Japan's Mummies: The *Sokushinbutsu* in Post-war Occulture

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Abstract

This paper examines the shifting representation of Japan's mummified monks *sokushinbutsu* 即身仏, within postwar culture and occulture. Traditionally venerated within mountain ascetic and Buddhist contexts, these mummified bodies have, since the mid-twentieth century, been reconstituted through what Christopher Partridge terms "occulture," a domain where religion, science, and the occult intermingle in modern media. Drawing on print culture, television and digital platforms, this study traces how the *sokushinbutsu* were transformed from sacred relics into cultural signifiers of extremity, curiosity, and national identity. The analysis situates this reimagining within the broader postwar fascination with mummification triggered by Egyptological exhibitions and Hollywood horror films, arguing that Japanese representations both mirrored and subverted international "mummy mania."

Drawing on theoretical frameworks from thinkers such as Deleuze and Guattari and drawing on the previous research by Han on the relationship between occulture and Japanese esoteric thought, the paper explores how the *sokushinbutsu* operate as hybrid bodies: not as static relics of premodern asceticism but as dynamic media figures whose continued visibility exemplifies Japan's negotiation between the sacred and spectacle in an era of technological change. Their recent appearances, however, have been further away than ever either from their original Japanese context or the influence of the Egyptian mummy and its media tropes. This plasticity suggests that the *sokushinbutsu* have been reterritorialized, assuming an image-form that circulates independently within occulture. I argue that this occurred through a process of typification as "Japan's mummies," developed in response to the persistent presence of the Egyptian mummy within international occulture.

Keywords: *sokushinbutsu*; occulture; mummification; media; body; modernity.

Introduction

The *sokushinbutsu* mummified ascetics occupy a distinctive position in Japan's religious imagination and modern media history. This paper explores how they came to play a significant role within what Christopher Partridge (2004, pp. 68–70) called "occulture," the circulation of spiritual and esoteric ideas particularly within popular media, and how, through their continual reappearance, they expose the tensions and synergies between rational modernity and a persistent longing for reenchantment. It draws on a constellation of theoretical perspectives that foreground materiality, discourse, and power. Via Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's (1987, pp. 88–91) concept of the assemblage (*agencement*), we may frame the *sokushinbutsu* as dynamic networks of relations rather than fixed religious artifacts.[1] Their preserved bodies, textual descriptions, photographs, and reproductions form configurations in which social, spiritual, and aesthetic forces converge and mutate. As Massumi explains, these variations operate through affective intensities (Massumi 2002, pp. 27–28) that generate both fascination and unease.[2]

Sokushinbutsu also belong to a broader cultural history of reenchantment. The early twentieth-century "Tutmania" and mummy "mania," fuelled by Egyptology, occult aligned movements such as Theosophy, and cinematic fantasy (Luckhurst, 2012, pp. 4–9), established an international vocabulary of the preserved sacred body, a symbolic convergence of science and the occult. As such imagery entered Japan through exhibitions, serialized translations, and popular magazines, it met an indigenous tradition already rich in ideas of bodily transformation and posthumous power. In theorizing this Japanese dimension of occulture, this study follows Han Sangyun, who emphasizes that the "cultic milieu" in Japan blurred distinctions between institutional religion and popular spirituality, creating a dynamic interplay rather than a binary

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[1] Terms used such as "assemblage," "territorialization," and "reterritorialization" follow Deleuze and Guattari's usage in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Assemblage refers to a configuration of heterogeneous elements: bodies, images, discourses, and affects, that temporarily cohere to produce meaning or function (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, pp. 88–91). Territorialization indicates the stabilizing of such relations, while reterritorialization describes the formation of new relations when older ones loosen or collapse (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, pp. 53–56). These concepts help illuminate how the *sokushinbutsu* shift across religious, scientific, and popular media contexts without entirely losing cultural intelligibility.

[2] The emphasis on affective intensity also recalls the Spinozist lineage behind much contemporary affect theory. For Spinoza, everybody possesses a capacity "to affect and to be affected" (1985, *Ethics* II.13), a formulation that deeply influenced Deleuze's and later Massumi's understanding of affect as a pre-personal force that traverses bodies before it becomes emotion or representation. Invoking this lineage highlights the way in which the *sokushinbutsu* operate not only as symbolic figures but as affective bodies whose power lies in their ability to shape and be shaped by the cultural environments through which they are encountered.

divide (2021, p. 86ff), focusing on how Japan's 1970s *mikkyō* 密教 "boom" flourished in that environment. Taking a similar view, this paper views the *sokushinbutsu* as part of a continuum linking Buddhist orthodoxy, academic ethnography, and popular media, not as heterodox anomalies but as symbolic mediators within Japan's own processes of modernization and spiritual self-definition. The "occulture" label, then, is not to categorize "Japan's mummies" as an aspect of fringe fascination with things heterodox and transgressive, but is rather a historical mode of reinterpreting established aspects of religious thought within modernity. This is not to downplay the attraction of the exotic or the heavily theory laden nature of the body within religion and society.

