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## ***Daruma Meets Domovoi and Then Some Yoga: Russians in Japan and the Religious-Spiritual Materiality of Migrant Living***

This paper explores how Russians residing in Japan obtain, use, and interpret various material objects linked to Japanese religious and spiritual beliefs or otherwise associated with spirituality and available in Japan. The study aims to trace the trajectory of these items' transformation from objects encountered accidentally to entities invested with distinct spiritual meanings assigned to them by their holders. These meanings do not necessarily coincide with the conventional understanding of the respective objects in the Japanese religious context. The paper also examines how some Russians engage in material-spiritual practices on a broader scale such that these practices become central to their lives in Japan. These practices often include involvement with schools of fortune-telling and yoga, popular in Japan. Examining these processes and the material objects participating in them makes it possible to determine how the religious and spiritual materiality of the host country both reflects and shapes the transformations experienced by the migrants. It also allows one to observe how the migrants' native religion—Orthodox Christianity in many cases—is challenged in the absence of its own materially expressed foundation.

*Keywords:* spiritual-religious materiality – Russian migrants – Japan

Studies on the relationship of migrants with materiality have been gaining momentum, resulting in what Wang (2016) has called a “material turn” in migration studies. Having addressed the issue from a multitude of perspectives and in a variety of worldwide localities, the works by Búriková (2006), Basu and Coleman (2008), Burrell (2008a, 2008b), Miller (2008, 2015), Dibbits (2009), Pechurina (2011, 2015), De Leon (2013), Löfgren (2016), and Golovina (2016, 2018a, 2018b) have underscored the rootedness of the migrant experience in the surrounding materiality, accidentally encountered by the migrants during their journey, willfully solicited to accompany them in times of transition and settlement, or received as gifts and tokens. These objects could be received from those who bade farewell to the departing migrants, traversed the borders together with them, or welcomed them in the new location. Similarly, studies of religion and spirituality have been

experiencing a shift toward attempting to understand an adherent's subjective experience from a perspective of materiality. These studies have thus examined individual ways of interacting with religious-spiritual paraphernalia and intimate material practices pertaining to a person's beliefs.<sup>1</sup> In the Japanese context and specifically in relation to domestic spirituality in a *material* home, this task has been undertaken by Daniels (2003; 2010a; 2010b: 81-104).

While many studies have addressed religion in a migrant context (Ennis 2011; Wong and Levitt 2014; Melchert 2017), only some have focused specifically on material objects and their handling by the migrants (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2008; Saraiva 2008); in some studies, attention to these objects has been paid as a part of broader investigations into the migrant material culture (Pechurina 2011). This paper seeks to narrow this gap in knowledge by addressing—based on the first-hand findings of an anthropological inquiry—how Russian (mostly female) migrants interact with objects of the Japanese religious-spiritual spectrum. In doing so, it aims to delineate the material culture of Japan-based Russians, with the focus on paraphernalia linked to Japanese religions and spiritual practices or otherwise utilized by the informants to serve as loci and mediums of their spiritual longings in Japan.<sup>2</sup>

### *Migrants and religion*

Many studies on migration and religion focus on religions followed by migrants before migration and the ways in which they reproduce and sustain these religions in the receiving society, as well as the functions of these post-migratory religious practices. These studies—whether they explore the material component of the practiced religions or not—furnish findings and perspectives that provide valuable context for the discussion central to this paper: how migrants interact with the religious-spiritual materiality of the host country. Specifically, the previous studies highlight the sociocultural and economic forces responsible for the ways in which migrants choose to practice their beliefs post-migration. For instance, Saraiva (2008) describes the religious practices of African migrants in Portugal, arguing that it is not just migrants who travel but also “their religious performances, performers, and the spirits that operate to help people in their life crises,” constituting what the author calls “transnational religious networks” (254). Specifically, Saraiva reports that the funeral ritual associated with the

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1. See recent edited volumes by Meyer and Houtman (2012) and Morgan (2010).
  2. For a definition of “material culture,” I follow Morgan, who argues that it consists of “things, uses, and paradigms” (2010b: 73), where the last can be interpreted as a sociocultural logic that predetermines the ways in which people choose to put objects to use.

ascendance of the deceased to the status of an ancestral spirit “is considered more effective if performed on the primeval ground” (259), which in turn brings about the transnationalization of the ritual. Saraiva does not conceptualize this in cosmological terms alone: it is the socioeconomic aspect of enacting a transnational community that these religious practices facilitate (266). Religion is thus mobilized as a tool for maintaining and maximizing transnational connections.

Other examples of how religion can be mobilized in a migratory experience include the work by Ennis (2011) on refugee engagement with religiosity. One of this researcher’s primary objectives was to assess the probability of post-refuge shifts in the religious consciousness and beliefs of a group of forced migrants. Ennis reported that, having introduced an exhaustive arsenal of variables, the majority of her informants remained what she called “religious maintainers,” followed by those categorized as “religious intensifiers.” While there were some in her sample who started questioning their religious beliefs (or converted), religion was generally maintained or intensified. It was thus mobilized to assist with coping, especially with the respondents’ experiences in the refugee camp, and interacting with the receiving society.

