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Introduction: The Materiality of Japanese Religions

Preliminary Considerations

Ritual tools, robots and religious commodities. Mandalas, amulets, incense, statues, altars, graves, relics, robes, temple ornaments, lanterns and music instruments. When removing the scripted filter of investigating religion *beyond* spirituality, the examples are countless and obvious for acknowledging religion *as* material. “Material objects of various types are essential parts of Buddhist practice and important constituents of the sense of what ‘being a Buddhist’ means. This is literally the stuff Buddhism is made of” (Rambelli 2017: 3). This characterization would obviously fit Shinto as well, and Japanese religion in general.

Materiality can broadly be understood as the realm of “things”; objects, artifacts, bodies, practices, symbols, senses, buildings, art, technology and everything that is “tangible.” Materiality is not just a byproduct of religiosity, but is an essential part of and a window to other aspects of all religions. The study of religion is thus also the study of objects, as well as of the production, commodification, interpretation, instrumentalization and embodiment of things. It is the study of human beings in religious contexts interacting with material culture, and of how things in themselves are agents in posthuman and transhuman culture. Materiality as a field of inquiry is different from material culture in that it goes beyond objects to investigate philosophies of matter and substance and the conceptual frameworks that precede, accompany, and follow the production, transmission, use, and disposal of objects.

The importance of materiality in the study of also Japanese religions has in recent years been acknowledged by several publications.¹ Recently, a special issue of the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* was titled “Modest Materialities: The Social Lives and Afterlives of Sacred Things in Japan” (2018). The focus of the articles was on religious objects, including “texts that are valued as objects or that are not

1. See for instance Reader and Tanabe 1998, Ruppert 2000, Sharf 2001, Jaffe 2006, Rambelli 2007, Borup 2008, Gerhart 2009, Glassman 2012, Rambelli and Reinders 2012, Morishita 2016, Rambelli 2017, Lowe 2017, Winfield and Heine 2017, Gygi 2018.

meant to be read, images that can only be understood in an interactive relationship with texts, and objects that transit from secular to sacred contexts and back again” (Hirasawa and Lomi 2018: 218).

In a sense, the study of material religion in a Japanese context is nothing new. Objects, buildings, rituals, space and bodies have been part of the study for decades, and it could be argued that the very study of Japanese religion with its multi-faceted approaches to an obvious empirical field is prototypically exemplary for the general study of material religion. However, the study of Japanese religion also has been inspired and effected by previous paradigms within the general study of religion, in which materiality has been seen as secondary or peripheral to religion, and a field assigned to archeologists, art historians and anthropologists. The study of religion in the twentieth century has typically been “most distinctively shaped by philological studies of scriptures, by analysis of kinship, by structuralist interpretations of myth, and by philosophical studies of cosmology and religious ontology” (Morgan 2016: 272). The Protestant bias of focusing predominantly on the theology of “great thinkers” and their doctrines, textualized piety, and idealist versions of elite religion also integrated the long European tradition of logocentric essentialism with its sharp distinctions between matter and spirit. Classical studies typically privilege spirit above matter, belief above ritual, content above form, mind above body, entailing the “devaluation of religious material culture—and materiality at large—as lacking serious empirical, let alone theoretical interest” (Meyer and Houtman 2012: 1). An evolutionary bias has presupposed that “the higher religion develops, the less it depends on material forms” (Ibid.: 10). It is quite obvious, that also “the Western study of Asian religions has been slow to incorporate material data” (Fleming and Mann 2014: 4), traditionally being biased by the “Protestantization of the East” (Masuzawa 2005: 133-138).