The postwar "boom" in ethnographic interest in the *sokushinbutsu* reflected an ethnographic interest in Japanese mummification and the intellectual milieu, mainly esoteric Buddhist, which informed it. While it undoubtedly resonated with the "West as mirror" paradigm characteristic of *nihonjinron* 日本人論 discourse, the fascination also drew strength from the widespread domestic enthusiasm for Japan's own cultural history, an enthusiasm that sustained interest in the *sokushinbutsu* irrespective of any explicitly comparative framing. It was, therefore, no more an importation of Western esoterica than the *mikkyō* "boom" to which it was closely related. On the other hand, however, the popular interest in the *sokushinbutsu* was not merely an example of the Japanese public's interest in their own cultural history. The international interest in mummies had taken root in Japan since the early twentieth century, but it was the coming of an international touring Tutankhamun exhibition (1965-1966) that helped make the mummy a mainstay of popular fiction, television and cinematic entertainment. The impact of that exhibition on Japanese culture should be understood alongside the coming to Japan of world cultural events at that time, such as the 1964 Olympics and the Japan World Exposition Osaka in 1970, cultural festivities of the highest profile via which Japan celebrated its successful postwar reconstruction and return to the centre stage of global cultural life.

This paper traces the key points on the itinerary of the mummy as a Japanese cultural trope which framed changing perspectives on the *sokushinbutsu* and paved their way into contemporary subcultures. The first examines the international fascination with mummification and the occult, situating the Japanese rediscovery of the *sokushinbutsu* within the worldwide "remystification" of the body that followed Howard Carter's 1922 discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb. The subsequent section considers how Japanese occulture translated this imagery into

new cultural idioms. Later sections turn to postwar media, where the *sokushinbutsu* emerge as figures of horror, irony, and moral allegory in television, manga, and online video. Through these examples, the paper argues that the *sokushinbutsu* function as cultural assemblages that continually negotiate Japan's relationship to death, modernity, and the sacred. Their shifting representations, from ascetic bodies to photographic icons and digital memes, demonstrate how "occulture" imagery persists as a technology of reenchantment in a cultural flow increasingly defined by transparency and the information and spectacle that fills the void (Han Byung-Chul, 2015, p. 39–40). In tracing this evolution, the study seeks to reposition the *sokushinbutsu* within the broader history of Japan's participation in international occulture, as sites where belief, image, and power coalesce into enduring meditations on what it means to inhabit, transcend, and remember the body.

Mummy mania, Tutmania, and International Occulture

The Western interest in ancient Egypt which grew from the nineteenth century onward introduced a new pantheon and a set of religious and architectural motifs to the European *imaginaire* and these were to set down firm roots within the occult. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ancient Egypt's mortuary practices were reimagined within Western esoteric circles as proofs of transcendent science. The Theosophical Society, through H. P. Blavatsky's works such as *Isis Unveiled* (1877) treated mummification as an aspect of the post mortem self that allowed the spirit to revisit the body (Blavatsky, 1877, vol. 2, p. 367). The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, followed by Aleister Crowley's A∴A∴ (usually thought to signify "Argentum Astrum," founded 1907) and the O.T.O. (Ordo Templi Orientis, reorganized by Crowley), transformed these ideas into ceremonial initiations of symbolic death and rebirth: "The iconography and pantheon were strongly influenced by Egyptology as understood through the lenses of the occultist imaginary" ... "what was involved was not a historical Egypt but an imagined Ægypt." (Bogdan & Djurdjevic, 2013, p. 4). Through illustrated periodicals and pulp novels, such "hidden" doctrines mingled with mass entertainment. Partridge (2005, p. 70) describes this diffusion as the birth of the *occultural commons*, a hybrid zone in which science, religion, and magic negotiated their frontiers. This convergence of archaeology, media, and esotericism established the paradigm through which Japan would later interpret the *sokushinbutsu*. The deterritorialisation of historical Egypt and its reterritorialisation as an occultural Ægypt constituted a pivotal moment in the global flow

of esoteric imaginaries, a movement through which the *sokushinbutsu* would later enter an assemblage of meaning as "Japan's mummies." Rather than a simple case of exotic fascination, this process unfolded through the circulation of bodies, images, and affects that detached the dead from their ritual and historical strata. Many other ancient civilizations were subjected to archaeological scrutiny without acquiring a comparable esoteric afterlife. The Egyptian mummies, however, first entered modernity through the scientific gaze as objects of curiosity and entertainment, unwrapped and displayed in acts of empirical revelation, before later being absorbed into the imaginative economy of occulture.