Coping or, more precisely, finding ways to make coping a less challenging experience in the context of migration and religion is also addressed by Topali (2013), who examines the religion of migrant Filipinas through the religion-work dichotomy. The religious practice discussed in this research is that of “silencing the body,” which emerges as both a “religious ethos” and an “agentical practice” (621) mobilized to construct a reciprocal relationship with employers.

Finally, some migrants come from highly religious societies, for whom staying abroad may carry connotations of religious liberation. This is the case for Indonesians working in Taiwan, as discussed by Melchert (2017). Melchert argues that while it is not the innate religious values that the migrants wish to be liberated from, they nevertheless aspire to freely choose their lifestyle, which living in Taiwan enables them to do. By contrasting the experiences of Indonesian workers to those of students from the same country, who do not experience similar religious shifts, Melchert emphasizes the importance of scrutinizing variables when assessing the situation of a particular group of people.

As such, these studies highlight that the overarching logic of transnational community-building, coping with hardships, and negotiating better work relations leads to religion being mobilized, and the search for an alternative lifestyle causes it to be subdued. While this paper’s primary objective is to investigate the relationship that migrants develop with the religious-spiritual objects of the host country as well as the idiosyncratic spiritual practices for which they utilize various material objects available in Japan, I aim to remain attentive to the various sociocultural and economic forces influencing their actions (such as the need to overcome hardships and attain agency in a new society), some of which resemble the patterns mentioned above.

### *Religion, materiality, and Japan*

The above examples have shown how religious beliefs are used as potent tools for people (i.e., migrants) to arrive at various practices matching their goals, although, in general, I am inclined to critique using the tool- and goal-driven approach to study human experience. Here, it is important to examine how exactly these various practices are operationalized—that is, “how religion happens materially” (Meyer and Houtman 2012: 7) for ordinary people (in contrast to those employed by religious institutions) and what role objects play in this process. In the framework of religious belief, which Morgan understands as a “pervasive community of feeling” (2010a: 7), material objects are “means by which human beings feel their way into their worlds, feel themselves, feel the past, anticipate the future, feel together” (2010b: 71-72). Meyer and Houtman (2012: 8) highlight the “indispensability of the material means—things, but also images, body, and words for religion to be tangible and present,” inviting scholars to “bring ‘things’ back” into the conceptualization of religion. Religion both reveals itself through *things* and is transformed by *things* as people partaking in an “affective practice” (Wetherell 2012) of belief devise new uses for the material objects, simultaneously adding to and subtracting from the arsenal of items traditionally associated with a certain religion. As such, questions pertaining to materiality should be considered central to the anthropological study of religion.

This may be particularly true for those of the world’s religions and spiritual beliefs that are more concerned with the practical realm—through one’s interaction with materiality—than the doctrinal-discursive one. The religions of Japan (this study’s fieldsite) that are considered to honor “everyday embodied practices” (Daniels 2003: 625), which have resulted in their conceptualization in terms of “*orthopraxis* and not *orthodoxy*” (Shields 2010), are of interest. Shields argues that an ordinary Japanese person’s reluctance to classify practices followed routinely by him or her as religion, such as the commemoration of the dead, stems from the primary focus of Buddhism and Shinto being on praxis rather than dogmas (2012).<sup>3</sup> Rambelli (2014) states that particularly in relation to Shinto, certain practices (such as the well-known and proudly held practice of rebuilding the Grand Shrine of Ise every 20 years) can be “ritualized *forms* without clearly defined *meanings*” (2014: 221), turning Shinto into a “vast and fluid field of possibilities and alternatives” (238). An overall trend of secularization and commercialization of religions illustrative of the present-day world (Borup 2014: 131-132), and thus an expansion of individual forms of engagement with materiality, adds another layer to this discussion.

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3. See Ama (1996) for an extensive investigation into the “non-religiosity” of the Japanese.

An openness to possibilities and an absence of dogmatic compulsion may be what make the Japanese religious-spiritual life nonthreatening for the migrant population and allow them to embrace it, albeit spontaneously. Thus, Japan's religious-spiritual realm can be experienced by an ordinary person as free of absolutism and invasiveness. An informant, a baptized Christian, told me that in times of doubt, it is emotionally easier for her to wander into a local Japanese temple and sit undisturbed on one of its stones<sup>4</sup> than to visit an Orthodox church, where she would have to behave with propriety and may be reprimanded for not doing so. In this connection and in relation to many more examples in this paper of how Russians in Japan interact with Japanese ritual-spiritual objects, I utilize Rambelli's (2017) concept of "semimorphosis," a process initially conceptualized by the author in the context of production of sacred objects pertaining to Japanese Buddhism. Rambelli argues that "each artifact can drift from one type of object to another, have one of its values emphasized and other narcotized" (20)—that is, undergo a process where "modifications in the semiotic status of the objects" (ibid.) occur.

### *Methods and demographics*

This paper draws on findings from ongoing fieldwork investigating the material practices of Russians in Japan as well as earlier findings obtained in the course of my anthropological study of the Russian community in Japan. Additionally, some sections are informed by data gathered from an online survey (n = 130) I conducted in February 2016 on the housing and home interiors of Japan-based Russians. A majority of the interviewees (all women) for this paper were from Tokyo as well as Kanagawa, Saitama, and Chiba prefectures. Of the online survey respondents (89% women), 41% were from Tokyo, followed by Saitama, Chiba, Osaka, and Kanagawa in that order; the remaining were spread across Japan. The majority of the present-day population of migrant Russians in Japan dates back to the 1990s, when the collapse of the Soviet Union made it possible for former Soviets to move across borders. While Russians initially moved to Japan primarily for economic reasons, many settling down in Japan through marriages with the locals, the latest waves include many educational and professional as well as lifestyle migrants (Mukhina and Golovina 2017). There are currently 8862 people from the Russian Federation in Japan (Japan's Statistics Bureau 2018).