Such arguments are also both present and religiously legitimate in aspects of Japanese religion, especially within Buddhism (and of course Christianity), but also in Shinto and various new religious movements. The Buddhist distinctions between epistemology and ontology often do privilege mind over matter, and although Mahayana Buddhist philosophies in principle transcend such distinctions with the idea that material entities are emptiness (*shiki soku ze kū*) and emptiness can be experienced through objects (*kū soku ze shiki*), physical manifestations when understood as skillful means (*upāya*) tend to have less intrinsic value than the ultimate reality beyond; this is especially true in the modern period, when icons and ritual implements are typically treated as “symbols” or pointers to an immaterial truth. Zen iconoclasm (which targeted, in forms that were mostly rhetorical, the preeminence of sacred objects in Buddhist practice), Pure Land negations of ritual effects, emphasis on this-worldly benefits and beliefs in the inherent power of “things” do tell us something about pre-modern reflections about materiality in Japan. Nevertheless, Western-inspired modernity was probably the

main catalyst of degrading the material aspects of religion. Buddhists responded to Christian missionaries' derogative challenges, and so-called "New Buddhism" later adopted some of the de-mythologized, de-materialized, spiritualized, and rationalized ideals of re-interpreting religion in a modern key. Defining and differentiating categories such as religion and "superstition" as well as spirituality and materiality was part of a Meiji modernization process in which, for instance, D. T. Suzuki's interpretation of Zen is significant and paramount. Inverting Western triumphant evolutionism and Orientalist clichés, D. T. Suzuki, Okakura Kakuzō, Inoue Enryō, Inoue Tetsujirō and several other Buddhist (inspired) thinkers could point to the East as the cradle of true spirituality, the West being quintessentially materialist. Modern scientific standards were imported and applied to the academic study of religion, where philology and hermeneutics became a general frame of understanding religion through canonical texts (the "scriptures"). Early Buddhology emerged out of this paradigm and produced ambitious collections, annotations, and sometimes translations of the Buddhist canon; the production in Japan of a new Buddhist canon, the *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, in the early 1920s was a monumental achievement. Japanese study of religion has generally adopted the modern "Western" paradigm of scholarship, and material culture was left for decades to anthropologists and folklorists. Melissa Anne-Marie Curley's reference in her article to a scholar and priest describing the women devotees' hair ropes at Higashi Honganji as "hollow spirit" is a typical example of the modern kind of discomfort with materiality when applied to religion. Even today, materiality is thus often "sanitized" in museum catalogs, glass cases and labels, with objects at safe distance, as it were, as mere "symbols" of faith and artifacts of the past.

This said, Japanese museums and scholars have been among the first to recognize that objects are essential for rituals, and thus a study of their production and use can yield invaluable information on past religiosities. Since the later 1990s, various exhibitions have explored the world of sacred objects in a broad sense, in which texts (scriptures, ritual manuals, painted scrolls) were juxtaposed to icons, images, and ritual implements of all kinds in vast overviews of the materiality of Buddhism (and, to a lesser extent, and more recently, of Shinto as well). Even so, however, these exhibitions, and the research behind them, often lacked an explicit focus on "materiality" as a conceptual dimension beyond their interest in "objects."

Recent approaches to religion have gone beyond such "Western" notions and acknowledged the need for more universally applicable models and categories for understanding religious phenomena. Scholarship has come to realize the necessity of including practice and materiality not only as degraded, inauthentic, "Catholic" "popular religion," but as equally important aspects of lived religion. While semiotic and hermeneutic aspects of texts as well as the belief systems of textualized religion are of course still important, there is the need for an alignment of scholarship to the empirical world of religious practices and beliefs beyond (or against) canonical

texts. In this regard, we might even be “witnessing the emergence of a post-idealist, post-foundationalist, and post-subjectivist paradigm in the study of religion” (Vásquez 2011: 11). As such, materiality is a new filter, another gaze with which to understand religion, “taking materiality seriously.”

The “material turn” and the study of material religion in recent years has not only been represented in a number of articles and books (also on Asian religions);² there is even a scholarly journal entirely devoted to the field.³ Material religion can be understood very broadly as “how religion is expressed in material forms” (Meyer et al. 2010: 209)—or, more in detail, as “the study of gender, sexuality, media, ritual, performance, and sacred space” (Morgan 2016: 272) with a focus on “[religion’s] material forms and their use in religious practice” (Meyer et al. 2010: 209). Materials as “anthropocentric” objects include materialized ideas, with things being carriers of meaning to be decoded (since everything can be a text and a semiotic configuration). Material things and practices in this sense are “symbols for meanings and ideas” and “bearers of information about culture” (Hazard 2013: 60), just like objects in museum spread the message of artist’s ideas and narratives (e.g. Stortini, this volume). Material religion also acknowledges the power of things, beyond the semiotic level. The study of the materiality of religion should thus “begin with the powers attributed to objects by religious devotees” (Morgan 2016: 276). Animist ontologies, in which there is a continuation of forms of existence, transgress the naturalist divisions between animate and inanimate beings. As such, “things act on humans and shape them” (Hazard 2013: 61), and the scholar should attend to “the richly embodied effects of material practices and things” (Ibid.: 63).

