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Peer reviewed

Occult Hunting and Supernatural Play in Japan. By Laura Miller. University of Hawai'i Press, 2024. 236 pages. \$72.00, hardcover; \$28.00, paperback.

Reviewed by

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In the opening paragraph of her new monograph, Laura Miller relates an encounter with three business school professors from Tokyo. Upon learning of her research on “the divination industry, they all laughed out loud!” This is just the sort of reaction Miller is writing against: “divination and other related activities,” she argues, “are not a trivial part of Japanese culture. Rather, they provide insights into realms of pleasure, creative exploration, and spiritual development, in addition to being extraordinarily lucrative” (p. 1).

The book’s opening vignette also reflects the challenge of defining the subject of inquiry. Each of eight relatively brief chapters takes up a distinct but related topic of inquiry—including divination and tarot cards, pilgrim stamps, magatama beads, amulets, and power spots. The connection between these practices/objects is that they all fit into, as Miller puts it, a “wide-ranging domain I label ‘occult’” that “implies the extraordinary, the not ordinary.” She is “interested in all aspects of selected objects or activities . . . using ‘occult’ allows me to explore them fully, including humorous, ironic, or irreverent uses” (p. 7).

Invoking “occult,” and the related concept of “supernatural,” Miller indeed focuses on practices and objects that have traditionally been relegated to the margins of serious English-language scholarship on Japan. But she is in fact tapping into something that is pervasive in Japanese contemporary media and commerce, and extremely popular in the everyday lives of many people. Her monograph therefore sheds much needed critical light on often overlooked quotidian discourses and market forces.

Although still rare in English-language scholarship, over the last several decades the discussion of “supernatural play,” as Miller phrases it, has garnered increasing attention in Japanese academia. Literary scholar and cultural historian Ichibanagi Hiroataka, for example, has published several monographs and edited volumes that explore “occult” practices from the Meiji period to the present. More broadly, scholars of folkloristics (*minzokugaku*), most famously Komatsu Kazuhiko and his colleagues and students, have long attended to the supernatural in history, visual imagery, and local legends. And recently, a new generation of scholars, such as Oikawa Shōhei and Hirota Ryūhei, has begun exploring the supernatural in contemporary (often urban) phenomena and media, in digital and online contexts,

and even in tourism and other forms of commodification.¹ *Occult Hunting and Supernatural Play in Japan* does not engage explicitly with these works but represents an important English-language addition to this burgeoning conversation. It also adds to existing English-language discourses on material culture and religion; Miller's particular contribution is her emphasis on occult objects as they are consumed in contemporary vernacular settings rather than explicitly religious contexts.²

Perhaps the book's most significant intervention is its focus on gender: "because women and girls are the primary drivers of transformed enchantment, they have inspired shrines, temples, and the media industries to accommodate their interests and tastes" (p. 1). While such questions are not entirely overlooked in Japanese scholarship, Miller's explicit attention critically highlights the gendered nature of many mystical practices in contemporary (and historical) Japanese society, locating women as the main agents in shaping and enjoying such pursuits. Another cogent objective of Miller's project is "to include popular culture, particularly material and visual artifacts, in the analysis" (p. 3). Her approach is refreshingly broad, bringing under scholarly purview such diverse materials as popular guidebooks to divination providers (p. 37), Hello Kitty tarot cards (p. 54), and manga and DVDs relating to "powerspots" (pp. 163–64), to name just a random selection of examples.

In the introduction, Miller begins by addressing thorny terminology and concepts—such as "occult," "supernatural," "religion," and "belief." She explains that because of the "feminized" nature of the particular practices under analysis, they are "often stigmatized as unworthy of study" (p. 1). But this is all the more reason it is critical to focus on women as the primary drivers of occult activities: "Occult hunters are able to experience agency and energy and to pursue the self-development and spiritual exploration that might be missing in jobs or family life" (p. 2).

Each chapter introduces a different form of occult hunting, beginning with its historical context and followed by discussion of its contemporary practice and the ways it is manifest in popular media (manga, anime, guidebooks, etc.), internet sites, tourism, and other forms of commodification. Chapter 1, for example, addresses the theme of divination by briefly introducing ancient methods of reading cracks in animal bones and tortoise shells, followed by a discussion of contemporary *omikuji* ("lottery slips," p. 17) at

1. Recent works include, Ichiyonagi Hirotaka and Ōmichi Haruka eds., *Kaii to asobu* (Seikyūsha, 2022); Oikawa Shōhei, *Shinrei supotto kō: gendai ni okeru kaiitan no jittai* (Ātsu ando Kurafutsu, 2023); Hirota Ryūhei, *Netto kaidan no minzokugaku* (Hayakawa Shobō, 2024).

2. For material culture within religion, see for example, Fabio Rambelli, *Buddhist Materiality: A Cultural History of Objects in Japanese Buddhism* (Stanford University Press, 2007).

shrines and temples. The historical contextualization is somewhat cursory (especially for a topic as expansive as divination), but it leads to a more thorough exploration of non-traditional forms of *omikuji* practice, including how shrines and temples attract visitors through an “aesthetic of cute” (p. 23) and how government entities and shops use *omikuji* outside religious contexts. The advent of quirky new genres of divination that play with traditional formats, such as “cake divination” and “ramen divination” (p. 27), further reflects the importance of entertainment and even humor in the proliferation of an ostensibly spiritual practice. The chapter that follows, “Occult Business,” appropriately takes the reader away from mainstream religious sites, such as shrines and temples, to the explicitly commercial—but still highly ritualized—world of fortune-telling shops and stalls.