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4. In this regard, see Prohl (2017) for a discussion on silent-sitting originating in Buddhism and being adopted worldwide as a secular practice of mindfulness.

### Results

The Results section of this paper consists of two parts. The first part focuses on the migrants' homes, primarily examining the objects related to Japanese religions and spiritual practices. This part incorporates both on-site observations and interviews as well as the findings of the online survey, particularly the questions related to the possession of such items. The aim is to reveal the kind of relationship the informants have with such items, the meanings they ascribe to these objects, and the transformation the meaning-making process undergoes in the course of a migrant's life in Japan. The second part examines the religious and, even more, the spiritual practices that the migrants reported to be crucial to their lives in the host country. The uniting feature is that each of these spiritual practices developed under the influence of certain circumstances after the informant's migration and settlement in Japan. The material objects involved in this process were often miscellaneous in nature and not necessarily connected to what is considered religious or spiritual in Japan. All of them, however, were procured in Japan and are discussed to illustrate how various items are interpreted by their holders to serve as loci or mediums of spiritual meaning.

#### *Part 1: Japanese religious and spiritual objects in migrant homes*

Objects related to Japanese religions and spirituality can be found in the homes of many Russian migrants residing in Japan, regardless of whether the migrants themselves ascribe divine meaning to the items. There is, however, a divide between homes where the migrants are part of the Japanese families into which they married, and homes with only Russians or Russians married to other foreigners. As I argued elsewhere, in the case of the households with no Japanese members, an increased number of Japanese miscellanea, including objects with spiritual meanings, can often be found if the person is single or in the early stages of relocation to Japan (Golovina 2018b). This finding can be interpreted in conjunction with such phenomena as self-discovery and exoticism.

The Japanese religious practices surrounding Shinto and Buddhism rarely featured in the informants' narratives beyond the inevitable nature of the women's encounters with these practices as residents of Japan or as members of a Japanese household. As such, though there are many items in the homes of the migrants that could be regarded as connected to Japanese religious and spiritual beliefs and the women do partake in some of the practices, especially if they marry into Japanese families and live with the in-laws, these are more often accidental rather than independently sought-out encounters.

## Butsudan

Where a Russian woman is married to a Japanese man, especially in cases of two-generational homes, a Buddhist altar or *butsudan* 仏壇 is often present in a Japanese-style room in the apartment or house. The *butsudan* is one of the “spaces traditionally associated with the domestic religious cult” in Japanese homes (Daniels 2003: 625). As Rambelli argues, it “contributes to the production of a vague religious ‘atmosphere’ (a ‘feel’ for religion), rather than to specific religious practices” (2010: 64). The Russian women rarely tend to the *butsudan*, leaving the task to their Japanese husbands and, more often, to other relatives. In one of the homes I visited recently while conducting on-site interviews, a Japanese-style room that the Russian woman had co-opted for herself as a home yoga studio hosted a *butsudan* of her husband’s deceased relative. She usually sat beside it while performing yoga poses. Although the informant was unable to provide me with precise details about who the *butsudan* was dedicated to, she nevertheless told me that she and her husband had just plucked and placed before it several fragrant *yuzu* 柚子 (citrus junos) fruits. Indeed, the room was filled with a subtle aroma, and three bright-yellow fleshy fruits decorated the *butsudan*. Thus, rather than through facts and proper care and rituals, this informant’s relationship with the *butsudan* was sensory in nature.

Another informant, although she did not have a *butsudan* in her apartment (which she shared with her Japanese husband and their young child; her mother was also visiting with them when I met her for an interview), showed me a box of *o-senko* お線香 (incense sticks) she burnt daily “to create a calming atmosphere and for peace of mind.” In a Japanese household, these sticks are usually burned during rituals of attending to the ancestral *butsudan*. My informant used a traditional Russian *khokhloma* lacquer box to burn the sticks—an unlikely stylistic combination. Here too, it was the sensory dimension of a Buddhist realm that the informant accentuated.



Figure 1.  
A traditional Russian *khokhloma* lacquer box that the informant used to burn incense sticks

### O-mamori and daruma

When asked which object in their homes they consider to be the most traditionally Japanese, 15 of 88 online survey respondents mentioned an item from the religious-spiritual spectrum. Apart from the aforementioned *butsudan* with 4 responses and *kamidana* 神棚 (a home altar in Shinto) with 1 response, the majority of the items listed could be classified as Japanese objects with perceived protective or luck-attracting qualities. These items included (initial wording preserved) *o-mamori* お守り, a *hamaya* 破魔矢 (in Shinto, an arrow that keeps demons away), a home protection charm from a temple, a luck talisman for the New Year, a *daruma* 達磨 (a round doll with links to Buddhism), a golden fan from a temple, a painting of Japanese gods, and New Year decorations<sup>5</sup> (the survey was conducted in February, by when these decorations are supposed to have been put away).

