



<https://doi.org/10.48417/technolang.2023.03.05>

Research article

On the Art of Shibari as a Form of Writing

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Abstract

The art of tying the body with rope can be considered a form of writing. In this technique, the rope moves, leaving traces-patterns on the body which acts as a living and feeling canvas. There is interaction at two levels: control of the ropes, their arrangement of nodes as a created pattern, and the impact on the person who feels the ropes and reacts to them in one way or another. Handwriting depends on the pressure on the paper. But if the “paper” feels touch, smooth curls or painfully sharp underlines, then in the course of writing you have to solve two problems – to make the letters correct, and to establish an emotional relationship with the paper. Thus, in shibari, logical concentration, correctness and safety of construction are important, but an even more lively response requires sensory involvement from the master or mistress. However, unlike most writing or painting, where it is enough to look at the result, in shibari it is important to see the stages of creation, as if the artist was fundamentally changing his work with each new stroke. Shibari as a language takes place on two planes: one existing in space – a three-dimensional pattern of knots and lines on the body, the other, unfolding in time – the movement of the rope, and the body subordinate to it. Shibari has the features of a performance, and tying can serve to convey the theatrical relationship between the master and the model, and, together with the surroundings, create a plot. Moreover, the drawing of a rope can convey specific meanings. In ancient Japan, when binding was used for prisoners, the ropes on the body not only prevented escape and determined the remaining degrees of freedom. The knots were also of service for providing information about the person.

Keywords: Shibari; Bondage; Technology of bondage; Shibari as a Language; Hojojutsu

Citation: Soulrope, K. (2023). On the Art of Shibari as a Form of Writing. *Technology and Language*, 4(3), 49-58. <https://doi.org/10.48417/technolang.2023.03.05>



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УДК 7:091.01

<https://doi.org/10.48417/technolang.2023.03.05>

Научная статья

Об искусстве шибари как форме письма

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Аннотация

Искусство связывания тела веревкой можно рассматривать как форму письма. В этой технике веревка движется, оставляя следы-узоры на теле, которое предстает как живое и чувствующее полотно. Происходит взаимодействие двух уровней: управление верёвками, расположение их узлов по созданному шаблону и воздействие на человека, который чувствует веревки и тем или иным образом на них реагирует. Почерк в том числе зависит и от нажима на бумагу. Но если “бумага” чувствует прикосновения, плавные завитушки или болезненно резкие подчеркивания, то в ходе письма приходится решать две задачи – делать буквы правильными, и налаживать эмоциональные взаимоотношения с бумагой. Таким образом в шибари важна как логическая сосредоточенность, правильность и безопасность построения, но так и живой отклик требующий от мастера чувственной включенности. Однако в отличие от письма или живописи, где достаточно посмотреть на результат, в шибари важно видеть этапы создания, как если бы художник с каждым новым мазком принципиально менял бы свое произведение. Шибари как язык имеет два плана: один существующий в пространстве – трехмерный узор из узлов и линий на теле, другой, разворачивающийся во времени – движение веревки и подчиненного ей тела. Шибари имеет черты перформанса, и связывание может служить передачи театрализованных взаимоотношений мастера-модели, и вместе с антуражем создавать сюжет. Однако рисунок веревки может передавать конкретные смыслы. В древней Японии, когда связывание использовалось по отношению к арестантам, веревки на теле не только не давали убежать и определяли степень свободы, но также узлы служили для информации о человеке.

Ключевые слова: Шибари; Бондаж; Кинбаку; Техника связывания; Шибари как язык; Ходзэдзюцу

Для цитирования: Soulrope, K. On the Art of Shibari as a Form of Writing // Technology and Language. 2023. № 4(3). P. 49-58. <https://doi.org/10.48417/technolang.2023.03.05>



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There are many ways to look at Shibari or Kinbaku, the art of tight binding of the body. One might consider it in terms of the erotic pleasure from bondage and domination. At the other end of the spectrum it can be interpreted in the manner of philosophy, raising the existential or metaphysical question of freedom and submission or freedom through submission. There is also the perspective of the arts according to which it is a theatrical performance or sacred ritual or a form of body modification.

However, there is an opportunity to look at shibari from the other side. It foregrounds the actions and gestures of the bondage master or mistress by looking at Shibari as a kind of writing. Perhaps this does not seem plausible at first. It has nothing to do with writing on a keyboard, and it seems rather different from the writing of a tattoo artist. But as soon as handwriting and calligraphy come to mind and the Far Eastern arts of writing with ink and brush, we might think of the rope as a kind of line that is drawn and developed in an artful way.