Human beings are engaged with webs of meaning, but also with webs of contextual embodiment. “Arguably, the single most important site of contestation in the materialist turn is the body” (Vásquez 2011: 11). Through ritual and embodied practices children learn religion, before the understanding of ideas and teachings, and “religion is felt, touched, heard, smelled, and seen, not only interpreted and cognized. Things are engaged in deeply somatic—and not only or primarily in semiotic—relations with humans” (Hazard 2013: 63). Devotional prayer, wearing prescribed dress or observing monastic discipline are embodied acts of engaged piety, but also of disciplining the body and controlling the person according to religious codes.

2. E.g. Kieschnick 2003, Berkwiz et. al 2008, Kendall 2010, Fleming and Mann 2014, Pinchman and Dempsey 2015.

3. *Material Religion*. Other specialized journals in the field include *The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief*, and *RES*.

Engaging the human body with the surrounding environment, and nature in particular, as a self-existing entity is a major focus of the so-called “new materialism” and “post-humanism.” Material things are thus understood to have agency to “do something” as an active part of a network of relevance, impacting also the human world. Religion in that perspective can be understood as “a system of technologies for the body’s interface with complex networks that join human and non-human actors in practices of exchange and interaction” (Morgan 2016: 277), focusing on “the conditions that shape the feelings, senses, spaces, and performances of belief, that is, the material coordinates or forms of religious practice” (Morgan 2010: 6).⁴ This new focus on the body, embodiment, and the body in the environment, has also opened new perspectives to study icons away from traditional art-historical approaches; as a ground-breaking book by Robert and Elizabeth Sharf (2001) powerfully showed, icons are not simply representations, but can be “presences” of the divine in this world. This understanding has reoriented the study of Buddhist artifacts in Japan and elsewhere; however, much still needs to be done regarding the sacred materiality of Shinto and other forms of Japanese religion. Satō Hiroo pioneered the idea that images are powerful presences of the sacred in this world endowed with different types of agency (Satō 2002); he shows how this understanding, based on medieval and early modern documents, was not limited to an intellectual dimension, but also affected ritual action and even social relations (as when the punitive powers of the buddhas and the kami were invoked to sanctioned oaths and legal agreements; see also Rambelli 1999).

Economy and power are also indispensable to consider, as they are relevant aspects of material religion. Although often neglected as “inauthentic” or secondary products of “true” religion, the production, ownership, distribution and sale of religious things are inherently related to religiosity. Religious identities and social stratifications are performed and negotiated through materiality, and however much economic matters are misrecognized, religion cannot exist without them. Mobile objects such as relics and ritual paraphernalia have been part of the dissemination of Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, as have the networks and trade routes related to them. Churches, temples, and shrines are symbols of value, and throughout history they have been centers of exchange for ideas, practices, and objects.

4. The concept of ‘assemblage’ in this way encapsulates the idea of a complex of interactive events, co-constitutive entanglements and mutually generative powers of humans and things (DaLanda 2006).

