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Caring for sacred waste: The disposal of *butsudan* (Buddhist altars) in contemporary Japan

This paper examines the affective labours of Buddhist altar (仏壇 *butsudan*) disposal in contemporary Japan. In the modern era, *butsudan* have served as pervasive signifiers of household religious affiliation and key sites for ancestor veneration rites. Today, however, the industry faces crisis. Not only have sales declined dramatically, but old altars are increasingly encountered as surplus goods by those who lack the space, ritual expertise, or inclination to care for them. Like other forms of sacred waste (like human corpses), disposal is complicated for practical and moral reasons, and often requires the performance of special rites (供養 *kuyō*). In this ethnographic study of the *butsudan* industry, I consider how workers manage their own and their customer's "problematic feelings" (気持ちの問題 *kimochi-no-mondai*) that are generated by disposal. I suggest that how people choose (or are forced) to dispose of *butsudan* is a meaningful, generative process, that provides insight into the everyday production, consumption, and destruction of the sacred.

Keywords: Material religion – sacred waste – disposal – *butsudan* – Buddhism – *kuyō*

During my internship with *Takimoto Bukkōdō*¹ (滝本仏光堂), a Buddhist retailer in Osaka, my colleagues were frequently tasked with the collection and disposal of old and/or unwanted *butsudan* (仏壇) or domestic Buddhist altars. On one occasion, our team is called to a residence in a rugged 1980s apartment block in suburban North-East Osaka. We are there to collect a modestly sized, but elaborate *Jōdo Shinshū* altar, decorated in black lacquer and gold leaf. I approach the job with anticipation, as a rare opportunity to discuss *butsudan* with those actively choosing to de-invest from this tradition. But it soon becomes apparent that an ethnographic interview is off the cards. Entering the cramped hallway, we are greeted by a taciturn couple in their mid-40s, who sit in *seiza* (正座)² on a threadbare tatami mat beside the *butsudan* for

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1. Except where noted, the names, images, and details of companies and individuals have been reproduced per their request and in line with ethics clearance for this research.
 2. A kneeling position considered the formal sitting posture in Japan.

the duration of our stay, surveying our work. My colleagues, Tan and Kobayashi, kneel before the altar and fold their hands in prayer for a few moments; the couple inform us that the altar has already completed the process of *kuyô*. We hastily dismantle the structure, attempting to hide dust clouds and any excremental evidence of a cockroach infestation. Each piece is transported immediately into the corridor where it can be further broken down out-of-sight. Outside, we cover the *butsudan* with quilted navy blankets, so that neighbours cannot see the contents. I get the distinct impression, later confirmed, that unlike installation jobs, when we often sit drinking tea with customers, this task is to be completed as quickly as possible. The couple nod politely as my co-worker comments on the beautiful dust coverings for the altar doors, which appear to be hand-made, and decline our offer to leave behind some of the smaller items such as sutra books and prayer beads. Indeed, in addition to the *butsudan*, the couple also tender several boxes of ritual consumables (like incense) and sentimental objects (like dolls) for our disposal. During parting greetings, circumspect enquiries finally reveal that the man's mother, who had cared for the altar, has recently died, but the couple are disinterested in continuing the practice.

The circumstances of this disposal request are typical of those I encountered during my time studying *butsudan* retailers, particularly those in urban centres, whose work now appears increasingly focused on the care of dead things, as well as dead people. In Japan, *butsudan* have long functioned as key ritual centres of familial veneration and domestic Buddhist practice. The *butsudan* assemblage consists of a double-door cabinet, enshrining a Buddhist icon (御本尊 *gohonzon*) and often ancestral tablets (位牌 *ihai*), and accompanied by a selection of ritual implements (仏具 *butsugu*) (Fig. 1). As well as religious artefacts, *butsudan* are also fine art pieces, incorporating many traditional crafts (like metal work, gold leaf, and lacquer). They are also big business. Lavish, handcrafted altars costing upwards of 12,500,000 yen and 'cheap but cheerful' acrylic models anchor two ends of this multi-billion yen per annum religious industry (Kamakura Shinsho 2018).

Today, however, the *butsudan* ritual tradition and industry face a state of crisis (Reader 2011). Not only



Figure 1.
An elaborate Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist altar in Ishikawa Prefecture. Source: Author, 2017.

have sales declined dramatically as families adopt non-religious and idiosyncratic death rites, but my fieldwork suggests that extant *butsudan*, particularly those of grand scale and elaborate design, are increasingly encountered as surplus goods by those who lack the space, ritual expertise, or inclination to care for them. A death in the family once served as the primary impetus for the purchase or renewal of *butsudan*, for use in the rites of veneration and separation known as *kuyô*.³ In many cases, this pattern continues. However, as *butsudan* practice wanes, today a death in the family might trigger a different kind of *kuyô* practice, aimed at the treatment and disposal of unwanted goods, including *butsudan* themselves. *Butsudan* thus present an interesting case of what is termed “sacred waste” (Stengs 2014), as they are both objects generated for use in ritual disposal (of the human body) and objects that are subject to special disposal rites.

Disposal itself is an ethnographically and theoretically-rich stage of transformation for material culture, religious or otherwise, but one that deserves far greater attention from religious scholars. In his recent work examining the rise of scholarship on Japanese religious materiality, Fabio Rambelli advocates for a more processual approach that examines,

“not only the ontological status and the phenomenological features of individual objects, but also their signification and the various types of labor involved in their production and fruition” (2017:1).

In this paper, I seek to divert some of this attention away from production and fruition, and towards wasting and disposal as equally meaning-laden processes. I suggest that how people choose (or are forced) to dispose of religious goods can provide unique insights into the everyday logic of the sacred or numinous, its making, and un-making.

