

**Christine L. Marran**

**Pets, Death, and Taxes**

**Barbara Ambros, *Bones of Contention: Animal and Religion in Contemporary Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2012. 265 pp. \$55.00 (hb); \$29.00 pb.**

The endorsements adorning the back of Barbara Ambros' enticing monograph describe *Bones of Contention: Animals and Religion in Contemporary Japan* as a study of pet memorial rites in the archipelago, but the book is about much more than that. *Bones of Contention* offers a detailed portrait of pet rituals in contemporary Japan through the lens of a broader history of animal memorial rites in East Asia, and describes the significant role that animals have played in Japanese culture as divine, shape-shifting, and disparaged creatures.

In introducing the reasons that pet memorialization forms a contentious subject in contemporary Japan as her book title suggests, Ambros outlines a number of broader debates on animals in Japanese culture. She begins with a detailed, historical counterpoint to the all-too-familiar claim by cultural nationalists and hopeful, but uninformed, scholars of western history and religion that Japanese culture offers an alternative, less dominionist attitude towards animals. Ambros's refreshing perspective proves these claims of Japanese exceptionalism utterly wrong. Her accounts of Buddhist and Shinto ritual convincingly illustrate that these religions have not functioned as an antidote to anthropocentric views of the Judeo-Christian West. Not only does Ambros' history of commemorative animal memorials show Japanese religious thought about animals to have changed over time, but she shows how attention to religious ceremony enables us to "transcend an overly idealistic reading of Japanese religious traditions and their views on animals" (18).

As part of depicting animals in memorial practice, Ambros outlines historical conceptions of what an animal was. The various terms used for animals in the premodern period suggest that the concept of "animal" was fluid and that there was a stronger sense of connection among the animal, human, and spiritual realms than in the modern period. Terms used to refer to animals depended on whether the emphasis lay on differentiating among animals, determining relative degrees of kinship among animals, differentiating animals from humans, or delineating modes of connection with the spiritual realm. This attention to past classifications of animals sheds light on the unfortunate narrowing of terms used to describe animals in the modern period such

that they can be referred to in various disciplines as a single undifferentiated unit (the “nonhuman” or “the animal”) primarily to give reference to the human. Ambros’ analysis of different historical taxonomies shows that the singular category of “animal” was not just a product of western modernity but developed through Buddhist and neo-Confucian cosmologies as well. By arguing that speciesist associations with animals cannot simply be the product of the rise of modernity and western attitudes (48), her work goes far in undoing the myth of Japanese exceptionalism and the conventional contemporary privileging of Buddhist thought as more ethical toward animals in Japan.

Ambros continues with the subject of claimed exceptionalism for Japanese treatment of animals and nature in her history of modern animal ritual. She shows how contemporary native animism (from the 1970s) enabled citizens to use animals for utilitarian purposes even as it treated them as spiritual beings, and how religious belief turned animals into willing martyrs for the sake of the nation’s progress and prosperity (51). Ambros is always careful to provide analogies from other cultures in time, never deeming Japan a unique or special case either in its care or abuse of animals. This makes her understanding of animals in Japanese culture compelling and a far cry from the kind of essentialist claims she finds in some western scholarship such as the example of an historian who “is able to construct the Japanese as exceptional by downplaying the role of animal domestication in Japanese history, by homogenizing human-animal relationships in Japan without regard to historical, regional, or class differences, and by ignoring the heavy use of nostalgia in contemporary Japanese pop culture” (22).

Animal memorial rites may have emerged in the premodern period, but it is with the relatively recent commodification of animals that animal memorial rites began to pursue a “ritualized perfection in the face of the mechanized and often bloody realities of modernity” (52). Ambros vigorously asserts that “although precursors are evident during the medieval period, such as the ritual release of animals and hunting rites, animal memorial rites emerged during the early modern period and became increasingly widespread as Japan became an economic superpower in the twentieth century,” (54). In the case of bears, Ambros shows that “By the early nineteenth century, bear memorials were being erected not to counter existing spirit retribution such as illness (as in the example from the 1730s), infertility, or the strange death of a hunter but to preempt retribution, allowing hunters to continue taking bears unharmed” (57). The same went for whales. The earliest memorials date from the mid-seventeenth century when whalers increasingly used nets to harvest. As with bear memorials, whaling memorials serve to justify the taking of the game. Horses prove to be another example of the way in which the increased use of animal for labor and food meant the increase in