Japanese Religious Materiality

Throughout Japanese history, objects have been used to religiously think and communicate with. The semiotics of Buddhist materiality, studied by Fabio Rambelli, has shed light on the “semiophores” of everything related to objects, artifacts, paraphernalia, bodies, and the economy. Things share the indexical and iconic values of texts, being “cosmological models, representations of the sacred, ritual templates, condensations of enlightenment, magical tools, ritual implements, status symbols, and aesthetic artifacts” (Rambelli 2007: 98). Ritual objects point to the sacred narratives of religious traditions. Esoteric Buddhism’s mandalas are symbolic, material diagrams interrelating micro- and macrocosms that are semiotically dense, as are the iconoclastic deconstructions of Zen and Pure Land traditions. Reading and decoding the symbolism of Buddhist temple interiors is like opening the doors to phenomenological and historical accounts of a theoretically subtle religious tradition. Buddhist mandalas are representations of cosmologies, the altar is a miniature representation of Mount Sumeru, the cosmic mountain of Buddhism, and the funerary tablet (*ihai/sotoba*) is modeled after the stupa. As Saka Chihiro shows in her article, performance of rituals of passage (whether participating in the Cloth Bridge Consecration Ritual or when crossing the boundaries from the world of the living to that of the dead) needs color codes with instrumental value as well as semiotic relevance. Semiotic codes are, however, changeable. Chun Wa Chan’s article on the portable miniature shrines (*zushi*) explores the polysemy of objects through historical change and when operating across belief systems. He shows that both Daoism and Buddhism have ascribed meaning and different levels of “usefulness” to the *zushi* as an agent mediating between the microcosm of the beholder’s body and the macrocosm of the religious universe.

Differently from Buddhist studies, where interest in materiality is now widespread and accepted, the Shinto tradition has seldom, if ever, been investigated from a material perspective. Of course, there are numerous studies on sacred space and shrine architecture; recently, there has been a growing interest in kami images (*shinzō*) and what is known as “trace art” (*suijaku bijutsu*), that is, the visual representations of Shinto gods as manifestations of buddhas and bodhisattvas. Not much work has been done on the materiality of ritual implements (*torimono*), and on the ideas behind the temporary abodes of the kami (*yorishiro*) and, more importantly, the physical bodies of the kami (*goshintai*), beyond generic references to animism. The concept of kami itself, with its vagueness and semantic extension, could certainly benefit from an approach informed from the “material turn.” As is well known, the term kami refers to anything that happens to be considered as sacred, from mountains to deceased people, from natural entities (stones, waterfalls)

to historic cultural heroes, from characters in the archaic Japanese mythology to modern soldiers. Still, one could argue that a conceptual articulation is necessary in order to separate material entities that are considered *kami* in themselves (such as Mt. Miwa, Mt. Fuji, or Nachi waterfall) from other objects (or beings) whose spirit (*tamashii*) has been divinized (such as courtier Sugawara no Michizane deified as Tenjin) on the one hand and from *kami* only endowed with spirit-like existence (and residing in specific objects such as trees, rocks, or mirrors in Shinto shrines) on the other hand. Recent developments in the Shinto world have resulted in an emphasis on the “spiritual” side of *kami*, also in order to avoid forms of cult based on material objects that are considered “idolatry” (*gūzō sūhai*) by Jinja Honchō (the Association of Shinto Shrines) also because of their affinity with Buddhist practice.

And yet, matters are not so simple. It is well known that a long line of theological discussion argues that *kami* are endowed with a “soul” or *tama* (Iwasawa 2011). *Tama*, however, analogously to *kami*, is another intractable entity—not because of its spiritual, elusive and ineffable nature, but because of its complex polysemy. The Japanese term *tama* denotes not only a spirit (also disambiguated as *tamashii*), but also a jewel (such as *magatama*, one of the imperial regalia), a pearl, and spherical objects in general. The early adoption of Chinese characters allowed for semantic differentiation, but that does not solve the fundamental, ontological question about what is primary in *tama*—whether the spiritual or material, the spherical or the invisible, the precious or the sacred. In many cultures, such cases of homonymy suggest that the material object came first, and the spiritual dimension was associated to it subsequently; in the Japanese case, a spherical jewel, a precious object, may have become a metaphor (preciousness), or perhaps a metonymy (its shape?) for a spiritual dimension attributed to *kami* and other beings.

All these considerations suggest that there is ample room for in-depth research on the materiality of Shinto, beyond received and simplified ideas of animism and anti-intellectual simplicity.

The complex and ultimately undecidable nature of *kami* and *tama* suggest that some things at least are also valuable without hermeneutic content. Religious materiality in Japan is most often ritually enacted or culturally practiced, with semiotically ascribed coherence being a merely theological possibility that may or may not be known to practitioners. Just like Shinto practices (such as rebuilding the Grand Shrine of Ise every twenty years) can be “ritualized *forms* without clearly defined *meanings*” (Rambelli 2014: 221), most rituals and ceremonies in Buddhist temples or at pilgrimage sites primarily have practice value with a focus on “perceived powers of divinities in specific sites” rather than “scholastic study or participation in a particular school” (Deal and Ruppert 2015: 93).

