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Caroline Hirasawa and Benedetta Lomi

Editors' Introduction

Modest Materialities

The Social Lives and Afterlives of Sacred Things in Japan

A grain of rice is venerated as a Buddha relic during rainmaking rites. An ox gallstone, made into ointment, is given by a Buddhist monk to a midwife who spreads it on the genitals of a birthing empress. A used toy flute made of bamboo is dedicated to the deities of Miho Shrine in order to protect its former user. This special issue examines the relationship between materiality and the sacred by focusing on unassuming, familiar, unformed, or affordable objects—such as scraps of wood, grains of rice, and pieces of paper—that were invested with powerful meanings or cumulative effects. The articles assembled here explore the introduction and circulation of such objects through Japanese religious practice and imagination.

Research on religious themes constantly refers to objects and materials. Iconography, implements, and ephemera play important parts in ritual and preaching, and objects serve as markers of faith and as protectors of the faithful. Birgit Meyer's clarification is helpful here:

> Materializing the study of religion means asking how religion happens materially, which is not to be confused with asking the much less helpful question of how religion is expressed in material forms. A materialized study of religion begins with the assumption that things, their use, their valuation, and their appeal are not something added to the religion, but rather inextricable from it. (Meyer et al. 2010, 209)

Caroline Hirasawa is Associate Professor of Japanese Art History at Waseda University, and Benedetta Lomi is Lecturer in East Asian Religions at the University of Bristol.

Religious objects therefore demand nuanced consideration. Examples in Japanese religion include texts that are valued as objects or that are not 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. Furthermore, the availability or ubiquity of certain objects allows large numbers of people to interact with and interpret them. For us, then, modest materialities are objects that are part and parcel of Japanese religion and that, for their very relational nature, defy categorical boundaries and, at the same time, accidentally or deliberately inhabit a multiplicity of spheres.

Contributors to this issue draw on the methodologies of art history, religious studies, anthropology, literature, and musicology. We follow in the footsteps of scholars who have developed creative and productive cross-disciplinary methodologies for studying Japan, such as the historian Kuroda Hideo, who regards paintings as historical documents, or the literature scholar Tokuda Kazuo, who studies narrative imagery. In writing about reaching across boundaries to resuscitate the field of anthropology, Tim Ingold described "a discipline waiting to be defined and named" in shared methodologies of observation, description, and proposition at the intersection of the fields of art, architecture, and anthropology (Ingold 2011, xi). Each author of this issue longs for stimulating and unexpected encounters across disciplines that will lead to new theoretical approaches. Integral to every argument is an insistence on the physical properties and trajectories of materials.

Building on existing approaches to religion, the articles reflect on the ritual, social, symbolic, economic, and transactional activities set into motion by and with objects. Although sacred visual representations and objects are no longer seen solely as aids to devotional practice, the concept that their potency derives primarily from human action is still widespread. Specifically, items such as talismans, statues, and mandalas are often said to work thanks to ritual manipulation. According to a well-known paradigm, acts of empowerment and blessing performed by monks or other ritual specialists are necessary to activate otherwise inert things, turning them into sacred, functioning objects (Tambiah 1984, 234–57). Research on the role of insentients in Japanese esoteric Buddhism offers a different perspective. As Fabio Rambelli has shown, scholar-monks within the Shingon and Tendai esoteric traditions envisioned material objects and nonhumans as already endowed with Buddha-nature, and thus allowed salvation to "derive from interaction with apparently inanimate objects" (Rambelli 2007, 18). Seen in this light, making any claim over the ontology of the materials under scrutiny becomes dependent on an understanding of ritual specialists and their clients, and also on the different spaces and contexts in which they participated.

The efficacy of talismans, mandalas, plants, and animals, however, are not merely the result of closed ritual contexts within particular sectarian or doctrinal

traditions. A variety of often conflicting attitudes toward the role and nature of objects coexist within and extend beyond these ritual spaces. We revisit the sacralization of objects, closely examining how their circulation and use defined and redefined them, in order to create space for additional dynamics to surface. As objects move from marginal environments into sacred contexts, they participate in networks of objects, humans, and deities. This creates social lives and afterlives for the objects, in which their status may shift between ordinary and sacred domains, while retaining past associations. This is worth stressing because notions of the "everyday" and the "sacred" are often considered to be mutually exclusive. If sacred or religious objects are seen as always removed from the quotidian, then, for common stuff to become sacred, it must have gone through a process or an act of separation from its regular uses and contexts. Conversely, returning a sacred object to something ordinary must, in this view, call for another rite of passage. What interests us is not only the religious observances that mark the movement of objects between different states, but the casual or negligent circumstances that ignore these distinctions or repurpose such objects (Agamben 2007, 75). The afterlives of sacred objects are especially useful in understanding how the lines between the sacred and the ordinary can be blurred or redrawn.

