

**SYMBOLIC MEANING AND EMOTION IN
JAPANESE ETHNOZOOLOGY**

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ABSTRACT: This paper uses ethnoscientific methods to explore the Japanese emotional assessment of the five ethnozoological life forms—mammals, birds, fish, snakes/reptiles, and bugs/insects. Surveys were administered to 42 respondents from both rural and urban backgrounds in Southern Japan. Each respondent rated the five life forms in order of most liked to least liked, and completed two free-lists: the names of animals they regard positively, and the names of those regarded negatively. While significant intra-group concordance was found with respect to the life form ratings, a number of creatures from negatively-rated life forms appeared on free-lists of liked creatures. These liminal creatures are culturally salient in Japanese aesthetics, and are subjected to greater symbolic representation and metaphoric extension in local expressive traditions.

INTRODUCTION

A recent topic of interest that has gained much attention in ecological Anthropology is the connection that humans have to animals. Humans contact and interact with animals through a variety of outlets. Through media, nature, foodways, religion, myths, folklore and customs human perceptions of animals can be influenced. (Hoage 1989) Nolan and Robbins (2001) demonstrated in a survey conducted in the United States that emotional predispositions and culturally conditioned attitudes play a significant role in the cognitive organization of ethnozoological domains.

In the United States, cultures are extremely diverse. Though there is an overlying Western culture that is dominant, it is composed of an amalgam of smaller complexes differentiated through religious philosophy, ethnic traditions, lifeways etc. Even though there is a great deal of diversity of culture, Nolan et.al. showed through a recent survey of Cecil Brown's animal life forms that there is a significant degree of intracultural concordance between people in the United States in the emotion that they feel towards animals.

Japan is a country that is quite different from the United States on many levels. Though they exist as a political giant in the modern world, they owe their economic success to some degree to a shared unified vision within their culture on a national level. It is a nation that has an uninterrupted line of rulers going back two thousand years according to historical texts. (Morton 1994)

The rugged mountainous topographic landscape of Japan has created social isolation and a diverse array of expressive culture, including crafts, festivals, dialects, and folk stories that are regionally unique. However, Japan has been a unified nation since the late 1500s, and since then all of the individual principalities have advanced under the same governments with the exception of a short period of revolution in the 1850s and 60s when the governmental bureaucracy broke down and was replaced with a new national one. (Hane 1992)

Japan is both spiritually diverse and spiritually united. If talking about the Shinto tradition, nearly 100% of Japanese take part in this philosophy through tradition. Shinto is an animistic religion that emphasizes reverence to local deities. Deities are frequently believed to be associated with animals which serve as messengers or incarnations of the spirit which is thought to inhabit a geographic area. (Morton 1994)

“Because every shrine of the Inari has a pair of fox images, a foreigner is often inclined to think that the Inari is dedicated to the fox or the Japanese worship it, while in reality the fox is a messenger of Princess Ugatama, the goddess of rice enshrined in it.” (de Garis 2002)

Spiritual beliefs in Japan permeate just about every aspect of culture and the understanding of the physical world. Spiritual beliefs and government are two ancient aspects of Japanese culture where people would be expected to show a common understanding. Historically in both government and spiritual ideology symbols have been important in the representation of the ideals, feelings and emotion that the bearer wishes to experience or convey. Animals have been used to symbolically represent people through crests, totems, mascots, spiritual soul guides etc. throughout history. I believe that in Japan symbolic meaning associated rooted in deep cultural tradition of spiritual philosophy and folk tradition permeates the Japanese understanding of symbolic meaning associated with how people regard certain life forms that is evident in material culture. Cognitive salience is important in generating positive or negative emotional responses to life forms in Japanese culture. Individual life forms are

represented in Japanese culture as symbols of emotion, feeling, and traits which the bearer wishes to gain or emulate. If certain life forms are looked at on a case by case basis then it is possible that a traditional model of classification such as Cecil Browns(1979) may not be adequate in expressing all categories life forms. Life forms that are more salient culturally and symbolically may conflict with classifications. For example, a respondent who listed insects as **least** liked might have listed insects on their list of **liked** animals. This might indicate that the life form has a greater symbolic or referential meaning.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The scope of the study looks at five categories of ethnozoological life forms—mammals, birds, fish, snakes/reptiles, and bugs/insects. Unlike Nolan's study which employed Cecil Browns classification of life forms, the classification "wug" was not able to be employed. There is no taxonomic equivalent of the term "wug" in the Japanese language. Therefore, it was necessary to create more taxonomically specific categories that the respondents could understand.

The research investigates the historical and traditional salience of several liminal life forms which

were mentioned in the free lists and how they correspond with the overall ratings of the life forms. I examine the hypothesis that symbolic meaning is an important factor in determining emotion and feeling evoked by different life forms. Secondly, because certain life forms are viewed positively and negatively, they may be affectively graded/judged according to certain traits which determine their overall assessment within the animal kingdom.