A vital component of this process was the early twentieth century efforts to remystify the national landscapes of modern Britain and Japan which paralleled the fascination with Egypt, Atlantis, Shangri-La and other to varying degrees fictionalized occulture territories (occulterritories?). In Britain, Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan* (1894) and *The White People* (1904) conjured forth the countryside as a palimpsest of pre-Christian forces, while in Japan, Yanagita Kunio (柳田國男, 1875–1962) reenlivened Tohoku 東北 folklore via *Tōno Monogatari* 遠野物語 (1910), and Miyazawa Kenji (宮沢賢治, 1896–1933) reenchanted his part of Tohoku through fantasy and the reimagining of agrarian cosmology as a moral ecology. Both the English and Japanese movements sought to retrieve immanent spirituality eclipsed by industrial modernity. This shared symbolic cartography laid the conceptual foundation upon which mummy mania could take root in Japanese soil. Just as twentieth century occult movements sought to revive esoteric religious experience through new religious movements, folklorists such as Yanagita and folk-craft theorist Yanagi Sōetsu (柳宗悦, 1889–1961) validated rural artefacts and beliefs as repositories of national essence that could enliven the modern age. Thus "Japan's mummies" (the *sokushinbutsu*) were understood as both specimen and sacred relic, but were now framed by concepts of what rural religious practice might mean for the present and what spiritual mysteries they might present. It is within this matrix of reenchantment that Japanese Egyptology, and eventually Japan's own mummy-related scientific and popular discourses, must be situated.

As Kawai has explained, Japanese Egyptology began when Japanese visited Egypt for the first time, during the Tokugawa Shogunate's first ambassadorial mission to Europe in 1862 (Kawai, 2017, p. 51). Japanese interest in Egyptology has remained strong until the present day, as

demonstrated by the extensive Japanese involvement in the creation of the recently opened Grand Egyptian Museum near Giza. By the early twentieth century, Japan's press had already registered Egyptomania as an emblem of cosmopolitan modernity. The Howard Carter episodes had all been extensively reported in much the same manners as they were in the Western press, but at that time the newspaper and magazine article was their main medium and their visual impact was limited. It was not until after World War II, that thorough scientific work on "Japan's Mummies" would take place. This was the project, like Carter's supported by a newspaper company (Asahi), on the Fujiwara mummies of Hiraizumi (Hasebe, 1950). This was an important precursor to the later work on the *sokushinbutsu*, but it is significant that the bulk of those projects did not take place until further input from international Tutmania had taken effect with the coming of an international touring Tutankhamun Exhibition to Japan, exhibiting in Tokyo (August–October 1965), Kyoto (October–November 1965) and Fukuoka (December 1965–January 1966). The spectacular black and gold design of the exhibitions helped draw immense crowds, inaugurating an "Egypt boom" that was intensely visual in nature. This tour took place during a period in which Japan celebrated its return to hosting major international cultural events. This provided the backdrop to a boom which took place both in the popular media and in academia.

The 1960s witnessed a remarkable proliferation of new scholarly and popular ethnographic works devoted to mummification in Japan. Andō Kōsei's 安藤更生 *Nihon no miira* 日本のミイラ ("Japan's mummies" 1961) and Hori Ichirō's 堀一郎 *Yudono sankei no sokushinbutsu (miira) to sono haikei* 湯殿山系の即身仏（ミイラ）とその背景 ("The sokushinbutsu of Mt. Yudono and their background," 1961) were early contributions marking the beginning of a large body of work. These were followed by collective and individual studies produced by the *Nihon Miira Kenkyū Gurūpu* 日本ミイラ研究グループ (Japan Mummy Research Group), including *Nihon miira no kenkyū* 日本ミイラの研究 ("Research on Japan's Mummies," 1969), Togawa Anshō's 戸川安章 *Dewasanzan no miirabutsu* 出羽三山のミイラ仏 ("Mummified Buddhas of Dewa Sanzan," 1974), and Matsumoto Akira's 松本昭 *Nihon no miirabutsu* 日本のミイラ仏 ("Mummified Buddhas of Japan," 1985; rev. 1993). A second wave of works were published from the 1990s onward. These included works by Hijikata Masashi 土方正志 (*Nihon no miirabutsu o tazunete* 日本のミイラ仏をたずねて (("Seeking Japan's mummified

Buddhas," 1996), *Shinpen Nihon no miirabutsu o tazunete* 新編日本のミイラ仏をたずねて, ("Seeking Japan's Mummified Buddhas: New Edition," 2018)) and Naitō Masatoshi 内藤正敏 (*Nihon no miira shinkō* 日本のミイラ信仰, ("Japan's mummy faith," 1999).