This study draws on my doctoral research into the evolving material culture(s) of death and *kuyô* in contemporary Japan. During fieldwork (2016-2018), I worked for several months as an intern with *butsudan* retail companies in Tokyo, Toyama, and Osaka, helping to guide customers around the showroom, install new altars in homes, and learn to craft altar goods. The *butsudan* industry is both conservative and cautious, and as such research engagements of this kind proceed slowly. My interest in disposal presented a particular challenge, as the topic of waste easily generates feelings of discomfort (Reno 2016: 7); nobody likes a researcher sorting through their bins. This wariness was exacerbated by rumours of improper disposal methods circulating via popular media, such as cemeteries selling old headstones on unattended graves (無縁墓 *muenbaka* or 無縁仏 *muenbotoke*) to be pulverised and used to asphalt roads (see NHK 2014), and decorative dolls tendered for disposal

3. This translation of *kuyô* is indebted to its theorising by Angelika Kretschmer (2000a).

that were actually sold to a television company for use in commercials. Whether or not such stories prove true, their infamy speaks to the high moral and financial stakes invoked by sacred waste. In Kristina Wirtz's study of waste generated by Cuban ritual practice, to which this paper is greatly indebted, the author reflects that she sometimes "allowed notions of propriety, in which one does not go digging into trash, least of all spiritually charged trash, to overcome any curiosity" (2009: 479). Ultimately, a judicious deployment of both curiosity and propriety was necessary for me to investigate *butsudan* disposal, although I admit that several stages in this commodity chain remain opaque.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I consider how contemporary patterns of *butsudan* use and disuse align with or controvert established understandings of sacred waste. The main part of this paper is then devoted to an ethnographically rich account of orthopraxic disposal methods as performed at *Takimoto Bukkôdô* in Osaka. I use this ethnography to build a theory of *kuyô* as a kind of affective labour, which works to both venerate and separate the bonds between people and things. I further document how the commercialisation of *kuyô* has allowed customers to shift the moral risks and practical expenses of disposal onto religious goods companies. Finally, I consider the emergence of alternate disposal methods as evidence of shifting norms around the treatment of numinous materials like *butsudan*.

Studying butsudan as sacred waste

In taking up the call to trace the cultural biographies of things (Kopytoff 1986), ethnographies of consumer culture have primarily focused on production, following Marx (1887), and later consumption, following Miller (1987), as the key sites of meaning-making, and overlooked discarding, disposal, and recycling (Wirtz 2009: 276-7). Wirtz identifies the origins of this neglect in the dual character of waste, as "simultaneously capable of humility and dangerous potency" (2009: 477). On the one hand, the seeming triviality of waste, beyond the "humility" of ordinary objects (Miller 1987:1), does not endear it to serious academic enquiry. On the other, its abject nature means "it is difficult to overcome notions of rubbish as something distasteful, dirty, and polluting" (Wirtz 2009:476). At the same time, the inevitable degeneration of material artefacts through time, even those imbued with numinous or transcendent forces, has been described as one of the most fundamental problems of material religion (Keane 2013:4; Kendall 2018: 861).

Discard Studies tackles the question of waste head-on. This interdisciplinary field emerged to address the cultural and ecological consequences of the excesses of consumer capitalism, where our handling of both industrial and domestic waste is increasingly globalised (see Reno 2015). Despite its humble status, waste should not be read as just "symptom[atic] of an all-too-human demand for meaning or a merely technical problem for sanitary engineers and public health officials" (Reno 2015: 557).

Indeed, interpreted as a cultural system, Joshua Reno argues that “waste is not only made by us... waste makes all of us” (2016: 5; see also Siniawer 2018: 3). People often make quite complex judgements about how to dispose of goods, informed by broader cultural categorisations of exactly what constitutes ‘waste’, which shift in response to social and economic pressures (Thompson 1979: 11).

Japan has been a particularly rich site for studies of waste in general (Siniawer 2018), and religious waste specifically. Rambelli and Reinders’ work on politically-motivated destructive acts describes Buddhist iconoclasm as an important site of cultural production (2012: 172). Triplett describes how “benevolent iconoclasm” forms a regular part of contemporary religious institutions’ commercial and community services (2017: 143), often centring on the rite of *kuyô*. The term *kuyô* is derived from the Sanskrit *pūjā*, meaning to give offerings, primarily to the Three Jewels of the Dharma, Buddha, and Sangha. In contemporary Japan, it is overwhelmingly associated with funerary rites and rites of ancestral veneration. But the list of entities deemed to require *kuyô* is subject to contestation and change. Since the Edo period, animals and domestic objects (民具 *mingu*) have also been subject to *kuyô* (Kretschmer 2000b: 382). Indeed, during the second half of the 20th century, Japan experienced a “*kuyô* boom” (Matsuzaki 1996: 162), driven by rapid economic growth that motivated professional organizations to sponsor rituals as reciprocation. Helen Hardacre (1999) has argued that the more recent emergence of *mizuko kuyô* (水子供養) for aborted, miscarried, or stillborn fetuses, was driven by the commercial interests of religious organisations that targeted women’s social anxieties around reproduction and family.

Exactly what qualifies objects like *butsudan* for ritual disposal is a matter of significant debate, both amongst scholars and my informants. An array of theories explore what Rambelli has called “the sacralisation of everyday life in Japan” (2007: 10), from ethnographically rich accounts of the interrelation of people and things (Daniels 2003) to calls for conceptualising a Japanese ontology as comprised of a single category of *mono* (モノ things/people/spirits) (Kamata 2009). Scholars of Buddhism have elucidated histories of doctrinal thought that inform the tradition of *kuyô* for objects: Rambelli’s work (2007) explores several strands of doctrine including the Buddhahood of non-sentients, and Guth describes the medieval veneration of needles (針供養 *hari kuyô*) as motivated by their perceived “potential to be reborn in other forms” (2014: 181). However, although such doctrines might shape contemporary *kuyô* as a historical tradition, they are rarely cited by the lay people who participate in these rites (Kretschmer 2000b: 384). Gygi (2019) gives a more ethnographically-grounded account, positing an underlying relationship of ‘substitution’ (身代わり *migawari*) rather than representation, whereby the material might be understood as a surrogate holder of the belief of human persons. What unites these scholars is their understanding of disposal as revelatory of the underlying metaphysics of sacred or numinous goods. During fieldwork, most Buddhist clergy and some retail workers identified the enshrinement of the Buddha and ancestors

in the *gohonzon* and *ihai* respectively as necessitating the performance of *kuyô*. More frequently, however, customers spoke of a sense of gratitude toward these objects that had been in service to the family, creating lingering ties between people and things. In this regard, as Kretschmer notes, it might be the “human-nature of objects”, rather than their “Buddha-nature” that inspires *kuyô* (2000b: 384). Although questions of Buddhist semiotics and cosmology appeal to me intellectually, this paper will focus on understanding the embodied experiences of those engaged in the labour of disposal.

