

# Metaphoric Use of the Figures of Animals and Sheep: US-Japan Interracial Relationship Written in the Stories of *Rashamen*

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## 1. Introduction

This paper examines how cultural encounters between the US and Japan were depicted through the metaphoric use of the figures of animals. Specifically, the paper focuses on the gendered representation of sheep—called *rashamen* (羅紗綿, 羅紗緬, 緬羊娘, 洋妾)—in modern Japanese history and in fictional stories from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1930s. *Rashamen* originally meant "sheep." Its meaning gradually changed, however, and it was used as a curse word to denigrate women who had sexual relationships with European and American men at the opening of the country in the 1850s.

While Japanese women who had interracial heterosexual relationships with American men were animalized as sheep, the American males were also compared to animals. Yu-Fang Cho, who scrutinizes representations of miscegenation between the US and Asia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in her *Uncoupling American Empire* (2013), shows a demonized and infantilized picture of the child of a white woman and a Chinese man to express "the fear of interracial intimacy" and of "racial contamination" (Cho 84-87) in the US imperial cultures. In this paper, I argue that Japanese women and American men who had interracial sexual relationships with

each other were metaphorically animalized and demonized in order to advance the fear of miscegenation and of the power relations between the US and Japan.

Animal representations reflect human understanding in a social and cultural context. As Linda Kalof notes in *Looking at Animals in Human History* (2007), hierarchies of gender and race are often shown through the depiction of animals:

... animals have been used to highlight hierarchies of gender, race and class, particularly the disgrace associated with transgressing traditional social boundaries (and for women, those social boundaries are sexual borders). (Kalof viii)

Through the utilization of animal representations as a means to understand human culture and society, we can see how stories of interracial relations between Japanese women and American men employ animal metaphors to symbolize the intercultural and trans-pacific relations between the US and Japan.

## 2. The Gendered/Sexualized Connotative Meaning of Sheep in Japan

During the process of Westernization and modernization in Japan, sheep are represented with gendered/sexualized connotations

associated with political and sexual control. In this chapter, I first briefly examine the history of sheep in Japan and the progression of the meaning of the word *rashamen*.<sup>1</sup>

Until the end of the 19th century, there were almost no sheep in Japan. While the Japanese did not know much about the animal because of its absence, they imported wool from Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch traders in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Though wool products became popular, knowledge of sheep did not develop during the time of national isolation from 1639 to 1853.

After the country opened in 1854, the government began to import and domesticate sheep to harvest wool for military uniforms. The government established agricultural testing fields for wool in Manchuria colony in northern China. Sheep were important for making clothes and collecting foods during World War II and during the American occupation era (1945-1952) after the war.

Sheep herds suddenly began to diminish as Japan witnessed economic growth from the 1950s to the 1970s and started to import wool from Australia and New Zealand. Real sheep are rarely seen in Japan today, though the image of sheep is common. Japanese images of sheep therefore reflect the knowledge of sheep gained from Chinese and European cultures and the influence of those political and economic cultures in Japan.

The Japanese word *rashamen* epitomizes this history. It is derived from the Portuguese word *raxa*, meaning woolen cloth. It was combined with a Japanese word *men* to depict thin, long threads. Therefore, *rashamen* originally meant woolen products or sheep themselves. As the people had never seen the animal before, they identified sheep with wool (Yamane 1983: 15-20).

However, the meaning of *rashamen* gradually changed to imply interracial sexual relationships between Western men and

Japanese women. After the country opened in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, *rashamen* came to refer to women who had sexual relationships with American and European men. Based on the belief that Western sailors committed sexual acts with sheep during their time at sea, *rashamen* was used as a curse word for Japanese mistresses or sex workers who served Western men (Takeshita 183-184). Those women mainly worked in the red-light district called Miyozaki in Yokohama, earning an enormous income by serving foreigners. Being *rashamen* was regarded as disgraceful, especially considering that the Japanese despised foreigners and considered them to be barbarians at that time (Takeshita 179).

The stories of *rashamen* women were fictionalized and widespread in modern Japanese culture. They were also adapted in various ways during the American occupation, when the word *rashamen* was used interchangeably with *pan pan*—an expression that referred to female sex workers for American soldiers (Takeshita 194). Sheep were also used to represent Japan's effeminized status as an occupied and emasculated country during the occupation, as seen in Kenzaburō Ōe's short novel "Ningen no Hitsuji [Human Sheep]" (1958) and Jun Takami's *Haisen Nikki* [Diaries of Defeat] (1959).