The Master or Mistress also creates, just as authors using other technologies of expression do. However, the flesh on which they work is not dead artifacts, the interaction with which is predictable and safe enough, but the human body. The body as a material for creation immediately sets the main limitations for the creator of Shibari. Evidently, the most superficial and primary limitations are related to safety: not to cause harm, not to cause injury, which means knowing the places on the body that cannot be tied, controlling the force of tension and the time of tying, ensuring that blood circulates to all parts of the body at all times etc. However, besides the obvious fragility of the “cloth” used for writing, it is a human subject that interacts and responds to the master's writing. Thus, during the creation there is a work with two levels: the control of ropes, their arrangement by knots as a created scheme, and the impact on the person who feels the ropes and reacts to them in one way or another.

The rope is the primary agent – it becomes the line and the pattern. Shibari unfolds in time, the shibari pattern manifests itself gradually, the act of creation is important in its own right. It is an act one of fixation, that is, a gradual process of arresting the body and arresting time: when it stands still it becomes an eternal moment. The final, complete rope pattern is not visible for long. Although it may be captured in a photograph, it is significantly the meaningful ending of a story or a process and not only the finally resulting work of art. Shibari reveals itself gradually, and every moment is important. In this, the shibari technique is closer to dance than to drawing. Nevertheless, the rope as a sliding line weaving across the body is clearly associated with a line guided by a pen or brush. However, unlike most writing or painting, where it is enough to look at the result – in shibari it is important to see the stages of creation, as if the artist with each new stroke significantly changed her work, each stroke giving birth to a new plot, and the result represents not the final completed final work, but one of the variants of reading, no more and no less than those that existed before. Thus, shibari as a language takes place on two planes: one existing in space – the three-dimensional pattern of knots and lines on the body, the other unfolding in time – the movement of the rope and the body obeying it.

The latter can be characterized by ‘non-metric time’ (DeLanda 2005): speed, pace, duration, timing, rhythms, frequency. The body, as an object that changes under the influence of the rope, gives shibari an aura of sacredness. The body of another is usually untouchable, except for a very close circle of people. And even in artistic practices it is unusual to exercise such a strong effect on the body as object, even as material.



Figure 1. Symmetrical Harmony Shibari (Shibari-mistress Karol Soulrope)

If we want to single out the primary element – a basic sign in a system of signs for shibari – like a letter or word in a language, a note in music, a body movement in a dance), then for shibari it will be a coil of rope around a person. The coils are fixed in knots and folded into patterns. At the same time, the rope appears as a single endless element, due



to the ease of always extending it by yet another rope. Starting with one turn, it gradually covers the entire body (Fig. 1). Ordean and Pennington (2019) see in the casting of rope through space what Deleuze and Guattari called “lines of flight.” By this name they meant de-stratifying marks of multiplicity which indicate rhizomatic connections (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

At the same time, the rope fixes, connecting parts of the body, primarily arms and legs, and also serves for hanging. The symmetry inherent in the body is also transferred to the shibari pattern, allowing you to make perfectly finished patterns (Fig. 1) or, in contrast to rebelliously break symmetry. Also, the pose that the model takes when his parts of the body are connected by ropes turns out to be far from normal, and the connection of different parts of the body with rope thus can render the canvas or material for creative writing original. The body appears also as malleable or changeable, as gradual changes of posture are produced over the course of a session. The rope and the body work together to produce striking complementarities and tensions.

The rope itself also plays a role as a material artifact. First of all, its length is standardized, allowing it to be controlled. Usually 8 meters long, ropes are used that give a sufficient amount of freedom of turns. The material of manufacture also plays a role, not only in terms of practicality, but also in terms of touch sensitivity. It is well known that underlining in letters and books depends among other things on the pressure on the paper. Handwritten words and characters also bear witness to our pressure, the effort to press, imprinting our ideas onto the uncomplaining paper. But what if you imagine that paper feels touch, be it light arcs or painfully sharp underlines. One might then confront two problems in the course of writing – to make the letters correct, and to establish a properly sensitive, if not emotional relationship with the paper: not to tear or drench it, to treat it with care without violating it. These two challenges require the actualization of different skills, in a sense, conflicting. Logical concentration, the correct construction of dashes, the sequence of letters in meaning – on the one hand, and a lively response, on the other, requiring sensual involvement. The windings and knots are still not letters, which allows greater freedom in terms of the logic of constructing the “letter” elements. Therefore, the sequence of moving the rope along the body, ideally, is simultaneously coordinated not only with the logical plan of the drawing, but also with the emotional response, the tension can be stronger or weaker, the pose created by means of the rope is more complicated or easier. It is clear that for such work it is necessary to know the “alphabet”, an arsenal of standard knots and harnesses. There are “recipes” that prescribe the rules and sequences for moving the ropes, but this is only the initial step. You can learn a few harnesses and repeat them “verbatim,” but this is not enough to master the “language.” Following the freedom of action and the emphasis of professionals, new masters seek to find their own ability to express themselves. Ordin and Pennington (2019) note the pressure of normativity to enforce strictness and correctness in “hierarchical modes of communication and pre-established ways,” suppressing divergent vocabularies of style and technique while constantly referencing one's practice to a normative model.