Furthermore, in a survey question that specifically inquired about the presence in the respondent's home of an object with protective qualities (n=85), 9 people reported they possessed various protective charms (such as *o-mamori*<sup>6</sup> and *hamaya* arrows) and 1 person named a Shintoist "wooden tablet" (presumably *kitōkifuda*

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5. The wording, albeit translated into English, is preserved in its original form. Some respondents Cyrilized common Japanese words, while others provided an explanation in Russian without using the Japanese word to denote an object or place. The Russian wording used by the respondents (which included words such as *оберег и талисман*) did not always make it possible to identify the exact object or place they referred to; however, as seen from the data, many of the objects were procured from local temples (or shrines) and were connected to New Year celebrations. Here, the respondents used the Russian word *храм* (temple) and not the one that means "shrine." However, the context indicates that the respondents probably referred to both Buddhist (in the case of *daruma*) and Shinto (for *o-mamori*) establishments.
  6. *O-mamori* (literally "protector") was the Japanese word most frequently used by the Russians without being translated into Russian while discussing talismans, amulets, and charms obtained by them in Japan. While *engimono* 縁起物 (Daniels 2003) may be considered to be a more appropriate term to describe objects with protective and luck-attracting qualities, the emphasis by the Russians on the word *o-mamori* (often regardless of the specific object being referred to) suggests that it is the "protective" element of these objects that they value the most. Contrarily, they may not understand the complex Buddhist concept of *en* 縁 as in *engimono* (Daniels 2003: 622-623). For why Russians in Japan borrow words from Japanese, most often pertaining to the realities of everyday Japanese living, see Kazakevitch (2013).

祈祷木札), clarifying that it had to be returned to the “temple”.<sup>7</sup> Some people additionally mentioned that the item had been purchased during New Year celebrations at a religious facility.

In comparison, 26 people named a Russian object, often a Christian Orthodox icon,<sup>8</sup> a *domovoi* (a heathen household god, usually a doll of an old man with a long beard), or a luck-attracting decorative horseshoe (or a combination of these). A few respondents reported possessing both a Japanese and a Russian object with protective and luck-attracting qualities. Additionally, a variety of idiosyncratic responses referred to various spiritual traditions beyond Japan and Russia. Among these were “souvenirs from friends,” suggesting that an item can become infused with protective or luck-attracting qualities if received as a gift. Finally, 37 people indicated *none*.

It is not uncommon for people in Russia to purchase, hand-make, give, and receive various objects with protective and luck-attracting qualities—for example, New Year charms (such as Chinese zodiac figurines). These objects often accompany New Year presents that Russians give to each other. Objects such as the *domovoi* and horseshoes can be found in many households, a remnant of heathen beliefs that have survived in a domesticized form since the introduction of Orthodox Christianity in Russia in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. As such, for Russians residing in Japan, the Japanese convention of procuring various talismans, amulets, and charms from a shrine or a temple (most often during a New Year visit) may serve as an organic extension of their own practices.

Another observation is that while in Japan, many such objects are considered to have a predetermined “length of service,” the women in this research were not always as happy to part with their possessions as to buy them anew. Traditionally, the items purchased at temples and shrines at New Year are expected to be taken back to the relevant religious establishments for a memorial service and ritual disposal.<sup>9</sup> This practice is understood in Japanese society in terms of interdependence between human beings and objects, and cyclic flows (Daniels 2003). One of my informants recalled when she (single and living alone at the time) had bought at a Buddhist

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7. In response to the questions in this section, one person did use the word “shrine,” but chose to use the Japanese word *jinja* 神社 spelled in Cyrillic; while Buddhism is widespread in Russia, Shinto is largely unknown. The choice of a Japanese word may thus indicate cultural distance.
  8. In Orthodox tradition, protection is not considered an icon’s primary function in a home (Calhoun 2014: 40-47). The fact that the respondents still perceive icons as such reveals how beliefs are experienced in an intimate domestic context.
  9. See Chapter 6 of Rambelli’s (2007) monograph for a detailed discussion on memorial services for inanimate objects in the context of Japanese Buddhism.

temple a luck-attracting *daruma* doll in January. Following the advice of a Japanese friend, she painted one of its eyes black to make her wish come true and placed it on a shelf in the living room. A year later, she was supposed to paint the second eye black if the wish had come true, take the *daruma* to the nearby temple to dispose of it, and buy a new one. While my informant did paint the second eye black, she liked the doll so much that she decided to keep it in her possession. The aforementioned reluctance to clear away and ideally dispose of New Year decorations (which are often hung on a doorway and thus resemble a protective charm) can be interpreted in the same vein. Overall, Japanese objects with protective qualities often stayed in the informants' homes far beyond their "lifetime." Due to its human-like appearance, the *daruma* in the vignette above was thus undergoing a transformation into something akin to a Russian household god, a *domovoi*, a figurine of which can never be discarded.<sup>10</sup>

