

BACK IN BLACK

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED FROM CHIBIKURO SAMBO?

BY KAZUO MORI



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THIS SUMMER, A METROPOLIS

reviewer called *Chibikuro Sambo* "the most controversial children's book of all time." Originally written in 1899 by a Scotswoman named Helen Bannerman, *Chibikuro Sambo* (*Little Black Sambo*) was a big hit in Japan until 1988, when it was pulled off the shelves after an outcry over its allegedly racist content. Not only is "sambo" an offensive term for blacks, but the illustrations perpetuated stereotypes of dark-skinned people. "If not antagonistically racist," the *Metropolis* reviewer wrote, "[the book] was at best unintentionally condescending."

I, too, was shocked to learn that Tokyo publishing company Zuiunsha re-released the book in April. I was also surprised to learn that it is selling very well. In my work as a research psychologist, I have been trying to prove that the popularity of *Chibikuro Sambo* is not due to racial discrimination among the Japanese people. My hypothesis was that they love it simply because they are fond of its story. The hero happens to be a black boy, but the Japanese would enjoy the book just as much if he were a white girl or anything else.

That's the reason I made a race-free version of the book, which I called *Chibikuro Sampo* ("sampo" means "taking a walk" in Japanese). I changed the protagonist to a black Labrador who goes for a stroll in the jungle and encounters four tigers. Then I let Japanese children compare this book with the original. If they found both versions equally enjoyable, it would indicate that they love the book because of its fantastic story. My psychological experiments did, in fact, show this exact result.

Soon after, I published *Chibikuro Sampo* under a pen name, Mori Marimo. The book was released by Kitaoji Shobo in 1997 and was a hit in Japan. That same year, two other race-free versions appeared here: *Sam and the Tigers*, by Julius Lester and Jerry Pinkney, and *The Story of Little Babaji*, by Fred Marcellino.

Race, however, is not the only issue that makes *Chibikuro Sambo* a controversial book in Japan. There are also questions about the ethics of the publishing companies that have repeatedly tried to make money on the back of the book's popularity, irrespective of the allegations that it is racist.

Chibikuro Sambo was first published in Japan by the prestigious Iwanami Shoten in 1953; it went on to sell well over a million copies before it was pulled off the shelves in 1988. The official reason was an objection by an Osaka-based group called The Association to Stop Racism Against Blacks. But that is only part of the story.

Iwanami's book was a pirate of the original and it contained drawings that had appeared in a US edition by an artist named Frank Dobias. (By the '50s, it was legal to publish *Little Black Sambo* in the US without paying royalties to Bannerman, but not so in Japan.) It also cropped and rearranged Dobias' illustrations without his permission. Also included in the volume was another work written by Bannerman, *Sambo and the Twins*. To illustrate that story, Iwanami asked a young artist named Fuyuhiko Okabe to imitate Dobias' style. Okabe, who later became famous for his original manga work, never listed this on his resume.

By withdrawing *Chibikuro Sambo* and officially apologizing for their ignorance of its racist aspects, Iwanami was able to hide this embarrassing episode. It seems that in Japan it is more shameful to be accused of piracy than racism.

FOR A PRESTIGIOUS JAPANESE PUBLISHER, IT IS MUCH MORE SHAMEFUL TO BE ACCUSED OF PIRACY THAN RACISM

Or perhaps not. The new *Chibikuro Sambo*, published this year by Zuiunsha, is a reproduction of Iwanami's dubious 1953 book (excluding *Sambo and the Twins*). Now that 50 years have passed, reproducing Iwanami's work without the publisher's permission is not illegal, but it is unethical. Iwanami protested to Zuiunsha that the book it was republishing "was harmful to editorial copyright."

Professor Masahisa Nadamoto of Kyoto Sangyo University, the translator of Japan's first legal version of Bannerman's original, published in 1999 by Komichi Shobo, also criticized Zuiunsha. "Republishing the Iwanami Shoten version, which cut-and-pasted the pirated American version, is taking a step back in history," the *Yomiuri Shimbun* quoted Nadamoto as saying in September.

The questions about Zuiunsha's behavior don't end there. The company reissued *Chibikuro Sambo* in April, but it waited until later in the year to reissue *Sambo and the Twins*. In the meantime, Okabe, the manga artist who declined to be associated with

Sambo and the Twins died. He was therefore unable to object to Zuiunsha's republication of the illustrations that he had declined to be associated with on his resume. None of this is probably of any concern to Zuiunsha, whose new *Sambo* sold more copies in three months than Komichi Shobo's un-pirated book and all the race-free versions combined.

Until recently, I believed that *Chibikuro Sambo*'s popularity in Japan was due to its story, since all the versions that appeared after 1988—including the race-free ones—were equally successful. Although the protagonist's name happened to coincide with an insensitive English term, the Japanese people have never associated the book itself with racism. However, it seems

that is not the case. Neither the book's racist tone nor its shady publishing history are enough to stand in the way of a good read or a handsome profit. Confronting the shameful history of *Chibikuro Sambo* in Japan is necessary if we are to show the world that we take racism seriously. ☞



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