

Laurel Kendall. Mediums and Magical Things:
Statues, Paintings, and Masks in Asian Places.
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BOOK REVIEW BY MALLY STELMASZYK

"DOWN from the altar and into the domain of enlivened ritual practice" (p. 182) is a shift in thinking about religious experiences encouraged by Laurel Kendall throughout her pivotal book as she examines ensouled images and the ways in which they are made, used, and consequently disposed of. Anthropological inquires have long looked at relationships between humans and nonhumans, materiality of spirits, and religious practices through debates such as an ontological turn, new animism, or cosmopolitics, to mention but a few. *Mediums and Magical Things* certainly falls within these debates, adding, moreover, an important spin to the ways in which we understand what it means to say that images have powers. In this book, the author considers the complexity of encounters with empowered images as situated in four geographical contexts spanning Asia: the statues used by Vietnamese and Burmese spirit mediums, the paintings hanging in Korean shamanic shrines, and the masks worn on the heads of entranced dancers in Balinese festivals. By introducing the notion of the ontology of ensoulment, Kendall ably demonstrates the key role of both artistic and ritualist practices and circumstances through which images become inhabited by spirits and, at the same time, the ways in which they become de-souled or de-animated.

In conceptualizing and structuring this monograph, the author introduces a distinct kind of comparative study wherein four examples of ensouled images interweave in a productive dialogue without reverting to either reductive conclusions lodged in the rubric of universalism or endless particularity. Through what Kendall refers to as "the validity of asking" (p. 22), a deeper understanding of agency and materiality emerges while illuminating how a question posed in one context might unveil unpredictable eventualities (both theoretical and ethnographic) in another. Kendall astutely situates her discussion on three analytical hooks or, as she proposes, affordances. The first concerns the traditions of religious image-making through quality workshop productions; the second discusses the distinct processes of ensoulment while asking how magic congeals with craftsmanship in the practices of fabricating images, and their installation, care, and disposal; and the final affordance probes the ways in which certain images affect the work of spirit mediums and shamans in Asia. The three affordances are analyzed within the four ethnographic contexts and are gradually considered in the first five chapters. The first affordance is discussed in chapters 1 and 3. The second becomes central to chapters 2 and 3, and the final one resonates through chapters 4 and 5. All three affordances then come together in the concluding chapter 6. Each of the six chapters is

based on an extensive and beautifully written ethnography which weaves around four distinct examples, starting with the Vietnamese statues, followed by Burmese figures, then to Korean images, and concluding with Balinese masks. Thus, through this intricate analytical framework, we are encouraged to unveil the conditions of doing, making, and using powerful objects.

Chapter 1 focuses on a plethora of Hindu and Buddhist traditions that directly relate to the achievement of image ensoulment. For example, she considers the use of liturgical knowledge in the practices of ensoulment, and the rule of blessings and prayers and the involvement of priests, monks, and ritual masters in the process of enlivening images. Kendall begins her analysis with parsing questions around the ways in which people produce the immaterial using the material means available to them. The author foregrounds the importance of relationships between people and objects in this process, which brings together shamans, mediums, artists, images, and the community. This allows Kendall to show how the notion of ensoulment reaches far beyond ritual practice. In doing so, she also highlights how the craft of creating images, where skills and materials interweave with the ritual or magic, is significantly absent from the debates on spirit materiality and animism. While we further learn about the circumstances in which the ethnography presented in the book emerged, Kendall also reveals her engaging journey, which spans different continents, as an ethnographer and an anthropologist.

As the discussion moves into chapter 2, a more complex conversation on image agency ensues, probing the ways in which effectuating the powers of images are understood and experienced by devotees in different ethnographic contexts in Asia. Through analyzing how gods, spirits, or energizing forces are inducted into the images and operate through them, Kendall introduces the core objects of study in the book. These are the temple statues that are part of the Mother Goddess religion in Vietnam, *nat* (local deity) figures from Myanmar, Korean god pictures and Korean shamans (*mansin*), and Balinese masks inhabited by *niskala* (Balinese invisible entities). The author thoroughly engages with diverse practices that constitute the process of ensoulment of each of the images and shows how these often resonate across the region. However, the analysis also elucidates an important difference for further discussion. In the context of Vietnamese and Burmese statues, ensoulment appears to be more static and directly

related to concrete practices, with the statues operating more as containers for gods and spirits. In the context of Korean pictures, this process is much more unstable and unpredictable while hinging on the gods' distinct relationship with the shamans and mediums. Similar ambiguity is conveyed in Bali where the process of mask ensoulment is often dangerous and uncertain, with masks being securely stored away outside of the ritual context.

This allows the author to delve into a broader discussion on the use of animism and animation as relevant analytical frameworks in the understanding of the processes of enlivening spirits. As Kendall convincingly shows, considering animism as a point of reference might be useful in discussing the dynamics of communication between shamans, spirits mediums, and non-naturalist beings in material form. However, the very essence of enlivening is something that animistic approaches, as discussed in some anthropological works, might overlook given its prevailing focus on forces as permanently residing in images. Kendall foregrounds her conversation on animism within some of the well-established analyses of human/nonhuman relations, such as those of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro¹ and Morten Pedersen.² To this, I would also add recent critiques of new materialism, in particular a pivotal work offered by critical indigenous studies in relation to indigenous metaphysics, as presented by, for example, Kim TallBear.³ TallBear's critique of the co-constitutive entanglements between the material and the immaterial in the wider context of intimate relations with nonhuman beings could have contributed an important angle to Kendall's discussion on ensoulment, materiality of spirits, and interactions with nonhumans in general.