### Dolls

Dolls were also present in some of the researched households. Daniels interprets dolls in Japan as "embody[ing] efficacious connections among people" and also possessing protective powers (2010: 166). In the online survey, the examples included "a couple of handmade Japanese dolls, made by the husband's relatives as a gift," "old Japanese dolls," and "*kimekomi* 木目込み and *washi* 和紙 paper dolls, which I make myself." The last respondent learned how to make dolls at courses affiliated with an arts and crafts store, and used this opportunity to both learn about Japanese culture and occupy herself while adjusting to the status of being a housewife. When I visited the homes of Russian women in Japan for interviews, depending on the season, I could also observe *hina* 雛 dolls (which are usually displayed in March) in households where the women had daughters. In one informant's home, *hina* dolls occupied a small shelf on a wall. The traditional wedding ceremony they represented was between Mickey Mouse and Minnie Mouse, with Disney ducks on a lower step serving as royal ladies and servants. While they had been newly bought and displayed in March, they remained in the same position when I visited the same home half a year later. The informant referred to their practicality as toys (albeit displayed and not directly played with) in the form of characters understandable to her children. She therefore saw no need to put them away after the *hina* celebration

10. Daniels reports that modern-day Japanese people also sometimes fail to ritually dispose of an item, thus "averting the flow of things." They then either give the objects away as gifts, turning them into permanent possessions, or, more rarely, dispose of them in a mundane manner (2003: 630-631).

and repeat the process the following year. In fact, she considered the tradition of displaying and then storing away the dolls<sup>11</sup> a “waste of purpose and space.” Another type of doll I observed during my research was an “identity doll” presented to a Russian woman by the Japanese head teacher of a daycare. The woman’s children had just started attending that facility, and all the newly enrolled children had received similar handmade cloth dolls, which they were supposed to bring with them to the daycare and take back home every day. The dolls were dressed and had black hair made of yarn but no faces. The parents were told to make the dolls’ faces together with their children using buttons and yarn. Although the woman felt burdened by this task, she nevertheless completed the assignment and embraced the daycare’s convention. While this practice is not widespread and may well be influenced by the Western concept of security blankets, it underscores the presence of dolls in everyday Japanese practices.

### *Part 1: Discussion*

In conclusion to the first part of the results, many objects of the religious-spiritual spectrum accidentally end up in the homes of Russians in Japan: they may belong to Japanese family members, be procured when the Russians accompany Japanese relatives to religious facilities, or be received as gifts from Japanese relatives and friends. Often, when the objects are sought out independently, the woman is single and looking for ways to familiarize herself with Japanese culture, with which she may be fascinated, viewing it as different and exotic, while also establishing her new identity as a migrant. In such cases, the procurement of Japanese items may take a much more agentically proactive turn than when the migrant is in a Russo-Japanese union. While the informants do not necessarily engage with the Japanese spiritual items on the levels of discourse, they nevertheless find ways to connect with them through the senses (often olfactorily). Japanese objects with perceived protective and luck-attracting qualities have resonated particularly organically with migrant Russians as collecting them resembles a practice followed in homes in Russia. The participants of this study, however, did not always adhere to the prescribed “length of service” of a certain item and were reluctant to put the objects away until the next holiday or dispose of them. At times, they simply wanted to keep an object they liked visible (thus approximating its use to that of a similar item in Russia). At other times, they found the actions of “procuring-displaying-storing-disposing” redundant

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11. In Japan, forgetting to clear the wedding display away after the festival is believed to cause daughters to remain unmarried (Daniels 2010a: 159). Symbolically, the daughters are seen as having stayed in the parental home (through the dolls) after the wedding has taken place.

and burdensome. It may be argued that Japan's "all-encompassing, relational ontology," a description Daniels uses for such Japanese practices (2010a: 166), has not been internalized by the Russians. Finally, the linguistic considerations should be kept in mind (see Footnotes 5, 6 and 7), as the vocabulary used by the Russians to name Japanese objects of a religious-spiritual spectrum may be helpful in understanding which of these objects' properties and functions are appreciated by the researched population. The semiotic underlay of the objects is deconstructed to foreground particular qualities associated with them that sanction new forms of use, which serves as an example of Rambelli's "semiomorphosis" (2017) in the context of religious materiality and migration. Moreover, it expands our inquiry into the nature of the objects themselves, suggesting the multifarious qualities of the material world—both those that are accentuated when different people engage with them in different circumstances, and those that, as stated by Harman (2018), may remain unknown to us outside the anthropocentric context.

*Part 2: Russian women in Japan in search of spiritual ground*

Presented below are cases concerned with spirituality and materiality as experienced by Russian women in Japan. Unlike the first part of the results, which focuses on the often-accidentally-encountered Japanese objects of the religious-spiritual spectrum in migrant homes and traces the relationships the informants developed with these objects, this section aims to unveil what constitutes the self-driven spiritual practices of Russian women in Japan and what material expressions these practices take. In other words, if the point of departure for the discussion above comprised the objects themselves about which, upon spotting them in migrant homes, I asked the informants, the point of departure in the results below was more often the informants' narratives, which turned my inquiry toward the objects. I have largely followed a life-history approach to provide a more holistic outlook of these women's experiences. Each of the titles is supplemented by the parenthetical mention of a material object, which functions as the material locus of the lived experiences discussed.

