

## **THINGS THAT BELIEVE AND HOW TO GET RID OF THEM: Towards a Material Ecology of the Numinous in Japan**

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### **Introduction: Object(s) of Belief**

What is the relationship between religious objects and beliefs, between the materiality of things and the immaterial idea? There are, broadly speaking, two ways of approaching this question in the anthropology of religion. Either religious objects are understood as expressions of cognitively held beliefs – or, conversely, belief emerges as the result of practices involving religious objects.

For the former to work, several conceptual accommodations are required. For example: to treat religious objects as mere ‘expressions’ of belief is part of the Protestant strategy to decontaminate matter from its more ‘contagious’ Catholic forms, in which the sacred can appear in the material shape of relics. Objects *of* belief are therefore based on a belief *in* objects. Webb Keane calls this “semiotic ideology,” a system of assumptions that define what counts as real presence and what counts as sign (2005). These semiotic ideologies are there to create stable links between the signifier and the signified, between the material and the numinous world. In spite of this, such settlements are rarely stable: things always exceed their own signification (Nakamura 2008).

The second approach, concerned with the material and bodily practices of believers rather than with cognitive content, has been particularly fruitful in the study of Japanese religions, where the notion of belief has long been a thorny issue, especially in post-war anthropology (Isomae 2012; Fitzgerald 2003). This shift in focus allows the circumvention of ‘belief’ as core concept in the analysis of indigenous practice, addressing instead “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). Such a refocusing not only brings matter back into the fold, it also re-centres the study of religion on practice:

Rematerializing the study of religion from its long-term commitment to scripture and theology means returning texts to their con-texts of objects, images, and spaces wherein texts are found and used. There we also find, animating this whole magnificent panoply of things, the actual people who produce objects and then render them dynamic in practice. (Zito 2011: 20)

Religious objects, then, become things *to* believe *with*, material entities through which belief is created and performed – as opposed to the more Protestant view that ritual enacts beliefs that are already cognitively held (Bachnik 1995).

But what happens to such objects when they are not used, enacted, or part of a performance? If the tenets of practice theory are strictly applied, would they then not cease to be religious objects? This paper explores what happens to ‘religious’ objects when they are simply left to their own devices in Japanese households.<sup>1</sup> I am following the trail of Fabio Rambelli who cogently argues that ‘being a Buddhist’ in Japan means foremost that one handles Buddhist objects (2007: 2). My contention is that, rather than describing these household items as objects *of* belief, or evidence of belief *in* objects, or objects *to* believe with, we can more accurately understand them as objects *that* believe. By this I do not mean that they are animated entities with agency and subjectivity, but that they allow for an externalization of cognitive belief altogether.

Methodologically, my argument is based on the attempt to reverse engineer a theory of ‘religious’ materiality, not from doctrinal notions and disputes, but from the vantage point of disposal. What notion of materiality emerges from such a shift in perspective? What is stuck in matter, that makes it so difficult to dispose of? And why do concerns with orthopraxy return as soon as it comes to getting rid of things? Disposal in this context is like an ethno-methodological experiment: what the thing was or meant (or what it is) is only revealed in a moment of crisis, when the existence of the thing is threatened. The method I am proposing here is therefore a kind of ‘negative ethnography,’ in two distinct senses: first, because it is based on removing the things that one wants to understand and therefore eliminating the phenomenon under inquiry and, second, because it is based on that which is not voiced or articulated.

The fieldwork data stems from a larger project dealing with hoarding in a Japanese context, from an intensive eighteen months period of fieldwork in Tokyo (2006/2007) and more intermittent bursts of fieldwork from 2010 to 2013, when I was working in the Kansai area. The first period consisted mainly of helping people to tidy up and get rid of accumulated stuff (see Gygi 2011); the second, while continuing with collaborative clean-ups, was more focussed on understanding the pathways to disposal (Gygi 2018). There was no particular focus on religious paraphernalia, so the data presented here is a side effect of understanding the processes of disposal, a ‘waste product’ so to speak. My interest in memorial rites for things was triggered by the desire of my informants to find a mechanism for what Ikeuchi calls “voluntary loss” (*jihatsuteki sōshitsu* 自発的喪失, 2010: 169).

