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Introduction

Laura Miller's[1] *Occult Hunting and Supernatural Play in Japan* is a thoroughly researched exploration of contemporary supernatural and spiritual practices in modern Japan. The main goal of the book is to examine the roles of various occult and supernatural activities with particular emphasis on women's participation in them. Miller integrates historical context, cultural anthropology, gender studies, media studies, and religious studies to offer an insightful look at modern Japanese occultism.

Structure of the Book

The book is divided into eight chapters, alongside an introduction and conclusion, each addressing different aspects of supernatural practices in Japan. Miller examines urban legends, paranormal tourism, the fortune-telling industry, and the commodification of esoteric items, such as tarot cards or pilgrim stamps in contemporary culture. The author analyzes how these activities serve as entertainment as well as providing avenues for female self-exploration and empowerment.

Throughout all chapters, Miller emphasizes the connection between the *kawaii*[2] (cute) aesthetic and the occult[3]. She explores how esoteric items are made more appealing and accessible through playful visual stylization, evident in fortune-telling apps, anime-inspired tarot cards, and themed cafes. This approach she describes could be said to represent a unique fusion of tradition and modernity.

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[1] Laura Miller is a professor of Japanese Studies and a Professor of Anthropology, currently at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. In her research she focuses on the interdisciplinary Japan studies and linguistic anthropology. The various topics she has covered in her publications include (but are not limited to) Japanese literature, aesthetics, fashion, gender (esp. femininity), historic figures or occult practices.

[2] The so-called *kawaii* aesthetics emphasize softness, playfulness, and innocent appeal, often featuring pastel colors, rounded shapes, and childlike proportions.

[3] Miller applies a broad interpretation of the occult, encompassing items and activities that can be perceived as supernatural, scientifically unexplainable and mysterious – from tarot cards, through protective charms, to places of concentrated spiritual energy.

Overview of the Content

In the *Introduction*, Miller outlines her interest in the topic of Japanese occultism, the methodologies used (predominantly interviews, participant observation, and literature analysis), and key terminology. She describes the occult, the book's central focus, as "extraordinary rather than ordinary" (p. 7). This idea could spark further discussion, especially considering how occult practices and their ties to popular culture (e.g., modern pop music, anime, manga, video games), could be seen as part of "occulture". This term, coined by Christopher Partridge (2004: 1–40), merges the concepts of the occult and culture, particularly within widely accessible pop culture. However, for Partridge, "occulture is strictly ordinary" (2013: 124), as its accessibility to a broad audience contrasts with the occult's traditional image as something hidden from the public eye. Miller herself shows how practices, such as tarot reading or collecting pilgrim stamps, are widely popular, with fans eager to visit occult sites or collect related artifacts. Thus, while the occult may seem extraordinary when viewed by outsiders, it becomes part of mainstream subcultures when incorporated into the entertainment industry.

The following chapters explore the individual practices that Miller analyzed. Each chapter follows a similar structure: an introduction to the practice in Japan, a historical overview (if possible), and usually the most voluminous part, the author's anthropological observations from visiting occult sites and practitioners. Lastly, Miller concludes each chapter on how these practices are reimagined in modern society, particularly through anime, manga, music, and video games.

The first chapter focuses on *Divinations* (pp. 11–32) and their continuous presence throughout the history. Beyond focusing on the popular *omikuji* (divination lottery slips, and the most popular form of divination) and their female-oriented aesthetic, Miller explores divination's social role and its ties to traditionally female spaces like beauty salons.

Occult Business, the topic of the second chapter, (pp. 33–43) aims at understanding the places where diviners reside and provide their services. Particularly important are the aesthetical and narrative stylizations of the diviners, often inspired by famous historical characters, as well as client reception, including online review system, preventing fraudulent behavior.

Chapters three to seven introduce various, most popular aspects of material culture associated with occult practices and popular spirituality in Japan. *Tarot Cards* (pp. 44–60) have gained popularity not only in the West but also in Japan, where their history is marked by a 1970s shift toward a female audience and a re-stylization featuring cute, feminine aesthetics. *Pilgrim Stamps* (pp. 61–80), aesthetically appealing stamps with artistic calligraphy characters awarded for a fee at specific temples and shrines, have sparked a collectors' boom among occult hunters. *Taoist Aper Talismans* (pp. 81–101), once secret charms crafted by clandestine groups, have become staples of esoteric pop culture. *Votive Tablets and Amulets*, such as *ema* and *omamori* (pp. 102–25), have undergone visual transformations, adopting *kawaii* aesthetics to attract a female audience. Finally, *Precious Curved Beads* (pp. 126–49), such as *magatama* with rich cultural and mythological significance, are also examined for their evolving role within contemporary esoteric practices.

The final eighth chapter discusses the concept of *Powerspots* (pp. 150–75), i.e. places presumably containing spiritual or healing energy, often associated with shrines, temples, forests, or lakes. Miller highlights the importance of such places for the occult hunters, mostly associated with healing, relaxation, and rejuvenation. For many women, these locations can also serve as a refuges from the hierarchical demands of their usual environments.

Strengths and Weaknesses

One of the book's greatest strengths is its interdisciplinary approach, blending anthropology, media studies, gender studies, and history to offer a comprehensive analysis. Miller's engaging and accessible writing makes the introduced cultural phenomena understandable to both academic and general audiences.

Miller's focus on women's role in occult activities is another standout feature, as she shifts the narrative from the male-dominated traditions often seen in existing literature. Her research illustrates how women in Japan are active participants and innovators in contemporary spiritual practices, using the supernatural for self-expression, empowerment, and community building. However, some readers may find the book's emphasis on cultural and aesthetic aspects lacking in detailed analyses of psychology or concrete religious ideas and practices. The broader scope of the book, while still a strength, may leave some readers wishing for a deeper exploration of specific subcultures or themes like paranormal tourism or professional ghost hunters.

Conclusion

In Japan, over 70% of the population identifies as atheistic or unaffiliated with any institutionalized religion, yet more than 65% consider spirituality important in daily life (Institute of Statistical Mathematics, 2017). The shift from organized religion to spiritual or esoteric practices[4], often seen in Western debates (e.g. Partridge, 2004; 2005), is also evident in Japan, though with key differences. Following the 1995 Aum Shinrikyo cult incident[5], spiritual practices outside official religions are often met with skepticism or hostility.

However, Laura Miller offers a different perspective, highlighting that women in Japan are leading the religious re-enchantment. They shape how temples, shrines, and occult practitioners present their work, blending spiritual interests with aesthetics, relaxation, and entertainment. Practices such as palmistry, tarot readings, and visiting powerspots have become part of modern culture, offering not only spiritual fulfillment but also opportunities for social and individual self-determination. Miller's *Occult Hunting and Supernatural Play in Japan* provides a nuanced analysis of this often overlooked, yet influential, aspect of Japanese society, dominated by women and generating significant cultural and economic impact.

[4] Often described in literature as connected to disenchantment – the decrease of perceiving cosmos as imbued with spiritual, mysterious, and incalculable powers, and re-enchantment – renewed tendency to attribute to the cosmos those spiritual and mysterious forces once deemed lost (e.g. in the increase in interest in New Age spirituality).

[5] In a tragic incident, cult members under the leadership of Shoko Asahara released sarin in several Tokyo subways, killing 13 and injuring more than 1000 passengers (MacWiliams, 2008: 200).

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