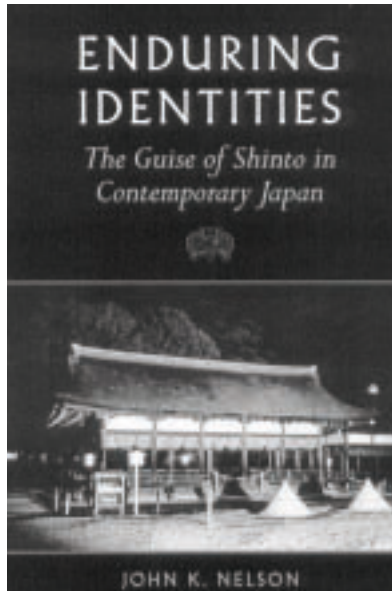
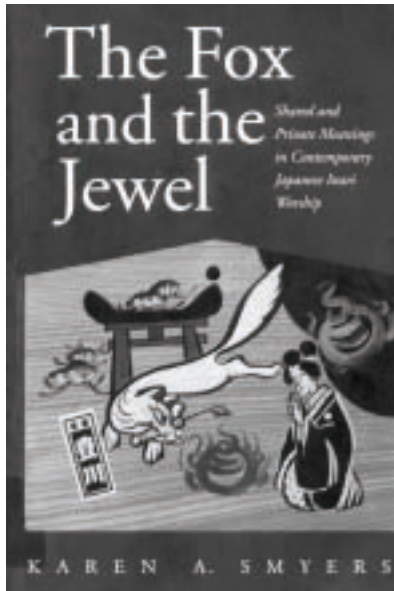


# Four New Looks at Japan

Review >  
Japan

The four books under review, having many topics and themes in common, all appeared within a year of each other. Written by different people from different places, they offer a chance to see how international scholarship is reflected in the authors' work. If scholarship is globalizing, one should be able to discern to which extent a scholar partakes in the learning that exists in the world on their chosen fields and topics. This helps to pinpoint a scholar's blind spots. The resultant is a rating of scholarly standards, tools, methods and procedures. It also gives an indication as to whether one is confronted with an open or a closed field of discourse.



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?

Schnell interpretes 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 contest 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 like 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 percussion has been linked to concepts of transition, the central theme of *The Rousing Drum*. That percussion accom-

panies transition rites confirms the thesis of this work, namely that changes in the ritual must be understood in light of social transitions.

Karen Smyers's book bears the same title as her dissertation, *The Fox and the Jewel*. It came as a surprise that as late as 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 indifference 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

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, such central institutions in Japanese society, as easily seen and widely used as Shinto shrines, had been so understudied. At New Year's alone, millions of people visit a Shinto shrine.

As in Schnell's book, conflict and competition are also a central theme here, where the rivalry between shrine and parishioners of the Kamigamo Shrine, situated in Osaka and Kobe on the fringe of the vast industrial and metropolitan heartland of the region, is the focus.

The rivalry finds symbolic expression in a fighting festival called the crow sumo (wrestling) ritual. Nelson and Schnell both combine fieldwork and archival research. Their common theme is social conflict and violence, through ritual and actual expression. Nelson incorporates a wide range of literature published in Japanese and English. If the American sources are well covered, European sources found their way into this study only if published in or translated into English.

The topic of Ian Reader's book *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan. The Case of Aum Shinrikyo* is the violence perpetrated in and by the Aum Supreme Truth. The Aum sect caught the attention of the world by carrying out a sarin gas attack inside a subway station located in the heart of Japan's government and law enforcement buildings in March 1995. Reader is more interested in why it happened, rather than in what happened. In seeking to understand what he calls 'the workings of religious violence', he studied the founder and the followers of the sect to find out more about their characters and the movement. He wanted to know their situations, the changes that occurred, the decisions and directions taken by the leadership. Reader places considerable weight on 'unforeseen events' in his explanation of the eruption of the violence, embedded in the personalities, doctrines, and nature of the movement's organization. Murder was given another name in the movement as is typical of ideological and political directives: when Aum Supreme Truth called it a good thing to 'poa' someone, it was a metaphor, and the justification, for a compassionate act of salvation, but with the new meaning of a killing. It is a sinister case of using 'silly words'. T.S. Eliot wrote of such terms that they are 'too clownish to be admitted into good company'. It is good to keep another phrase by the poet in mind: 'The pursuit of politics is incompatible with a strict attention to exact meanings on all occasions.'

