

***Black Kewpie and Little Black Sambo:
Reading Juvenile Food Culture in American-Occupied Japan***

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the hitherto underexamined topic of juvenile food culture in American-occupied Japan (1945–1952) by analyzing *Kuronbo Sambo* (1949), a Japanese translation of Helen Bannerman’s *The Story of Little Black Sambo*. Just like other Japanese translations of Bannerman’s tale, the story of *Kuronbo Sambo* also starts with Sambo, the protagonist, facing the danger of getting eaten by tigers, but the tigers turn into butter; Sambo’s mother uses it to make a feast, and Sambo and his family consume them as dinner. Using the dialogue translation in the 1953 Japanese version of Bannerman’s tale as a thread, Erica Kanesaka Kalnay highlights the relation between the racial imaginary of *Little Black Sambo* and the *kawaii*, or “cute,” aesthetic of postwar Japan. Yet I want to highlight a different dimension that is found in the Japanese translation, that is, a figure of Sambo drawn into the text: a black Kewpie. He appears as a black-colored version of Kewpie—the logo mascot of the first Japanese brand of mayonnaise, not butter, with the same name. While the work reproduces the prewar concept of Little Black Sambo, *Kuronbo Sambo*, I contend, situates the narrative at the intersection between race and food through the black Kewpie, creating a new subtext. By analyzing the visual representation of Sambo, in addition to materials related to Kewpie at the Celluloid House Yokohamakan and Daicel-Ijinkan, this paper argues that *Kuronbo Sambo* points to a shift in children’s food culture in postwar Japan.

Keywords: Little Black Sambo, Blackness, Kewpie, Food, American-Occupied Japan

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Introduction

This paper explores the hitherto underexamined topic of juvenile food culture in American-occupied Japan by analyzing *Kuronbo Sambo* (Shima, 1949), a Japanese translation of Helen Bannerman's *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (Bannerman, 1899). Similar to other Japanese translations of Bannerman's story, *Kuronbo Sambo* starts with Sambo, the eponymous character, facing the danger of being eaten by tigers, but the tigers turn into butter. Sambo's mother uses it to make a feast, and Sambo and his family consume it as dinner. Using the dialogue translation in the 1953 Japanese version of Bannerman's story as a thread, one scholar highlights how "the Victorian racial imaginary of *Little Black Sambo* lives on in the *kawaii* (可愛い), or 'cute,' aesthetic of postwar Japan" (Kalnay, 2020, p. 566). Yet here, I want to highlight a different dimension found in the illustrations in the Japanese translation; the figure of Sambo is drawn into the text as a black version of Kewpie—the logo mascot of the Japanese brand of mayonnaise, not butter, with the same name.

The Kewpie Corporation was the first company to produce mayonnaise products in Japan, starting in 1925. Discontinued in 1943 because of World War II, the Kewpie Corporation began to manufacture mayonnaise again during the American occupation period in 1948, one year before the release of *Kuronbo Sambo*. Although *Kuronbo Sambo* reproduces the prewar anti-black racist concept of Little Black Sambo observed in subsequent U.S. editions¹ of the book, I contend that *Kuronbo Sambo* can be read as a narrative negotiating race and food through the black Kewpie, thereby producing a new postwar Japanese subtext. By analyzing the visual representation of Sambo, in addition to materials related to Kewpie at the Celluloid House Yokohamakan and Daicel-Ijinkan, this paper argues that *Kuronbo Sambo* points to a shift in children's food culture in early postwar Japan which was informed by food shortages and domestic hunger.²

Kuronbo Sambo

Despite being the earliest Japanese translation of Bannerman's story, *Kuronbo Sambo*³ has received little or no scholarly attention, though there are a number of studies exploring the Japanese reception and translation of *The Story of Little Black Sambo*. Previous studies erroneously identify the first complete translation of the story in Japan as *Chibikuro Sambo*, published in 1953 by Iwanami Shoten, one of the most reputable publishers in the country. However, a Japanese translation of the story had already been made available in American-occupied Japan by the publisher Sekaisha in 1949 in an anthology titled *Ten ga Okkochite kuru: Amerika Douwa shuu (The Sky Is Falling: A Collection of American Fairy Tales)* (Shima, 1949), which contains *Kuronbo Sambo*.

Curiously, the collection—edited by Teruo Shima—misleadingly presents well-known European stories, such as *Henny Penny*, *The Rooster*, *The Mouse and the Little Red Hen*, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, *The Three Little Pigs*, and *Little Red Hen and the Grains of Wheat*, as

¹ For example, the 1908 edition illustrated by John R. Neill, best known for his illustrations of the Oz books by L. Frank Baum, featured images of Sambo that were even more caricaturized and dehumanized.