Furthermore, as I illustrated in the first part of the Results section, the relationship the Russian women develop with the Japanese religious practices surrounding Buddhism and Shinto are often externally driven and unplanned in nature. Contrarily, when the women opt for spiritual solutions to help them cope with various situations, these practices are sought out independently from among a variety of options and cannot usually be defined in strict religious terms. In many cases, these practices are organized around what Borup (2014) calls a result of "transcultural meetings between 'East' and 'West'" (131) and "general secularization in the modern world" (132). The sources that inspire these practices of the Russian women are as follows. First, the practices are influenced by those of present-day Japan as seen on television, in books readily available at bookstores and convenience stores, and on the Internet (such as

Kazuko Hosoki's 細木数子 fortune-telling or Christianity-inspired prophecies at a local cafe). Second, the practices are related to spiritual traditions originating in different parts of the world, which are currently trending internationally (such as feng shui, yoga,<sup>12</sup> and aromatherapy). Knowledge about these can be easily obtained from non-Japanese sources. Finally, some opt for highly specific solutions that originate in Russia, the informants' homeland, but are marginal in nature (such as magic).

### 1. Fortune-telling (books)

When I visited Olga at her apartment for an interview, her child, whose Japanese father Olga married a few years earlier, had just turned one. We sat in the living room, the floor of which was covered with a soft plum-colored carpet to ensure the child's safety. About half an hour into the conversation, it became clear that Olga was still suffering from the effects of a traumatic childbirth a year ago. She had been in labor for several days and had undergone many complications; Olga said she wondered how she had survived. Spending her days largely alone due to her husband's busy work schedule, she felt isolated and tired and thus turned to fortune-telling. Apart from basic furniture, the carpet, and some toys, there were no visible objects in the living room; therefore, I immediately noticed a few fortune-telling books in Japanese on a small coffee table. Olga explained that they were books on *Rokuseisenjutsu* 六星占術, a fortune-telling technique originating in Chinese astrology. It was adjusted for use in Japan by a modern-day fortune-teller Kazuko Hosoki, a celebrity whose portrait is imprinted on each of the editions she has published. Judging from the fact that the books in Olga's house were pencil-marked in many places, she had studied them carefully, finding "many explanations for [her] situation."

#### 1.1 Christianity-inspired prophecies (a mobile phone recorder)

I first interviewed Yana, then a single mother, shortly after she completed her master's studies in Japan and was finally able to bring her four-year old child, born to a Russian father, to Tokyo. Although fluent in both Japanese and English, Yana was finding it difficult to secure a permanent job in Japan. Not wanting to return to the Russian Far East, she was also looking for a potential marriage partner in Japan. Finding the opportunity to date while raising a young child was challenging. She said it was both due to personal time constraints and the attitude toward single mothers in Japanese society (Aoki and McDowell Aoki 2005). As

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12. See an edited volume (Borup and Fibiger 2017) for a detailed discussion on the "Eastspirit": how Eastern ideas and practices circulate in a global context.

such, when I conducted a series of interviews with her, she was in a situation of search and instability. A Christian (non-Orthodox), Yana often referred to God in our conversations, saying that she “feels God in [her] heart and that he talks to [her].” Yana said that God was leading her every step of the way, helping her assess each situation. At one of our meetings, she took hold of my hand and said that she wanted to foretell my future. As I surrendered to the experience, Yana closed her eyes and proceeded to spell out what lay ahead of me in a calm monotone. Each of her sentences started with “God says” as if she were relaying God’s words to me. She then told me that it was her dream to open a prophecy café in Japan where people would come, have a drink, and then have their future similarly predicted and, importantly, use their mobile phones to record what the fortune-teller said. Yana then recommended a prophecy café that already existed (Yogen 預言 Café), located at central Tokyo. I did go, in order to learn more about Yana’s practices and her inner world. The café seemed popular, and I was able to enter only after waiting for an hour. The fortune-telling session lasted for 10 minutes. All the visitors had a “prophet” attending to them. My prophet, a woman in her fifties with permed brownish hair and dressed in bright clothes, reminded me to use my mobile phone’s recorder to take the prophecy home with me and listen to it again. Her monologue focused on the present-day situation; thus, it revolved more around what she sensed about me at that very moment, rather than a prediction of the future. Her manner of speaking (including the words “God says”)<sup>13</sup> reminded me of Yana, except that Yana had spoken in Russian. Although I was unable to stay in touch with Yana due to a series of mutual relocations, I know that she was finally able to settle in Japan.

## 2. Feng shui (furniture and décor)

Valentina’s fascination with feng shui, or Chinese geomancy, developed following her sudden relocation, caused by a series of unfortunate events, from Tokyo to a city in southernmost Japan. These events had also worsened her financial situation and, then a graduate student, she was forced to work in a banquet hall as a waitress, although she had earlier hoped to be able to primarily focus on her

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13. In a 2017 article, “Coffee and Prophecy: The Curious Tokyo Café Serving Messages from God,” published after I had initially visited the location, journalist Michael Lanigan, having spoken to the venue’s owner, suggests that the ultimate aim of this endeavor may be to increase the number of if not converts then at least those who can find spiritual connections to Christianity. In this regard, Yana’s practices may also be understood as an unorganized form of missionizing, although in her narratives, it was the primacy of God’s message in her own life that she focused on most.