Thus, in modern Japanese history, sheep exemplify interracial sexual relationships and the powerless femininity of women and the nation under the control of foreigners. As Yoshida points out, the popularity of the stories and *rashamen* discourses have especially worked as a barometer of US-Japan relationships (Yoshida 4). The next section investigates how early cultural encounters between the US and Japan are depicted in a *rashamen* story that uses metaphoric references to sheep and other animals.

### 3. The use of *Rashamen* and Animal Metaphors in a Story of *Tōjin Okichi*

Okichi, a geisha, is the most famous *rashamen* woman in Japanese history (Saito 17). She was sent to the first American Consul General, Townsend Harris (1804-1878), to serve him beginning in 1856 during his stay in Shimoda. It was the first port city that the Shogunate government opened to foreign ships in 1854, and the local society despised her as a *rashamen* and "*Tōjin*," a foreigner. She became an alcoholic and committed suicide after Harris left Shimoda for Edo to sign the Treaty of Amity and Commerce in 1858.<sup>2</sup> Though her existence has not been historically proven, her name remains as the heroine of popular novels and dramas about Japan's encounter with the Western world (Saito 18).

In the late 1920s and the 1930s, the tragic story of Okichi's life was often dramatized by novelists and playwrights (Yamamoto 660-662). As mentioned, the *rashamen* stories emerged when US-Japan relationships were under tension. The popularity of the novelization of Okichi stories in the 1920s underlined this social trend. This was just before Japan asserted its emerging colonial power with the establishment of Manchukuo in 1932, contributing to its diplomatic isolation in the world and leading to conflicts between Japan and the US (at the time, both nations were interested in the Chinese market). Fictionalized stories from that era include Gisaburō Jūichiya's *Tōjin Okichi* (1929) and *Toki no Haisha Tōjin Okichi* [A Loser of the Time: *Tōjin Okichi*] (1930), Seika Mayama's *Tōjin Okichi* (1930), and Yūzo Yamamoto's *Nyonin Aishi Tōjin Okichi* [The Tragic Story of a Woman: *Tōjin Okichi*] (1930). Some of these stories were written for Japanese theater performances known as

*kabuki*, but they were also adapted for movies, such as Kenji Mizoguchi's *Tōjin Okichi* (1930).

In these stories, the Japanese and American characters encounter cultural differences related to the treatment of animals. One example is seen in Jūichiya's *Tōjin Okichi* series.<sup>3</sup> Based on historical data and Harris's journal, which was published in 1895,<sup>4</sup> his story of Okichi is set around 1857. Okichi and other Japanese officials are confused when they hear that Harris wants to drink milk to take more nourishment, as doing so was taboo among Japanese people at that time (Jūichiya 1930: 228). Another example is the differences between horseshoes in the US and Japan. Harris is surprised to see that Japanese horses are shod with straw sandals, *zōri*, rather than horseshoes (Jūichiya 1956: 117). This is actually mentioned in Harris's journal repeatedly as an example of old Japanese customs that go against modern civilization (Harris 292).

Such cultural encounters are also often depicted through animal metaphors. In the story, while Japanese people call Okichi *rashamen* (Jūichiya 1956: 121), meaning sheep, Harris and other Westerners are described as something unclean that needs to be purified because they eat cows, drink milk, and wear woolen clothes. As seen in the following quote, they are disdained and said to have the smell of a four-legged animal:

The other day, four or five drunken foreigners broke into a house . . . The family of the house came back, cleaned there, and then called a Shinto priest to purify the house . . . However, the smell of the four legs still remains. (Jūichiya 1956: 97)<sup>5</sup>

Western men and Japanese *rashamen*

women were called "four legs." The word *rashamen* is used to denigrate women who have sexual relationships with American men and have the smell of "four-legs" and "beasts" (Jūichiya 1956: 21). Also, the author's use of the Japanese characters for *rashamen*, "綿羊" (Jūichiya 1930: 94), which means long threads and sheep, reminds readers of the word's original meaning. Hence, in the story of Okichi, *rashamen* exemplifies a woman who breaks the taboo by eating meat and sexually serving an American man.

Other metaphoric animal references can also be seen. For example, Harris compares "uncivilized" Japanese people to animals, and Okichi describes Harris as an animal. Moreover, when Harris encounters Japanese customs that he cannot understand, he feels annoyed and uses such metaphors to describe them:

According to the knowledge that [Harris] got from [Matthew Calbraith Perry] and other precursors [who had arrived in Japan], Japanese were strange and uncivilized people, who trampled Christ literally, executed criminals with boiling water, and performed *hara-kiri* . . . he found that they were even more bizarre and annoying . . . They came and went in the streets in *kango*, in which they sit easily like mollusks without legs or a spine. (Jūichiya 1956: 115)

He compares Japanese to mollusks, emphasizing their physical smallness and showing his hatred for an unreasonable system of transportation. However, while Harris compares Japanese people to animals, Okichi also uses animal metaphors to emphasize the physical differences between them.

