

**Barbara R. Ambros.** *Bones of Contention: Animals and Religion in Modern Japan.*  
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**Commissioned by** Jolyon B. Thomas (University of Pennsylvania)

In *Bones of Contention*, Barbara Ambros asks her readers to consider an intriguing question: What can a focus on the burial and memorialization of animals tell us about contemporary Japanese religions?[1] As it turns out, quite a lot. Ambros's fascinating new study of pet memorialization takes up long-standing issues in the field while breaking new ground. This broad-ranging study covers premodern spirit possession, the industrialization of consumption, the militarization of animals, ambiguities in the legal definition of religion, necrogeography, religion on the Internet, and the explosion of pet culture in postwar Japan. Based on four years of ethnographic fieldwork at zoos, aquariums, museums, temples, and pet cemeteries (primarily in the Kantō area), and combined with extensive historical background, this book provides an excellent model for how a historian should tackle a contemporary subject. It represents a welcome advance in the study of contemporary Japanese religions and will work well in both undergraduate classes and graduate seminars. After briefly summarizing the book and

marking some of its significant contributions, I would then like to use the volume to reflect on the current state of the field, particularly the use of ethnographic methods to study contemporary Japanese Buddhism.

Ambros's main goal in the early chapters is to push back against rhetorical and ideological attempts to situate contemporary pet memorial services within an innate, timeless Japanese intimacy with animals and nature. *Nihonjinron* (the idea that Japan is uniquely unique) aficionados will appreciate the author's careful historical refutation of this enduring canard. Chapter 1 explores symbolic, spiritual, and etymological representations of animals in the premodern period. Not only does Ambros confront idealized notions of Japanese "oneness with nature," but she also challenges romanticized notions of Buddhist compassion. Those of us who discuss medieval-period animal release ceremonies (*hōjōe*) in our courses would do well to consider the author's caveat (via Fabio Rambelli and Lisa Grumbach) that "injunctions against taking life mixed soteriological con-

cerns with concrete sociopolitical goals and claims to territorial power” (p. 41).

In chapter 2, Ambros extends this argument into the modern period, contextualizing memorial and propitiatory rites for animals not within an inherent Japanese love of nature, but rather its commodification and consumption. In the twentieth century the increase in animal-related ritual directly relates to the “modern military, industrialized whaling and fishing as well as other food industries, and modern educational and research facilities that rely on killing or commodifying large numbers of animals” (p. 12). Ambros helpfully distinguishes modern memorials for military animals, animals in the food industry, lab animals, and zoo animals across three periods: “the fascist 1930s and 1940s,” “the memorial-rite boom in the 1970s and 1980s,” and the contemporary period. The chapter’s central argument is that the growth of memorial rites for animals in the twentieth century came as a specific response to “modernity and the commodification of animals” (p. 52). Here again, the author moderates nostalgic interpretations—for example, the idea that food-industry rites are motivated by a fear of vengeful animal spirits—by also considering modern elements such as public relations, employee bonding, and the economic bottom line. Citing Jun Morikawa, Ambros points out that festivals and memorial rites in remote whaling towns, ostensibly offered to propitiate the spirits of the animals, also serve to “promote a prowhaling agenda and revitalize local whaling and fishing economies by creating positive publicity and encouraging among the public the consumption of whale meat” (p. 75).

Chapter 3 tackles taxation of religious institutions by contrasting the findings of Supreme Court cases challenging the tax exemption of two pet-memorial temples. In the case of Jimyōin, a Tendai temple in Kasugai City, the Supreme Court decided in favor of assessing corporate income taxes, while in the case of Ekōin, a Jōdo temple in

Tokyo, the Court upheld its tax-exempt status. By teasing out what she calls the Court’s “paradoxical conclusions,” Ambros provides one of the most important contributions of the book, intersecting with two central but as yet woefully understudied aspects of contemporary religious life: (1) the fundamental place of economic and legal factors in the maintenance and propagation of Japanese temple Buddhism and (2) the crucial role that legislation and state bureaucracy play in defining religious activity. Ambros’s discussion in this chapter dovetails nicely with Stephen Covell’s examination of taxation and temple tourism, and the two would serve as the basis for an excellent teaching module on the subject.[2] In addition, her attention to the boundary-marking function of bureaucracy can be put into fruitful conversation with Jason Josephson’s arguments concerning the significance of international treaties in defining religion, as well as with the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*’ recent special issue on religion after Aum.[3]