The Wasting of Butsudan

Butsudan fall apart over time and from lack of care, becoming alternatively dusty and rickety, or musty and damp. Their hard wood and dark corners provide a perfect hiding place for infestations of mice or cockroaches, and determined woodlice burrow behind thick layers of lacquer to eat the wooden frame. The size, shape, and weight of *butsudan* also makes them difficult objects to clean and position in the home. For example, one customer of a *butsudan* disposal service expresses her fear at what damage her hefty *butsudan* might cause if it toppled over during an earthquake.⁴ According to industry insiders, *butsudan* typically have a consumer lifecycle of sixty years before repair or replacement becomes necessary (Hasegawa 2005:11), but this greatly depends on the inclinations and financial resources of the contemporary generation.

Even physically pristine *butsudan* can suffer what scholars have called a “social death” (Daniels 2009). These altars sit unloved and untended in living rooms or in abandoned houses in an (increasingly depopulated) Japanese countryside.⁵ The Japanese *butsudan* market has significantly contracted since its peak in the early 1990s (Reader 2011: 241-242) and rites of ancestral veneration, beyond immediate post-death rituals, have lost their central place in the life of the household (Suzuki 1998). Several interlinked social transformations are cited as driving this change, primarily urbanisation (and attendant pressures of domestic space), the emergence of the nuclear family, and secularisation (see Suzuki 1998, 2000; Kawano 2014). Together, these factors weakened the household lineage system (家制度 *ie seido*) via which the *butsudan*, grave, and obligation to care for the ancestors are inherited. With fewer children born to inherit *butsudan* and younger generations increasingly less interested or knowledgeable about them (Daniels 2010: 157), *butsudan* are increasingly becoming surplus domestic goods.

4. <http://www.memoriarubutsudan.com>

5. For more on post-war rural depopulation rates and its social effects, see Traphagan and Knight (2003: 11-13).

The circumstances of the use, disuse, and disposal of *butsudan* challenge received ideas about the nature of sacred waste, which characterize it as a bi-product of active ritual practice (see *Material Religion* Special Issue, 2014). David Chidester assigns two further characteristics to sacred waste: its ambivalent valence as “highly charged, negatively charged” matter, and its status as a “surplus”, useless in any political economy of the sacred (2014: 239-240). While *butsudan* seem broadly to fulfil these latter two characteristics, their attenuation into waste largely occurs through *disuse* rather than use. In this sense, waste *butsudan* cannot be classified as “exhausted objects” that have fulfilled their purpose and have been degraded through wear, as other Japanese religious debris has been described (Rambelli 2017:7). Further, not every unwanted *butsudan* is promptly tendered for disposal. As I explore in the next section, disposal often incurs substantial financial and social debts, and thus might be delayed indefinitely by storing *butsudan* in the home. The 1987 Communication Design Institute research project refers to such objects as “deadstock” (死蔵品 *shizôhin*), which are generated when “the goods redistribution infrastructure fails to meet consumers’ needs”. Similarly, Daniels’ descriptive category of “troublesome things” (2010: 157 & 174) captures the complicated feelings surrounding those objects that take up space in the home, but cannot be easily disposed of because of one’s obligation to care for them.

As Gygi describes and my ethnography attests, complicated emotions emerging around the disposal of religious goods “manifest... as a desire for orthopraxy” (2018: 8). In the next section, I introduce the standardised methods for the treatment of waste *butsudan*. I adopt the language of orthopraxy, not orthodoxy, given the focus of Japanese religions on practical ritual (see Shields 2010) as well as the lack of exegesis about disposal.

Orthopraxic disposal at Takimoto

Takimoto Bukkôdô is located in Moriguchi City, North-East Osaka, and headed by their highly energetic, loquacious third-generation President, Takimoto-san. I joined the head store’s delivery and removals team, who ferry *butsudan* between the company’s eleven display rooms and customers throughout the Kansai region. The team consists of four contrasting characters: Enomoto, a kindly junior colleague and former pet shop worker; Kobayashi, an ex-Manzai⁶ comedian; Mitsume, a seventy-something master of the industry still in rude health; and Tan, a strong-silent type, who would drink multiple cans of sweetened coffee throughout the day and

6. Manzai (漫才) is a traditional style of stand-up comedy in Japan performed in two-person teams consisting of one ‘straight man’ and a ‘funny man’; Kobayashi was the ‘funny man’.

crush them in his fist when driving. The disposal processes practiced at Takimoto certainly do not reflect those at all *butsudan* stores across Japan. Takimoto services both suburban and rural areas, including multiple regions with a strong *Jōdo Shinshū* (True Pure Land Buddhism) following. Practically, this means that the store specialises in elaborate, golden altars alongside more “modern” designs (see Nelson 2008) and maintains close ties with temples, and this is reflected in what I judge to be the relative conservatism of their disposal methods.

On the way to my first ever disposal request, Mitsume reminisces about the job ‘back in his day’. He states that only a few generations ago, old *butsudan* were disposed of by families, who took them to their ancestral plots of land to be burnt, sometimes with the assistance of a priest if they were a parishioner (檀家 *danka*). Today, like many elements of Japanese funerary and religious practice (Daniels 2010:85), these services are readily outsourced to commercial entities: in this case, *butsudan* retailers, but also specialist disposal companies. Indeed, the disposal of religious artefacts has become a key service that *butsudan* retailers offer both temples and customers directly. At the start of 2018, *Hasegawa Butsudan* in Ginza offered free removal and disposal of old *butsudan* to customers purchasing a newer (usually more compact) model. Other stores accept waste religious goods from temples and their parishioners free of charge, in order to strengthening business ties.

