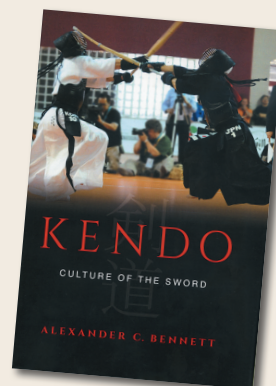


BOOK REVIEW

Kendo: Culture of the Sword

Alexander C. Bennett

University of California Press, 2015
328 pages.



One of the most prominent Japanese cultural exports has long been and continues to be martial arts, or *budō*. No doubt the omnipresent anime characters, J-pop idols, and now world-heritage designated cuisine have come to garner more attention in the press, publications, internet, and social media, but it is probably safe to say that none of them have captured the popular imagination quite like *budō* and its most revered representative, the samurai. While traditionally the samurai were well versed in numerous arts such as *jūjutsu* (unarmed combat) and *kyūjutsu* (archery) to name just a few, they are undoubtedly most associated with the sword, their quintessential symbol, often described as their “soul.” This is precisely the theme that Alexander Bennett treats in depth in his work, showing the reader that the many pat associations surrounding the culture of the sword and swordplay in Japan are the result of a deliberate discourse cultivated over time according to the exigencies of the contemporaneous social and political agenda. In the author’s own words, his work sets out to “illustrate the socio-historical evolution of Japanese swordsmanship and its correlation with perceptions of tradition, cultural nationalism, and ‘Japaneseness’” (p. 25). His nearly three decades of kendo training is his means to do this, and his extensive experience, wide knowledge, and keen insider’s insights add enormously to the persuasiveness of his argument.

The reader is struck by the very personal content in “Prologue: Kendo Basics,” in which the author openly and courageously describes his early experiences in kendo as a high school foreign exchange student in Japan. He begins his narrative effectively with the somewhat childlike impressions of a seventeen-year-old exchange student upon entering the kendo *dōjō* for the first time: “The ferocity of the scene conjured up images in my mind of kamikaze, samurai, and ‘hara kiri’” (p. xviii). He relates that first impression to a dueling Jedi knight and Darth Vader in *Star Wars*. This contrasts nicely with the mature and studied observations of the scholar-practitioner that the seventeen year old would later become. He should also be commended for going out on a limb and discussing at length what kendo means to him personally, in both an educational and spiritual sense.

Kendo: Culture of the Sword tends at times toward the romantic, but it nonetheless provides crucial insights into just how transformative kendo can be, coming straight from the mouth of a prominent practitioner. The author’s descriptions of his first kendo teacher, Sano sensei—to whom the book is dedicated—are vivid and allow the reader to almost feel the tension permeating the *dōjō*, which his lively prose does a good job transmitting.

The author considerably assumes that the reader would benefit from a basic understanding of how kendo works in order “to contextualize the forthcoming discourse on its cultural significance” (p. xxv). He is right, and he provides ample information on the gear, stances, strikes, point system, strategies, and more, buttressed by helpful diagrams and tables. For the uninitiated, this introduction to the principles and practice of kendo makes the subsequent discussion more accessible and enjoyable. The introduction is helpful in setting the narrative as he considers “What is Japanese Budo?” in the context of premodern and modern, unarmed and armed arts, touching upon issues of invented traditions and spurious lineages. He shows how the “samuraization” of Japan began in the nineteenth century as Japan came to assert its uniqueness, which in turn included values based on the samurai. The author tells us that “Kendo represents a fine example of an ‘invented tradition’ that was ‘freshly compounded’ during the period of modernization to cultivate national partisanship” (p. 21), as he demonstrates how kendo was marshaled to this cause. Following the prologue and introduction, the first chapter, “The Art of Killing: Swordsmanship in Medieval Japan,” provides historical background on the formation of the warrior class, the place of the sword, and the rise of its cult, while the second chapter, “The Art of Living: Early Modern Kenjutsu,” considers the “sportification of the sword” as it traces the transition of *kenjutsu* from a combat art to a combat sport. The third chapter, “The Fall and Rise of Samurai Culture: Kenjutsu’s Nationalization,” looks at the modernization and reinvention of *kenjutsu* into kendo during the Meiji period within the context of Japan forging a national identity. It also treats the formation of the Dai Nippon Butokukai and its role in the standardization of martial arts. Chapter 4, “Sharpening the Empire’s Claws,” examines how the state utilized kendo to prepare youth for war by making it compulsory and brutalizing the techniques. Chapter 5, “Kendo and Sports: Path of Reason or Cultural Treason?,” follows this to the postwar period, where kendo was sanitized into a democratic sport devoid of militarism. The final chapter, “Crossing Swords and Borders: The Global Diffusion of Kendo,” traces the international spread of kendo in Europe and the Americas as well as the former colonies of Korea and Taiwan.

It is obvious that the author is highly invested in kendo in both professional and personal senses, and a slight perfume of idealism can be detected in certain parts. When he tells us that the extreme side of kendo (introduced to the author by Sano sensei) “is accessible only when one is able to let go and shed the ego” (p. xxv), it would seem to imply that the stark and severe power relationships characteristic of such *dōjō* are themselves devoid of egotistical concerns altogether, something I have personally observed not always to be the case. On the whole, however, the book steers clear of over-romanticizing kendo and taking the popular discourse as unquestioned. On the contrary, he reminds us that while kendo may be perceived as the “purest” of the martial arts, evidenced in its prevalence at the school and community club level, as it is practiced today it is a modern invention (p. 20). His discussion also traces its growth and establishment in the modern Japanese cultural landscape, within which he cites Harumi Befu’s assertion that Japan’s modernization coincided with a process of “samuraization” where the values of the former ruling samurai class came to be perceived as normative of Japan. As is well known, this ideology was also transmitted overseas through Nitobe Inazō’s *Bushidō*, a work that still serves to inform a large number of foreign enthusiasts about the “spirit” of Japan.

One thing that stands out is the omission of Chinese characters throughout the book. While this work is clearly scholarly in nature, mainly written for Japanese studies specialists, owing to the nature of the topic it will also no doubt be read by a large number of kendo and other *budō* enthusiasts. That being said, the inclusion of Chinese characters—whether in-text or in an index—would have facilitated reading for the specialist and made it more stimulating for the enthusiast (who may well be studying Japanese). With the names of so many *budō* schools, people, government committees, and texts, I found myself writing the characters into the text myself. If one is going to include macrons, it would make sense to provide characters as well; unless the omission was the preference of the publisher.

In addition, considering how thorough his treatment of *budō* and how prominent the themes of internationalization and the invention and evolution of tradition, I find it surprising that the author did not even mention the phenomenon of Brazilian jiu-jitsu. This art, founded by the Japanese immigrant Maeda Mitsuyo (1878–1941) and expanded and developed by the Brazilian Gracie family, now has come full circle back to Japan where there are hundreds of *dōjōs* and thousands of Japanese practitioners who now take *jūjutsu* 柔術 (popularly romanized as “jiu-jitsu”) to refer to its Brazilian manifestation. This may be asking too much, however. Bennett has given us a thoroughly researched, eminently readable, and scholarly mature study of an important cultural nexus in kendo, one that has finally found a prominent place in English-language scholarship.

Reviewed by James Baskind