Leaving aside modernist hermeneutics, a general acknowledgement that things have a vital essence is widespread in Japanese history, as well as in the present (Rambelli, ed., 2019). A type of animistic ontology is artistically represented in

so-called “techno-animism” (Allison 2006) with robots⁵ entering the religious world and in the universes of modern anime and manga articulating transgressions of human and non-human spheres. It would perhaps be wrong to see in the fetishization of technology a recent, and perhaps aberrant development. Rather, it can be argued that Buddhism has often encouraged technological development as a way to spread its teachings and practices and make them available to more people in larger geographical contexts. If this is correct, attention to new technologies is thus part of a *longue durée* historical trajectory (Rambelli 2018). Authors working on robots, new media, and online technologies have focused on supposed animistic tendencies (Mori 2005); however, it is necessary to assess and discuss these new developments in religious practice as part of an expansive view of sacred materiality.

In this context, “sacredness” is typically not as profoundly explicated as in monotheistic religions. The idea of something having specific (religious) power is, however, clearly seen in Shinto contexts, not least with the concept of *kami*. In one aspect, everything is fundamentally (within the realm of) *kami*, manufactured in recent years ecologically with the “greening of Shinto” as religious nature preservation. As we have seen, the *kami* also become present in specific persons, animals or objects (*yorishiro*), the latter being either man-made (e.g. mirror, folded piece of paper) or natural (e.g. tree, rock, waterfall). In recent years, “power spots” have been manufactured as sources of attracting this-worldly benefits from sacred sites, several of which are closely related to material objects. In Buddhist tropes, cosmologizing the sacred where everything is buddha nature (*bushō*) or dharmākaya (*hosshin*), including inanimate objects, animals and nature, represents the idea that the universal Buddha (Vairocana) is “present in each single particle of dust of the universe” (Rambelli and Reinders 2012: 8).⁶ The process of “semiomorphosis” (Rambelli and Reinders 2012) transforming cosmic tropes into

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5. The Japanese ‘robot priest’ Peppar performing a Buddhist funeral at the Tokyo International Funeral and Cemetery Show and Life Ending Industry Expo in 2017 was just one of the items at the annual temple and shrine industry’s showing of facilities, equipment, and service specialty exhibition for temples and shrines. A recently invented ‘amulet beacon’, combining a traditional Shinto amulet with an inbuilt GPS device to help tracking elderly people with dementia, not only fuses health care with religious security. It is also a symbol of technology transgressing the human/non-human domains, domesticating the field of robots not any longer needing consecration as an ‘exotic other’.
 6. This East Asian idea reflects the metaphor of Indra’s net, in which “each phenomenon is seen as a jewel attached to a node in a vast tangled net, reflecting all other jewels and in turn being reflected in all of them. Their nature is both projective (active) and reflective (passive) at the same time” (Trenson 2018: 271).

embodied experience can also be translated into the general value called “empathy toward things” (*mono no aware*). As Ksenia Golovina shows in her article, it is also seen in the way Russian migrants interact with objects of the Japanese religious-spiritual spectrum as transnational loci and mediums of their spiritual longings.

Concrete sacredness of things is seen in Buddha figures, mandalas, portraits of patriarchs, monastic robes, bowls or precious stones. Buddhist images (*butsuzō*) abound in temples and monasteries “with hundreds or even thousands [...] of all shapes and sizes” (Sharf 2001: 1), some of which “were known to walk, to fly through the air, to sweat and weep, to appear in dreams, and to perform a host of miracles on behalf of the faithful” (Ibid.: 2). Buddhist relics can be both bodily (mummies, hair, teeth), objects of use associated with Buddha (bodhi tree, begging bowl, staff) or objects of commemoration (images of Buddha, arhats, bodhisattvas).⁷ Brian Ruppert discusses important relics of medieval Japan as “wish-fulfilling jewels” (Ruppert 2000), since their primary value was to be used as central objects with which to achieve concrete benefits. Julia Cross in her article analyzes such relics magically manifested at temples. The Hokkeji nuns not only had access to the power of the relics, but also gained symbolic power by hosting such important treasures, possession of them being a proof of lineage “and proximity to the Buddha and to his teachings”.