Chapter 3 moves away from the process of ensoulment towards the specific practices of fabricating images to become containers or seats for gods, spirits, and energies. With reference to Marcel Mauss's⁴ culinary metaphor on the notion of magic as a recipe (p. 66), the author examines the congealing of magic and craftsmanship as they come to produce powerful images. Kendall supports her discussion with an extensive ethnography that unpacks complex actions associated with

1 Viveiros de Castro, "Exchanging Perspectives."

2 Pedersen, *Not Quite Shamans*.

3 TallBear, "Beyond the Life/Not-Life Binary."

4 Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*.

carving and preparing objects. These actions include the quality of wood, the carver's integrity and purity, but also some minor magic, such as the importance of lucky days, prohibitions, offerings, and the use of skills in crafting the statue that will satisfy the gods (pp. 74–98). In the context of Korea, great importance is further attributed to the relationship between the shamans, gods, and painters. Indeed, through her nuanced study, Kendall ably shows us how craft, art, religious practice, and magic can become a single activity in the process of creating specific images.

In the second part of the chapter, the tensions between older, more “traditional” methods of image fabrication and the growing commoditized production are introduced. With references to Mauss's⁵ and Alfred Gell's⁶ discussions on magical acts and technical execution as variables that can be combined (p. 100), Kendall turns to distinct technologies of enchantment where the circumstance in which the images are produced along with the materials being deployed contribute to the overall efficacy of the images themselves. With respect to increased commodification, these technologies often become reduced to pure technology for cost-effective purposes. As Kendall convincingly points out, however, such distinctions between commodified and non-commodified objects are not instantly obvious. Although offering an important contribution to the understanding of the commercialization of religious practices, such as shamanic shows and selling religious images as souvenirs, Kendall stresses the role of distinct ambiguity surrounding such practices, which goes well beyond the commodity and non-commodity dualism.

The intricacies of relationships between ensouled objects, mediums, and shamans are a center of analytical discussion in chapter 4. Kendall points to the parallels between carefully crafted images considered as containers and carefully prepared bodies that await interaction with the enlivened images. As the author stresses, these parallels, although executed through different practices, are neither representational nor experiential. Rather, they constitute discrete modes of engagement. In order to illustrate her argument further, Kendall refers to the concept of an assemblage to reflect how bodies, images, and gods operate as a machine of interweavement, a machine that is fluid, un-

stable, and unpredictable. The connections that occur between ensouled images and the mediums, who foster their animate presence in ritual settings, is also analogically compared to electricity. This allows the author to explore the ways in which material religion and the dynamics of ritual work continually recombine while remaining vulnerable to diverse factors, such as circumstance and relations between those involved in the process. Thus, Kendall revisits her earlier remarks on the intrinsic ambiguity that accompanies the ontology of ensoulment when, for example, some images work better than others and sometimes they might not work at all. With some critique of Amazonian and Southeast Asian studies, this translates into further consideration of animism as limited in accounting for a refined sense of the ontological practices with which the author engages.

In chapter 5, we move towards the complexity of socioeconomic circumstances in which the ensouled images are created. Revisiting some of the remarks from chapter 3 concerning the growing commercialization of religious objects, the author convincingly explores how the production of statues, masks, and paintings goes far beyond the frames of mere representation or embodiment of “pure commodities in art market exchange” (p. 133) as it is often understood. Kendall explores the fluidity of boundaries between empowered images and pure commodities that seem to overlap both in the context of practices that surround them and the ways in which people perceive them. As in the previous chapter, the question of the unpredictability of enlivened objects is considered, allowing the author to illuminate how the shifts between sacred and secular identities can often become inconsistent and unknown. In short, rather than moving in a straightforward manner towards disenchantment, ensouled images spin in numerous directions including art, religion, and economics. Considering the importance that is attributed to ambiguity, fluidity, and uncertainty throughout Kendall's book, it would have benefitted from more engagement with Siberian and Mongolian cosmologies, where cosmological relations, including humans, spirits, gods—and also objects—are often fluid, difficult to discern, and intermittent.⁷

5 Ibid.

6 Gell, “The Enchantment of Technology.”

7 See, for instance, Willerslev and Ulturgasheva, “Revisiting the Animism Versus Totemism Debate”; Delaplace and Empson, “The Little Human and The Daughter-in-law”; Levin, *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing*.

Chapter 6 concludes this journey of image analysis by exploring the complexity of the paths through which ensouled images become part of the museum environment. In a compelling manner, Kendall discusses how it is often through the practices of theft, appropriation, and damage paired with insensitivity and ignorance that the empowered images become transformed into museum objects. As the author convincingly shows, the conditions of ensoulment and de-soulment of images are rarely available in museum records, despite their pivotal role for the overall presence of the image and its path from fabrication to afterlife. Powerful images displayed in museums often affect the museum staff and those who sell or gift images to a museum collection as well as museum visitors. As Kendall rightfully points out, to not acknowledge these processes, in, for example, literary considerations of sacred materials, renders the understanding of the image significantly poorer.

Kendall's monograph constitutes a key reading for anyone who is interested in the broader understanding of how materiality and immateriality come together in a productive dialogue while revealing the nuanced processes of producing sacred images and the complexity of sociocosmic relationships that surround them. By offering a unique framework of an ontology of ensoulment, the author poses fundamental questions regarding the ways in which art and the sacred, as well as the commercial, interleave while pushing our comprehension of "what an image is, how it has been understood and used, and the work it was once expected to accomplish" (p. 177). Moreover, Kendall's book is an important voice that should be heard and attended to in the current wider anthropological debates on matters such as cosmopolitics, the pluriverse, and the Anthropocene, where anthropology continues to grapple with the intricacies of human and nonhuman interactions and their direct implications for our worlds.

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