Book Reviews

Barbara R. Ambros


*Bones of Contention* examines the long history of animals in the Japanese religious imagination, the surprisingly short history of memorial rites for deceased animals, and the fraught position deceased pets occupy in the contemporary religious landscape. In the book’s introduction, Barbara Ambros explains that her work was inspired in part by the death of one of her own pets: while she was working in Tokyo, her parakeet Homer died unexpectedly; Ambros elected to have his remains interred at Jōnan Pet Cemetery, a site run by a Nichiren Buddhist temple (p. 8). Attentive readers might note that Ambros’s other pets earn a mention in the acknowledgements that open the volume and in the biographical sketch that closes it. Ambros clearly loves animals and *Bones of Contention* explores territory that will be intuitively interesting to readers who share this feeling. But this is not a sentimental book. On the contrary, it offers a sustained critical interrogation of the liminal position assigned to animals in the Japanese religious worldview, resisting nostalgia and romanticism at every turn. Drawing on an astonishingly diverse set of textual and ethnographic sources (from the *Kojiki* to corporate tax law), Ambros has taken what would appear at first glance to be a narrow topic of investigation and produced a wide-ranging, fascinating study.

In her first chapter, Ambros sets out to unsettle the usual “overly idealistic reading of Japanese religious traditions and their views on animals” (p. 18). From the Jōmon period onward, animals functioned both as natural and symbolic resources: the pre-modern Japanese ritual specialist managed the cosmic order by manipulating not only animal images but also animal bodies, whether by protecting those bodies (as in the case of animals of unusual color sent to court as gifts) or killing them (as in the case of animals sacrificed in rituals of spirit pacification) (pp. 34–35). The rise of Buddhism as the “dominant ide-
ology” of the Heian period introduced a new way of thinking about animals, stressing their “beastly otherness” (p. 25). Still, Ambros argues, the line between human and animal remained a porous one: liminal people whose professions brought them into close contact with animal products were characterized as beasts (chikushō) but animals were also sometimes imagined as exemplars of the particularly human virtues of gratitude and good manners (p. 38). Stories of animals paying back favors many times over developed alongside rituals of animal release, which Ambros reads in connection to a third way of thinking about animals—understood as living beings, animals became the focus of sympathetic concern, and rituals of release functioned to generate karmic merit for animal and human participants alike. Ambros stresses, however, that the language of merit was flexible: the notion of ensuring a good rebirth also underwrote the ongoing practice of animal sacrifice at Suwa shrines (p. 42). The tension between animal as being and animal as mere object only intensified during the early modern period, with the same Neo-Confucian pharmacological texts that detailed the culinary and medical uses of various animal species recording the magical powers each species was known to possess (p. 45). Ambros elegantly summarizes this as “a dichotomy between animals as resources and animals as supernatural forces” (p. 46).

This dichotomy is at heart of Ambros’s analysis of memorial rites (kuyō) for animals. Although the practice of animal kuyō is sometimes imagined as an ancient one, Ambros argues that in fact, it is in almost every way a modern invention. The book’s second chapter traces the development of animal kuyō over the course of the early modern and modern periods, starting with the “prototypical” memorial mounds for bears and whales that appear in the first half of the eighteenth century (p. 57), through the memorial rites for military animals that grip the public imagination in the 1930s and 1940s (pp. 66–68), and on into kuyō for livestock, laboratory animals, and zoo animals that spring up during the postwar period (pp. 71–86). Rather than reading animal kuyō as evidence of a deep-seated and quintessentially Japanese respect for animal life that persists despite the increasing commodification of animal bodies made possible by modern technologies, Ambros suggests reading kuyō as the mask that conceals commodification (p. 83) and so makes it bearable. She thus calls into question our received understanding of animal kuyō as an authentic element of the Japanese religious tradition—if it is a tradition at all, it is an invented tradition (p. 87).

Although Ambros devotes the first two chapters of the book to reviewing the history of animals and animal memorials in Japan, her target is the present moment. She notes that memorial rites for pets are consistently read in opposition to other forms of animal kuyō: animal kuyō is constructed as an authentic