rituals. In this case, the decreased use of horses in the postwar period meant the decrease in memorial rites for horses. Less surprising were the memorials erected for horses used in the military. (In continuing with her comparative perspective, Ambros cites western examples of similar belief that animals were meant to serve human purposes, though she argues that animals were not considered to possess spirits capable of salvation, as in the early modern Japan case.) Ultimately, Ambros calls these kinds of early modern and modern memorials to animals used in consumption, for military purposes, in lab experiments, for service animals, and in zoos “invented traditions” — elaborate rituals disguised as tradition that serve to diffuse the commodification of animals by treating the animals as important agents in building empire, medical institutions, and community, and who are constructed as having sacrificed themselves to such purposes. Through an array of compelling examples, Ambros successfully shows that as the commodification of animals has increased in the contemporary period, so have memorial rites.

Ambros’s twist to familiar histories of anthropocentric dominionism is to show how attitudes about animals emerge from the dead. Writing from the perspective of necrogeography allows her to show how animals straddle the natural, the domestic, the metamorphic, and spiritual worlds. On the one hand, depictions of the memorialization of animal bodies suggest a rejection of a deeply exploitative world when we consider the memorialized animal ashes in the urns of cramped cemetery plots in Buddhist cemeteries in the archipelago. On the other hand, memorials such as those for lab animals seem little more than a gloss for protecting uninterrupted medical research.

After discussing animal ritual in the context of labor and consumption, Ambros turns to the domestication of some animals as pets and the pet memorials for deceased pets. She begins with an extended history of pet-keeping in a cross-cultural context illustrating that domestic animals were primarily kept by social elites in premodern Japan until the post-WW2 period when pet-keeping became a more widespread phenomenon. Ambros is particularly interested in the shift when nonhuman animals came to be considered part of the family unit. She argues that pet memorial rites have little in common with memorial rites used for animals that legitimized imperial, national, and so-called traditional practices, because they do not reside within a broad network of relationships.

In explaining the rise of pet memorial rites, Ambros observes that “in the second half of the twentieth century the scope of memorial rites has been expanded to include a wide variety of beings and inanimate objects from mizuko [aborted fetuses] and pets to eyeglasses and brassiers.” She suggests that Japan’s long history of Buddhist funeral and memorial services and contemporary declining birthrates have encouraged Buddhist temples to seek new ways to produce revenue. Ultimately, pet memorials are used by people who would embrace similar treatment of humans and animals in life and in death, and are provided by an institution that needs revenue like any other. These services, as Ambros shows in detail, can then be subject to taxation, thus providing revenue to the state.

In terms of disciplinary frame, Ambros’s study falls squarely within the parameters of animal geography when she is most concerned with place, especially the landscape of the dead, the taxing of the dead, and the mediatization of the dead. In describing the usefulness of framing her research in terms of animal geography, she cites the relatively new insights found in such texts as Philo and Wilbert’s *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places: New Geographies of Human-Animal Relations* (2000) and Wolch and Emel’s *Animal Geographies: Place, Politics, and Identity in the Nature-Culture Borderlands* (1998). These latter studies of animal geography explore the ways in which human culture has articulated the human-animal divide and subjected animals to social and spatial practices of inclusion and exclusion (14). One might also cite Julie Urbanik’s more recent *Placing Animals: An Introduction to the Geography of Human-Animal Relations* (2012). In general, Ambros does not argue for the importance of any particular disciplinary approach or for placing her work specifically within an established academic discipline or field. This is liberating in the sense that the incredible variety of primary sources, and descriptions of religious and state practices involving animals are themselves the focus of the chapters.

An admirable example of religious and cultural anthropology, and necrogeography, *Bones of Contention* examines ritualized treatment of animals to show changing conceptions of human and nonhuman animal difference, and how Japanese individuals and institutions have chosen particular animal bodies as worthy of special attention for utilitarian, symbolic, spiritual, and economic purposes.