Tight-sleeved *rasha* [woolen] clothes, and a *rasha* [woolen] hood.

His eyes like a blue glass are laughing in the shade of a cherry tree in leaves and a

pine tree. His neck and hands are like an albino. His hair is the same as a monkey. (Jūichiya 1956: 100)

Okichi expresses her fear of the man by comparing him to an albino and a monkey, highlighting the physical differences between Japanese and American people.

#### 4. Animals as Unclean and "Others"

To see why the differences between both cultures are emphasized using the word *rashamen* and animal metaphors, a brief explanation of the history of meat eating in Japan is needed.<sup>6</sup> In Japan, a Buddhist country, eating meat was officially prohibited for about 1200 years, from the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Under the influence of the Chinese culture of the Tang dynasty, the consumption of cattle, horses, dogs, chickens, pigs, and sheep became taboo in the 10<sup>th</sup> century—although sheep did not exist in Japan at that time. These six animals were considered "unclean," while some local communities worshiped them as gods (Ishida 110-111; Nakamura 51).

During the national isolation, 135 regulations protecting animals were issued under the reign of Shogunate Tokugawa Tsunayoshi (1646-1709). In this period, the influence of Confucianism was more important than Buddhism for the treatment of animals (Ishida 118). Eating meat and killing those animals was taboo until 1871, when Japan opened its country and the new government recommended that people eat meat to gain physical strength in order to compete with modern Western countries.

Thus, on the one hand, the connotative meaning of sheep in Japan is significantly different from Christian cultures, where sheep are a symbol of purity and sacrifice. The word *rashamen*, applied to Okichi as the

concubine of an American man, refers to the taboo that she broke by sexually serving him—a taboo that is socially equated on the consumption of meat. Indeed, she was said to have the smell of a four-legged animal. Their interracial sexual relationship was associated with bestiality between a man and sheep, as noted in the section explaining the origin of the word of *rashamen*.

Conversely, for Americans and Westerners, the absence of sheep shows a cultural difference between the West and the uncivilized world in Asia. Harris's isolation from the American government and other international affairs is emphasized by the lack of eating meat, as an English man who visited Harris in Japan in 1858 mentioned:

[Harris and Henry Heusken, a Dutch interpreter] had been for eighteen months without receiving a letter or a newspaper, and two years without tasting mutton—sheep being an animal unknown in Japan. (Oliphant 345)

It is worth noting that the figure of sheep and animals gained local significance when Japan encountered its "Other" (i.e., the West and the US, which maintained global hegemony). Japanese women sexually serving American men and American men sexually served by Japanese women were represented as animals in order to demonize their actions. Accordingly, the metaphor animalized American men and Japanese women and thus fueled the fear of miscegenation.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper examined the cultural encounter between the US and Japan by analysing the use of the figures of animals as metaphors. The change of the meaning of the word *rashamen* showed the historical process of product importation and the beginning of the interracial relationship between Japanese

women and Western men. Stories of a famous *rashamen*, Okichi, often use animal metaphors to describe cultural encounters between the US and Japan, reflecting the different attitudes toward perceived human-animal relationships. There, Japanese women and American men who engaged in interracial sexual relationships with each other were metaphorically animalized and demonized. Their actions were equated to the taboo of meat eating, epitomizing the fear of miscegenation and Western power that Japan experienced as an open country.

By investigating the metaphoric reference to animals and sheep, this paper has shown one example of how animals were used to describe "Otherness" in the early process of modernization during the trans-pacific negotiations between the US and Japan.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For details on the history of sheep in Japan, see Yamane 1983: 9-49 and Yamane 1989: 15-21.
- <sup>2</sup> For the history of Okichi, see Yoshida 81-121.
- <sup>3</sup> The author, Gisaburō Jūichiya (1897-1937), was known as a novelist and translator of English novels, such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847)

(Jūichiya 1956: 412-413).

- <sup>4</sup> Townsend Harris's journal was first published in 1885 by William Eliot Griffis in his book, *Townsend Harris, First American Envoy in Japan*. The journal was given to the public in its full and complete form for the first time in 1930 with an introduction and notes by Mario Emilio Cosenza (Harris ix).
- <sup>5</sup> Translations from the work of Jūichiya are mine.
- <sup>6</sup> For more details on the history of meat eating in Japan, see Ishida 87-128 and Nakamura 24-32; 51-57.

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