Chapter 4 deals with sacred space, particularly “necrogeography,” and is primarily concerned with detailing different ways in which spaces for deceased pets are segregated from similar human spaces. Home altars, family graves, ossuaries, and crematoriums all enforce species boundaries. But pets, like zombies, vampires, ghosts and other boundary transgressors, offer helpful critiques of human and nonhuman distinctions. Ambros’s arguments, both here and throughout the book, hinge on the idea that pets are necessarily liminal beings. Her use of liminal, however, is somewhat removed from its full context. Liminal does not represent a static betwixt and between state, but rather a dynamic process of separation from one status and reincorporation into another. Simply setting up a distinct pet burial space does not, in and of itself, make it liminal. I would suggest that the aspect of this process that is excluded—the reincorporation of pet cremains into communal ossuaries—could add additional dimensions to the story. While Ambros takes up the often con-

tentious issue of placing animal remains in the same grave as their owners, she does not deal with the implication of human and animal remains being literally combined. I could only find one exception to this oversight—the Internet chat room post by a man who *claimed* he was secretly going to mix the ashes of the family dog with his father’s remains (p. 146). Missing from the book’s discussion of mixing is what happens when these graves no longer have anyone to maintain them. Once yearly maintenance fees cease, the grave is cleared out and reused. The interred remains are then moved to a communal ossuary where the ashes are all poured in together. At this point, anyone interred in the temple grave has no choice whether or not he or she wishes to be mixed with the remains of animals. Objections to this possibility were being raised in the early 1990s by scholars such as Mori Kenji, but are unfortunately absent from the book.

In chapter 5, Ambros turns to religious discussions of the posthumous fate of animals. While Buddhist clerics appear unable or unwilling to articulate their conceptions of an animal afterlife, other professionals, particularly psychics and clairvoyants, have been only too happy to fill this gap. Ambros introduces several popular spiritualists who stress the vengeful nature of animal spirits while simultaneously offering solutions they claim are far more effective than Buddhist practices. This discussion is particularly useful in situating Buddhist memorial rites within the broader spiritual marketplace. As Ambros ably demonstrates, scholarship on contemporary Buddhism is most effective when it places temples and priests in the context of contemporary society with other religious professionals who have equal access to all the modern modes of public dissemination.

Turning now to methodological and conceptual issues, *Bones* provokes scholars to consider a number of fundamental issues in the study of contemporary religious life. The first issue is historiographical in scope: how exactly do we make con-

nections between historical precedents, doctrinal tenets, foundational texts, and contemporary practices? I am not referring to vague, simplistic correspondences—what are the actual processes by which history is connected to and understood by people in the present? Do earlier religious forms provide specific motivations or simply generalized, after-the-fact justifications? What are the most significant historical moments in that process and do they become more or less relevant as we get closer to the present? What exactly do we mean when we write, for example, that doctrinal associations between a “horse-headed wrathful Avolokitesvara” and Jizō are “*reflected* in animal memorial stones and in the iconography of contemporary pet cemeteries” (pp. 38-39; emphasis mine)? How are we to understand the verb “*reflected*”? Elucidating these questions opens into the more fundamental issue of what contemporary studies offer and what the responsibilities of those of us working in the field are to text, history, and doctrine. Ambros does an excellent job of providing a wealth of historical background regarding Japanese notions of animals, but largely to show that those attitudes, as in other cultures, have always been ambiguous, practical, and economically motivated. Considering Ambros’s focus on three historical periods in the modern period, there could have been more engagement with the emergence of *mizuko kuyō*, which peaked during the second of Ambros’s historical periods, or the spread of Eternal Memorial Graves, which duplicate many of the processes Ambros outlines with pet memorials. All three practices represent temple Buddhist responses to the same demographic and market (religious and secular) shifts, and all three involve attempts to connect to a putatively immutable past.