studies. Tiring though the work was, the venue turned out to be a place where Valentina befriended other Russian women, who played a significant role in her emotional healing following the aforementioned crisis. One such friend introduced her to feng shui, and Valentina recalls, “In the midst of chaos, feng shui was my attempt to take control of the uncontrollable.” She rearranged her furniture and placed various feng shui–inspired objects, purchased in Japan or received from the new Russian friend, in the apartment she had moved into in that southern city. She also read Russian books on feng shui, mostly borrowed from the Russian friend, and some Japanese ones, which she bought in Japan. Interestingly, another change was happening to Valentina simultaneously with her preoccupation with Chinese geomancy. She described herself at that time as being “still very religious [Orthodox Christianity], but starting to reassess [her] faith in the light of life events.” This process is illustrated by how her icons, which had initially occupied the upper walls, specifically the “red corner” of her Tokyo home, were being repositioned to places (such as lower shelves or even a closet) not strictly meant for icons, in Valentina’s new dwelling in the south. She said that, ultimately, she had stepped away from Christianity; when I last visited her home, the icons were placed under the hanging clothes in her wardrobe, a decision that also had to do with her new Japanese husband and his family’s lack of acceptance of the material manifestations of Christian beliefs at home.<sup>14</sup> She continued, however, to practice feng shui, having changed up to five apartments since developing the interest. As Valentina was giving me a tour of her (and her husband’s) home during the interview, she took the time to explain the positioning and colors of the feng shui–organized furniture and items—wooden ducks on a shelf at the head of her marital bed, a laughing Buddha above her dining table, and small potted plants.



Figure 2.  
Feng shui inspired figurines and shapes in Valentina’s apartment

14. See Daniels (2010a: 167) for how important it is “to situate people and things in space” in research on materiality.

### 2.1 *Yoga and aromatherapy (essential oils)*

The two cases of interest in aromatherapy that I encountered in the course of this research stand out because they incorporate a business-oriented element. Not only were the two women I interviewed fond of aromatherapy per se, but they sold or otherwise promoted the items and related services (such as aroma massage) and thus generated small earnings for themselves. Moreover, it appears that aromatherapy may be somewhat of a trend among the Russian-speaking women in Japan. Karina's case developed as follows. When she moved to Japan (together with her preschool-aged son) to marry her future Japanese husband, she started looking for ways to occupy herself. As her husband, older than Karina, was considerably well-off, she had time to look for something not purely out of necessity but in line with her interests. Thus, she found herself learning yoga, flower arrangement, aromatherapy, and astrology, each of which then became part of her occupation. Although she was unable to find a job as a yoga or aromatherapy instructor with a Japanese employer, she started organizing yoga classes for the Russian-speaking community and further developed various courses, both offline and online, where she taught how to choose and apply aroma oils. Some of these courses combined her knowledge of aroma oils and astrology. She further pursued the latter by attending a paid online course conducted by a Russian instructor. Karina was excited about her work: yoga and aroma oils were part of her everyday routine. As we walked toward her home for an interview, I caught an unusual smell emanating from her long hair. She said she mixed oils according to the desired purpose, such as to be calm or energetic on a particular occasion, and rubbed them into her hair and body. She was cheerful and positive, and honest about her wishes and limitations (such as her lack of knowledge of the Japanese language), saying that yoga and aromatherapy made it possible for her to achieve spiritual tranquility and clarity. The room where I interviewed her, also used for yoga instruction, was a small tatami room with a window opening onto a bed of blossoming flowers and with an aquarium of goldfish. Karina also showed me sets of aroma oils and accompanying products that she purchases online and which occupy considerable space in her home.

### 3. *Yakuza and witchcraft (photographs and body hair)*

Irina originally came to Japan to work as an entertainer but soon quit that occupation. A single mother (of a child with a Russian man whom she had divorced), she was determined to stay in Japan. Through acquaintances, she engaged in a variety of sales projects, working at some point in the used automobile business. These engagements helped her economically but were not sufficient to secure a

visa to remain in Japan. Although she was in a civil union and cohabited with a Japanese man, she was not sure she loved him enough to marry him. Ultimately, with the help of friends and her Japanese partner, she succeeded in applying for and securing an investor's visa. Her son still lived mostly in Russia, waiting for his mother's visa status to be confirmed. About that time Irina fell in love, the object of her affection being a former client, a "brutal tattooed man" from mafia circles. She lovingly called him "Yakuznya," combining the Japanese word *yakuza* (mafia) with a Russian diminutive-hypocoristic suffix commonly added to names (-*ya*, such as in *Kuzya*). The romance continued for a while; however, Irina soon came to know that Yakuznya was seeing someone else. She suspected that it was another Russian woman he had met at a hostess club. She said that his love for that other woman was taking irrational forms and, taken aback by the suddenness of his betrayal, Irina concluded that the woman *privorotila* (cursed—that is, made his love for her irrationally strong) Yakuznya. This conclusion was corroborated by the fact that Yakuznya's and Irina's own health began to deteriorate. She quickly consulted a friend in Russia who was "knowledgeable in such matters" and was told to bring with her, during her upcoming visit to Russia, photographs of Yakuznya and his new lover as well as some of Yakuznya's body hair. Thus, Irina embarked on a quest of obtaining the required objects (for photographs, she used those in her own and her partner's phones) and took them to Russia. There, the friend introduced her to a *babka* (whisperer), who performed a ritual.<sup>15</sup> Upon Irina's return to Japan, she found Yakuznya "healed" of his unhealthy passion;<sup>16</sup> however, their relationship did not continue either "as it was becoming toxic." Since then, Irina has separated not only from Yakuznya but also from her civic partner, has brought her son to Japan, and has been further developing her business.

