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Wrapping the Soul: Ritual Products and Gendered Consumption in Japanese Culture

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ABSTRACT

This study provides an ethnoconsumerist account of the existence and meaning of a unique ritual product, abdominal binders, used in Japanese maternity rituals. Central to the notion of an ethnoconsumerist approach toward understanding is the notion of a cultural analysis that includes both a text view and a field view (Venkatesh 1995). In this study, the text view is provided through an extensive review of cultural texts and materials related to Japanese religious, medical, and social history. In addition, the field view is conducted through ethnographic fieldwork in Tokyo, Japan. With the ethnoconsumerist research approach, the text view and the field view are combined to develop a cultural framework.

The author finds a deeply embedded belief system surrounding the “hara” (portion of the abdomen located approximately two inches below the navel) in Japan. In short, the “hara” is found to symbolize the vital center of the soul from a Japanese cultural and spiritual perspective (Durckheim 1962). This meaning is transferred to the abdominal binder, a ritual product germane to Japanese maternity culture.

Such garments and the custom of abdominal binding during pregnancy are found to date back to at least the tenth century in Japan. The author finds their use and application in contemporary Japanese culture to reveal two dominant emergent themes: wrapping the soul and the social construction of “mothers.” Transformed throughout history and embraced within contemporary practice, abdominal binders represent a spiritual conduit to the gods that offers protection for the dyadic soul of the Japanese mother and child. In the context of “liminality” during the rite of passage into motherhood, they also perform a critical role in the social construction of “mothers” in Japanese culture.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


