

BEYOND
JAPAN

Beyond Japan Transcript

Series 2, Episode 25: Pets & Animal Cafés with Brittany Rapone

Edited by Oliver Moxham, Host and Producer (27/4/2022)

PETS & ANIMAL CAFÉS
WITH BRITTANY RAPONE



OM: Oliver Moxham

BR: Brittany Rapone

OM: Hello and welcome to *Beyond Japan*, an interdisciplinary podcast that looks at the broad reach of Japanese Studies from within and beyond Japan. This podcast is brought to you by the Centre for Japanese Studies at the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures in collaboration with the University of East Anglia. I'm your host, Oliver Moxham, Research Project Coordinator at the Sainsbury Institute and researcher of language and Japanese war heritage.

Today we are joined by Brittany Rapone, PhD candidate at the School of Social Sciences at Oxford Brookes University, to discuss attitudes towards pets and animal cafes in Japan. Brittany walks us through the cultural commonality of human-animal relationships and the “rent-a-pet” model of animal cafes in Japan, providing the *iyashi*, or “comfort”, of animal interaction at an hourly rate.

We hope you enjoy the show.

OM: Okay, good morning, Brittany, thank you for joining me on the podcast today.

BR: Thank you for having me.

OM: So, first of all, I would like to know a bit more about you. Can you tell us about your area of expertise and how your interests have brought you there?

BR: Well, as a PhD student in anthropology, I've been brushing up on just general sociocultural Japanese anthropology, but my previous background was more focused

on animals and animal conservation. So, my expertise has become where those two areas would cross in a Venn diagram, I guess.

So, that's why I've been focusing a lot on pet trade and animal cafés in Japan, so I could combine my expertise on animals related to conservation in addition to the sociocultural issues of Japan.

OM: Great. So, let's provide some context to animals in Japan. Pet ownership is one of the great constants of human societies, although key elements vary from culture to culture, such as what animals should and shouldn't be pets or what the purposes of pets are. Could you provide us with some of these fundamentals around pets in Japan?

BR: Yes. So, I liked when you talked about it being one of the great constants, because that's something I realized too, when I was doing some research into it. Just the key events and the timings have been different around the world, but the progression from people mostly just using animals for utilitarian purposes to gradually becoming more indoor pet family members has sort of happened around the world.

In Japan specifically, though, there's interestingly a few people who do research on pet funerals and pet cemeteries in Japan. So, you can find [actual] pet cemeteries with tombstones from 1905-1910 and things like that, that a great majority of them and a great increase in pets was mostly after World War II and [USA] occupation. [As] the economy blossomed in Japan, and many things that used to be for the elites, for the upper class, kind of became middle class, common things to own, and one of those things was pets. It's actually often referred to as a "pet boom", but the more I look at it, I

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don't know if "boom" is actually the correct word. The Japanese government does a lot of surveys every three years, basically on any topic, and they've [been conducted] since 1974. They did a general opinion survey on animals and animal protection and things like that. Even since 1974, when they first did it, to the most recent one in 2010, in general, when they ask people "do you have a pet?" it's always been around between 30-35% of the population, so that's been pretty stable for a long time.

What I think has changed, though, is what you were talking about, the types of pets that have become common to keep and how people view pets as part of their family members. While the rate of people owning pets has stayed pretty constant since 1974, one interesting thing I noticed was that birds in Japan used to be fairly common pets according to this survey. [As] time has gone on, that's drastically decreased, whereas dogs have been the most significant increase in ownership. So, [it's] not necessarily the rate of pets changing the past few decades, but perhaps just the type of pets being commonly kept.

OM: I see. And how does that compare with British or American pet-keeping habits?

BR: So, from what I can tell, it seems that it's fairly similar again to many other parts of the world, including in the UK and the US, just as the general progression might have occurred slightly later, but when you [are] reading about lots of the issues in current day Japan that has to do with pets and people's concerns that pets are replacing children, that young people prefer pets over starting a family, lots of the same exact topics that come up and related to modern day pets in Japan are actually being talked about in the

US and the UK. Similar with the [COVID-19] pandemic, there was lots of [talk] about lots of people adopting and buying pets in the US, and then as I came here during the pandemic to the UK, [I have been] reading about that too as being a big thing, [about] a drastic increase in the amount of adoptions in pets. [While] talking to some Japanese friends – I haven't been able to see the numbers on this, but just casually talking to Japanese friends – they were speaking of the exact same phenomenon happening in Japan, that as the pandemic increased the "work from home" situation, that there was a big rise in people getting pets.