The recurrence of the word *miira* ミイラ in the titles of the research works signals a deliberate engagement with international Egyptomania. The Japanese term *miira* had been coined to explain Egyptian mummies, borrowed from the Portuguese *mirra* (myrrh). This postwar application to *sokushinbutsu* was a conceptual reterritorialization that, in Deleuze and Guattari's (1987, pp. 508–510) sense, grafted international imagery onto Japan's sacred ethnographic geography. The choice of *miira* also signalled a cultural translation on the part of writers and publishers who preferred a neutral and more generally recognizable word. Where premodern discourse had emphasized *sokushinbutsu*, a term related to *sokushinjōbutsu* 即身成仏, "becoming a Buddha in this very body" *miira* projected both scientific modernity and international occulture onto the *sokushinbutsu*. Similarly, the word *Nihon* ("Japan") is consistently present from Andō's pioneering work *Nihon no miira* "Japan's Mummies" onward. This phrasing, by the obvious implied contrast with foreign mummies, appeals to the intriguing fact that something so other could be so close to home, that one's own nation should possess such ethnographic intrigue. This is close to the essence of "occulture," in that it frames the mysterious in the context of a narrative, genre or medium which is accessible and familiar. The approach taken in the "Japan's Mummies" ethnography genre has obvious crossovers with that other mainstay of popular postwar publishing, *Nihonjinron* 日本人論 or "theories of Japaneseness," also a heavily theory-laden genre which tends to both exoticize and idealize (even mythologize) aspects of the Japanese identity.

For a thorough exploration of the work of the Japan Mummy Research Group and the media coverage thereof, see Castiglioni's paper (2024, pp. 143–155), which begins by introducing the portrayal of the *sokushinbutsu* in a range of premodern travelogues, among other materials, which, of course, do not show the slightest influence of matters Egyptian. Let us conclude this section by focussing on two scholarly yet rather leftfield and occulture heavy treatments of the *sokushinbutsu*. The first of these is photographer turned ethnographer Naitō Masatoshi, whose photographic study of "Japan's *sokushinbutsu*," *Nihon no sokushinbutsu* 日本の即身仏 (1969) was followed by his ethnographic study *Nihon no miira shinkō*, mentioned above, after thirty

years of sustained interest. Naitō understood the camera as "a magic tool to perceive the intangible," and folklore as "a camera behind the camera that makes it possible to see an invisible world," taking inspiration from his own esoteric practices in Shugendo (Tokyo Photographic Art Museum, 2018a). Naitō's black and white close-ups of the *sokushinbutsu* possess a depth and detail unattainable in the many more elaborately aestheticized or fully lit scientific photographs of such figures. He succeeds in capturing each *sokushinbutsu* as an individual presence, expressing their differences. It is interesting that he chose the term *sokushinbutsu* for his photographic study which portrayed particularity, and *miira* for his ethnographic work.

This fusion of science, folklore, and art also intersected with *mikkyō* culture. Perhaps the most interesting example of this is Inagaki Taruho 稲垣足穂 and Umehara Masaki 梅原正紀's 1973 work *Shūmatsuki no mikkyō: Ningen no zentaiteki kaifuku to kaihō no ronri* 終末期の密教：人間の全体的回復と解放の論理 ("Esoteric Buddhism in the End Times: The Logic of the Human Being's Total Recovery and Liberation,") which reinterpreted esoteric Buddhism as a philosophy of holistic regeneration. The "End Times" implied here are the tumultuous days of late stage capitalism. Naitō Masatoshi contributes a provocative essay entitled *Chitei kara no urami: Miira – Kiga to "sutemi-butsu" no rekishi* 地底からの怨み・ミイラ—飢餓と「捨て身仏」の歴史— ("Grudge from Underground: The Mummy – The History of Famine and the 'Body-abandoning Buddha'" pp. 131-166). In this piece, Naitō interprets the *sokushinbutsu* not simply as ascetic saints but as figures animated by a latent spirit of vengeance (*urami* 怨み) against the social and economic systems that perpetuated suffering and hunger. He frames their self-mummification as a radical act of self-negation that also functions as a symbolic "revenge" upon exploitative civilization, an interpretation that aligns closely with the militant leftist ethos of several other contributors to the same volume. The collection includes essays such as Umehara Masaki 梅原正紀's *Gyakusatsu no bunmei o jusatsu seyo: Kigyōshu jusatsu kitō sōdan angyaki* 虐殺の文明を呪殺せよ—企業主呪殺祈禱僧団行脚記— ("Curse to Death the Civilization of Slaughter: Practice Chronicle of the Industrialist Curse-killing Incantation Monks," pp. 239-300), which calls for ritual "curse-killing" of corporate polluters.

The intellectual motivations driving Naitō warrant brief elaboration. His encounter with the compelling materiality of the *sokushinbutsu* became a formative influence on his lifelong

interest in Shugendō, which he came to regard as a pathway into forms of religious experience that seemed both older and more capacious than those acknowledged within dominant modern frameworks. For Naitō, the *sokushinbutsu* were not simply ethnographic objects but material presences whose affective power challenged normative accounts of modernity. He believed he had encountered another, more mystical and non-modern land at Dewa Sanzan. Importantly, this orientation toward self-empowerment, toward the retrieval of mystical locations and ritual practices, and toward a productive tension between modern and anti-modern modes of thought reflects the very ethos of the postwar occult boom in Japan. Writing amid the social upheavals of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Naitō's reinterpretations therefore grew not from antiquarian curiosity but from a desire to locate in Japan's religious past spiritual resources that might offer a response to the pressures of contemporary capitalist society, a concern shared by figures such as Umehara.