Broadly, the contemporary orthopraxic disposal process begins with customers contacting their family temple, whose clergy direct customers to retailers, as many no longer have the capacity to handle disposal directly. Recently, however, the opposite flow is more common, as many neolocal urban families do not have established parishioner relations with a temple and may wish to avoid (re)activating them, given the significant financial and social obligations they entail (see Rowe 2011: 5-6). The disposal process continues to the purification of the *butsudan*, its disassembly into component parts, and finally, cremation. Within the industry, this entire process is commonly called *kuyō*, although this term specifically refers to the formal ceremony for purifying the altar. This ceremony, called *tamashii-nuki* (魂抜き ‘spirit removal’), *hakken-kuyō* (撥遣供養 ‘expulsion ceremony’), or *heigan kuyō* (閉眼供養 ‘eye-closing ceremony’)⁷, varies by tradition, geographic region, and the personal teachings (and predilection for performance and drama) of the priest.

Halfway through my internship with Takimoto, I was able to witness both a spirit removal ceremony (魂抜き *tamashii-nuki*) and spirit enshrinement ceremony

7. The teachings of *Jōdo Shinshū* focus on veneration of Amida Buddha and not the ancestors. Followers are thus instructed to not make ancestral tablets, a teaching which I have observed is only sometimes fully adhered to. Thus, the *kuyō* rite is directed at the *gohonzon* only. Triplett (2017) observed that a corresponding rite of *senza kuyō* is performed in *Jōdo Shinshū* to cleanse the *butsudan* before disposal.

(開眼式 *kaigan-shiki*) in a single day, as a *butsudan* was moved from a residence on one side of the city to another. Early that morning, two cars carrying the Takimoto delivery team drove out to Osaka's North-East region, stopping on the way to collect a Sôto Zen Priest, Amaoka, from a local temple. Amaoka is in his 70s, with a studious but with a mischievous nature; in the car he regales me with stories of nights out drinking with Kobayashi. The car turns into rows of single storey, low-slung workers units, made from stucco clad plaster board. The house we entered was in a state of organized chaos, a result of the married couple's recent attempts to pack up their late grandmother's belongings for removal into the family home. A large tray of tropical fruit was sandwiched between packing boxes and disassembled furniture before a substantial solid-wood *karaki* (唐木 'exotic wood') *butsudan* in the centre of the living room.

Once the priest changed into his formal robe, and the necessary glass of water and foliage were gathered for the ceremony, our team arranged ourselves behind the family. The rite, which lasted approximately twenty minutes, began with Amaoka purifying the room, *butsudan*, and assembled guests by taking a small glass of water, dipping a leaf into it, raising the leaf to the crown of his head, then into the water once more, and finally flicking it around the room and over the altar (Fig.2). Amaoka then led the assembled crowd in recitations of the Heart Sutra and other passages, which he later explained to the family broadly mirror funerary rites for the human dead. At the climax of the ceremony, he took up his *juzu* (数珠 rosary) in the right hand

and, addressing the *gohonzon* and then the *ihai*, entreated the spirits to recede in a clear voice, simultaneously making circular gestures. At the conclusion, our team stepped in to remove the *butsugu* from the altar and wrapped the frame in thick blankets for transport. The couple thanked the priest and handed over pre-prepared formal packages filled with several hundreds of thousand of yen as payment for the *tamashii-nuki*, the forthcoming *kaigan-shiki*, and the priest's 'transportation fee'. In the car to the next location, I complimented Amaoka on his performance. He smiled and animatedly described his dramatic use of a long brush made from horsehair in the upcoming performance *kaigan-shiki*. This brush is flicked before the *gohonzon* and *ihai* to "inject" the spirits into these icons. It is



Figure 2.
Tamashi-nuki ceremony performed for a *butsudan* in Osaka. Source: Author, 2017.

important, he reflected, to add some flair to one's performance of these rituals, so that contemporary generations understand the value of his fees.

By removing supernatural elements, *tamashii-nuki* appears to function to cleanse the altar and protect the owner from any potential misfortune (バチ *bachi*) caused by its subsequent destruction or mistreatment. In my experience, the concept of *bachi* is most readily manifest in people's sense of stewardship and concern for the welfare of objects after they leave one's possession, rather than fear of concrete negative outcomes. However, when pressed for real examples, Mitsume told me that people had reported getting pains in various parts of their body or falling ill due to their neglect or mistreatment of the family grave and altar. It is for this reason that Mitsume, who is particularly fastidious in fulfilling his religious obligations, travels over three hours each month to visit his ancestral grave to make offerings. This understanding of *butsudan* as potential negative causes resonates with David Chidester's statement that "as precarious matter, sacred waste carries an ambivalent electricity" (2014: 239). Chidester recalls the ideas of Roger Caillois, who described the sacred as not merely opposed to the profane, but a "contagious, fleeting, ambiguous, and virulent" force (2001[1939]: 139) that must be contained or pacified through special acts. In a similar vein, scholars of Japanese funerary culture describe how the dead, although primarily understood to be benevolent (Maeda 1976:137), can turn into hungry ghosts (餓鬼 *gaki*) who wander the countryside causing various misfortunes to the living, and must be pacified through *kuyō* (e.g. Smith 1974:41; Ooms 1967: 227). Indeed, in studies of ancestor worship worldwide, anthropologists observe significant ambiguity in the orientation of the dead toward the living (Newell 1976; Kretschmer 2000a:52).

