



Barbara R. Ambros, *Bones of Contention: Animals and Religion in Contemporary Japan*

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THIS MONOGRAPH on recent Japanese pet mortuary practices is a welcome contribution to the study of religion and human-animal relationships in Japan. Barbara Ambros was introduced to the pet cremation and memorial services industries in 1999 when her parakeet was euthanatized after an abrupt seizure. Later, as she learned that this topic has gotten attention from scholars as well as spiritualists and Buddhist clergies, she decided to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in pet cemeteries, Buddhist temples, zoos, and aquariums (8–9). The thesis of this book is very clear and consistent throughout the text: while most scholars discuss whether pet mortuary practices are more akin to their human counterparts than those for plants and objects, or vice versa, Ambros argues that the liminal status occupied by pets is what makes this topic so controversial in Japanese society (9). The disposal of a pet's body and the ideas associated with it become a “bone of contention” because while pets are considered as members of the family by contemporary Japanese pet owners, there is an understanding that the human and animal spheres should be clearly separated and stratified.

The author's archival research is thorough—she draws from Japanese folklorists, scholars of Japanese religion, psychiatrists, spiritualists, pet loss specialists, various Japanese websites, newspaper articles, and the Japanese classics (*koten*). A brief summary of five chapters suffices as an illustration of my point. Chapter 1 describes the premodern Japanese perception of animals, which she argues was under heavy ideological influence from China (48). This recognition of the hybridity of premodern Japanese perceptions towards animals seems to implicitly prepare the reader for her later analysis that contemporary pet mortuary practices encompass Christian ideas as well as Buddhist, folk, and possibly New Age beliefs (158, 171–85).

Chapter 2 is devoted to the historical analysis of (early) modern Japanese mortuary practices for non-pet animals. She points out the public nature of these practices for animals in laboratories, the military, the food industry, and zoos, in contrast to the intimate, private atmosphere surrounding contemporary pet mortuary practices (88–89). Ambros argues that modern mortuary practices for non-pet animals, which were established in the age of industrialization, justified human exploitation of these animals (87).

In chapter 3, she turns to legal aspects of the pet mortuary industry and compares two legal cases that resulted in contrasting judgments: pet-related services provided by Jimyōin, a Buddhist temple in Nagoya, were taxed (104), while those of Ekoin in Tokyo were exempt because the services were considered to meet the

religious objectives of the temple rather than regarded as a sideline (110). This case study also reveals that human-animal boundaries are not only contested in the sphere of religion but also in that of law.

Both chapters 4 and 5 concern themselves with the contemporary debate on the proper mortuary practice for deceased pets. Chapter 4 examines the spatial aspects associated with the actual practice of pet mortuary services, and chapter 5 focuses on the discourses regarding a pet's whereabouts after its death. In chapter 4, Ambros argues that the emergence of human-pet joint burial and memorialization initially seems to erase the boundary between human and animal, but a closer look at the actual practice reveals that they in fact reaffirm the boundary by separating and stratifying the mortuary landscape (155). This chapter is a powerful reminder that people's world views are often materialized in landscapes, but can easily become a stage where these world views are contested, negotiated, and modified (for example, 143–46). In chapter 5, Ambros proposes that there is a shift in the discourse surrounding the posthumous state of pets. In the 1990s, spiritualists explained that pets may become vengeful spirits unless properly appeased (163), while in later periods, peaceful images of a pet's afterlife have been proposed and have gradually spread, partly due to the introduction of pet loss literature (171).

The broad range covered in this book, both historical and topical, is possible thanks to Ambros' extensive reading of published materials in conjunction with her interviews and participant observation. Personally, I find her thesis of the liminality of pets quite accurate as well as anthropologically interesting. It is true that anthropologists have paid attention to the liminal when it comes to the classification of animals (LEACH 1964). However, traditional theory tends to treat it as a static cosmology, while Ambros proposes a more dynamic picture where the human-animal boundary is not assumed but constantly negotiated among various actors. In this regard, the book aligns with recent interdisciplinary literature on human-animal boundaries (HARAWAY 1991).

As a contribution to the ethnography of contemporary Japanese society, this book sheds new light beyond the immediate topic of concern, namely human-animal relations. For example, according to Ambros, many Japanese people reject the idea of pet mortuary rites because, unlike memorial practices for non-pet animals, these rites do not evoke the sense of community, stressing instead an individual or a nuclear family's connection to the companion animal (89). This analysis has an immediate relevance to the age-old problem of inside/outside, or public/private dichotomy (NAKANE 1970). Multiplicity and amalgamation of belief systems are also well documented (see OHNUKI-TIERNEY 1984). However, since the assimilation of Christian, New Age, and psychological ideas into the public discourse seem to be rather recent phenomena, they merit more serious attention. As a Japanese scholar interested in religion I cannot help but think of the seemingly heathen teachings of a "cleric of animals" with the world views depicted in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Christian and psychological; SADAMOTO 1994–2013) or *Kan'nagi* (Shinto, Christian, psychological; TAKENASHI 2006–2013).

This book also left me with an impression that Ambros' choice of a multi-sited ethnography hinders her from developing a more ethnographically down-to-earth

analysis. I was expecting the focus of the book to be a detailed life history and participant observation of individual pet owners possibly before and after the death of the pet. Unfortunately, it seemed as if the ethnographic data were used as an eye-catching anecdote or just to confirm the point already made through other sources, thus masking the richness of firsthand experience. In other words, I expected chapter 5 to be full of examples like that of Ms. M. and much more about her and other participants' lives before and after the ritual (156–57). The pet mortuary service industry operates in many communities and so it is at least necessary to mention how similar or different those practices are in different regions. In that sense, as a multi-sited ethnography this book has done a good job of generalizing recent trends and at the same time as dealing with local differences (as shown in chapter 3). Nevertheless, reading chapter 5, which points out the shift in perceptions regarding a pet's afterlife, I wondered about the individual processes where such an understanding is achieved and internalized in a pet owner's mind: how does the mass media help people to come to their own understanding? In other words, how does Ms. M. know that “animals are locked into a continuous rebirth as animals desirable” (170)? Are there any other sources involved in this process? How does the family make decisions about the way in which they treat the body of their dead pets? Do members of a family share the same ideas of a pet's afterlife? Do they negotiate it among themselves? I believe another chapter targeting these questions above would have benefited this informative and thought-provoking work.

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