Within this broader milieu of the occult boom, when artists, writers, and spiritual seekers were increasingly drawn to countercultural spaces where estrangement, non-duality, and the collapse of conventional boundaries could be embraced, Naitō's photographic experiments emerge as emblematic rather than eccentric. This "Shugen master equipped with a camera" (Tokyo Photographic Art Museum 2018b, p. 178) pursued precisely the sort of radical perceptual and bodily reorientation that defined the era's alternative spiritual cultures. His closing piece in the 2018 exhibition, a photograph aestheticising a piece of excrement he had spent many days training his own body to produce, exemplifies this impulse: a deliberate act of collapsing the dualisms of pure/impure, beautiful/base, subject/object. In doing so, Naitō enacted the very countercultural sensibility that animated the occult boom. As the museum's Ishida Tetsurō observed, "No normal person could wrap their mind around a concept of this kind, or the scale and extent of the passion involved" (Tokyo Photographic Art Museum 2018b, p. 178).

These two semi-academic, ideologically influenced works mark the beginning of the "afterlife" of the *sokushinbutsu* within occulture, in which what is signified by the mummy is quite separate from its original context, and not informed merely by unmoving physicality. The first puts it in the context of a Japanese reenchantment sourced from the vestiges of the premodern on the national periphery, the other in that of the radical politics of the 1970s.

Movies and Television

The coexistence of scientific and mystical readings of the *sokushinbutsu* also found expression on screen. A landmark horror series broadcast on Nippon Television from July to October 1961, directed by Tamura Shōzō 田村正蔵 and Funatoko Sadao 船床定男. *Kyōfu no miira* 恐怖の ミイラ ("The Mummy of Terror," 1961) drew directly on the conventions of Hollywood's 1930s and 1950s mummy films such as Universal Pictures' *The Mummy* (1932) and Hammer Studios' *The Curse of the Mummy's Tomb* (1964) but recontextualized them for domestic audiences. Released during the 1960s wave of imported horror, it transposed the exotic terrors of Egypt to Japan. The success of the series helped consolidate the term *miira* as an entertainment genre keyword, collapsing distinctions between sacred relic and cinematic monster. The "curse of the mummy" trope in the Anglosphere mummy films that reflected the Carter Tutankhamen episode surely influenced the rather less iconic "curse of the *sokushinbutsu*" mystery genre which emerged in the late Showa period. *Yudono-sanroku Noroi Mura* 湯殿山麓呪い村 ("Cursed Village at the Foot of Mt. Yudono," 1980) is perhaps the best known of the 100 or so novels (mostly mystery) published by Yamamura Masao 山村正夫 (1931-1999) between 1959 and 1998. A movie with the same title came to cinemas in 1984 directed by Toshiharu Ikeda 池田敏春 (1951-2010). Interestingly, the story deals with the dreadful topic of compulsion in becoming a *sokushinbutsu*. Some of the *sokushinbutsu* were fugitives of various sorts who had sought sanctuary in temples. It is possible that in some cases they may have been pressured by circumstance or by those with influence over them into undergoing the *sokushinbutsu* practice. Serious themes, such as the trauma of the late Pacific War and immediate postwar years, are taken up. The rest of the storyline is, nonetheless, a fairly predictable arrangement of a professor involved in illicit romance uncovering skeletons in a family closet, sex and violence ensuing. Without the *sokushinbutsu* content, this could have been any other formulaic mystery. The *sokushinbutsu* was just about familiar enough to be plausible and yet mysterious enough to give the whole village an air of doom. The image of the *sokushinbutsu* on offer here is that of the uncanny curiosity from the interior foreign land, but the curse motif is almost certainly imported.

By the mid-1960s, the image of the mummy had migrated fully into the shared visual language of postwar Japanese entertainment. Within the expanding culture of *tokusatsu* 特撮 (special-effects) and *kaijū* 怪獣 (monster) spectacles, the mummy became a malleable icon of fear, fun,