Butsudan retailers who take on the responsibilities of altar disposal often take pains to ensure that the objects they handle are properly treated. Some *butsudan* companies no longer directly handle disposal. For example, *Ōgoshi Butsudan* in Toyama, which receives about 150 disposal requests annually (mostly connected to the purchase of new altars), directs these items to a disassembly company, after confirming that customers have organised *kuyō* rites with their local temple. In Tokyo, *Hasegawa Butsudan* accepts *butsudan* frames and decorative *butsugu* from customers, delegating their collection to a commercial courier company, but I witnessed staff gently declining the collection of ancestral tablets and icons, except in extraordinary circumstances, and directing customer to temples. As the manager at Ginza Hasegawa explained, "they are things with a soul, and we are just a *butsudan* store". For retailers like Takimoto, who regularly handle a large number of used religious goods, their exposure to potential harms is disproportionate. President Takimoto admitted that his company's conduct in this regard is rather superstitious (迷信 *meishin*), often going above and beyond the ritual services requested by the customers. Notably, Takimoto will routinely organise for additional performances of *kuyō* on *butsudan*, even when the customer

communicates that the rite has been performed. *Gohonzon*, as manifestations of the Buddha, are perhaps the most potent element of the *butsudan* for religiously minded persons. They are separated from the assemblage and collected at the company's headquarters, where they receive up to five additional veneration rites.⁸ This includes calling the company's affiliated temple to perform a formal additional *tamashi-nuki* ceremony, as well as less formal *kuyô* practices, like offering incense and chanting sutras during subsequent cremation.

I was surprised to discover that even after *kuyô* has been performed, the *gohonzon* and *butsudan* are not always "deactivated" or returned to being 'just a thing', as some scholars have suggested (see Rambelli 2007:216). For the store employees at Takimoto Butsudan at least, *kuyô* is not absolute. The Chairman once offered me the following explanation: "even if *kuyô* could remove 70% or 90% of the spirit of the thing, there is still 30% left. It's not the same as a new thing". In this manner, as Mark Rowe suggests of the *en* between the living and the dead (2011: 221), the bonds between people and *butsudan* might never be completely dissolved, even though they can be dampened or suppressed. Indeed, if we think about *kuyô* in a functionalist manner, the rite appears incredibly ineffective.

Company President, Takimoto-san, struggled to explain the apparent superfluity of such continuous acts of *kuyô*, finally suggesting that they are largely motivated by his "problematic feelings" (気持ちの問題 *kimochi-no-mondai*). This is a phrase I frequently heard from lay customers as well as industry insiders when explaining their emotional difficulties of dealing with sacred waste. What it suggests is that *kuyô* operates not on a binary logic of the addition or removal of spirits, but as a kind of affective labour that acts on the interconnectedness between people and things. Through *kuyô*, people care for the dead, both human and non-human. I deploy the language of 'affect' here because it captures the kind of embodied response that informants struggled to express further in words. More often than not, my probing enquiries as to why such objects could not be readily disposed of or reused post-*kuyô* were met with tilted heads, shudders, and recoiling bodies. My (perhaps misguided) demand for more specific explanation was met on

8. A notable exception is *gohonzon* belonging to Sôka Gakkai, a lay Nichiren Buddhist school and new religious movement. In Sôka Gakkai, the iconicity of the *gohonzon* as a manifestation of Nichiren and the Lotus Sutra means that its mistreatment or destruction is considered an offense (Wallinder-Pierini 2018). When approached with a Sôka Gakkai *butsudan* for disposal, many of the stores I spoke with will ask customers to contact the organisation directly to arrange collection of the *gohonzon*, as improper treatment has been known to cause offense. Beyond this case, I observed very few differences in the treatment of *butsudan* based on doctrinal differences between Buddhist schools.

my final day working in Osaka, when President Takimoto handed me a treatise and diagram on *kuyô* (Fig. 3). He writes,

Within the concept of *kuyô* there are the components of ‘gratitude’ and ‘hope’. Expressed on the axis of time, ‘gratitude’ is looking at the past from the present, and ‘hope’ is looking toward the future. If you can feel both ‘gratitude’ and ‘hope’, then thinking about humanity’s long history and future, you begin to understand your place in the present.

[...]

In general, *kuyô* is an act of differentiating the separation of people and things, by performing *kuyô*, a grateful heart is born, you know your own existence, and at the same time, hopes toward the future are born.

In this sense, *kuyô* is an act of separation, but born from a recognition of the interconnection between things (Kretschmer 2000a:217-218).

Although this definition of *kuyô* is specific to the treatment of sacred waste in Japan, I find resonances within studies of disposal more generally. In his fascinating ethnography of life at an American landfill, Joshua Reno argues that the “distancing effect” of waste treatment is a form of care:



Figure 3.

A diagram prepared by President Takimoto of Takimoto Bukkôdo to explain the concept of *kuyô*. Reproduced with permission.

[t]o see waste as a social relationship means recognizing the subtraction of unwanted material from our lives as a form of care provided by others. They care for us by absorbing the unstable risks and benefits that mass waste proliferates (2016: 14).

Like sanitation work, the labour of *kuyô* in Japan is increasingly outsourced to professionals, who take on both its the practical challenges and spiritual risks, freeing individuals from these burdens. Reno’s theory of care has the advantage of centering the material realities of this labour. Scholars working on affective labour in Japan have tended to interpret these acts as intrinsically immaterial, because it produces intangible sentiments or feelings (e.g., Plourde 2014). However, this characterization ignores the energies and bodies (both human and non-human) through which affects emerge in a very visceral manner (Bennett 2010:xii).

Burning bonds: Takiage

For President Takimoto, one resolution to this problem of feeling is provided by cremation (焼き上げ *takiage*)⁹ of the *butsudan*. *Takiage*, which Rambelli describes as a derivation of *goma* (護摩) fire rituals practiced within the Shingon school (2007: 254), is a common method of disposal for many religious ephemera at temples and shrines. Less commonly, objects might be buried, floated away along a river or at sea, or in limited cases, de-composed and remade (Rambelli 2007:248-50). On special days like the spring and autumn equinoxes (彼岸 *higan*) and on 'Butsudan and Butsugu Day' (March 27), *takiage* for *butsudan* is held at temple grounds. However, I found such public performances of *takiage* to be rare. Restrictions on open burning in urban centres introduced under Japan's Fire Service Act (1948) (消防法 *shôbôhô*) means that today, the process almost always occurs on private land in rural areas.