A focus on the process of disposal, during which an object is moved into the category of ‘no longer useful’, is particularly interesting in the context of ‘sacred’ objects, because of the widespread assumption that sacred objects become inalienable and therefore “terminal commodities” (Kopytoff 1986: 75), that is, objects that can no longer be exchanged further. Memorial rites for objects during which the objects were destroyed were one way to protect the terminal commodity status. However, in my own fieldwork this was not always the case: much of the emotional ambiguity my informants felt was informed by the possibility of alienating inalienable things. This mostly applied to objects that were created to be enduring presences in people’s lives, such as dolls. The other category of ephemeral sacred objects such as talismans and amulets (see below) was expected to circulate between the temporary owner and the institution that issued them – a shrine or a temple – on a yearly basis, therefore creating an enduring exchange relationship. As material traces of the power of the entity the talismans participate in, they have to be renewed and redistributed, leading to spiritual prosperity on the side of the supplicant and economic prosperity on the side of the institution. At least

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the editors of this special volume, Caroline Hirasawa and Loma Benedetta Lomi, who have kindly invited me to participate in this project, as an anthropological sheep among religious wolves, so to speak.

this is what a description of the ‘religious’ system would look like from the perspective of exchange theory.

The concerns of my informants, however, did not map neatly on to these processes of exchange, nor did they match with ideas of the talisman as distributed sacred power. What struck me during my fieldwork was the difference between the forgotten, ‘unperformed’ object whose presence is not imbued with any significance and the same object that on the brink of disposal suddenly becomes ‘sticky’<sup>2</sup>. My argument is that this only seems contradictory if we assume objects to be expressions of beliefs that are otherwise held cognitively. To conceptualise these objects as ‘embodiments of sacred power’ is to map both the spiritual and material connection between the objects and the numinous entity they represent, from the entity’s point of view. The objects therefore appear as the literal ‘body’ (*bunshin*, 分身) of the *kami* 神 or *hotoke* 仏. By contrast, my hypothesis is that we can gain a better understanding of these objects and their place in people’s everyday lives if we think of them less as embodiments of sacred power, but rather as *bunshin* that believe in place of the person who owns them. By conceptualising these objects as body substitutes for the believer rather than the believed-in, we can thereby think through the semiotic believer-divinity link from the position of the person, rather than the divine.

Recent academic work on semiotics in Buddhism has mostly focused on the material and semiotic links between the unconditioned Buddha nature and its representation (Rambelli 2013). Ironically, this focus on doctrine and concept has left the relationship between these sign-objects and their owners to the more literal-minded sociologists of religion; much of the religious studies research on Japan is informed by the particular semiotic ideology of sociological research in which religious objects become readable as expressions of religious belief (Anderson 1991). But what if we posit a different relationship between external/material objects and internal/cognitive beliefs? In other words, what if, rather than a relationship of representation in which what is inside corresponds to what is outside and vice-versa, we assume that the underlying relationship is one of substitution? I am inspired to argue this by Takie Sugiyama’s insight into the cultural idiom of *migawari* 身代わり, which can be translated as either ‘body substitution’ or ‘body surrogacy’:

In interviewing a woman in her sixties I found her firmly dedicated to a Shinto sect<sup>3</sup> without being a member of it. It turned out that her action had nothing to do with her own faith but was a surrogate devotion for the sake of her deceased mother, who had been a devout member. She missed her mother deeply and became a religious successor without, however, losing her nonreligious identity. (1994: 109f)

In this case, the surrogacy is not just a question of social role, but can express another person’s faith or sincerity. The supplicant does not pray *for* others, but *instead* of them, a common practice at Shinto shrines. While the idiom of *migawari* allows for persons to be substituted by others, these others must not necessarily be human. ‘Body substitution’ with material surrogates is also an

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<sup>2</sup> I do not argue here that this is a better understanding of materiality in a Japanese context than an account based on doctrinal exegesis. Rather than to assume a culturally specific understanding of materiality, my argument is that from the vantage point of disposal, the materiality of religious objects appears as a particular formation.