METHODS

The research for this paper was carried out in Japan in January 2005. It was conducted in the prefecture of Yamaguchi among respondents within the municipality of Iwakuni. The population of Iwakuni is approximately 105,000, with population spread from urban to ultra rural areas. The survey was conducted with respondents living in urban, suburban, rural, and ultra rural locations in Iwakuni. Respondents were both male and female, and ranged in age from eight to eighty five with an average age of 37 years old.

Surveys contained a list of five life form categories that respondents were asked to rate from most to least liked from one to five, with one being the most liked and five being the least liked. An equivalent to Cecil Brown's

classification system was attempted however, due to linguistic constraints the two categories of "snakes" and "wugs" had to be changed to snakes/reptiles and bugs/insects. The categories in Japanese are as follows; 鳥類 (chourui), 魚類 (gyorui), 哺乳類 (honyurui), 爬虫類 (hachuurui), 昆虫類 (konchuurui), or birds, fish, mammals, reptiles, and insects respectively. The respondents then filled out two free lists in which they wrote down as many animals that they could think of which they liked and which they disliked.

The mean rankings of the life forms from the respondents were calculated and Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance (W) was used to measure intragroup agreement for the rankings of the five categories of life forms. Significant concordance among the rankings was found ($W=.668$), which indicates strong consensus among the respondents. Table 1 shows the mean ratings of the five life forms, and their relative rank.

The free list tables were analyzed using ANTHROPAC 4.95 (Borgatti, 1995), which generated an aggregated table of all listed items in order of frequency. Thus it was possible to isolate individual life forms that were listed in a liked or disliked free list which did **not** correspond

with what would be expected based on the rankings. Ethnohistoric research was conducted which involved research of symbolic crests, three dimensional talismans worn in battle, linguistic data, and folk lore that are deeply rooted in Japanese history. This was done to try to help explain why certain life forms were listed as liked when they belonged to a category that was rated as the lowest.

RESULTS

Kendall's coefficient of concordance showed strong intragroup agreement among the respondents. The categories of reptiles and insects were the least liked with average ranks of 4.45 and 4.28 respectively. In an examination of the individual surveys, all respondents classified reptiles and bugs as level 4 or level 5 with the exception of 1 individual who rated them 3. Mammals ranked highest with an average rating of 1.33, birds and fish occupied the mid-zone with 2.38 and 2.55 respectively.

For the liked free lists a total of 299 life forms were offered by respondents. Table 2 illustrates the list of most commonly liked life forms in descending order of frequency. The top ten most frequently listed fall within the mammal taxon, this confirms what might be expected in

accordance with the results of the American study (Nolan et.al. 2005). In the same respect we would expect to find representatives of the fish and bird life forms followed by generic constituents of the insect and reptile taxa.

However if we look at the top third of the list consisting of 103 different life forms we find that 5 out of the first 33 life forms listed are reptiles or insects— turtle (4), butterfly (4), kabuto mushi (兜虫) literally helmet beetle (3), kuwagata mushi (くわがたむし) stag beetle (2), snake (2), and dragonfly (2). With the exception all of the above lifeforms were listed in the disliked free lists (table 3).

The individual respondents who wrote these animals on their free lists all ranked their category (insects or reptiles) as 4 or 5 (least liked) so it is evident that these individual subjects possess some characteristics which redeem them or evoke positive feeling and emotion. Ethnohistoric research gave insight to the presence of these "liminal" life forms on the liked free lists. It is these "liminal" creatures where I direct my attention further.

Poisonous snakes are less likely to be encountered in the cooler Northern clines of Japan however Yamaguchi has a warmer year round annual temperature and climate in which

poisonous snakes are able to thrive. While I was there I saw two signs that read "Beware of Mamushi", which is a poisonous snake common in Japan. Obviously, the possible danger that snakes represent is the reason for it being ranked as one of the top three disliked creatures on the free lists. However, in Japanese folk tales, snakes are often represented as creatures that are misunderstood and detested by humans, and therefore must undergo plight or exile before they are redeemed or accepted. (Yanagita, 1948)

In the case of Iwakuni the snake is considered the messenger of the local Shinto deity. The white snake in particular is considered to be a spiritual representative. On the liked animals free list "white snake" was actually listed, and if combined with the two other "snake listings" it accounts for a total of three people. This also shows specifically that "white snake" is seen as being different from the general category of reptiles.