Saka’s article on the Datsueba figure shows the relationship between dress and ritual efficacy. The deity’s efficacy is enhanced when covered or decorated with additional fabric (“statues are incomplete without clothing”), generating not only material objects for ritual use but also, as she suggests, developing religious beliefs. Symbolism and efficacy are also tied to bodily parts, such as hair. Women’s hair was used as fertility emblems, as amulets to ensure family members’ safe travels, and, when removed from the head, tonsure was magically transforming women into men and true disciples of the Buddha. Curley in her article elaborates on this, explaining also how women’s hair robes were also used as relics to secure birth in the Pure Land.

This clearly links to the important relationship between materiality and ritual practices. Rather than being primarily “things to believe with,” objects become religiously meaningful through ritual, as “substitutes for a general and vague notion of belief” (Gygi 2018: 20). In Zen monastic settings, materials throughout history have served as “utilitarian utensils, pedagogical tools, ritual paraphernalia, or means for focusing the mind” (Winfield and Heine 2017: xv). Undergoing a ritualization and sacralization process by religious specialists at special settings, immaterial power is bestowed on objects as carriers of sacredness, since artifacts

7. On Buddhist images and objects, see Ruppert 2000, Sharf 2000, Rambelli 2007, Glassman 2012.

are “de facto produced to serve some ritual function” (Rambelli 2017: 12) with performative effects (Ibid.: 19). As Paride Stortini shows in his article, art displays can also have ritual and sacralizing functions, such as Hirayama’s wall paintings becoming “alive” as relics through an eye-opening ceremony (*kaigen kuyō*). The opposite movement of de-sacralizing objects after they have served their purpose and are ready to “die” is equally important. Just like spirits possessing living beings are “matter out of place,” so are spirits taking abode in inanimate bodies meant to leave after use. De-sacralization ceremonies for inanimate objects (*hakken shiki*) are performed for dolls, printing blocks, pens, needles, calligraphy brushes, combs, fans or eyeglasses (Kretchmer 2000, see also Saka in this special issue) to both honor and “de-animate” them (Triplett 2016) from their functions as both instrumental tools and/or “substitute body” (*migawari*) or “alternate body” (*bunshin*) of the sacred or the user. The power of some objects should be ritually destroyed so new ones can be installed. The old *gohonzon* of other Buddhist traditions should be thrown away so a true member of Sōka Gakkai can install the new and authentic one, which is also an institutionally holy emblem. Hannah Gould in her article shows how important such rituals are, and how troublesome it can be to handle what Katja Triplett has called “sacred waste.” Retailers take care of disposing and having rituals (*kuyō*) performed for the *butsudan*, so the ties between living, dead and materials are correctly managed and cut. The disposal of sacred objects no longer needed is related to the problem of iconoclasm. In Japan, the most obvious case of iconoclasm took place in the early Meiji period in what came to be known as *haibutsu kishaku* (elimination of Buddhism), but there were other occurrences of destruction or defacing of religious icons and implements not considered proper or orthodox (see Rambelli and Reinders 2012). Iconoclasm, and the destruction of religious artifacts in general, is another fertile topic in the materiality of religion, because it deals with actions on objects and their rationalizations (including questions on modes of representation and interaction with the sacred).

Owing, manufacturing, and handling religious objects is closely related to power. Sacredness can be both valuable and dangerous, and it has political impact. Buddha as a statue was transmitted, accepted, revered, discarded, and re-installed as an object of political power in the sixth century, as described in the *Nihon shoki*. Amaterasu and the Three Imperial Regalia (*sanshu no jingi*) have been symbols of the nation, explaining and legitimating the sacredness of the emperor, the nation, and the people. Amalgamation of Buddhist and Shinto images and objects was the norm, until the impactful rupture in the early Meiji period that resulted in the formation of Buddhism and Shinto as two separate religions (*shinbutsu bunri*) and prohibited rituals and objects regarded as primitive relics from superstitious times. Owning certain religious objects at politically fraught periods and places can be dangerous. During the Tokugawa period, stepping on images of the Virgin Mary (*fumi-e*) was a religio-political ritual forced upon the Christians—