In a chapter on tarot cards, Miller shows that there are not only numerous guidebooks, websites, and even classes devoted to this very old (and originally imported) form of divination, but that Japanese producers create innovative new card designs, many of which incorporate characters and concepts from popular culture and media, such as Hello Kitty and Gundam. Others draw on Japanese folklore and religion or adapt European and Christian imagery. Miller performs close readings of several of these innovative cards, demonstrating both the radical diversity of styles as well as the ways in which they “are intentionally humorous and playful” (p. 54).

In fact, Miller’s observations are most acute when she describes visual media and material objects. We see this, for example, in her chapter on *goshuin*, or “pilgrim stamps,” calligraphic inscriptions received by visitors to shrines and temples. She rehearses the history of the practice and introduces its current “boom,” in which pilgrim stamps are so popular among female visitors that “the design of many new stamps and stamp books reflects feminized tastes” (p. 62). But the heart of the chapter is her careful readings of calligraphic styles, imagery, and other aspects of contemporary stamps (including an augmented reality cell phone app). Similarly, her chapter on votive tablets (*ema*) and amulets (*omamori*) analyzes these well-known objects of religious material culture through the lens of aesthetics and commodification. Examples include secular versions sold by stores and tourist sites, as well as an innovative religious version called Omamo, through which petitioners use a website to order a bespoke personalized *omamori*. As Miller concludes: “The talent for inventing new connections between sacred things and nonsacred imagery and objects tells us that people are creatively searching for ways to tap into supernatural power” (p. 125).

Another chapter introduces *reifu*, paper talismans using stylized Chinese characters and cryptic symbolism. While she includes a brief history of this complex religious object and the practices associated with it, Miller is more interested in the question of “What happens when esoteric, specialist knowledge becomes egalitarian, and the embodied object of this

knowledge is commodified and promiscuously disseminated?” (p. 84). She accordingly presents *reifu* in a variety of contemporary popular forms—in video games and manga, for example, or personalized in a style she labels “*My Reifu*” (p. 97).

In a later chapter, Miller takes up another object that, despite (or because of) its long and complex history, has recently been recuperated within popular media and culture: the curved beads known as *magatama*, which are documented as far back as the Jōmon period (14,000–300 BCE) and are part of the so-called Three Sacred Treasures. After a brief historical overview of these iconic objects, the chapter provides numerous examples of their contemporary popularity and meaning, showing, for example, how they are featured today in amulets and celebrated in shrine festivals. *Magatama* imagery has also been coopted for mascot characters and plastic charms. There is even a museum in Tamatsukuri Onsen (Shimane Prefecture) that sells “*magatama*-themed herbal bath salts, pouches, pickles, and incense burners” (p. 147). As with her discussion of *reifu*, Miller’s focus on the contemporary use of *magatama* brings attention to objects and activities usually passed over by academic analysis.

In contrast, the final chapter takes up a phenomenon that has already garnered scholarly (and popular) attention, namely, the powerspot (*pawā supotto*), “a place where people can acquire positive luck or spiritual energy” (p. 151). Developing as a late-twentieth century mash-up of imported New Age ideas and existing Japanese concepts of sacred space, powerspots are often located at shrines, temples, or other explicitly religious sites, but they can also be found in natural places or objects. Miller points out that most powerspot seekers are women and, not coincidentally, “much of the mass media reporting on the trend have expressed denigrating and disparaging attitudes” (p. 152). By drawing on sources such as guidebooks, manga, and survey data, the author counters this dismissal, arguing that women are not attracted to these sites out of naive susceptibility to media hype or simple notions of “belief.” Rather powerspot-seeking is a meaningful social practice that entails escape, entertainment, creativity, and individual agency: “Sacred and natural spaces are objectified as destinations for women in search of a balm for life’s disappointments and as short-term refreshment from their hectic, everyday existence” (p. 175).

Throughout the book, Miller reiterates the primacy of women as drivers of the economics and aesthetics of the occult. While she convincingly establishes the nontriviality of her subject matter through her numerous and varied examples, her argument would have been bolstered by more concrete data demonstrating the financial scale of occult industries and the key role of women both as consumers and producers. Such supporting information would also make her argument more nuanced; although the significance of gender is clear, for example, one wonders about other

demographics, such as generational differences, educational background, and income levels.

Miller explains that she approaches her analysis “from an interdisciplinary cultural studies perspective derived from history, art history, literature, media studies, and anthropology” (p. 3). Certainly this is the most productive approach for topics as varied and complex as the ones she examines. At times, however, this interdisciplinarity makes the writing more descriptive than analytical, and as a reader I often wished for more extensive interpretation, perhaps drawing from relevant gender theory or media discourse. Direct ethnographic interaction would also have provided greater insight into the on-the-ground perspectives of occult hunters. Indeed, many of Miller’s most memorable observations are based on her firsthand experiences as a consumer or as a visitor to occult-related sites, but they can come across as anecdotal. At Ise Shrine, for example, she observes two women who “spent ten or more minutes with their arms straight out touching tall trees, eyes closed, as they drew in energy” (p. 158); it is a tantalizing but limited observation, which could have been fleshed out through a conversation with the women about how and why they chose this particular way of interacting with the powerspot.

But these caveats aside, by engaging head on with a set of topics that have been mostly ignored in academic literature, the book opens important new avenues for further research. It is, in a sense, a detailed primer on these diverse but linked subjects, introducing readers to objects and activities that often hide in plain sight; through highlighting their importance, Miller helps us see the larger contours and values of the given moment. Indeed, by providing overviews of each theme but drilling most deeply into contemporary manifestations, the author shows us that interpretations of the “occult” and the “supernatural” are always changing and always subject to historical context. Moreover, with its focus on practice and play rather than on questions of belief or religion, the book offers a blueprint for analysis of meaningful but often trivialized aspects of culture. I hope others will be inspired to pursue this kind of research further.