At Takimoto, burnable *butsudan* parts are collected and then cremated each quarter at the company's rural headquarters. President Takimoto described the experience of watching *takiage* as "feeling relieved, because the form of the thing [カタチ *katachi*] disappears". For him, it appears that by transforming *butsudan* into ash, in dissolving its physical, identifiable nature, its hold over him similarly dissipates. Triplett, describing this process, argues that

"the destructive force of the fire aims at those elements of the material object that need to be expelled and sent off in a process of purification. In other words, we could see it as a kind of exorcism" (2017: 150).

In the case of *butsudan*, as well as resolving potentially burdensome ties to sacred waste, *takiage* also solves the practical problem of what to do with surplus goods. However, this alchemy does not appear to work for all types of sacred waste; the human body remains potent throughout its transfiguration into bone and ash, substances which continue to attract *kuyô* rites spanning several generations.

Butsudan retailers and more general domestic waste companies¹⁰ now offer completely online packages for the collection, *kuyô*, and *takiage* of Buddhist altar goods, which allow customers to dispense of *butsudan* with minimal cost and fuss. The Memoriaru *Butsudan* Company, for example, offers a same-day *butsudan*

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9. Triplett reports that this purification rite is referred to as *jôbon* in the *Jôdo Shû* tradition (2017: 150).
 10. Known as *ihinseiri-gyô* (遺品整理業 lit. 'memento disposal firms'), these companies market themselves to urban dwellers burdened by an excess of consumer goods, particularly those inheriting entire family homes of stuff from relatives (see Allison 2018; Gygi 2019).

collection service, and at an additional cost, *kuyô* and *takiage* rites performed by a priest. The performance and quality of this *kuyô* is verified by the provision of “photographic proof” and certificates to customers. This suggests that some level of trust needs to be established around the care of sacred waste; not all proxies for affective labour are equal. Reading testimonials posted on the Memoriaru *Butsudan* website, one customer was relieved to hear of the company’s “proper” (しっかり *shikkari*) treatment of altars, as he became concerned about a news report on the illegal dumping of *butsudan* in landfill. Like rumours about the improper recycling of gravestones into asphalt, such reports speak to consumer anxieties about the proper treatment of waste. As we shall see in the next section, these anxieties can breed confusion about exactly which artefacts require special treatment.

The virulent, durable sacred

So far, I have primarily analysed the treatment of *butsudan* in regard to their numinous qualities, but this overlooks the material properties of altars. As Guy Hawkins writes of the study of waste, “at some point, the gritty materiality of waste gets under your fingernails, and the limit of classification and social construction is felt” (2006:2). A focus on “metaphorical value at the expense of... materiality” (Guth 2014: 172) typifies previous studies to *kuyô*. In her study of *kuyô* for needles in Early Modern Japan, Guth argues that the animacy of venerated objects is “derived not from their spirit (alone), but from the concrete material qualities” (2014: 171). The size, weight and traditional ‘*wa*’ (和 Japanese) aesthetic of some *butsudan* are significant factors motivating some people’s decision to dispose of them. The multi-media assemblage, including bronze vases, wooden rosaries, and more recently, plastic offering dishes, also determines how and where they can be disposed. Wirtz describes the waste generated by Cuban ritual as “quite mundane in their appearance, much like other garbage in a gutter” (2009: 439). Indeed, the covert biography of ritual practice these objects belie makes them potentially dangerous (2009: 477). The ephemera produced by the rituals performed at the *butsudan*, such as matches and flowers, can be characterized in this way. However, *butsudan* themselves are codified, elaborate artefacts, making their disposal conspicuous.

Cremation is a viable disposal method for many *butsudan* components, including the wooden frame, silk hangings, and *gohonzon*. Indeed, as *butsudan* dry out over time, they become a quick-burning accelerant, although some release noxious fumes due to the lacquer. However, several components, such as metal work and ceramics, present a challenge to the logic and practicality of *takiage*, in both their distinctiveness and durability. At *Takimoto Bukkôdô*, porcelain urns that have held human bone and ash are broken into small pieces and buried in the ground, ideally somewhere that people will not walk over frequently. At the headquarters

in Osaka, mountains of metal *butsugu* were boxed up and transported to company headquarters for storage. Some elements, like *orin* (おりん brass bells) that still produce a good sound, are repaired and resold, but only at a customer's explicitly request for second-hand goods. Preliminary enquiries reveal that Japanese scrap metal companies do accept used altar goods. However, it has been difficult to ascertain from *butsudan* stores exactly how or if these two markets connect, particularly in exchange for money. Indeed, on more than one occasion, I was admonished, "this is just for your curiosity".

Not all *butsudan* components are treated with the same degree of ritual care, with decorative elements like flowers generally raising few concerns. However, both employees and consumers expressed uncertain and conflicting views about exactly which artefacts required special treatment. What I found most intriguing was how the power of the *gohonzon* and *ihai* appeared to 'seep out' and infect surrounding objects on the altar. This is especially the case for customers who were inexperienced in altar ritual and highly motivated to 'do the right thing'. For example, during the installation of one large gold *butsudan*, a middle-aged female customer, who had purchased the altar upon her husband's death, asked a series of detailed questions about how to clean and handle each altar good, and how to dispose of consumables like flowers, candle stubs, and incense ash. My co-worker Enomoto explained that candles could simply be placed with domestic trash and ash spread over the garden. But he advised that ultimately, this is also a "matter of feeling", and if she felt these items required special treatment, she could take them to a temple for *kuyô*.