unless the latter succeeded in covering up their faith as *kakure kirishitan* (Hidden Christians) and revering their objects of prayer disguised as Kannon. Nichiren's *Gohonzon* was considered to be a "controversial and even dangerous piece of writing" (Wallinder-Pierini 2018: 106) and followers of the new sect could be "severely punished and even beheaded if the scroll was found in their possession. Followers were seized and tortured, some were executed" (Ibid.: 96). Zen Buddhist objects have instantiated "institutional authority into recognizable symbols of legitimacy and power" (Winfield and Heine 2017: xv). On the other hand, "the worship, distribution, collection, and theft of relics were potentially means of reinforcing or subverting hierarchical relations" (Ruppert 2000: 12). As Chan in his article shows, the miniature shrine (*zushi*) in the eighth century acted as an object conferring power, and the Nara court used it to "buttress the myth of an unbroken lineage of the ruling family." At a different level, Curley in her article shows how donating hair to be used in ropes was a way for women to participate materially (and physically, in the first person) in the construction of the Higashi Honganji temple in Kyoto, by a logic according to which the donated hair would stand in for the donor herself.

Religious things have "use-value," "non-hermeneutical value," and, as commodities, also "exchange value" (Rambelli 2017). We find that material and economic wealth are expressions of a successful religion not only in the assets of new religious movements, some of which, as "prosperity Buddhism" are substantial suppliers and consumers of economic wealth (Borup 2018). Both Buddhism and Christianity have, as "world religions," significantly based their capacities of dissemination on physical and exchangeable capitals. Christian churches in Japan were symbols of successful Western modernity, and Buddhist temples and monasteries have been, since their integration on Japanese soil, prosperous and economic power centers, contributing to a modern capitalist society (Borup 2019).⁸ In addition, marketing strategies to secure donations and pilgrims have for many centuries been inseparable from Buddhist temple activities. Until the late Edo period, many Buddhist temples controlled Shinto shrines and their proselytizing activities, either by itinerant Buddhist personnel (*gannin*) or by Shinto professionals (*onshi*) which benefited the entire religious complex and its region. During the Edo period, however, certain Shinto shrines asserted their autonomy, if not independence, from their Buddhist overlords, and began to promote themselves (in competition with Buddhist institutions) by selling talismans, amulets, and images,

8. It is quite indicative, that "Buddhist institutions' failure to control people and objects (including Buddhists' own failure to control themselves in their interactions with sacred objects and wealth) would eventually result in the end of Buddhism" (Rambelli and Reinders 2012: 4).

by performing prognostication and purifications, and in general by establishing relationships and encouraging people to visit and to sponsor their shrine. In other words, the “Shinto” portions of large Buddho-Shinto complexes functioned, in terms of marketing and the promotion of economic activities, very much like Buddhist temples.

Today, exchange patterns in the broader field of Japanese religions involve ritual exchanges between Buddhist priests and lay people, donation contracts between members and institutions in new religious movements, and ritual gifts, offerings and payments for concrete services at Shinto shrines. Death in itself is an important service industry which includes the services of Buddhist priests, undertakers, and funeral companies, and gifts for the deceased (*kōden*) as well as return gifts to the guests at the funeral (*kōden-gaeshi*) as part of the ritual exchange codes and market of religious commodities. Religion constitutes a veritable business for suppliers of goods and paraphernalia, including coffins, graves, incense, rosaries, books, altars, amulets, pilgrimage attire; quite a number of temples, shrines, churches, and religious organizations' own property for sale or rent.