In this regard, the word "materiality" is not here used as a synonym for "material," but is rather a means to tease out different relations between an object, its surroundings, and one or more subjects, including human subjects. Our approach to the relational or cumulative agency of mineral, plant, or animal entities is informed by the work of anthropologists such as Daniel Miller, Arjun Appadurai, and Peter Pels. Borrowing Christopher Tilley's thoughts on stone, it is a way "to consider and embrace subject-object relations going beyond the brute materiality of stones and considering why certain kinds of stone and their properties become important to people" (Tilley 2007, 17). The concept of "materiality" enables us to see past the material in ways that we could consider both vertical—that is, interested in meaning and significance—and horizontal, concerned with other similar entities in an environment. At the same time, we call attention to the self-organization and vibrancy of objects that is not derived from human determinations or otherwise culturally bound (Bennett 2010, 2–8).

The proof of our approach is in the details of each case study. Benedetta Lomi explores how the extraction, circulation, and conceptualization of ox bezoars (*goō* 牛黄), a highly-valued concretion found in the stomachs of bovines, informed their ritual and therapeutic use. Bezoars were renowned for their healing properties and were employed by Daigoji ritualists as part of safe childbirth practices. Although ritually empowered (*kaji* 加持) before their topical application, she argues that their efficacy cannot fully be appreciated without tackling the broader network of meanings in which bezoars were embedded. Moving away

from strictly ritual contexts, Lomi draws attention to the characteristics that made bezoars uniquely appealing: their instability, rarity, and polysemic nature. Their production depended on a concretion forming in the biliary duct of an ox, a process that could not easily be predicted or controlled. Furthermore, their retrieval required that outcasts scavenge animal carcasses to free the stones from layers of dead matter. This dangerously polluting enterprise was often met by a sense of awe, as described in Heian-period literature; the bright color of the stone made it akin to a precious stone. Indeed, once extracted, bezoars became part of a flux of precious objects and substances that were safeguarded, donated, or exchanged as part of tributary offerings. Turning to the ways in which later Buddhist scholarship reflected on the meaning and efficacy of bezoars, Lomi shows that the material, symbolic, economic, and social dimensions of this substance were linked together by the sound of its name—*goō*—which elicited images of royal power, wish-fulfilling jewels, and human essence. The efficacy of bezoars emerged from relational exchanges that included but were not limited to ritual interactions.

The journeys of this material illustrate how the agency of sacred objects can be stimulated. Steven Trenson uses the interlocking and inter-reflecting metaphor of Indra's Net to explain a different network of associations.

> In this metaphor [of Indra's Net], 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. Similarly, an object may be seen as a jeweled node set within a net of interrelated factors, not only reflecting the characteristics of these factors, due to which its inherent aspect is altered, but also projecting its own (material, conceptual) properties onto them, affecting their nature as well.

Trenson deploys this understanding of agency to frame an inquiry into the medieval social and conceptual networks behind the use of rice grains as substitutes for the Buddha's relics. After providing an overview of esoteric Buddhist rituals in which rice served as the primary icon, he examines the doctrinal supports for this substitution. Much like ox bezoars, the underpinnings are semantic, material, and symbolic. Trenson discusses how, in Sino-Japanese Buddhist thought, relics and rice grains were believed to share a common etymology and a similar shape. This facilitated the participation of rice grains in the larger network of relic beliefs and practices. Eventually, this led to the recognition of rice grains as the missing link to fully understanding the relation between relics and Buddhist conceptualizations of human procreation.

In these two articles, the efficacy of substances employed in key esoteric Buddhist rites results from more than just acts of empowerment. Rare and common objects (bezoars and rice grains) are positioned in an "Indra's net" of associations at the juncture of different spheres—natural, social, economic, ritual, and

doctrinal. Their power derives as much from participation in ordinary discourse and practice as from separation from mundane environments. And their unique properties help to determine their agency. The formation and production of bezoars cannot be controlled by humans. Rice grains can be planted and harvested, but their generative, life-giving potential is also independent from human intervention. Peter Pels uses the term "fetish" to indicate things that, like bezoars and rice grains, operate at "a crossing of categorical boundaries, a border zone where one cannot expect the stability of meaning that is routine in everyday life" (Pels 1998, 112). He argues that a lack of easy categorization characterizes the agency of material things. He calls it the spirit "of" rather than the spirit "in" matter. Pels sees the fetish as an object that affects the course of affairs, by virtue of its mere (material) presence (Pels 1998, 112). In our Japanese examples, instead of being activated entirely by external forces, when meaning derives from a network of transactions, the power of these items also originates with their matter.

