

[Japan Society-New York: Documents Project. (1800-1890, foreign relations)]

**Document 10: “Is not this a strange custom?” Iwakura Mission diary, Kume Kunitake,  
1872**

*On Race*

*17<sup>th</sup> day, 2<sup>nd</sup> month, Meiji 5 (March 25), 1872, Washington, D.C. European civilization has some brutal and barbarous customs.* The evil practice of capturing slaves has a history which goes back to Ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome. From the early 1500s, Spain, Portugal, Britain and Holland all competed in navigation, exploration and colonization. For centuries, they captured black slaves [in Africa] and transported them to their colonies. For centuries this practice was rampant. These people were called “slaves,” which in Japanese is translated as “*nuhi*” [bonded men and women], but the cruelty of the Westerners’ slavery was far worse than any system of bondage which ever existed in Japan.

In a Washington art gallery selling oil-paintings, I saw a painting in which some white men, armed with guns were lined up [on one side]. They had tied up the black people and made them squat there. On the other side of the painting, among the trees, other whites were hunting black people. When I inquired, I was told the painting depicted the hunting of slaves in Africa. . .

In the *Chou li* [Rites of Chou], the section dealing with the responsibilities of governors and officials forbids the selling of human beings as if they were oxen or horses. It seems incredible that in Europe the custom of slavery persisted like this until very recent times. Once established, the habits that control human hearts die hard. . . .

[After the U.S. Civil war] in 1865, after debate, the Constitution was amended to abolish slavery. . . . This, however, did not bring greater contact between the races. Because black people

were regarded as ignorant savages, white people did not want to mix with them. The separation between white and black people is as distinct as that between clear and muddy water.

Some black people achieved freedom early on, other outstanding black people were elected to the House of Representatives and still others have accumulated great wealth. Clearly, the colour of one's skin has nothing to do with intelligence. People with insight have recognized that education is the key to improvement, and they have poured their energies into the establishment of schools. It is not far-fetched to believe that, in a decade or two, talented black people will rise and white people who do not study and work hard will fall by the wayside.

### *On Religion*

*26<sup>th</sup> day, 6<sup>th</sup> month, Meiji 5 (July 31, 1872). New York City. Fine.* We went to the Bible Society. . . . The society sells Bibles in many countries, and we were each given a Chinese translation. Not only does everyone own a copy of the Bible which is kept in every home, but if people go away on a journey lasting a few weeks, they feel obliged to take it along. It is especially revered by women. If the owner is wealthy, the book may be lavishly bound and decorated with gold and jewels. Some people spare no expense in adorning their Bible, but there are also very plain versions so that poor people can afford them. . . . A copy of the book is always kept in the reception-rooms of commercial establishments and in hotel rooms. . . .

In the West, when people talk about a nation and the character of its people, they always discuss religion. When a foreigner comes to their country, they always ask what religion he observes and what god he worships. When they meet someone who professes no faith, they think of him as a lost soul or a heathen from the wilderness, becoming cautious of him and severing all social relations. . . .

When we read the Old and New Testaments, which Christians exalt, some parts are merely unbelievable tales of voices from Heaven or the resurrection of a crucified criminal. Thus, the Bible can easily be dismissed as the ramblings of a lunatic. We were suspicious of the tears of those who prostrated themselves in prayer before a man condemned to death for heresy, whom they acclaim as the son of a Heavenly king. Every city in the West has blood-stained images of a dead man being taken down from a cross, with streaks of blood running down his body. These images are hung on the walls and placed in the corners of rooms, giving one the impression that one is passing through a cemetery or lodging at a place of execution. Is this not a strange custom? Yet Westerners think it strange that people in the East have not accepted Christianity, and even rational people well-versed in world affairs urged us to display these images. . . . There are many strange aspects in Christ's teachings. It would scarcely take an intelligent scholar to defeat the arguments advanced by the Christians and render them silent. However, when we compare the sincerity of their practice to ours, we cannot but feel ashamed.