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15. Irina's case is unique because of how she concluded that in a love triangle that involved two Russian women and a Japanese man, it could only be Russian magic that could be applicable, and "transported"—through objects—her situation to Russia, where she had it dealt with.

16. By highlighting that in the worldview of his informants, "white people" (as belonging to a different socioreligious system) are not usually at risk of being harmed by local spirits, Malinowski hinted at the importance of one's spiritual embeddedness in a certain context (1916: 357) for rituals to be "effective." In this regard, Irina's choice of Russian magic to "treat" a Japanese man "love-cursed" by a Russian woman is of interest. See also Saraiva (2008: 259) for a corresponding example.

*Part 2: Discussion*

One of the peculiar features of these findings is that a majority of the cases are idiosyncratic. Although some of the Russians in Japan are believed (based on the information circulated in the online community) to be dedicated followers of Orthodox Christianity and attend church regularly, there have been only a limited number of such believers among the vast number of people I have interviewed over the course of nearly 10 years, since I first started investigating the life of Russians in Japan.<sup>17</sup> Valentina's case, although partially concerned with Orthodox Christianity, is one about reassessment of Christian values and stepping away from Christianity. The idiosyncrasy seen in each of the cases is interesting: it reveals that unlike some other migrant communities in the world (see Mazumdar and Mazumdar [2008] for a discussion on the Hindu practices of migrants from India to the USA), modern-day Russians in Japan may not have common religious-spiritual "habits and felt-life of old practices" (Morgan 2010a: 4) of an intensity that could prompt them to reproduce and sustain Orthodox practices in the host country, in the absence of readily available expressions of Christian materiality. Nevertheless, the idiosyncrasy of each of the cases allows us to conceptualize them in terms of what these women were attempting to effectuate—that is, a sense of control, tranquility, mindfulness, self-fulfillment, and freedom from unwanted alliances, states and qualities that are currently trending and considered the desirable traits of an individual in the contemporary world (Altglas 2014; Borup and Fibiger 2017). Furthermore, a uniting feature of the cases is that many women developed the need for an individual spiritual solution in Japan in times of crises. For three of them, moving to Japan was at least partially associated with the need to provide for their children, of whom each of these women was the only guardian. Crises of varying intensities emerged in nearly every narrative that had to do with spiritual solutions being independently sought by these women. The nature of the women's engagement with each of the spiritual systems and the accompanying objects is agentic. Despite being determined by the women's daily encounters with people and objects and by the women's individual sociocultural histories, their solutions emerge as much more proactive than the often spontaneous relationship formed by respondents with Japanese objects, described in the first part of the Results section. Importantly, the migrants in this research chose systems that were easily

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17. It is, however, important to mention that in the online survey ( $n = 112$ ), 43% did respond affirmatively to the question regarding "the presence of items (for example, icons) connected to the religious beliefs of the survey respondent," suggesting that many may nevertheless possess icons and other religious objects connected to Orthodox Christianity, regardless of whether the respondents themselves can be classified as practicing adherents.

“consumable” and open to interpretation because of their status as spiritual practices rather than religions and the availability of resources in Russian, English, and easy-to-understand Japanese (such as the books by Kazuki Hosoki).

What are the objects that featured in these women’s accounts? Ranging from books, mobile phone recorders, furniture, décor items, and essential oils to personal photographs and body hair, they were purchased at bookstores and convenience stores, mobile phone shops, furniture and domestic interior stores, souvenir shops, and from online merchants; printed out from mobile phones; or obtained literally from the body of their unsuspecting owner. Seemingly disparate, for each of their holders, these objects are imbued with the quality of being loci and mediums of spiritual energy, either while being utilized or indefinitely. This spiritual energy, as mentioned above, helps make people feel in control of their situation (fortune-telling, prophesying, and feng shui) and achieve tranquility (yoga and aromatherapy). Ultimately, Irina’s endeavor involving Russian magic also led her to severing unwanted connections, acquiring peace of mind, and realizing her goal of settling in Japan. Finally, although the monetary gains are minimal, these practices are at times organized as part of an economic enterprise where the women (as in Karina’s case) attempt to spiritualize, through yoga and aromatherapy, the larger migrant community.

### *Conclusion*

In this paper on religious-spiritual materiality and migration in Japan, I have relied on extensive ethnographic data in an attempt to reveal how objects of the religious-spiritual spectrum, directly associated with Japanese religions or otherwise available for use and consumption in Japan, are obtained, handled, and infused with meaning by Russian women. It has been established that the Japanese religious objects in migrant (or multicultural) homes undergo a process of “semimorphosis” (Rambelli 2017) as they are regarded based on varying semiotic frameworks by those who interact with them. Many migrants have developed a sensory relationship with the objects. Often, the migrants’ participation in the practices pertaining to such objects is informed by their own habitual dispositions of handling similar items in the home country. Although transforming during the course of a person’s life as a migrant, these relationships with the essentially Japanese religious-spiritual objects do not usually translate into religious beliefs or spiritual solutions beyond the routine practice of acknowledging such objects and spontaneously forming an association with them. Contrarily, when it comes to overcoming various difficulties associated with the sociocultural and economic circumstances of being a migrant, Russian women engage with the materiality of the objects, seemingly much less religiously pronounced, and imbue them with lasting spiritual meaning, which, although idiosyncratic, fits within the trending global context of secularized spirituality.

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