A similar categorical complexity is discussed by David Quinter and Caroline Hirasawa. Although both authors deal, at a basic level, with texts, their respective analyses foreground the polyvalent and performative nature of materials in interactions among different individuals and entities.

David Quinter examines the Mantra of Light (*kōmyō shingon* 光明真言) assemblies promoted by Eison and his order that have been held at the Nara temple Saidaiji since medieval times. Instead of focusing on one of the assemblies' most obvious material aspects—the sand empowered by the mantra—Quinter shifts attention to the rosters that list the names of those who supported these gatherings through donations of goods, labor, and other beneficial deeds. These documents shed light on the network of contributors, while also revealing how these networks are celebrated and reaffirmed during the assemblies. Quinter suggests that rosters of donors were commonly used for a variety of purposes, including fundraising, but also served an important ritual function through their recitation and handling during the gatherings. Quinter's analysis of medieval records in conjunction with direct observation of recent assemblies held at Saidaiji reveals the arrangement of the registers on a special altar while a monk quietly but rapidly reads names, an act repeated throughout the days of the assembly. This constant vocalization of the names of past and present donors aurally materializes their presence and establishes a community of living participants, absent supporters, and long-gone patrons. At the same time, the reading at times overlaps both with the opening eulogy and the recitation of the Mantra of Light. Quinter argues that these joint recitations result in mutual empowerment. On the one hand, the eulogies and mantras cleanse and offer blessings to those whose names are inscribed in the registers. On the other, the registers and

recited names become support for spreading the mantra beyond the halls of the temple, beyond the spatial and chronological bounds of the assembly.

Quinter's contribution reminds us that rosters are important empowering devices not because they instantiate the transcendental power of a deity or a group of deities. They are powerful because they are a tangible, audible marker of an otherwise intangible web of relationships. The ritual employment of rosters foregrounds the importance that reaffirming these relationships had for the Shingon Ritsu order's identity and followers. More importantly, it shows that the very heart of the assemblies, the recitation of the Mantra of Light, was deeply indebted to a wide-ranging network of actors.

Caroline Hirasawa follows a different paper trail. Narratives in the fourteenth-century didactic paintings *Shidoji engi e* 志度寺縁起絵 and *Yūzū nenbutsu engi* 融通念仏縁起 present supernatural entities as actively involved in Buddhist devotional projects. The rosters and oaths that appear in and are used in conjunction with these paintings initiate or propel exchanges among the mundane, heavenly, and hellish realms. The paintings, intended as transparent windows onto otherwise invisible corners of the cosmos, illustrate the afterlife results of sacred vows, acts, and constructions in this world, thereby conveying to audiences the rewards of participation in a promotional or fundraising campaign. Supporters are assured that even humble donations will materialize as magnified and everlasting afterlife benefits. Documents in these images and legends are a medium for transcending worlds. This transcendence emphasizes the beneficial effects and punishing consequences of writing in a way that empowers campaign documents to assist in realizing expensive constructions.

The sacred objects that Hirasawa examines (paintings, documents, and temples) are more than passive receivers of worship or supports for the divine. The images give form to the active participation of these objects in networks that extend into other realms. As another contributor to this issue remarks, these are things to believe with.

The last two articles in this volume push the argument further. Ouchi Fumi explores the musical objects dedicated to Miho Shrine in Shimane Prefecture. A custom of offering expensive musical instruments and refined miniatures developed from the late Edo period due to the association of two important shrine deities with legends about Empress Jingu's pregnancy and the deity Ebisu's fondness for music. Later, musical toys came to be offered as well. In the circulation and ritual power of these toys, Ouchi identifies a dynamic network of deities, shrine attendants, souvenir sellers, local performers, and visitors to the shrine. She argues that offering affordable, used musical toys and reproductions of instruments marks a shift in religious practices at the shrine. The toy replicas function like human-shaped paper dolls (*hitogata* 人形) to which sins and defilements can be transferred according to a logic of substitution (*migawari* 身代わり). The

toys are often inscribed with the age and gender of the donors, and more importantly, these objects directly touched the bodies of children. Used toy flutes and whistles, for example, have been blown through to produce sound, allowing for the establishment of a unique, personal bond between their owners and the deities. This, Ouchi posits, makes these objects into an affordable way of accessing divine power.