wonder, and even moral problems. In the Deleuzian sense, each new version constituted an assemblage: flesh, prosthetic, camera, and child's gaze recombined to produce the affect of the uncanny body. As television gradually supplanted cinema, the mummy migrated into the sphere of domestic popular entertainment, taking new form within the *tokusatsu* hero programs of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Episodes of children's series such as *Jaianto Robo* (ジャイアントロボ, *Miira kaijin* ミイラ怪人 "Mummy monster" broadcast February 26, 1968), *Kamen Raidā* (仮面ライダー, *Ikikaetta Miira Kaijin Ejiputasu* 生き返ったミイラ怪人エジプタス "The Resurrected Mummy Monster Egypt", December 4, 1971), *Chōjin Baromu-wan* (超人バロム・１, Hakkyō Majin Miira Ruge 発狂魔人ミイラルゲ, "The Mad Mummy Demon Ruge", April 30, 1972), *Kinkyū Shirei Ten-Fō Ten-Ten* (緊急指令 10-4・10-10, *Yami ni Ugoku Miira* 闇に動くミイラ, "The Mummy that Moves in the Dark", August 14, 1972), *Kagaku Ninja-tai Gatchaman* (科学忍者隊ガッチャマン, *Arashi o Yobu Miira Kyojin* 嵐を呼ぶミイラ巨人, "The Mummy Giant that Summons the Storm," October 15, 1972), *Kikaidā Zero-wan* (キカイダー 01, *Miira Otoko no Nitoro Bakudan* ミイラ男のニトロ爆弾, "The Mummy Man's Nitro Bomb," August 25, 1973), and *Taigā Sebun* (タイガーセブン, *Yomigaetta Miira Genjin no Fukushū* 蘇ったミイラ原人の復讐, "Revenge of the Revived Mummy Primitive," October 13, 1973) repeatedly staged encounters between technologically empowered heroes and mummified antagonists: *miira kaijin* (ミイラ怪人, "mummy monsters").

Within the idiom of children's action drama, the mummy became a flexible signifier: sometimes a tragic revenant seeking justice (*Taigā Sebun*), sometimes a parodic threat neutralized by the moral rationality of the hero (*Kamen Raidā*). Even when defeated, these figures were framed through pathos or nostalgia rather than simple horror. In this respect, the *tokusatsu* mummy embodied the genre's broader ethical logic: monstrosity as a vehicle for moral instruction and emotional transformation rather than as a one-dimensional spectacle of fear.

Kyōfu Gekijō Anbaransu 恐怖劇場アンバランス (*Miira no koi* 木乃伊の恋 "Love of the Mummy," broadcast January 8, 1973) deserves particular attention as an overtly stylized and sexualized reworking of premodern Japanese horror motifs. The episode can be read as a

modern visual adaptation that recalls Ueda Akinari 上田秋成 (1734–1809) and his unsettling satirization of *sokushinbutsu* cults in *Nise no en* 二世の縁 ("The Destiny that Spanned Two Lifetimes") which appears in the *Harusame monogatari* 春雨物語 ("Tales of the Spring Rain," 1808). The production's use of special effects and its lurid contemporary setting situate it firmly within the aesthetics of early 1970s television horror, while its choice of a comparatively obscure literary source suggests an attempt to find content for modern occulture output within Edo period writing on the supernatural. That said, Akinari's satirical and cynical approach, and the commentary on the human condition it conveys, is not lost in the work.

Magazine Culture and the Occult Boom

From the late 1960s through the 1980s, Japan experienced what is often described as an *okaruto būmu* オカルトブーム ("occult boom"), during which television, pulp magazines, and cinema merged scientific curiosity with esoteric spectacle. In the 1970s, this intersection between pedagogy and popular mystery extended into children's publishing, where the imagery of mummification and ancient remains became part of an accessible visual education in science and wonder that also sought to cultivate ethical reflection on life and death.

In 1977, Fujiko F. Fujio 藤子・F・不二雄 (1933–1996) published *Doraemon fushigi shirīzu: Nihon no nazo to fushigi* ドラえもんふしぎシリーズ 日本のなぞとふしぎ ("Doraemon Mystery Series: The Mysteries and Wonders of Japan") in the 101 Comics Deluxe line from Shōgakukan. The volume presented Japan's natural and historical curiosities such as volcanoes, fossils, ruins, and legends through Doraemon's humorous yet didactic narration. Each episode used scientific discovery to illustrate a moral lesson about curiosity, cooperation, and respect for nature's processes (Fujiko F. Fujio, 1977).

By the early 1980s, this educational curiosity developed into explicitly transnational "mystery" narratives that linked Japan's ancient past with global archaeological fascination. In 1981, Takashi Yōichi たかしよいち and Yoshikawa Yutaka 吉川豊 produced *Sekai fushigi monogatari 10: Nihon ni nokoru nazo no miira* 世界ふしぎ物語 10 日本にのこるなぞのミイラ ("World Mystery Tales 10: The Mysterious Mummies Remaining in Japan") (Takashi & Yoshikawa, 1992/1981). The volume presented Japan's *sokushinbutsu* alongside Egyptian and Incan mummies, situating the ascetic bodies of northern Japan within a global narrative of

preservation, piety, and moral devotion. Its companion work, *Manga sekai fushigi monogatari 4: Nazo no shōnen ō Tutankāmen* まんが世界ふしぎ物語4なぞの少年王ツタンカーメン ("World Mystery Tales 4: The Enigmatic Boy King Tutankhamun"), reenacted the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb and the surrounding "mummy's curse" mythology in a child-friendly narrative (Takashi & Yoshikawa, 1991). Both volumes reinforced the parallel between archaeological discovery and spiritual discipline, framing scientific exploration as an exercise in moral understanding.