OM: Fascinating. So, a defining feature of pets in Japan isn't pet ownership, but a kind of "pet renting" in the form of animal cafés, ranging from cat cafés to owl cafés. How did this industry start out and how is it distinct from private pet ownership?

BR: Okay, so the pet cafés start with the cat café. That's probably the most well-known. There's a café in Taiwan that from 1998 took the claim of the first cat café, but from what I understand it was a café in which cats could casually wander in and out as they please. [That's] not really what the modern-day cat café is, but that concept sort of grew out of there and went to other countries in East and Southeast Asia – I think actually first South Korea and then it came to Japan in 2004, I believe [that was when] the first cat café [opened]. It functions on the model that it's a café in which you can get food and drinks but there's a bunch of cats that are just lounging about that you can interact with as you please. They're most common actually in Osaka and Tokyo, but you can find these throughout Japan and again, these actually can be found throughout East

and Southeast Asia as well, and slowly they have been popping up in the more Western world. There's a couple in London, I know there's at least one in Edinburgh. There's a couple that pop up in the US, but they're actually in general different than the Japanese ones, which I can go on to explain that later, but one thing that Japan sort of started was the non-domesticated exotic [animal café].

So, in addition to cat cafés, there are also rabbit cafés and things like that – again, sort of typical pet animals – but from Japan [came] actually the first owl café and from there it sort of has exploded into being cafés that have multiple niches. Owl cafés are probably the most common of the exotic ones but there's also ones that specialize in reptiles, snakes, [etc.]. There's a lot of them that are just called *shōdōbutsu*, just "small animal" cafés that will feature sometimes things that are again still typical pets, such as gerbils and guinea pigs and things like that, but more and more exotic. [Usually] it's referred to in Japanese as *mezurashi* animals such as meerkats, otters, prairie dogs, [etc.]. The original reason I actually got into this was because my advisor was looking into slow loris trafficking in Japan and I've seen cafés online with slow lorises. Sugar gliders are very commonly found, [it's] just like a hodgepodge of these small, cute mammals. So, these exotic cafés can also be found pretty much throughout East and Southeast Asia. I've heard that South Korea has recently banned these cafés which is interesting because they have a few raccoon cafés in South Korea. It will be interesting to see what happens to all those raccoons, but these sort of exotic cafés, while we do have some of these sort of seedy roadside zoo things in the US, you're not going to find any sort of like exotic animal cafés like you can in East and Southeast Asia.

I use the word café, but it's also important to note that the café aspect really varies.

Some of them are just like indoor petting zoos, and it's like, "oh, here's a water bottle", and that's the café aspect, whereas others [have] a full menu, with drinks and things like that, that you can enjoy while looking at a lizard or something.

OM: Sure. So, I'm intrigued by the different affective levels amongst the clientele. Do regular visitors develop personal attachments to individual animals, making them a kind of pet substitute, or is it more of like observational practice? What's the level of engagement with the animals here?

BR: There's been some literature published focusing on cat cafés, some ethnographic work that shows that basically all types of people go into these cafés, people by themselves, couples, groups of friends, [etc.]. What these individuals doing this ethnographic work discovered that really caught their interest was these regulars who came all the time by themselves and were often middle-aged salary men/women who were coming in every day after work, and a lot of these people would have favourites. An interesting aspect too is a lot of people who go to these cafés, when they've done surveys, actually have cats at home as well. So, it's kind of like a vacation pet. I don't know if that makes sense. It's interesting to see. When these people who were the regulars, who the ethnographic work was focused on, when they were interviewed to figure out, "why do you come here?", pretty much with every single person, the concept of *iyashi* came up, which is commonly directly translated as "healing" in English, but it's not necessarily like a physical healing per se. It's like a mental, emotional sort of

healing. I think also like rejuvenation, renew, relaxing, that sort of stuff all kind of falls under the bubble of *iyashi*, anything that regenerates you for the next day, because these were all people that were really usually stressed in their personal lives. [They] had really intensive work obligations – lots of them were in customer service – so they had very strict sort of social interactions where they constantly have to use *keigo* (honorific Japanese). A few people on the opposite end of the spectrum were the *hikokomori*, the "shut-in" people, who were looking to get out but not ready necessarily to jump on out to full society. So, visiting the cat café with the cats was like a transitional step for them getting back out there. So, that's something that I found really interesting.