In this context, sacred objects are animated by human interactions, but the manipulations are not necessarily targeted or intentional. It is through extended, casual contact that simple toys come to retain something of their owners, blurring the boundaries between the human actors and the objects they used.

Fabio Gygi's contribution to this issue considers the extrication of mundane objects from social networks. His fieldwork explores the role of contemporary religious institutions in disposing of dolls, stuffed animals, amulets, and other ephemera—objects which have inadvertently taken on sacred properties in ambivalent mutual attachments with their owners. Counter-intuitively, amulets forgotten in a drawer or hung above the stove for years accrue agency through their passivity or lack of utilization. As with Ouchi's musical toys, this relationship is best understood in terms of substitution, but the process is inverted. These objects are body substitutes from which, in disposal, their owners are exorcised without risking exposure to uncanny dangers. Moreover, Gygi argues that impurities can be removed without having to believe in them; the material presence of these objects renders corresponding cognitive belief superfluous. Their agency lies in their ability to believe on behalf of their owners. The objects are not exact replicas of their owners, but through passive proximity they become substitutes for some of their owners' experiences. What animates these objects is something other than their owners since they are shaped by those things that the owners did not do or that did not happen to them. Their power derives precisely from this alterity.

In this light, the relationship between objects and their human owners takes on entirely different meanings. Instead of making a transcendental and immaterial force available to believers, the object creates a gap, keeping the human and the divine at a safe distance from each other. The agency of the sacred object is still one of negotiation, but one aimed at facilitating a compartmentalization of the two realms rather than their union or exchange.

The toys and dolls discussed in these last two papers clearly function as *migawari*, but perhaps we can see the other substances and objects dealt with in this issue as operating similarly. The power of objects is inextricably linked to their apparent staticity, which, as Gygi notes, "keeps something in place." At the same time, the very perception of passivity allows modest materialities to move easily between mundane and sacred realms. This dual potential for mobility and place-holding is what makes these objects so adaptable throughout their lives

and afterlives. Ox bezoars may be empowered, exchanged, and interpreted, but the parallel between the expulsion of bezoar and childbirth is clear: it is a substitute for the unborn child, painfully pushed out of the ox's body to ensure a safe and painless human delivery. Rice grains double for the perfected body of the Buddha through an embryonal metaphor; the seed of life, the seed of awakening, and the actual seed are perceived as participating in the same essence. While these associations depend on human imagination, it is the material presence and properties of rice grains that lend them to a particular collection of associations.

Rosters substitute for a multitude of individuals and deities. The physical presence of these documents, which have outlasted the donors and patrons whose names are inscribed, allows each person to continue participating in the life of the religious community by attending liturgies and by receiving and granting blessings. Rosters of sacred commitments, created in this world or the other, are placeholders for their fulfillment as well as for the rewards vow-makers can expect for their pious deeds. Vows and virtuous projects are simultaneously replicated in documents and constructions across worlds. In all of these examples, the object does something on behalf of the human and can be said to act independently for them.

Finally, toy instruments and dolls remind us that the agency of objects can accumulate incidentally. Humble toys and dolls left at a temple for disposal or collecting dust in the corner of a house are livelier than one might suppose. Grounding the efficacy of religious objects in processes of ritual empowerment may give us the impression that we can control their power, but articles in this issue also illuminate objects that come unintentionally to acquire complex, unruly, or uncanny powers. By thinking of objects not only as receptacles or tools, but as nonhuman actors, we hope to stimulate new scholarly reflections on the vibrant materiality of Japanese religions.

* Many of the articles in this issue began with a workshop organized by Caroline Hirasawa and Lucia Dolce entitled "From the Ephemeral to the Eternal: Modest Materialities of the Sacred in Japan," sponsored and funded by the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures and the Center for the Study of Japanese Religions at SOAS (2015). The issue was also enriched by a series of lectures and a workshop sponsored by the Sacred Materialities Project at the Institute of Comparative Culture (Sophia University, 2011, 2016–2018), and panels held at the Association for Asian Studies conference (Seattle, 2016) and the European Association for Japanese Studies (Lisbon, 2017).

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