In 2007, Yoshikawa Yutaka revisited the theme in *Dokidoki miira daishūgō* ドキドキミイラ 大集合 ("The Great Mummy Gathering"), published by Rironsha 理論社. The book juxtaposed real-world mummified remains including Egyptian pharaohs, Incan children, Buddhist ascetics, and museum curiosities through lively illustrations and accessible commentary (Yoshikawa, 2007). These works collectively demonstrate how late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century children's media in Japan synthesized the scientific, moral, and occult dimensions of the mummy. Within the broader sphere of postwar "occult boom," they participated in what Partridge (2004) terms "occulture," a diffuse network through which esoteric ideas, moral instruction, and entertainment coexisted in popular form. The *miira* thus became a pedagogical emblem that transformed curiosity into ethical reflection, mediating between rational knowledge and spiritual imagination. Rather than a separate "mystery culture," these texts exemplified a Japanese strand of occulture in which the supernatural was rendered educative, transforming death into a field for moral inquiry and wonder.

While children's educational manga domesticated the mummy as an object of moral curiosity, popular magazines such as *Mu* ムー (issue No.7, November 1980) reimagined both mummies and *sokushinbutsu* within a sensational framework of *fushigi kagaku* 不思議科学 ("mystery science") appearing alongside essays on UFOs, psychic powers, and ancient aliens. The magazine's special feature *Miira no himitsu* ミイラの秘密 ("*The Secrets of the Mummies*") juxtaposed Buddhist ascetics with Egyptian and Andean mummies and treated all as evidence in an international catalogue of the uncanny. Eclecticism was a defining feature of the *okaruto būmu* of the 1970s, when occult categories both foreign and domestic could be freely combined. *Shōnen Magazine* 少年マガジン (No. 36, 1971) featured *Saikuringu kaiki ryokō* サイクリング怪奇旅行 ("Cycling Trip to Mystery"), a children's guide to cycling illustrated with

photographs of *sokushinbutsu*, which invited readers to take a cycling trip to view the mummified monks, which provide a suitably rewarding and adventurous destination with the advantage of being in Japan. The mummies are also markedly incongruous with the general content of the article, reterritorialized and even "transparent," pasted in like a kind of content rich clipart. Through these media, the mummy and the *sokushinbutsu* converged within what we might call an "occultural commons," that is, the broadly shared cultural 'reservoir of ideas, beliefs, practices, and symbols' of occulture described by Partridge (2004, pp. 4, 84 etc) but extended to include content that has become a meme or entirely deterritorialized from its original context or even an established context within occulture. The educational book and the television monster worked toward the same end, reconciling the visible corpse with modern knowledge. By the late 1970s, these icons had saturated the visual culture of the *okaruto būmu*, and by the early 1980s the televised mummy and its educational companions had undergone a subtle transformation. No longer an undead other, the mummy had become familiar and even endearing, a figure of sympathy as much as spectacle. This humanization prepared the ground for the next phase of the cultural life of the *sokushinbutsu*, its migration into manga, light novels, and later anime, where the preserved body came to symbolize emotional endurance, relational ethics, and the reanimation of faith through imagination. The same logic of assemblage that had once joined camera, prosthetic, and child viewer would extend to paper, ink, and digital screen. Within this media ecology, the *sokushinbutsu* emerged as both character and concept, a figure through which Japanese popular culture continued to negotiate the tension between death and persistence. A forthcoming book chapter (Morris 2026) addresses the distinctive presence of *sokushinbutsu* in horror manga, and further papers will be necessary to explore their instantiations in literature and gaming culture.

Toward transparency

While the occultural sphere has allowed the *sokushinbutsu* to inhabit the full range of contexts and media, it has also brought "transparency" to them in that their image is now quite readily transposed as if it were on an acetate sheet that can be set against a variety of backgrounds. This illustrates the dual process of the removal of the body from its original ritual geography and the reapplication of it within the symbolic economy of society.

