

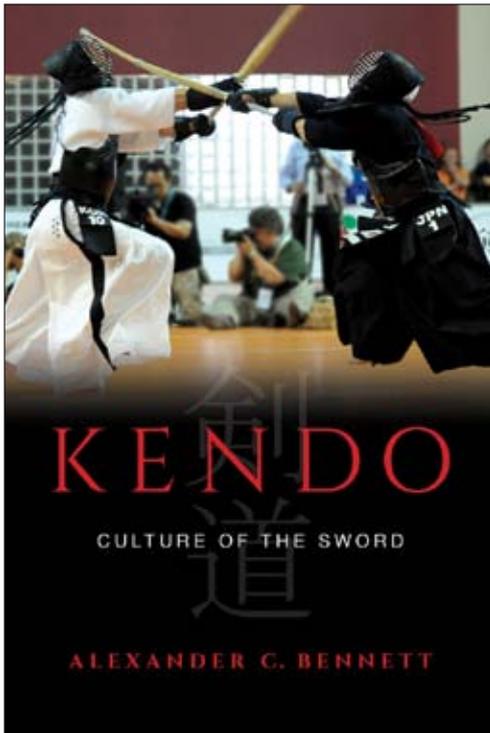
BOOK REVIEW

Kendo: Culture of the Sword

Alexander C. Bennett

University of California Press, 2015

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REVIEWER

Dr. Andrea Molle holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Milan. Between 2006 and 2008 he conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork on Japanese Martial Arts in Nagoya, Osaka, and Tokyo. He is the founder and lead scientist of BUDO-lab [<http://www.budolab.org>], an interdisciplinary research group at Chapman University that focus on the study of combative behavior and martial arts practice.

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The easily accessible writing and rich information contained in *Kendo: Culture of the Sword* [2015] makes it an essential work for both enthusiasts and scholars in the field of martial arts studies. As someone who has lived in Japan and is active in the field of quantitative and computational study of Japanese Budō, I can readily attest to the expertise of author Alexander C. Bennett. Bennett, trained as both a historian and as an anthropologist, is a brilliant and prolific scholar who has dedicated his professional life to the study of Budō in general and kendo in particular.¹

An enthusiast-practitioner as well as an academic scholar, Bennett has actively contributed to the overseas diffusion and development of these disciplines. His long-time residence in Japan coupled with his linguistic competence makes Bennett uniquely suited to this project. Not only is he able to make use of and explore sources that simply do not register for most scholars, he is also able to make strides in an area of martial arts studies that has been reluctant to open itself to inquiry. I cannot think of anyone more qualified than Bennett to write the book on the social and political history of kendo.

Bennett's many years in the field are discernible in every aspect of his writing. Despite the fact that the book was written for a general audience, as suggested by the detailed technical explanation of kendo [xvii–xxxv] and the introduction to the various other forms of Budō [1–25], it will no doubt prove useful for scholars interested in exploring new topics in the field of martial arts studies. In this volume, Bennett acts as a guide to the main religious, philosophical, historical, and political events that shaped the development of modern kendo across the centuries. He presents a wide range of information including names, events, places, and technical evolution, and he does so with an enjoyable prose style that is light and vivid without losing the rigor and precision that is expected of a scholarly monograph.

The only limitation that I see in this manuscript is a persistent tension between Bennett-the-kendo-enthusiast and Bennett-the-kendo-scholar. By and large, Bennett manages to execute a sophisticated balancing act on this front; nevertheless, I often got the sense that he was forcing criticisms as if to avoid charges of bias regarding his lifelong passion. Additionally, in the introduction, it was as if he felt compelled to justify his work to both the academic and the Budō communities. Still, this is a very common tendency in works currently being produced in martial arts studies.

¹ Alex Bennett holds a PhD in Human Studies and Science from Kyoto University [2001] and a PhD in Japanese Studies from the University of Canterbury [2012]. He is currently an Associate Professor at Kansai University in the Department of International Affairs and specializes in religious studies, Japanese history, and Budō culture.