² The school lunch program was initiated in 1946 to improve children's nutrition. The program provided powdered skim milk imported from the United States as an essential source of protein and minerals. By 1949, however, due to the continuing food shortage, most children were receiving only 105 to 180 calories per day, well below the target of 600 calories per child. See Chris Aldous (2010), pp. 252–255, for a more detailed writing on the school lunch program.

³ *Kuronbo* is a Japanese racial slur for black people.

American fairy tales without mentioning the names of their original authors. The preface to *The Sky Is Falling: A Collection of American Fairy Tales* further suggests that these works, including *Kuronbo Sambo*, were imported to American-occupied Japan because of their popularity in the United States, stating, “日本の、小さい子供たちが、浦島太郎や、かちかち山の、お話が、大好きなように、アメリカの小さい子供たちは、この童話を、お父さんや、お母さんから、きいたり、ご本で、よんだりして、大きくなっていくのです (Just as little Japanese children love the stories of Urashima Taro and Kachikachiyama, little American children grow up hearing these fairy tales from their mothers and fathers or reading them in books).”⁴ The entanglement of *Kuronbo Sambo*’s anthology format and its misplacement in American literature has obscured its origin within Japanese culture.⁵

The influence of the American literary milieu on the 1949 Japanese rendition of *The Story of Little Black Sambo* is evident in its visual elements. The context of American literature facilitated a visual shift in the depiction of a pickaninny as a black Kewpie, highlighting the complex ways in which stories and images travel across borders and are transformed and reinterpreted in different contexts. While Bannerman’s storyline was simple enough for small children to read (it is well known that she wrote and illustrated the book for her young daughter), the illustrations that accompany the narrative garnered much criticism (mainly in the United States) for the portrayal of Sambo as a pickaninny, a derogatory caricature of a dark-skinned child of African descent and a racial slur for African American children. A pickaninny, according to Robin Bernstein, is “an imagined, subhuman black juvenile who was typically depicted outdoors, merrily accepting (or even inviting) violence [....] Characteristics of the pickaninny include dark or sometimes jet-black skin, exaggerated eyes and mouth, the action of gorging (especially on watermelon), and the state of being threatened or attacked by animals (especially alligators, geese, dogs, pigs, or tigers). Pickaninnies often wear ragged clothes (which suggest parental neglect) and are sometimes partially or fully naked [...] the figure is always juvenile, always of color, and always resistant if not immune to pain” (Bernstein, 2011, pp. 34–35).

The 1949 edition showcases three visual versions of Sambo, all illustrated by Fumio Matsuda. Sambo’s first appearance is among a collection of animal sketches at the beginning of the anthology (including Peter Rabbit, the Three Little Pigs, etc.), where he sits calmly facing a tiger with his hands behind his back. Sambo’s clothing is minimal, and he wears hoop earrings and ankle bracelets that carry the connotations of slavery. The purplish-blue background obscures his skin tone. The second portrayal, a profile view of Sambo’s face with earrings, a necklace, and a hair bow, is the most similar to that of a pickaninny—the original, imported image of Sambo from the United States—emphasizing his jet-black skin and full lips. The third version, which appears in the main text, however, takes an aesthetic turn as it reimagines Sambo as a black Kewpie.

⁴ The collection was published in 1949 by Sekaisha during the American occupation of Japan. At that time, there was an active incorporation of American and Western lifestyles and culture among the Japanese masses. *Ichinen no Sekai Meisaku Dokuan: Tesuto tsuki* [First Year’s World Masterpiece Readers: With Test], published by Jitsugyo no Nihon Sha in 1950, also featured *Kuronbo Sambo* as an American fairy tale.

⁵ *The Story of Little Black Sambo*’s Japanese origin is unclear, as many publishers in Japan produced pirated versions.

Kewpie and American-Occupied Japan

Kewpie, originally a comic-strip character created by Rose O'Neill in the United States in 1909, is most famously recognized in Japan as the mascot of Kewpie mayonnaise rather than as O'Neill's comic character. In 1925, the Kewpie Corporation was the first company to produce mayonnaise in Japan. Because of the immense popularity of Kewpie dolls, O'Neill initially sold them as paper dolls in the United States. However, the first Kewpie doll was produced as a bisque doll in Germany in 1912. Kewpie dolls arrived in Japan at about the same time as in Germany, approximately between 1913 and 1915, when the first Japanese bisque Kewpie doll was produced. From 1913 to 1923, Japan was the world's largest producer of celluloid toys, and Japanese-made celluloid Kewpie dolls were exported worldwide. During this pre-World War II Kewpie doll boom, Toichiro Nakashima, the founder of the Kewpie Corporation, designated Kewpie as the company emblem, creating a symbolic association between Kewpie and the distinctively Western food category, mayonnaise.