Reader makes exemplary use of primary and secondary sources. He also makes extensive use of Japanese and English language studies. He might have included Eric Wolf's last work, *Envisioning Power* (1999), a study of ideologies of dominance and crisis. Begging the question of religion, most helpful for understanding the Aum Supreme Truth is Patricia Steinhof's study of the Japanese Red Army Faction and its splinter groups. Both authors are at pains to point out the overwhelming number of parallels and similarities with mainstream social organizations in Japan. An oscillation between kindness and harshness is a regular feature of interactions between Japanese actors: a harsh, volatile, aggressive side and a kind, compassionate side is expected of a teacher and authority figure, and ultimately of everyone.

Aum Supreme Truth resembles Japanese society more than it differs from it. Likewise, it resembles millenarian communities who practice religious violence more than it differs from them.

Of the four books, only Nelson and Smyers include a glossary of characters, not necessary for the general reader but indispensable for those who can read Japanese. A combination of contemporary fieldwork and archival research is the only feasible way to study the literate and complex societies of Asia. Schnell, Nelson and Smyers remind us that American anthropologists are not as dismissive of historical resources as they are thought to be. ◀

Works in order of publication:

- Schnell, Scott, *The Rousing Drum: Ritual Practice in a Japanese Community*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press (1999); pp. 352, ISBN 0-8248-2141-6 (pb); ISBN 0-8248-2064-9 (hb).
- Smyers, Karen Ann, *The Fox and the Jewel: Shared and Private Meanings in Contemporary Japanese Inari Worship*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press (1999); pp. 288, ISBN 0-8248-2058-4 (hb), ISBN 0-8248-2102-5 (pb).
- Nelson, John K., *Enduring Identities: The Guise of Shinto in Contemporary Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press (2000); pp. 336, ISBN 0-8248-2120-3 (hb); ISBN 0-8248-2259-5 (pb).
- Reader, Ian, *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan: The Case of Aum Shinrikyo*, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press (2000); pp. 304, ISBN 0-7007-1108-2 (hb), ISBN 0-7007-1109-0 (pb).

**Dr Jan van Bremen** is an anthropologist working at the , Center for Japanese and Korean Studies, Leiden University, the Netherlands. E-mail: J.G.van.Bremen@let.leidenuniv.nl

# Yen Bloc: Towards Economic Integration in Asia

Review >  
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-Aimée Tourres

The admission that 'Asia's developing countries with most of their international transactions denominated in US dollar and with their currencies pegged loosely to the dollar belong to a de facto dollar bloc' is the kick-off start of the book. Two questions follow: 'Is the formation of a yen bloc desirable, and if so, is it possible?' A senior economist at the Nomura Research Institute, specialized in the Asian economy, C.H. Kwan has become notorious on this issue, which he has been covering for almost a decade, ever since his book *Economic interdependence in the Asia Pacific Region, towards a Yen bloc* (1994).<sup>1</sup> Combining academic analysis with his experience as a member of various committees advising the Japanese prime minister and the minister of finance, he answers them in two-part presentation comprising a total of nine chapters. In the first part presenting 'The economic fundamentals supporting a Yen bloc', he explains the rise of regionalism in Asia, the yen-dollar rate, the de-dollarization versus re-dollarization or the aftermath of the bubble economy. Having armed us with the basic but essential concepts to understand the Yen bloc subject, the author uses each chapter composing the second part 'Forming a Yen bloc in Asia', to present the different perspectives on the Yen bloc issue from Japanese to global.