A dragonfly, or "tombo", is a creature that is deeply rooted in Japanese symbolism. Very few insects are represented in Japanese folk tales; the dragonfly is an exception. In traditional folk tales it is a creature that is associated with the bringing of wealth. (Yanigata, 1948)

In samurai culture the dragonfly has a unique word that is used only in samurai context; kachi mushi. Kachimushi

literally means, "the bug that wins" or more commonly "Victory insect". It is revered historically as an insect that only flies forward and does not retreat, and because of this has a redeeming quality that is respected. Symbols of dragonflies are often incorporated into the handles of swords or fashioned as three dimensional crests and affixed to the front of a samurai's helmet in battle. (Sasama 1999) Dragonflies are used in several different "kamon" or family crest designs which are used to designate lineage. (Kaneda and Hawley 1994) Crests are perhaps one of the most historically important symbols in Japanese culture. Where honor and family ties are interrelated the crest of a family does much more than represent the line, it emulates ideals that are important to the family or qualities that the members of the family wish to live up to. (Dower 2000) The famous general Honda Tadakatsu, was known to own a spear that cut a dragonfly straight through the middle. Because of this it was thought to have magical powers and possess "mana" or spiritual energy. Thus it was named "Tombogiri" (dragonfly cutter). (Sato 1983)

The butterfly is a creature that was often used as a family crest by both warriors and aristocrats. It was historically seen as elegant and graceful, possessing symmetry and form which were qualities that many artists

and warriors wished to achieve in their arts. (Dower 2000)

Butterflies are the most widely used life form in Japanese crest designs. Samurai used it in their crests as well as incorporated symbols of butterflies into their armor.

Butterflies, when worn as three dimensional objects, act as symbolic talismans which possess qualities which the bearer wishes to emulate or gain.

Kuwagata and kabuto mushi are insects that by western standards would be repulsive. The kabuto mushi is a great horned beetle that some would consider to be grotesque with its long and sharp protruding horn. Kuwagata possess large pinchers which appear deadly at first sight. However they are currently popular as pets. Collecting these two types of insects is a popular rage amongst youngsters today.

Linguistic evidence gives us a lead into the symbolism of these two creatures. The term "kabuto", is not originally a term that is related to insects. It is a word that means "helmet", more specifically samurai helmet. (Sasama 1999)

"Kuwagata" is originally a term used define the protruding "antennae" on the front of a samurai helmet which denoted the rank of the shogun, and in later periods high ranking generals. Thus, it can be said that in itself, the linguistic terminology used to name these two insects is complimentary in nature, creating a symbolic connection

between them and warriors with a code of honor. Kuwagata and kabuto mushi symbolize good fortune and wealth traditionally.

As mentioned above family crests are very important historically to the Japanese, they represent not only the family line but symbolize attributes which the bearers of these symbols wish to emulate or gain. Over 4,200 different Japanese family crests have been recorded. Over 90% of those are of plants or geometric shapes. (Adachi 1972 and Dower 2000) Only a minor fraction of Japanese crests employ living creatures in their designs. The living creatures represented are; butterflies, birds, horses, dragonflies, crabs, bats, turtles, rabbits, and shrimp. If we were to extend this into the geometric categories that are symbolically connected to animals we could include three more— snake eye, kuwagata, and kabuto. (Hawley and Kaneda 1994) All of the creatures that were focused on in this study are contained in the very exclusive group of family crests either represented directly or connected through symbolic imagery.

I think it worth mentioning that though the centipede is not used in a particular family crest, it is used in Takeda Shingen's battle flag, as well as in sword accoutrements in the ancient province of Kai. (Isogai 1988)

Though the centipede is not mentioned in the "like" freelist, it was mentioned by over half of the respondents as a disliked creature. One possible reason that it was used in a battle flag and not on a crest, and also was not added to the "like" lists is that even in feudal times it did not possess positive redeeming qualities. Rather it possessed negative redeeming qualities. In folklore it is said that centipedes will "bite you in the behind". Takeda Shingen's motto was steady as a mountain, and the centipede no doubt represents his stubbornness to move in battle and is a warning to people of the great danger that they may endure should they try to attack him. Though the qualities of the physical attributes of the centipede are negative, it should be mentioned that they are historically symbols of wealth and good luck in battle. Perhaps the overwhelming negative/dangerous physical qualities and the lack of salience in Yamaguchi prefecture culturally as a positive being is the reason for it not being viewed positively.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study show that Japanese people perceive living creatures on the basis of multiple

affective components. Representation through media, cultural, and ecological proximity are no doubt important factors in the popular construction of shared perceptions about animals in contemporary times. Pierson(2005) notes that while television programs provide factual information about animals they also, “..rely on the *human **template of character*** to perceive animals in moral and normative terms..”.

This survey, however, showed that there are deeply rooted cultural, religious, and folk traditions that explain the liminality of certain creatures which are salient in Japanese society. Values expressed through the Japanese Shinto philosophy and the understanding of nature at least in some part, influences the outlook that people take towards the creatures surrounding them. Because of this, certain creatures are used to represent the spiritual world, good fortune, luck, and embody qualities that humans respect. Human animal relationships in Japan are complex one and appear to be cross sectional. Despite Japan's progressive economic and political movements toward modernization and Westernization, there is an enduring folk tradition that guides human's affective evaluations of animals. While this appears to be cross-sectional further

research is necessary to determine the demographic component of ethnozoological perceptions in Japan.

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TABLE 1

Life Form	Mean Rank
MAMMALS	1.33
BIRDS	2.38
FISH	2.55
Bugs/Insects	4.28
Snakes/Reptiles	4.45