The commercial aspect of material religion is significant and necessary, and included in most of the articles in this issue. Gould goes behind the business of the funeral industry and examines the retailer's universe, where *butsudan* as contemporary surplus domestic goods is part of the general “commercialisation of *kuyo*.” Papp describes how the different kinds of ritual artefacts, consumer goods and market-oriented activities (such as the visit to the photo studio or the children's festive dress) represent important constituent elements of the ritual experience and social display of the *shichi-go-san* rite of passage. Golovina's Russian immigrants use *butsudan*, *o-mamori*, *daruma* dolls, fortune-telling books, mobile phone recorders, *feng-shui* furniture, yoga and aromatherapy utensils as objects for consumption and sensory interaction in their transnational identity formations. In (modern) religious worlds, economic capital is often “misrecognized” as inauthentic, or transformed metaphorically into other kinds of capital. This is typically performed by religious institutions, but even in museums, as Paride Stortini explains, material capital is converted into religious capital and transformed through art. Economy, in other words, is a necessary component of religious materiality in various aspects. Another aspect of the material, economic side of Japanese religion is tourism. Most tourist travels include visits to religious sites—mostly Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, and a few early Christian churches; increasingly, tour operators are exploiting popular interest for “power spots” and even the occult (with tours to haunted places in Kyoto). However, guidebooks and magazines consistently juxtapose sacred places, and historical sites with natural hot springs (*onsen*) and restaurants—something that begins with the travel literature of the Edo period. In any case, one wonders about the degree of synergy between the tour operators, the local administrations, and religious organizations involved.

Concluding remarks

In this special issue, we have selected a number of contributions written by junior and emerging scholars who work on various issues related to the materiality of Japanese religious traditions from different perspectives and approaches. Some articles are historical, covering objects in the classical period, in the middle ages, and in the Edo period. The majority of contributions, though, are focused on the modern and contemporary era, perhaps a consequence of a general orientation toward modernity in scholarship today. Each of these contributions is original in its own way. Julia Cross uses relics to explore medieval women's religiosity, an increasingly important topic but still largely unmapped. Saka Chihiro shows how Datsueba's clothing and its symbolism contributed to the reinterpretation of that cult and the development of new cults. Melissa Curley shows changes in the attitudes toward material objects and their role in religious practice through a close analysis of Higashi Honganji's famous hair ropes. Paride Stortini explores how paintings, archaeological findings, and relics produce a loop of material and spiritual imagination and practices centered on the memorialization of the past, both in the collective sense of the transmission of Buddhism to Japan, and in the individual of one's affective links. Ksenia Golovina investigates how Russian Orthodox people residing in Japan adopt and transform a wide range of material objects linked to Japanese religious and spiritual beliefs. Melinda Papp discusses how consumerism and practices of consumption intersect and affect the *shichigosan* rituals, dating from the Edo period but performed today in very different forms. Hannah Gould studies the processes, labor, and practices involved in the rites for the disposal of Buddhist family altars (*butsudan*) to be discarded as a way to understand expectations and beliefs among users. Chun Wa Chan offers a critical analysis of the early history of miniature shrines (*zushi*) in Japan and addresses their original polysemy, which is at the basis of later repurposing of this important object. A common thread that runs through these articles is a focus on change and transformation: most of the objects studied in these papers remain largely unchanged but participate in vastly different systems of rituals and beliefs; other objects are no longer in use (or important); some objects are new and try to situate themselves within an older tradition.

The materiality of Japanese religions, especially in an explicit, self-aware, and theoretically alert form, is a recent academic development, and much remains to be done. The materiality of Shinto is a vast blind spot, and so is that of new religious movements (as authors still tend to focus on their immaterial animistic outlook). It is necessary to study the contexts, processes, and agents of creation of religious objects throughout history (who made what, for whom, how, and for what purposes). Another crucial, and largely missing theme, is that of how premodern Japanese envisioned the role of objects and materiality in general on a conceptual

level, away from facile attributions of animism. Materiality can also be expanded towards environmental studies, in order to better understand how the environment, nature, and specifically the elements (earth, water, fire, air, space, wood, metal, etc.) were understood and how they functioned within a general economy of the sacred. A substantial and growing body of research exists concerning the role of mountains in Japanese religions (specifically, Shugendō studies), but little has been done about the sea (see Rambelli 2018), and almost nothing on other environments and elements. The material turn has determined a shift away from the centrality of sacred texts towards icons and other sacred objects, but this still presupposes the primacy of the visual (and, to a lesser extent, of the tactile) in relation to other senses. Sensoriality is another dimension that needs exploration and sustained investigation: the soundscape, the olfactory repertory, and food in the Japanese religious world all await to be studied in depth.

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