What the Bible expounds is understood by everyone, from kings and nobles to slaves and innocent children. Every week on the day of worship, rich and poor, carrying their Bibles with them, go to church to listen to sermons, pray and sing, and then return home. Parents teach the Bible to their children; . . . The moment an infant is born, it begins to imbibe the Bible's teachings with its mother's milk to the depths of its heart. . . . Where there is a village, there is a church; where there is a group of people, there is a Bible meeting. Even if their teachings are not lofty or profound, they are firm in their practice and in their faith. . . . Even if they lose in argument, their faith is not shaken. We may mock their stubbornness, but this dedication is the

very essence of their belief, and I wonder whether it is in this aspect more than anything else that we cannot compete, because what is most treasured in religion is practice, not argument.

*On Newspapers (same date)*

America is a country where many newspapers are published. . . . Newspapers are regarded as important in Europe and America: they monitor the policies of national, state, country and village governments; they are conducive to learning and scholarship; they report on trade, thereby building the country's wealth and enriching it; and they encourage good customs and moral behaviour. Without leaving home one can learn about conditions across the country. From one's house one can obtain a grasp of world affairs. Thus, newspapers truly encourage the spread of culture and are indispensable.

The value of a newspaper depends on the editor's human qualities and learning; the power of an editor's pen exceeds that of a million foot-soldiers. Because this is something which men of learning ponder seriously, journalists often have greater influence than politicians. Superior people take up the pen. . . . *Civilised countries have many distinguished citizens. These are not necessarily found among those who hold power. If one seeks them among ordinary people, however, they are as plentiful as trees in a forest.*

**Source:** Kume Kunitake, comp. *The Iwakura Embassy 1871-78: A True Account of the Ambassador Extraordinary & Plenipotentiary's Journey of Observation Through the United States of America and Europe*, Vol. 1: *The United States of America*. Trans., Martin Collcutt. Chiba, Japan: The Japan Documents, 2002, 216-219, 363-367, 370-371.



### **Context.**

Over a span of eighteen months during 1871-73, some fifty leading Japanese officials toured the United States and Europe in one of history's most remarkable journeys of diplomacy and discovery. They negotiated treaties, studied foreign institutions, and told the story of Japan's rapid entry into the world of nations—all while the Meiji government was just getting on its feet at home. Kume Kunitake, the private secretary of the mission's leader, Prince Iwakura Tomomi, compiled a five-volume journal of the mission, describing and commenting on what they saw and thought. His observations provide a remarkable insight into what happens when two cultures—one old and steeped in Asian traditions, the other filled with the energy of a new and rising people—come together. Dating in Kume's document was by the old lunar calendar, which Japan used until 1872; the equivalent Western dates are in parentheses.

### **Questions.**

1. What core Japanese values are revealed when Kume makes his evaluations about race and religion in the West? Does he make mistakes? If so, why?
2. What features of Christianity stimulate admiration in Kume? Which ones inspire disrespect? What do his observations reveal about the nature of elite religion in 19<sup>th</sup> century Japan?
3. What do Kume's comments suggest might have been the surprises an American might have had in visiting Japan for the first time in the 1870s?



**Terms.**

*Iwakura Mission, 1871-73.* An embassy of about fifty Japanese officials, including several at the very top of the government, to observe Western traditions, report on Japanese progress, and negotiate more equal treaties with leading Western nations. The mission spent some eight months in the United States, followed by the better part of a year in Europe's leading nations. Its leaders were unsuccessful in securing new treaties, but their studies resulted in remarkable changes in Japanese policies across the next decades.

*Chou li [Rites of Chou].* One of China's classic Confucian treatises, dating from the fourth century BCE, it was influential in shaping the value systems of both China and Japan. It is usually romanized *Zhou li* today.

*Newspapers.* Newspapers still were a relatively new phenomenon in Japan. Indeed, Japan's first daily newspaper, *Yokohama Mainichi Shimbun*, had begun publishing early in 1871, the year in which the Iwakura embassy set sail—from Yokoyama—on its mission.