[However], doing my research, basically, there's been no ethnographic work at all on these more exotic cafés, such as the owls, the *shōdōbutsu*, [or] the reptiles. That's what I'm really interested in and really hoping to get Japan to do because I want to know, are the motivations the same? Are people going to owl cafés or *iyashi*, or is it more like a novelty thing? Are there regulars at a lot of pet cafés or is it just more like a one-off sort of thing? These are all unknowns right now and pretty much the only research on exotic cafés so far has been just numbering them, like seeing how many there are in Japan and watching the progress as they rise over time, but again there hasn't been any sort of ethnographic work. So, the differences between them and the cat cafés I so far don't know.

OM: I've personally never been to a pet café while in Japan. I was under the impression that people went there for the selfies, so I'm surprised to hear a large chunk of the

clientele go by themselves a personal comfort. Have you visited these sort of places before yourself?

BR: So, I have actually never been to one before either and I don't know why, I really like animals. So, just the previous times I've been in Japan it just wasn't something that came up, so I've never been to one of these cafés myself. However, one thing that many years ago – maybe 2010, so about a decade ago now - the first time I went to Japan I was with some friends and we were in a mall just exploring and in the mall there was a pet shop and we decided to go on in and this pet shop was not like anything you would ever see in a mall in the US. There was a wallaby! It completely blew my mind. There was a giant tortoise walking around, there was an iguana, and owls. I think the wallabies stuck out to me actually the most out of everything. I just remember being so surprised that this was just in a mall out and about and I actually forgot about that memory for many years until I started doing this research and I remember thinking, "oh yeah, I could have just bought a Wallaby if I wanted to while I was in Japan." It was very strange. So, I've never been to any of these cafés, but I have been able to witness with my own eyes some of the interesting pet possibilities that you can get in Japan.

OM: Yeah, definitely. So, the term *iyashi*, which you referred to before, which can be translated as "healing", "solace" or "therapy", is a prominent one in the literature around pet cafés, referring to the comfort patrons receive for the hourly fee. In a nation where discussion around mental health is relatively limited, could pet cafés be thought of as a space for self-medication of sorts?

BR: Yes, that's a really good question. So, basically [amongst] the three researchers who really focused on the cafés, *iyashi* has been picked up as being a main reason [to visit] and – I forget which author it was exactly – but she did refer to it sort of as an informal therapy which I thought was really interesting because if you think about it, even in places where mental health is more openly talked about, the fact of the matter is [that] to receive help can be very difficult and very expensive. An hour in a pet cafe versus an hour with a therapist, while not comparable at all [in] the experience you will have, the accessibility to the average person to be able to go to one of these cafés is like I said, if you're in Tokyo and Osaka, they're everywhere and they're fairly cheap and there's big chains of them. There's little "mom-and-pop shop"-type ones. You can really find anything. You could find the café for you.

The *iyashi* aspect, though, I think it's also important to notice the *iyashi*. It's a talking point when these cat cafés come up, but [with] *iyashi* services in general, a lot of things fall into that category. So, while the cat cafés are just one example, the cat cafés would be considered maybe a type of *iyashi* service in Japan. But there are many other things that could be *iyashi* services, including things like a maid café, or host clubs, or even like sex work, getting a massage, getting your nails done, [etc.]. Lots of things that are in America [would] lots of times [just] be referred to as a "treat yourself" kind of thing, and that sort of seems to be the general equivalency of it. It's just like a way to treat yourself, but it seems like a temporary band-aid sort of thing.

Some of these people, these regulars, from reading these papers, it was actually interesting that they were like, "oh, I would never tell my co-workers I went to a cat cafe", because they were like middle-aged men and they didn't want people to think they were like cat *otaku* (fanatics) or something. So, it's interesting that [with] mental health issues, talking about them can still be very stigmatized or controversial everywhere, including in Japan. Even this alternative therapy of the cat café for some people was also something they didn't really want others to know about.

OM: Fascinating. So, we've covered how pets improve people's well-being, but let's look at the well-being of the animals in these cafés. Some cafés keep exotic animals, sometimes smuggled into the country like the slow loris and meerkats, as you mentioned. What is the general level of care they receive and what kind of legal protections do they have?