Although production was halted in 1943 because of wartime raw-material shortages of eggs, vegetable oil, and vinegar, the Kewpie Corporation resumed manufacturing mayonnaise during the American occupation period in 1948, a year before *Kuronbo Sambo*'s debut. The production of prewar-style Japanese Kewpie dolls also continued throughout the postwar occupation era, encompassing the creation of black Kewpie dolls alongside conventional nude-colored, cherubic figures. Various manufacturers of Kewpie dolls catered to overseas markets, and during the occupation, American servicemen found the Japanese Kewpie dolls rare and valuable and often kept them as souvenirs. From 1947 on, the General Headquarters of the Allied Forces (GHQ) mandated that all export products from Japan must carry the inscription "Made in Occupied Japan." Thus, celluloid Kewpie dolls produced during that period have that inscription. The details of the production of black Kewpie dolls in Japan remain obscure and subject to speculation. One plausible explanation for their genesis, however, is that blackness was a marker of robust health,⁶ a notion that is also underlined in the narrative of *Kuronbo Sambo*.

The Black Kewpie

Although *The Story of Little Black Sambo* explores themes of vulnerability and consumption, *Kuronbo Sambo* delves into those themes even more deeply by emphasizing the story's association with food (mayonnaise), thereby bringing to the fore the *edibility* of the black Kewpie. The physical appearance of the black Kewpie (with its rounded face, tummy, and tufted hairstyle that resembles an infant, complete with an impish smile) in *Kuronbo Sambo* adds another layer of complexity to the story's underlying message through the fusion of Sambo with Kewpie, a culinary icon; the black Kewpie's innocent silhouette assumes or plays the role of Sambo. This creates a unique perspective on the story's subtext, suggesting that the black Kewpie is not simply a mirror image of a pickaninny, a racial caricature, but is a distinct character that shifts the narrative's focus to the consumption of an edible black Kewpie as opposed to an edible pickaninny. As such, later in the story, the black Kewpie faces depredation by tigers. The accompanying illustration vividly captures the sense of danger as Sambo frantically climbs a palm tree to escape the beasts. This image—in which

⁶ A known example is the former Calpis logo, which shows a black man with full red lips drinking Calpis while grinning.

the black child figure appears unusually strong and almost wild—was created by the editorial staff and illustrator and is not in the original text.

Sambo's vigor is emphasized further in the portrayal of food toward the end of the story, another significant revision of the consumption theme in *Kuronbo Sambo*. The original dinner sequence showcasing Sambo and his parents, Black Mumbo and Black Jumbo, indulging in pancakes prepared with melted tiger butter is memorable but controversial because it portrays the characters as gluttonous. For example, Black Mumbo eats twenty-seven pancakes, Black Jumbo eats fifty-five, and Little Black Sambo eats 169, but the dinner that appears in *Kuronbo Sambo* is a feast (ごちそう, content and amount not specified), not pancakes. The story concludes with a sudden shift in focus to Sambo's physical transformation after having eaten the tiger butter, saying, “とらの、ばたーを、たべた、くろんぼ・さんぼーは、とらのように、大へん、つよいこどもになりましたとさ (Upon eating the tiger butter, Sambo became a strong child, just like a tiger).”

During the postwar occupation of Japan, a dire domestic hunger crisis struck, leading to widespread malnutrition. With food in short supply, daily calorie intakes plummeted, and a new form of commercial black market emerged nationwide. Although the food situation started to improve in 1948, basic staples such as butter and mayonnaise remained beyond the means of many people. Even as hunger persisted, paradoxically, children's literature of the immediate postwar era presented the fantasy of fatty and delicious foods. *Kuronbo Sambo* illustrates this shift in Japan's dream food landscape, ultimately linking good health with the black hero character Sambo. By shedding light on Sambo's attachment to robustness, the story elevates the significance of food and blackness as a symbol of strength and vitality.

Conclusion

The American occupation of Japan significantly impacted the experience of blacks in Japan. The postwar period saw the emergence of a generation of mixed-race children, known as GI babies, born to American servicemen and Japanese women. *Kuronbo Sambo*'s story underlines the theme of food and its connection to the postwar Japanese perception of the black child figure. By transforming into a black Kewpie, Sambo's body emerges as a transnational space where robustness and blackness blend seamlessly. In American-occupied Japan, the image of the black Kewpie turned Sambo, which accommodates the long-standing concept of the pickaninny, was uniquely consumed through its association with food in a way that differs from other versions of the work.

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