Another class of items that sits within this ambiguous space is sentimental artefacts. A wide array of domestic artefacts falls into this category, often those that have a particular link to a personal experience or memory. Old *butsudan* that have been in the family for multiple generations frequently reveal a cornucopia of smaller sentimental objects. This makes the disposal process akin to a treasure hunt for the team, who have previously discovered beach rocks collected on a summer holiday, old wrist watches, dried umbilical cords, and teeth.¹¹ The array highlights the role of *butsudan* as a catch-all for difficult-to-dispose of sentimental stuff. Often, younger generations inherit these objects as part of the *butsudan* assemblage, and have little background information as to their significance. *Butsudan* stores and commercial disposal services also become recipients of

11. Occasionally, large sums of money have been found in the altar, although President Takimoto advises customers against using the altar as a hiding place, as it has now become a cliché often seen on television dramas and films, and thus a target for thieves.

a whole range of artefacts from different spiritual traditions, such as Tarot cards, amulets, and Christian crosses. *Takimoto Bukkôdô* usually accepts easily burnable items such as umbilical cords (dried and stored in boxes), but gently rejected more durable items like wedding rings or war medals. At the *tamashi-nuki* ceremony I describe in this chapter, our team arrived to find five boxes of Japanese dolls that the customer had arranged around the altar so that they could receive *kuyô* and then be disposed of (Fig. 4). As I detail in the next section, the norms around exactly what requires *kuyô* appear both contested and changing.



Figure 4.
A box of sentimental items tendered for disposal with a *butsudan*. Source: Author, 2017.

Alternative butsudans disposal methods

Sacred waste may, as Stengs argues, “always demand a special treatment” (2014: 235), but the evidence from Japan suggests that it does not always receive it. Not everyone is equally motivated by the same degree of concern, nor fear of negative consequences from the mistreatment of these items. Additionally, where the orthopraxic disposal process makes demands of financial expense, time, and (re-)establishing potentially onerous connections with religious organisations, some consumers seek out alternative methods despite sometimes facing significant public censure. Such boundary-pushing forms of disposal are revelatory of how people balance a desire to rid themselves of religious goods and their obligations to the welfare of objects, as well as transforming understandings of what constitutes the sacred in contemporary Japan.

Resale, remaking, and recycling

A concern for the welfare of objects even after they leave one’s possession helps to explain the limited domestic economy for second-hand *butsudan* and *butsugu* in Japan. Very few listings for used altars appear on online public auctions sites, those that do appear to be in the style of new religious groups like *Sôka-Gakkai*. I have found no brick-and-mortar stores that display second-hand altars for purchase. As way of explanation, Kobayashi ventured that abandoned *butsudan* imply that the original

owners' family has broken up, or that their business has failed, and customers do not want to inherit this bad luck with the altar. From the perspective of the original owner, as subsequent misuse or neglect of the altar could reverberate back onto them, selling or even donating altars for re-use has also proven unpopular. For many of my co-workers at Takimoto, it was the altar's attachment to these generations of owners, as "something that people have prayed towards for a long time [*zûto ogande-kita mono*]", that made second-hand use uncomfortable, if not impossible. Used *butsudan* thus become what Kopytoff describes as "terminal commodities" (1986), which are (ideally) excluded from all future exchange relations. Despite being worth tens of thousands of dollars retail, *butsudan* have almost no re-sale value, and indeed, the more elaborately decorated and expensive the *butsudan*, often, the greater the cost of its disposal. In this regard, *butsudan* might be interpreted as an extreme example of a broader cultural discomfort with consuming certain second-hand goods in Japan. In her study of domestic goods, Daniels reports that most of her informants expressed "a strong dislike for things that had been used", because they could not discern how the object had been treated in the past (2010: 174).

However, these otherwise terminal commodities can find other pathways back into commercial circulation through markets for foreigners. As Daniels documents, at flea markets held in temple grounds, religious goods begin a second life "as antiques, folk crafts, or exotic Japanese souvenirs for foreign tourists" (2003: 631). Whilst I am yet to see an entire *butsudan* on sale, stalls selling *butsugu*, particularly golden candlesticks and incense braziers from the *Ôtani* branch, are plentiful in Kyoto's markets. The foreign-facing second-hand economy also extends online, with a number of e-commerce stores on eBay and Rakuten. Via these channels, *butsudan* and *butsugu* circulate far beyond their original contexts of production and use, and I have heard stories from *butsudan* retailers of foreign tourists and even government dignitaries purchasing *butsudan* to use as wine racks, book cases, and shoe cupboards. I have also heard from several members of the expat community, including a number of academics, who expressed interest in purchasing *butsudan*, preferably antique, as an artefact of cultural history. Mac, the barista at my local coffee place in Kanazawa, is constantly looking for antiques to decorate his café and home, and is often dumbfounded at what he viewed as the disdain for second-hand goods in Japan. He and his wife had recently purchased an old house in the countryside that came with a *butsudan*, fully decorated with *gohonzon* and *ibai* (for another family's ancestors), abandoned by the previous owner and their family. Although Mac wanted to keep the altar as a "cool" and "authentic" feature, his Japanese-American wife was significantly less enthused with the proposition.

When I showed pictures of *butsugu* for sale at flea markets to my Takimoto co-workers, they were shocked, but not, as I had supposed, due to the taboos around resale, but because of what they perceived to be the poor quality and extravagant prices. Despite his personal discomfort with second-hand *butsugu*, Kobayashi could

understand their appeal as art objects and further suggested that foreigners would not be affected by the potential *bachi* of these objects. In a similar vein, Gygi attests that vendors at temples flea markets thought foreigners to be the most suitable buyers for second-hand religious goods for this reason (2018:16). Discharging religious goods to non-Japanese thus emerges as a viable disposal conduit for these commodities, one that has existed for some time now. Kretschmer describes how in the 1990s some temples began to donate dolls tendered for *kuyō* to overseas children's charities, both as an act of goodwill and because plastic dolls could not be cremated for fear of chemical fumes (2000b:386). Kobayashi only wishes that people selected better quality artefacts as representative of the Japanese tradition of *butsudan*.