Until the early 1980s, the Japanese government was reluctant to promote the yen as an international currency, fearing that a large demand for its currency would destabilize the Japanese economy while making it difficult to conduct a monetary policy. But now, as Asia is replacing the US as Japan's largest trading partner, stabilizing the Yen's effective exchange rate through the formation of a Yen bloc should help reduce the vulnerability of the Japanese economy to fluctuations in the yen-dollar rate while bearing less exchange risk in both current account and capital account transactions. From the 'Asian perspective' (the only empirical chapter), the latest crisis has vividly illustrated that the traditional exchange rate policy of pegging to the US dollar is no longer compatible with macroeconomic stability in Asian countries.

Editor's note >

Parts of the book have been published earlier in 'Towards a Yen bloc', *NRI Quarterly*, Vol.8 number 2, Summer 1999, pp. 2-13.

Note >

<sup>1</sup> Also see: Kwan, C.H., 'The theory of optimum currency areas and the possibility of forming a Yen bloc in Asia', *Journal of Asian Economics*, 1998.

The theory of optimum currency area is then used 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 is 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 NIEs 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 fail to meet the conditions for forming an optimum currency with Japan.'

But some of Kwan's most interesting observations occur in the final reflective section, relative to the 'global perspective', where he replaces the United States in its due position as regarding international finance. He points out that: 'thanks to the need to finance its chronic current account deficit by borrowing overseas, the US has turned into the world's largest debtor country. The mirror image is the emergence of Japan as the world's largest creditor country and by far the largest foreign holder of US treasury bonds. Never before has the world's leading creditor country had most of its overseas assets denominated in the currency of the world's largest debtor country. This unprecedented situation has become a major source of instability in the international financial system, as symbolized by the gyration of the yen-dollar rate. The emergence of international currencies that compete with the dollar may help impose discipline on the economic policy of the US by rendering the international environment less forgiving of its mistakes'. Together with the euro, the emergence of the yen as an international currency, by imposing discipline on US economic policy, should therefore enhance the stability of the system.

Worth noting, in contrast to Europe and America, economic integration in Asia has been achieved mainly through the initiative of the private sector, without formal treaties. Likewise, according to Kwan, a Yen bloc is unlikely to be established under Japanese government initiative; rather it will be the result of the increasing preference for the yen over the dollar by the Asian economic agents. Yet, perhaps Japan is capable of facilitating this process. Kwan believes it 'no exaggeration to say that Japan is facing the choice between now or never in its attempt to promote the yen as an international currency'. However, the author stresses that due to its current economic situation Japan



will first need to revitalize its economy, before it can even contemplate facilitating the yen is to play the role of Asia's key currency.

The political aspect cannot be ignored either. The Japanese occupation during World War II is still fresh while the real political opposition may come from the US, if the formation of a Yen bloc is interpreted as posing a challenge to the status of the dollar as the key currency. But the idea will mature when the potential economic benefits will surpass the political costs. In this context, the formation of an East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC) advocated by Mahathir, Prime Minister of Malaysia, contains a clear and symbolic say, that is, an element of 'thinking East-Asian' by strengthening the voice of East Asia and East Asian economic cooperation. One thing however: the book was written under the premiership of Obuchi keener on such visions than Koizumi. At present, Kwan's views more clearly follow what Eisuke Sakakibara, former Vice Minister of Finance for International Affairs and now professor at Keio University, Tokyo, has been strongly advocating for years. If Sakakibara was nicknamed 'Mr Yen' for his influence over currency markets, it is not for no reason. Beyond the so-called Chiang Mai initiative, which aims to create a network of Central Bank currency swaps among ASEAN+3, Sakakibara states that Asia should aim for creating an Asian Currency Union in ten to twenty years. ◀

- Kwan, C.H., *Yen Bloc, Towards Economic Integration in Asia*, Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, (2001) pp.204, ISBN 0 8157 0083 0, index



**Dr Marie-Aimée Tourres** is an economist fellow at Institute of Strategic and International Studies, ISIS-Malaysia (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia).

She specialises on ASEAN+3 countries with a particular emphasis on Malaysia. Her areas of work also include economic crisis management and international financial architecture.

E-mail: marie@isis.po.my