

H-Net Reviews

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Sheila Cliffe. *The Social Life of Kimono: Japanese Fashion Past and Present*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. Illustrations, charts. xvi + 229 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4725-8552-3; \$88.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4725-8553-0.

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Commissioned by Martha Chaiklin

It is telling that the title of Sheila Cliffe's volume is not *Social Life of THE Kimono*, which I found myself correcting endlessly while writing this review, but *The Social Life of Kimono*. Kimono, like many Japanese words, is both singular and plural, even in English-language usage. The choice not to use a definitive article takes away the oriental, monolithic, grandiose overtones so often implied by talking about "the kimono." The title hints at the fact that Cliffe is interested in kimono not as a lofty, mummified, cultured item stiff with nationalistic overtones but as a more humble clothing item. This dressing down of kimono relocates it to a space where the garment becomes the equivalent of a T-shirt and jeans, a fashion item to be played with and subverted.

Indeed, the T-shirt and jeans analogy, although overused, is more apt than you might think, given that both kimono and T-shirts have migrated from inner wear and underwear to stand-alone garments. Cliffe traces this sartorial migration, as well as a sociocultural one, in the early chapters of the text. Chapter 1 ("Think Fashion or Tradition?"), chapter 2 ("Tracing Trends in Heian and Edo"), and chapter 3 ("Mode Becomes Modern: Meiji to Twenty-First Century") provide something of a timeline for the development of kimono from the late 700s to current-day Tokyo. This is a path that has been traversed by other scholars, for example, Liza Dalby in *Kimono: Fashioning Culture* (1993). However, Cliffe proposes a paradigm shift when investigating kimono. Cliffe's work builds on other fashion scholars' rejection of fashion studies' ongoing exclusion of non-Western garments and its obsession with a Eurocentric approach. Looking at kimono as an item of fashion helps to distance the garment

from preexisting oriental overtones inherent in reading the garment as folk dress, and instead places it on the same stage as haute couture.

Chapter 4, "In Press and Picture: Kimono Discourse," provides an overview of kimono in print: in both image and word. It is one of the most image-rich sections of the book, and covers both kimono pattern books, used to showcase a kimono house or artisan designs for clients to order from, and such scholarly works as Dalby's book mentioned above. In the preface to *The Social Life of Kimono*, Cliffe states that she set out to write the kimono book that she could not find—the successor to *Japanese Costume and the Makers of Its Elegant Tradition* by Helen Benton Minnich (1963) and Dalby's *Kimono*. This chapter gives an overview of key English-language kimono scholarship, providing something of an annotated bibliography. It is this scholarly commentary that means that Cliffe's book, although rich in images, avoids being another "coffee-table" book on kimono. A highlight of the chapter is the comparison of two English-language kimono guides that reflect the dichotomy that Cliffe presents in her work. Yamanaka Norio's *The Book of Kimono: The Complete Guide to Style and Wear* (1982) lays out sixty-two separate steps for putting on a formal visiting kimono, aimed more at showcasing the impossibility for non-Japanese to wear kimono. In contrast, *The New Kimono: From Vintage Style to Everyday Chic* (2011), by the editors of kimono magazine *Nanaoh*, focuses on humble cotton and wool garments worn by everyday people.

The final chapters of Cliffe's work build on this idea

of everyday kimono wearers, both in Japan and scattered around the world. Chapter 5 (“Making and Marketing”), chapter 6 (“Wearers and Wardrobes”), and chapter 7 (“Returning Kimono to the Streets”) are, to my mind, where the true value of *The Social Life of Kimono* lies. Cliffe’s own experiences as a daily kimono wearer and her connections to artisans and craftspeople linked to kimono production give a fascinating insight that other kimono scholarship has overlooked.

It is hard not to look at Cliffe’s volume in comparison with Manami Okazaki’s *Kimono Now* (2015), which appeared two years earlier. The two volumes cover similar ground; however, Okazaki’s is firmly in the realm of the coffee-table book with a vast collection of images and fashion spreads of street fashion stars, such as Rinrin and Kurebayashi. I cannot help but wish that Cliffe had included more of her own extensive kimono collection or even more interviews with the rising stars of kimono on social media, such as Anji Salz (based in Tokyo) and Kimono Salaokabe (in Melbourne) in addition to more established kimono wearers, such as Berber Oostenburg, Lyuba Johnson, and Naomi Hormozi, who also appear in Okazaki’s book. Cliffe focuses on the living, breathing kimono traversing the busy streets of Tokyo and the back streets of rural Japan. Okazaki’s volume, like Dalby’s, is firmly located in the rarefied air of Kyoto. While it could be assumed that Tokyo and Kyoto wearers of kimono are doing the same thing, years of differing taste, political friction, gender roles, and cultural stereotypes have, as Cliffe points out in her commentary on Dalby, resulted in two opposing kimono wearing practices.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should state that I am a longtime follower of Cliffe’s kimono Facebook page (and of Oostenburg, Johnson, Hormozi, and Salz). In 2014, I worked with Barbara Hartley to bring part of Cliffe’s kimono collection to Australia as part of the Technologies of Gender symposium held at the University of Tasmania. Throughout her research, Cliffe has maintained a strong online presence through her kimono Facebook page and her series of Youtube videos. This further contemporizes kimono practice and means that follow-up work—the ongoing social life of kimono, perhaps—could be conducted through this platform. Indeed, Cliffe has already stated that she plans to expand

her work on kimono wearers’ wardrobes, the preliminary research of which is showcased in chapter 6. It is, after all, in these social aspects that Cliffe’s strength lies. Cliffe mentions in her prologue that she was a volunteer during the cleanup of the aftermath of the devastating 3/11 earthquakes. During her work, she found that there was still a strong connection between kimono and everyday Japanese. In a single sentence, Cliffe relates how kimono were some of the most mourned possessions lost in the disaster, even by those who are not kimono wearers themselves. This tantalizing note hints at how kimono has wrapped itself around the very soul of the Japanese people. And while it may be too raw now, it is a narrative that warrants further study.

The Social Life of Kimono falls somewhere between beautiful coffee-table book and academic study. As Joy Hendry points out in her *Times Higher Education* review, parts of the book feel like a glossy mook (magazine book) but others can be hard to read at times.[1] Cliffe’s work highlights both the disciplinary struggle in fashion studies of looking beyond the West for credible style innovation while also combating ongoing misconceptions that kimono as a garment is an archaic, monolithic, unchanging symbol. Given its vast range, it should be accessible to both Japan scholars and wider readers. Perhaps the reason why there are so many kimono books is due to the versatility of the garment. Given a full range of obi sashes and kimono accessories, it is rare that two kimono wearers would put together the same ensemble, even when wearing the same robe; one-hundred-year-old kimono can be worn with a fresh style today by mixing in a new accessory. *The Social Life of Kimono* does cover well-trodden ground in parts, but it mixes in new information and hints at future projects by Cliffe, making it as tantalizing as the glimpse of a hidden collar on a kimono wearer as they run to catch their train in downtown Tokyo.

Note

[1]. Joy Hendry, review of *The Social Life of Kimono: Japanese Fashion Past and Present* by Sheile Cliffe, *Times Higher Education* (April 20, 2017): <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/books/review-social-life-kimono-japanese-fashion-past-and-present-sheila-cliffe>.

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