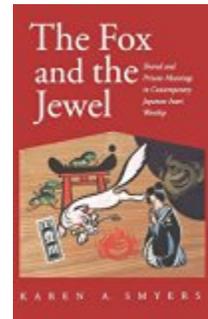


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Karen A. Smyers. *The Fox and the Jewel: Shared and Private Meanings In Contemporary Japanese Inari Worship*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998. viii + 271 pp. \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8248-2102-9; \$49.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-2058-9.

Reviewed by Cathy Mosely (Storyteller and Independent Scholar)
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My interest in foxes began several years ago and originally focused on finding positive stories to include in my storytelling repertoire. However, this interest has broadened and I have found myself researching a diverse range of topics, which includes a growing interest in Asian culture and lore. Originally I had only had a passing interest, but with a vast amount of fox stories coming from Japanese and Chinese folklore I realized that I needed to further my reading. And in doing so, I happily stumbled upon this book.

The Fox and the Jewel is broken into seven chapters, with the first chapter, "Introducing Inari," establishing the premise that Inari worship encompasses a diverse range of followers, beliefs, and locales. However, there is, despite this diversity, a recognizable set of symbols: the fox, the jewel, red torii, red worship hall, prayer flags, rock altar, cedar, fried tofus, and rice. Some or all of these are usually present during worship, and the author discusses the concepts connected with each in later chapters. She gives the fox and the jewel their own separate chapters. In this chapter the author also gives a brief history of Inari worship.

The second chapter, "Priestly Traditions and Shamanic Influences," discusses the two major centers of Inari worship, Fushimi Inari and Toyokawa Inari, where the author did a year of field work each. In this way she was able to compare and contrast the Shinto and Buddhist beliefs about Inari. However, she does not simply deal with the priests and lay workers of the two main temples, she also interviewed a wide range of "religious specialists," which is a term she chose for the healers and shamanistic leaders that follow their own form of Inari worship. With this chapter she also shows that,

even though these are major centers, they do not dictate a central doctrine, even amongst their most devoted followers.

Chapters Three and Four deal with the main symbols of Inari, the Fox and the Jewel, respectively. In these chapters, Smyers covers the religious views of the symbols, the folkloric background, and the etymological theories currently being offered. And with her discussion of the Fox she includes information about the status of living foxes in Japan today. She also points out that while many priests disapprove of the focus given the Fox in Inari worship, since they prefer not to imply that Inari takes a form of a fox, that they do not remove the statues. Even though the fox as a symbol is downplayed by the priests in the centers, it is quietly acknowledged that the symbol is inextricably bound up in Inari worship.

Chapters Five and Six, "A God of One's Own: Individualizing Inari" and "Shared Semantics and Private Persuasions," discuss the nearly infinite range of views and ways of worship. These chapters emphasize the extremely personal views of Inari, and how this variety coexists. In Chapter Six, there is a general breakdown of some of the communicative styles that the author noted during her research.

Chapter Seven, "From Rice to Riches—The Inclusiveness of Inari," discusses how Inari has come to encompass not only agriculture (embodied by the symbol of rice), but monetary prosperity, as well as the richness of good health. This, however, only touches on a few aspects of a very rich belief system—a system that the author has endeavored to give a balanced overview of. In this chapter, Smyers concludes with the idea that the success of Inari worship lies in its ability to adapt and to update, by

which it remains a viable, and living, religion. She also points out that the importance of the Fox as a symbol lies in its history of being a shape shifter in the lore, with its embodiment of both light and dark elements, and in its known adaptability.

The Fox and the Jewel is an excellent overview of not only Inari worship, but of how one element of religion

functions in Japanese society. And the author also has a very readable style, which is enhanced by her descriptions of the her field work.

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