BR: Okay, so starting with the cat cafés, of course, that was one of the things that people, as these became popular in Japan, [were concerned about], the welfare and health of the cats and things like that. [However], as they were a new service, too, there [weren't] really any laws to regulate them. In general, in my research, I could only actually find one café that was ever shut down because of welfare issues. They seemed more like hoarders than a café and had an insane number of cats in a small amount of space.

As these cat cafés became more popular, the laws actually had to adapt to them, and there is animal protection law in Japan that right now is reviewed every five years, and I

believe around 2010 it was amended to include that the displaying of animals could not occur past 8 p.m. Apparently it was meant to target pet shops that were in entertainment areas, the kind of a thing where animals were being kept awake late at night as a display rather than actually being used for looking for homes. It became a big deal for cat cafés because most cat cafes are actually open until like 10 p.m. They said it was a problem because apparently a lot of their clientele, these regulars are coming in between 8 – 10 p.m. at night, and so from the complaints about it, the law is actually revised to exclude cat cafés from the presentation of animals past 8 p.m. which is, I think, interesting.

In general, though, animal protection laws in Japan are fairly weak, especially compared to the US, Canada, the UK, [and] lots of Western Europe. While they're better than a lot of places in Southeast Asia in general, they're not that great. So, these cat cafés, people have gone there and sort of gotten a feel of them and been able to make their own determinations, but again, there's been little to no work done on these exotic ones. So, the only judgments that can be made right now are from a distance, so I don't want to say anything like too distinctive, but from a distance, there are lots of obvious issues that you can see already.

One of the things the law has to do with, all species have individual needs that are unique to them, and a lot of these cafés just have again a hodgepodge of animals. Even the owl cafés will have a variety of species, not a single owl, and you kind of wonder how they are able to really cater to all these unique species that come from all over the

world, different climates, some nocturnal, some diurnal, some that are meant to live on their own, some that are meant to live in groups, some that are meant to fly, some that are terrestrial, are all being kept in an indoor petting zoo, not reflective of what they would experience in the wild at all. So, again, while I haven't done any ethnographic work and I can't say first-hand, from what you can tell from a distance is that the welfare conditions of the animals in these more exotic places is questionable.

OM: I see. Well, thank you for answering all of my questions, Brittany, and good luck with getting out to Japan to do your ethnographic research. We'll look forward to hearing what comes from that. Before we finish the episode, can you share with us what other projects you're currently working on?

BR: Thank you. So, one of the things I'm working on is actually sort of related to what you mentioned earlier about what is a pet in different places with the world. For me, that was one of the first thoughts I came up with, the idea of again, these cafés, they could be like a temporary pet. While some people think it's okay to have them in a café and others think they don't might just have to do with people's different definitions of what is a pet or what is domesticated, what is wild, what is exotic. As I was doing research on it in English, I didn't realize that what is considered exotic, if you're talking about in the conservation world, if you're talking in the veterinary world or if you're just talking to the general public, is going to be different. So, one of the first things I'm actually interested in looking at is language and luckily this I can do. I don't need to be in Japan to do some of the work I want to do for this. I just need culturally Japanese people and Oxford is a

pretty international place, so that'll be great for me. But looking into how Japanese people categorize animals or what words they would use to describe these animals, I figured out these exotic pet shops, they use the word *mezurashi* a lot, but they also have the katakana word *ekizochiku* in Japanese, and there are *yasei dōbutsu*, "wild animals". So, what terminology is used in Japanese to define these animals and maybe what is considered a pet, what isn't, what's considered domesticated, what's non-domesticated? It would be interesting to do some comparative work with people from the UK or other countries and if I don't end up being able to go to Japan, that might be a route I take, doing more comparative stuff.

OM: I see. Well, thank you once again, Brittany, it's been a real pleasure.

BR: Thank you.

OM: You can find a link to Brittany's research profile in the description below. Don't forget to subscribe on JapanInNorwich.org or on your preferred podcast provider for updates on new episodes. Join us for our next episode with Maud Rowell, freelance journalist and author of *Blind Spot: Exploring and Educating on Blindness*, to discuss Infrastructure for the Blind. Maud's upcoming William Holman project, 'Where Birds Don't Fly', will see her independently travel the length and breadth of Japan to demonstrate that accessible public infrastructure can benefit us all.

We hope you will join us then. Thank you for listening.