The second methodological issue that needs to be addressed concerns the ethnographic component of the book. In addition to a number of monographs published over the last several years, we are about to see a significant increase in publications on contemporary Japanese religions. I

know of at least six dissertation projects in the area, two of which will be going to publishers this year. *Bones*, though full of poignant ethnographic vignettes, could have benefited from more ethnographic detail. Despite a wealth of background information on the two temples featured in chapter 3, I found myself wanting more. Is it enough to look at a number of sites in Tokyo and then contrast them with a few temples elsewhere? How much detail should we provide on the regionality (*chikisei*) of these temples? Is it a region historically strong in a given sect? What does that mean for temples from other denominations? Is it an area suffering from depopulation (*kasō*)? What is the primary form of income for the area? Fishing communities have much different ritual demands and expectations than farming areas or white-collar suburbs. I also wanted to see more details about the thirty sites Ambros visited. How were they chosen? How were they approached? Were there any pet memorial sites that failed?

The same sorts of issues come up with the individuals making the choice to create these new memorial practices. What were their family and educational backgrounds? How were they trained, both formally and informally? What work have they done outside of their temples? In chapter 5, for example, we are introduced to Yokota Harumasa, a fascinating Sōtō abbot who calls himself a “cleric for animals” and who “promotes a vision of the afterlife that combines Buddhist, animistic, and Christian notions with psychology and pet loss therapy” (p. 180). Though never clearly stated, it appears as he was not temple-born (*zaike*), which is as significant to understanding his motives as anything else we are offered. I bring up these points not to critique the book, but to urge scholars working in the contemporary period to consider a broader range of factors in seeking causal relations for temple activities.

Again, in the hopes of spurring a larger conversation on method, I would like to consider how

Ambros addresses the issue of correlation—that is to say the kinds of inferences we can draw from the ethnographic study of pet memorial temples. For example, Ambros informs readers that at temples offering pet memorials she commonly encountered priests constructing “Buddhism as a religion for the living” (p. 162). The implication is that this orientation is somehow particular to these temples and that priests who are not conducting pet *kuyō* conceive of Buddhism differently. That this framing occurs consistently throughout the second half of the book should not surprise us. The author is writing about animal memorials and thus needs to clear rhetorical space to justify the attention. Her primary move here is to argue that the ambiguity of a pet’s position in the household, family, and memorial cycle sets them apart and thus offers a unique perspective on the people who conduct animal rites and the places where they occur. I would argue the exact opposite. While one could make a case for the distinctiveness of the rites themselves, the priests who conduct them are utterly typical. For practically every passage of priestly description in the book, one could replace the word “pet” with “person” and the author’s claims would ring no less true. One example should suffice: “Unable or untrained to produce appealing answers based on doctrinal sources, many clerics avoid addressing the issue of the afterlife of [people] entirely” (p. 161). Other aspects of pet funerals and memorials listed in the book that hold equally true for human services include, but are in no way limited to: the reactions of mourners when they first encounter the cremated remains of a pet, that no one is overly concerned about vengeful spirits, that priests are not following established doctrine, that priests are not getting much help from their institutions on how to adapt ritual to local realities, and that priests are reluctant to detail pricing for their services.

Approaching pet-memorial temples as distinct has helped the author frame a compelling story of the afterlife of animals, but in so doing I

think she has potentially limited the scope of her findings. What we have here is a detailed, nuanced, and wide-ranging study of the state of contemporary Japanese Buddhism. It should be required reading for anyone working in the field.

Notes

[1]. I would like to thank the graduate participants of RS 716, aka “Cool Books on Japanese Religions,” for a fascinating and fruitful discussion of this book.

[2]. Stephen Covell, *Japanese Temple Buddhism: Worldliness in a Religion of Renunciation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005).

[3]. Jason Ananda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012) ; and *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 39, no. 1 (2012).

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(Josephson 2012; *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 2012)

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*Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 39/1. 2012

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[2] The idea that Japan is uniquely unique.

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