However, despite the existence of canons, rules of construction, direction of movement of the rope, etc., there is no normativity in modern shibari, there is a way of self-expression through the movement of a rope around the body.

All bondage masters have their own style and their own rhythm, which unfolds the movement of the rope in time. Depending on whether one experiences the body through massage or through tantric techniques, this rhythm can be boldly expressive or gently formative. So, you can end up saying that some master has a tantric handwriting. For some, the rope just slides in their hands, while someone sorts it out. The bondage rhythm is like a dance style: there is a tango, there is a waltz, there is slow, there are fast dances, and there is a fade, a pause. The rhythm can be broken, changing, that is, a period of fast movements can be followed by deliberately slow movements in order to “hear” the partner. Or vice versa, in order to intensify emotions, one can suddenly speed up the pace, binding as quickly as possible in order to knock out the partner’s breathing, unsettling it.



Figure 2. The photograph captures individual moments of Shibari’s “writing” process (Shibari-mistress Karol Soulrope, photographer Anastasya Lyskowets, model Nick Pavlovtsev, makeup artist Natalia Ustavitskaya)

The aesthetic component of the Shibari language is obvious, manifesting itself in the material and imperious connection of the rope and the body. From the underground and fetish performances, it has extended into wide circles and entered the stage, and the sphere of photographic art. Photography allows you to break the continuous process into separate moments, each a telling “sign,” each capturing the “resonance” of certain



moments even as they flow into another (Fig. 2). Special entourage, costumes, and additional items make it possible to create rich visual images with rich iconic symbolism, which develops the binding as a plot narrative (Fig. 3). Shibari exhibits theatricality, Pennington (2017) draws attention to the possible presence of an audience, repeated sequences of behavior performed in certain ways to achieve certain results, technique, dramatic spectacle and denouement (Pennington, 2017). The playful roles of the master and the model can be manifested both in the bends and writings of the rope, the movements of the body, hair, clothes of the model, or in the actions of the master. However, unlike the theatrical representation of feelings, the characters of shibari are immediately implicated in the process, they do not merely stand in. The rope rules over the body, as if assuming control over the owner of the body. Just like certain forms of compelling and compulsive speech, one is carried away by feeling, without opportunity to act.



Figure 3. Arresting bamboo composition (Shibari-mistress Karol Soulrope)

However, there is also a symbolic significance of rope drawings. One of the origins of shibari is hojojutsu. Dating to the beginnings of the Sengoku period in the second half of the 15th century, it was a martial and law enforcement technique used to capture and hold a prisoner. In order to grip and fixate the captive, they combined an effective method of restraint with a pronounced visual aesthetic, allowing some degree of body mobility. The degree of formality is determined or regulated under the Japanese concept Shingyōsō



(真行草) which can be applied in different contexts, including calligraphy. Three categories of formality are Shinsho, Gyōsho and Sōsho. Shinsho is strict and font-like, good for administrative documentation. Gyōsho is a semi-formal style, analogical to lettering with its formal qualities, and so on. Sōsho is the least formal and may be compared to cursive writing in European language. In a philosophical sense Shin means following the truth, Gyō means carrying out the truth, Sō signifies form as nature (Hanazawa et al., 2004). The Shingyōsō levels of formality were also used for the bondage of captives. However, in the martial arts, they had slightly different meanings. Regardless of the particulars, they stand for “Ideal” (shin; 真), “Divergence” (gyō; 行), and “Freedom of expression” (sō; 草). Figure 4 demonstrates the difference in placement and complexity of the rope forms (nawagata ; 繩型) on the captive. The three techniques Sō, Gyō and Shin exhibit the different meanings: Sō seeks only to prevent the opponent from launching an attack and is otherwise indifferent, Gyō immediately confronts the opponent, demonstrating power aggressively, and Shin strikes down and incapacitates the opponent.

Many complex connections and patterns have been invented in hojojutsu. The many intricate connections and patterns invented in hojojutsu are clearly intended to convey specific meanings. Features of nodes and constructions spoke about the type, context and severity of the crime. Other such variables include the prisoner's gender, region of Japan, social status, disability, etc. (Hojojutsu, 2015). There were many reasons for this, and only a small part of these connections were sufficiently standardized to be recognized outside the local region. Thus, although there is no single language of shibari knots, if desired, it is possible to convey a message using them. This is not surprising given that in ancient times, knots, worsted items, threads and balls were used to record knowledge and events, as well as for magical purposes (Nastevičs, 2016). Similar knotted cords appear in many ancient cultures around the world: a kipuphor to account before the 19th century in the Inca Empire. “I would make people go back to using knotted cords instead of written characters” writes Laozi, referring to the Japanese Warazan method of accounting by knots (Laozi, 2001, chapter 80).

