Schnell interprets the transition from ritual competition to physical violence through Southeast Asian examples. He applies concepts such as ‘moral economy’, ‘weapons of the weak’, and ‘hidden transcripts’ to his Japanese case. At the turn of the twentieth century, local landlords began to withdraw from direct cultivation, switching their business to urban areas and their allegiance to the central government. They gradually became absentee landlords who no longer functioned as local patrons. The shift from ritual context to physical attack expressed the erosion of a moral economy and the imposition of a market economy, along with a loss of local autonomy to national government and bureaucracy. Since the mid-nineteenth century, vengeance-seeking during the festival began to appear as a ‘hidden transcript’. According to Schnell, the resulting situation was a form of ‘internal colonization’, the imposition of the nation state upon the peoples inside its boundaries. These days a new conflict is breaking out in the town, this time between the participants in the festival and the town officials. The participants cling to a ‘fighting festival’, while the officials desire a spectacle that is safe and appealing as a ‘tourist festival’.

With tenacity and to great profit, Schnell avails himself of the Japanese sources and scholarship, early-modern and modern ones alike. Besides written material, Schnell makes good use of a number of photographs. Ethnographies inevitably show gaps, however, and in this case the drums themselves could have been given some more attention. They may seem to be mere instruments, but, as it had not always been a fighting festival. The question Schnell then addresses is: when and why did ritual competition change into local confrontation and conflict?

By Jan van Bremen

Scott Schnell’s book is a study of a ‘fighting festival’ in a rural town in central Japan. Through a combination of historical research and contemporary fieldwork, he exposes some drastic changes in the course of the festival’s history, for example, that the celebration of the festival moved from autumn to spring. A more profound discovery, however, is that it had not always been a fighting festival. The question Schnell then addresses is: when and why did ritual competition change into local confrontation and conflict?

The Fox and the Jewel

Karen M. Smyers

Like Schnell, Smyers also makes ample use of photographs. The book does not include a list of the photographs, however, which would have helped the reader to locate and identify them apart from their places in the body of the text. John Nelson’s study of a Shinto shrine also came as a surprise to this reviewer because it revealed that, before 1993, no full fledged study of Inari worship had been written in English. Another surprise was the extensive gap in time separating research on the fox and other animal deities in popular Japanese religion; sixty years of indiference separate the first published work, dating from the first two decades of the twentieth century, and Smyers’s own research. Among the rare earlier work on the fox, Smyers found M.W. de Visser (1875-1930), who studied real and mythical animals in the first two decades of the twentieth century, and whose findings play a vital role in this dissertation.

Smyers uses a wide range of sources that includes non-American authors who publish in English. This is not so common in American circles, where there is a tendency to be more inward-looking and self-centred, concentrated in a number of rival, self-contained networks. Clifford Geertz coined the term ‘involution’ to describe a form of social organization progressively collapsing upon itself. Self-contained discourse circles implode (the case of the Aum Supreme Truth and comparable sects studied by Ian Reader and discussed below bear this out).

A Feast of Violence

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Yen Bloc: Towards Economic Integration in Asia

The theory of optimum currency areas is the basis to provide a regional perspective. The author focuses on three main criteria as major determinants: the extent of economic integration, the similarity in economic structures, and the similarity in policy objectives. He concludes stating it’s unrealistic that Japan, the Asian Newly Industrialized Economies (NIEs), members of ASEAN, and China together and at once form an optimum currency area [...]. It is more likely that Japan and the Asian nations form an optimum currency area, with potential membership extended to include Malaysia and Thailand as they reach a higher level of economic development. Countries still at an early stage of economic development such as China, Indonesia, and the Philippines face the conditions for forming an optimum currency area with Japan.

Yes, a Yen bloc is desirable for Asia including Japan. And yes it can become reality. Here are the conclusions drawn by Chin Hung Kwan in his latest book Yen Bloc: Towards Economic Integration in Asia.

By Marie-Aïme Tourres


The rivalry finds symbolic expression in a fighting festival known as the ‘Fox and the Jewel’, a Yen bloc, in Towards Economic Integration in Asia. The Fox and the Jewel: Shared and Private Meanings in Contemporary Japan. The Case of Aum Shinrikyo, published in Japanese by the Van Houten Foundation, the Netherlands. E-mail: J.G.van.Bremen@let.leidenuniv.nl

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