dance and shamisen. I am always happy when I improve myself and acquire new skills through my daily practice. I play shamisen as a Jikata (music player) at Ozashiki. I hope I can improve my shamisen skills even more so that maiko can dance even better and more easily accompanied by my playing.

— What is your goal as a geiko and maiko?

**Masanao:** I’m the youngest in Gion Higashi right now but we will welcome new younger girls soon. I will continue to learn from the older maiko and geiko while behaving appropriately as an older maiko role model to the younger ones. **Fukuyuri:** This is my second year as a maiko. I know that I have a character which often tries to avoid hard situations, but I would like to try my best in my daily practices of shamisen and singing so as not to be left behind by other maiko. **Mitsuhana:** It’s my fourth year since I became a maiko. Now there are younger maiko than I so I hope I can behave well and can take good care of customers in Ozashiki as a good role model for them. **Mametama:** Being a geiko has been my goal since I came to Gion, so I can’t give up until I have my Eri-kae. I would like to strive to improve my dancing skills, too. **Umehina:** I’m also hoping to be a geiko. Every day is a learning experience through watching how older geiko work and behave in Ozashiki in order to become a better geiko. **Hinayu:** With the great help of older maiko and geiko, I always watched and tried to replicate even a single body movement of theirs. Finally, I have been able to become an independent geiko. I will not stop making an effort to improve myself in Ozashiki as I wish to emulate the more experienced geiko. As the same time, I hope I can accomplish my own charm and attraction as a geiko. **Mamesumi:** It has been five years since my Mise-dashi (※3), the debut as maiko. Regarding performances, I came to notice which I perform well and which I do not only after I became a geiko. I will always remember my pure determination when I started my training and will continue to make an effort to improve my performances, especially in dancing.

**Umeha:** My most important goal is to succeed the tradition of Kamishichiken which I have inherited from the older maiko and geiko. We can learn classical performances from our teachers but for more casual dancing such as Chari-mai (※4) and games played during Ozashiki, we have to learn through watching how the older maiko and geiko do. Sadly, the number of geiko who had chances to learn them is not many today, so I hope I can be the one who can pass on such traditions to the younger generations.

— What is the attraction of Kagai?

**Ichिया:** Kagai in Kyoto contain one of the most extraordinary traditions of Japan. A Kagai is a unique place where number of unique manners and customs are preserved deeply still today. That is exactly what I wanted to learn in a Kagai

and thus I’m here today. I’m still so impressed with the fabulous culture of Kagai even today. **Hinayu:** I totally agree with Ichिया. Kyoto is the city of the traditional culture and crafts of Japan. Kagai culture relies on all kinds of them such as original customs, kimono, hair ornaments and accessories. I hope more people will experience this wonderful culture of Japan. **Mamesumi:** I would like more people to know about the sophisticated performances and manners acquired by all geiko and maiko, from the elder ones to younger ones. Ozashiki is the only place where people can observe this. I hope people create a chance to experience the culture of Kagai even once in their lifetime, then they will understand what I mean. **Toshisumi:** There are other areas in Japan where the culture of Kagai remains, however, I think Kyoto is very special because we have five Kagai here and every one of them has its own character. I can find the distinct differences of each Kagai at the stage of the annual combined performance. I will try my best to pass on this rare and special culture of Kagai to the next generation. **Umeha:** The world in which we live is changing so fast. Contrary to that, I feel Kagai remain timeless and the flow of time is very slow. Kagai remain unchanged and I’m amazed how people in Kagai have kept them so. Here in the Kagai of Kyoto, young girls of our age follow a traditional lifestyle. As today’s world is extremely changeable, I wish sincerely that more people come to a Kagai and see the value of life here which respects traditional Japanese life and culture.

— Thank you very much for your stories.

(※1) Eri-kae: When a maiko becomes a geiko. It literally means “changing the color of the collar.” During the maiko period, girls wear a vivid red colored collar (lit. “eri”) while after becoming a geiko the color is changed to pure white.  
(※2) Okiya: A house where young maiko live and go off to work at the Ochaya. The female manager of an Okiya is called “Oka-san (lit. “mother”)  
(※3) Mise-dashi: A girl goes through a one-year training period called “Shikomi” and a one-month long period called “Minarai-san” before becoming a maiko. After that time, a girl celebrates her “Mise-dashi” and debuts as a maiko.  
(※4) Chari-mai: Dances which have been taught verbally during Ozashiki. “Chari” means funny and humorous words and movements.

紅色に染まる秋の五花街、京の秋の公演

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