However, even if the specific meanings of nodes and lines are not known and are not implied by the creator, the shibari letter carries meanings. In addition to its vivid expressiveness, shibari attracts with its return to corporeality the awareness of writing as a material act, an act of influencing reality, and one that deeply implicates us in communication. In the digital age, when writing becomes intangible, but role play and arcane symbolisms become prominent, shibari shocks by its boldness and sensitivity.

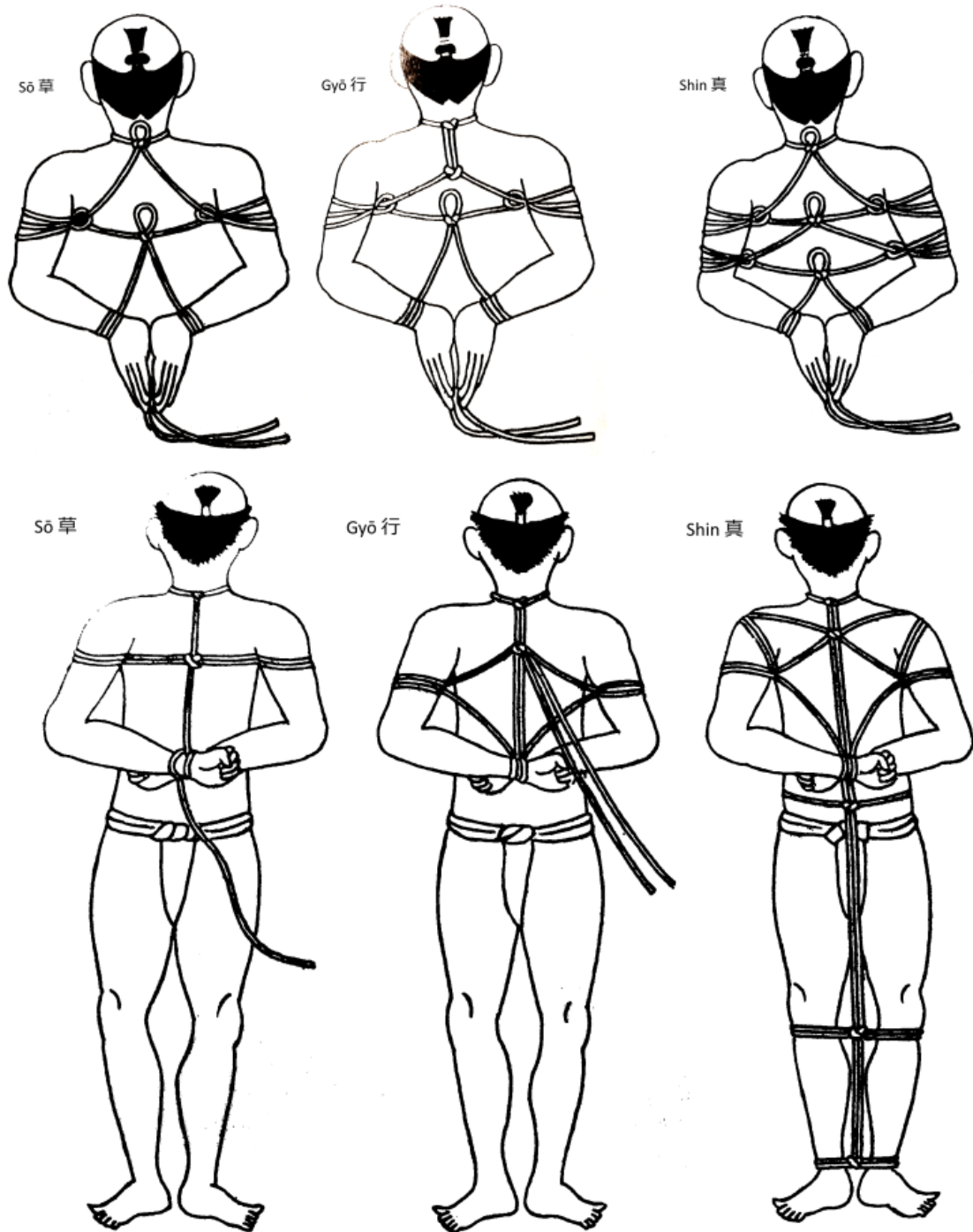


Figure 4. Captive bondage in ancient Japan: the Sō, Gyō, and Shin techniques (Hojjutsu, 2015).



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Статья поступила 3 мая
одобрена после рецензирования 18 августа
принята к публикации 14 сентября 2023

Received: 3 May 2023
Revised: 18 August 2023
Accepted: 14 September 2023