Nanao Yoshi's Bari 3 Tantei Kennai chan: Totsugeki Kijo Sokushinbutsu Jiken バリ 3 探偵圏内ちゃん―凸撃忌女即身仏事件― ("Full Signal Detective Kennai chan: The Online Attack Married-Woman Sokushinbutsu Case," 2016) is the third novel in a detective series featuring an introverted young female investigator. In this work, the term *sokushinbutsu* refers not to an ascetic monk but to the emaciated corpse of a woman who has died by suicide following prolonged online abuse. Kennai chan, the reclusive digital detective, must solve the case through her expertise in smartphones and social networking sites. The novel is saturated with contemporary internet slang and jargon, reflecting a youth-oriented, predominantly female readership. Within this setting the cultural history of the *sokushinbutsu* is evoked as background scenery, lending the narrative an atmosphere of borrowed religiosity (p. 15ff). The novel demonstrates the continued vitality of the *sokushinbutsu* motif in popular fiction and subculture. It also makes clear that the term has now broken free from its religious and historical origins, becoming an ironic signifier within a networked "occultural" vocabulary. The sacred corpse functions here as a metaphor for the exhaustion of digital subjectivity: a body preserved by exposure, deprived of aura yet endowed with perpetual visibility.

Another emblematic text, this time taking up the Egyptian bandaged mummy motif, is Kashiwabara Hiro's 柏葉ヒロ *Miira no Kaikata* ミイラの飼い方 ("How to Keep a Mummy," serialized 2016; anime adaptation 2018). The story of a high school boy who adopts a palm sized mummy transforms the macabre into tenderness, preservation becoming a metaphor for emotional intimacy and domestic affection. Yet *Miira no Kaikata* also extends earlier mummy narratives by presenting the preserved body as a relational node, neither alive nor dead, but sustained through attention and affection. If *Miira no Kaikata* sentimentalizes the mummy, Nakagawa Rumi's 中川るみ *Sokushinbutsu no kei ni shosu* 即身仏の刑に処す ("*Condemned to Be a Sokushinbutsu,*" 2022) restores the horror context it had originally borrowed from Hollywood. In this dystopian novel, mummification is not voluntary transcendence but a state imposed punishment. Nakagawa's fiction portrays the collapse of ascetic self-transcendence into authoritarian control.

By the 2010s the mummy had entered a fully digital afterlife. Video games such as *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (FromSoftware, 2019) and *Shin Megami Tensei V* (Atlas, 2021) amongst others reconfigured *sokushinbutsu* as interactive archetypes. Across all these variations runs a

shared media logic. Each new representation repositions the *sokushinbutsu* within the evolving regimes of mediation. The body that once signified the continuity of faith now guarantees the continuity of narrative. The mummy's stillness generates motion through replication and circulation. In the terms of Deleuze and Guattari (1987, pp. 508–510), the *sokushinbutsu* is deterritorialized, becoming an assemblage in which body, medium, and authority converge.

Conclusions: *Sokushinbutsu* and the Dynamics of Occulture

Ethnographic fascination with Japan's mummified ascetics would probably have arisen even without direct Western influence. Nevertheless, the visual and narrative formats through which the *sokushinbutsu* entered popular awareness in the postwar period were shaped by the global "mummy mania" that had already taken root in popular culture since the early twentieth century. The *sokushinbutsu* have never been static relics. They have circulated across multiple media and interpretive regimes within "occulture."

Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the assemblage, which "holds together by constant variation" (1987, pp. 88–89), offers a productive framework for understanding this process. Within occulture, "Japan's mummies," both domestic and Egyptian, operate as assemblages of meaning that are continuously reconfigured through new material and discursive relations. They have been represented as sacred relics, scientific specimens, cursed objects, regional emblems, figures of horror, and objects of care. Their significance resides precisely in their capacity to enter and transform new associations. Underlying these shifting representations is a Spinozist insight into the persistence of bodily capacities across vastly different regimes of meaning. The sokushinbutsu endure in occulture not simply because they are visually striking, but because, in Spinoza's terms, they continue "to affect and to be affected" in new ways as they encounter new media environments. Their afterlives thus demonstrate how a body's power is not exhausted by its historical origin but continually reactivated through cultural circulation. This process corresponds to what Spinoza (1985, Ethics, II.13) identified as a body's power to affect and to be affected, an expression of vitality that persists across differing contexts and temporalities.

The history traced in this study also clarifies a distinctive mode of reenchantment in which spirituality, scholarship, and spectacle are mutually constitutive. In postwar Japan, occulture became a means of negotiating secular modernity through the interpenetration of ethnography,

mass media, and visual culture. Figures such as Naitō Masatoshi reframed the *sokushinbutsu* as active presences within a living ethnographic landscape. The subsequent migration of these images into manga, video games, and online platforms continued the same logic of recontextualization, translating the sacred into reproducible circuits of entertainment and transforming the miraculous into a mediated aesthetic experience quite separate from their original contexts.

The *sokushinbutsu* inhabit a liminal zone between two interrelated currents of occulture: the international imaginary of the mummy as an object of mystery, science, and spectacle, and the Japanese lineage of Buddhist austerity, devotion, and postwar cultural nationalism. Their continuing presence across media forms and historical periods attests to their role as mediators in Japan's negotiation with death, modernity, and spiritual identity. Their current "transparency" as reterritorialized occultural content in the popular gaze will itself ensure their ongoing rediscovery by new pilgrims and academic readerships.

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