Norms around the destruction process also appear to be shifting, from *takiage* and toward recycling. Faced with economic pressures, environmental concerns, and increased regulation, some *butsudan* companies have begun offering creative alternatives to cremation. These processes might re-direct *butsudan* back into commodity exchange, but usually only after significant material transformations take place. For example, the innovative *butsudan* and *zushi* (厨子 reliquary) maker Alte Meister have launched a service to disassemble and re-make *butsudan* into smaller-scale altars, not for resale, but for re-use by the original customer.

More radically, Kumada Butsudan in Nagoya have launched “a new type of *kuyō*” service, which involves disassembling and wood-chipping old *butsudan* so that they may be “transformed into a new life”¹² as furniture made from composite chipboard. The marketing and presentation of this service presents themes of reincarnation and eco-ism as essentially Buddhist (Fig. 5). Like Memoriaru Butsudan's online



Figure 5.

Mural at Kumada Butsudan recycling centre, Nagoya, 2018. Source: Author, 2018.

12. <http://www.kk-kumada.com/service/disposal>

disposal services, Kumada also stresses their careful treatment of altars, including hiring a priest to perform *tamashi-nuki*, and tasking specialist *butsudan* craftspeople with disassembly. When I visited in early 2018, President Kumada was keen to distinguish his service from other more general recycling companies along these lines; “those stores are not specialist, they don’t know how to treat the altar – it’s quite a difficult thing to do, it takes skill. They just lump it together with other furniture”. His service has grown exponentially since its launch nearly a decade ago. The store once received approximately ten requests per month; today they receive one hundred. Customers often contact the company online, after other stores refuse to dispose of their altar without the purchase of a new *butsudan*: “other *butsudan* stores see it as a burden, as a *mendokusai* [めんどくさい troublesome] part of the industry. But we are happy to do this for customers, as this is a new business direction”.

Dumping

Finally, perhaps the most controversial means of *butsudan* disposal that I encountered is the oversized waste service run by city councils. *Butsudan* retailers and temples often warned me that even if one were to place *butsudan* outside the home with domestic waste, sanitation workers would not collect it, because of the potential for negative spiritual repercussions. Despite these declarations, as of late 2017, the Osaka City website¹³ lists *butsudan* as an accepted ‘oversized waste’ for only 1000 yen. Similarly, the Kanazawa city waste guide states that only ‘post-*kuyô*’ *butsudan* are accepted, although it is unclear how this ontological transformation is to be judged. Additionally, several popular ‘Q&A’ websites and consumer advocates provide advice on how to dispose of *butsudan* in this manner. One such organization¹⁴ stresses the finality of *kuyô*, which they state transforms the altar into “a mere container/box”. Thus, one “should not worry about what the neighbours may think or about one’s own psychological resistance to disposing of this object”.

The social dynamics of domestic waste disposal in Japan appears an under-researched topic given the role it plays in shaping consumer goods, household routines, and value systems (cf. Siniawer 2018). In most urban areas, domestic waste must be sorted into various categories, placed into transparent plastic bags (sometimes labelled with the family name) or open crates, and carried to a dedicated location on the street at specific days and times. This system places a high burden of labour on the individual consumer over the management of their own waste (Daniels 2010: 79). Making a mistake can incur neighbourly censure, and in some

13. <http://www.city.osaka.lg.jp>

14. <http://reset-soul.com>

cases, a dreaded “red flag” posted to one’s garbage. During fieldwork I frequently heard stories of people resorting to fugitive means to dispose of waste – breaking stuff into smaller pieces to obscure them or taking rubbish to communal bins at train stations. The distinctive design and size of *butsudan* make them difficult to disguise. Some people reported driving to a different city ward the night before collection to deposit them far away from one’s residence. Attempts to de-identify the waste and hide its owner suggest that such acts are accompanied by not an insignificant emotion of shame and public censure. Like iconoclasm, clandestine disposal practices confirm, rather than undermines, the numinous quality of these objects. As perhaps the most potent form of waste (Paine 2014: 242), the dumping of human remains represents a particularly transgressive act. According to a *Mainichi Shinbun* report (2017), between 2014-2016, there were over 203 reported cases of human remains abandoned on public transport in Japan, a phenomenon known as *ikotsu okizari* (遺骨置き去り) and in over 80% of the cases, the culprit remains unknown. Such methods might seem extreme, but where both *butsudan* and the ‘correct’ disposal processes are quickly becoming burdens, it is perhaps no wonder that new processes for ridding oneself of unwanted objects arise.

Conclusions

According to popular commentators and academics working inside and outside the industry, *butsudan* appear to have lost much of their relevance to contemporary Japanese lives and deaths. However, one would be wrong to dismiss *butsudan* as entirely without power, if not at the point of their purchase and use, then at least at disposal. This moment, somewhat paradoxically, both seems to highlight the growing obsolescence of these objects and cement their status as sacred waste (if not sacred goods). As Gygi notes, it is on the brink of disposal that “the forgotten, ‘unperformed’ objects” might suddenly become “sticky” (2019:2). This dynamic, I think, has something to tell scholars about the process of disposal, which can activate certain material agencies and consumer anxieties that otherwise lay dormant. It suggests that unmaking can contribute to the making of the sacred as much as the processes of production and consumption.

Anxieties invoked by *butsudan* disposal do not exist in isolation, but tap into wider ideas about the interrelation between people and things as well as practical norms of second-hand goods and waste management. *Butsudan* might receive special care as particularly potent examples of sacred waste, but they also exist on a continuum of stuff. These anxieties can motivate consumers to put off disposal indefinitely, or outsource their obligations toward objects to commercial or religious institutions. Today, *butsudan* retailers are responsible for the practical burdens and spiritual risks of properly treating sacred waste. In this context, one can see *kuyô* as a kind of affective labour, performed by proxy, in order to separate – but never fully

disband – the ties between people and things. Of course, not all elements of the *butsudan* assemblage are treated to the same level of regard, nor do all consumers deem these actions necessary. Perhaps it is only when *butsudan* are casually placed outside one's home with other domestic waste, that they will have truly lost their significance. But for now, they remain troublesome goods and sacred waste.

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