The goal of the book is clearly presented in its introduction: To deconstruct and demystify kendo in order to discover the historical processes that led to its creation. To Bennett, kendo is an invented tradition that emerged, as did all of the other forms of Budō, in a particular historical milieu. It has been shaped by a number of competing political agendas and social objectives. Each chapter is designed to present the reader with an analysis of kendo through the most important philosophical paradigms, theoretical debates, and historical issues involved in its construction. Through this discussion, we see that kendo is both the object of the analysis and the perfect metaphor to approach the complexities of modern Japanese society.

The first chapter of the book is devoted to presenting the foundations of the 'Art of the Sword' during the medieval period. While not holding back any essential historical information, the core of the chapter is an intriguing concept that Bennett refers to as the 'aestheticization of violence' [36]. This is a very important concept. It gives the reader a viewpoint from which to understand how Japanese martial arts evolved from a pure set of combative skills to become a complex social artifact and, in some cases, even a sport. The Japanese understanding of mind-body interaction, meditation, enlightenment, and social relationships introduced in this first chapter put the following four centuries into perspective. From the second chapter on, Bennett explores the five phases of 1) Intellectualization, 2) Spiritualization, 3) Pacification, 4) Commercialization, and 5) Sportification.

After reading each section, it is clear that the invention of kendo was not separate from the creation of a larger (inter)national myth: the 'way of the sword'. The sword (and, by extension, practices associated with swordsmanship) is mythically framed as a unique Japanese archetype. Interestingly, this is far from a historical truth. The sword, both as an instrument of war and as a sacred symbol, had always been much more meaningful in the European imagination than in the Japanese imagination. However, as Bennett notes, it did serve the ethos and the interests of the emerging ruling elite during the Meiji Era.

Moving on, Chapters 3, 4, and 5 discuss the cultural implications of kendo through the lenses of pre- and post-World War II Japanese nationalism. In Chapters 3 and 4, Bennett investigates the time period during which Japan tried to establish its political and cultural hegemony throughout East Asia. It was this effort that led to the construction of kendo as the heir to the ancient (re: invented) wisdom of the samurai class which helped to instill a useful sense of pride and sacrifice in the Japanese people. Consequently, the 'samurai spirit' aided the government in instituting pervasive social control.

Later, in Chapter 5, Bennett covers Japan's efforts to find its place in the postwar world. During this period, a more modern kendo concealed the underlying tension resultant from the contradictory demands of globalization (i.e. conformity vs distinctiveness and tolerance vs discrimination). This discussion of modern kendo and the sportification of Budō leads to Chapter 6 and, finally, the Epilogue, wherein Bennett discusses issues related to the internationalization of the Japanese martial arts. If kendo arose from (or at the same time as) Japanese nationalism, then is there really a way to make it a globalized practice?

Bennett seems to suggest that the answer may be no. As the Japanese people believe themselves to be the only ones capable of fully appreciating the implications of the philosophical, social, ethical, and psychological dimensions of kendo, every effort to globalize kendo is invalidated by the presumption that 'non-Japanese people will never understand'. Interestingly enough, Bennett notes that this presumption seems to have been internalized by the many non-Japanese who consider all Japanese practitioners to be inherently 'authentic' and superiorly skilled. This is a very provocative conclusion to a question that not all scholars are willing to address, and the candidness with which Bennett addresses it is all the more encouraging, especially insofar as further studies of this phenomenon (perhaps from more sociological vantage points) and its effects on the social construction of kendo would yield very interesting insights.

Unfortunately, Bennett does not seem to be willing to offer more evidence than his own personal anecdotes gained while working as a translator for some of the main Budō associations. I am well-aware that Bennett's work is situated in the fields of history and anthropology. Nevertheless, as a quantitative social scientist, I cannot avoid noting that, despite the high quality of the historical reconstruction, several of the cases presented as evidence of the modern implications of kendo (and Budō more generally) are taken from the author's personal experiences and interviews. This hardly constitutes what we might call a scientifically valid 'sample set'.

In conclusion, this book is a must-read for researchers in the field of martial arts studies. Bennett's efforts allow non-specialists the opportunity to form their own opinions on the interconnections between kendo and the evolution of Japanese society. The book is reasonably simple, yet it provides a 'blueprint' for the design of all sorts of future research projects on the Japanese martial arts. For students, the structure of the book is clear and it provides vivid explanations of the more important and challenging concepts. Overall, the book offers ample material to stimulate further inquiries in response to the many unanswered questions currently animating martial arts studies.

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