<sup>3</sup> The reference here is to the Gedatsu-kai 解脱会, new religious movement founded in 1929 that incorporates Shinto and Shingon Buddhism elements.

important way to safely communicate with the divine. The body substitute enables the contact by being exposed to the presence of the deity, but the *honjin* (literally ‘original person’, meaning the person who is doubled by the *migawari*) remains protected from the forces thus unleashed (Law 2014). The doubling of the body that allowed impurities to be removed and contained is one of the enduring models for rites of purification which consist of a complex intermingling of Shinto, Daoist, and Buddhist beliefs (Yamagami 1970). In early modern Japan, *migawari* talismans emerged as a popular form of material culture that would protect the person by offering a double, to which negative forces could attach themselves (Bond 2014). I shall argue that in post-war Japan, building on traditional practices, questions of religious belief more broadly have been dealt with in an analogous manner. In other words, what if we don't assume that the sign instantiates a presence of that which is absent, but instead that it allows the distancing creation of absence of that which is otherwise too closely present?

If belief is usually understood as a vertical relationship between an immanent material object and a transcendental idea held as a cognitive disposition, then the approach taken here is more horizontal: the nature and the content of beliefs changes as a function of ‘distance’ from the religious center from which power emanates. The material objects serve as vehicles whose geographical distribution mark the reach of a religious institution. Following this idea, I will first look at how materiality is understood at Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines and then at the ways in which certain objects have been dealt with in ethnographic writing on Japan. After that I will present three ethnographic vignettes from my own fieldwork dealing with the more or less ephemeral sacred and how to get rid of it.

### **Materiality in Buddhism and Shinto: *Bunshin* versus *Migawari***

While a detailed understanding of Buddhist and Shinto notions of materiality is important to understand objects and their presence in a Japanese context, these are formulated from the point of view of religious institutions or even from the point of view of the entities that are enshrined themselves. Rambelli, for example, argues that the Buddhist ambivalence towards the material world is a result of the different answers that can be given to the question of the scope of the dharma (2001). In other words, to what degree does Buddha nature penetrate the cosmos? Does it extend only to sentient beings, or do non-sentient entities such as plants and rocks have the same potential for enlightenment? Rambelli describes the complex chains of transformations that shape Buddhist materiality:

The idea that material donations [...] to religious institutions and their members (the sangha) would generate spiritual benefits is crucial [to] Buddhist materiality because it means that material objects can be transfigured through ritual action into sacred entities [...]. This circular transformation of the material into the spiritual and the profane into the sacred and back forms the basis of the sacred Buddhist economy, in which a community of renunciants survived [...] thanks to laypeople's donations in exchange for ‘spiritual’ services. (2007: 68)

While objects and services are exchanged in a circle of transmutation, Buddhist icons exist at the boundary of the ontological registers of the conditioned/unconditioned Buddha-nature and therefore can be seen as real presences in the world (Faure 1998). They make the power of the sacred visible, tangible, and material and that is also what renders them vulnerable to iconoclasm in times of changing regimes of values (Reinders 2012).

In Shinto on the other hand, the kami (deities) were worshipped in shrines that served as temporary. They would have to be invited and hosted in *yorishiro* 依り代, particular objects that can be man-made (a mirror, or a folded piece of paper) or natural (a large tree, or a rock, or another scenic element of nature). It was only after Buddhist monasteries started changing the religious landscape in the sixth century CE that shrines become permanent structures to provide housing for the deities (who still require enticement to manifest). However, once settlement has been achieved mobility becomes a major concern for both Buddhism and Shinto. Once the distinction between ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’ spaces gains traction, the sacred needs to be mobile to extend its reach. This is evident in Shinto shrine festivals during which the deities are translated into portable shrines and are carried into the communities of worshippers to protect and bestow merit. Although some argue that Shinto does not have the independent doctrinal apparatus to make it into a ‘religion’ in the strict sense, different branches started to spread around Japan with the development of the road network and pilgrimages, an early form of tourism. Portable sacred objects that could be installed in shrine branches in other places in Japan necessitated a more technical understanding of their relationship to the original sacred entity and its embodiment (Sugahara 1996).

In her ethnography of Inari worship, Karen Smyers argues that the Inari cult spread across Japan because its main centers of worship allowed the spiritual essence of the Inari deity to be apportioned:

Inari has been divided and re-enshrined with far greater ease and frequency than other Shinto kami, and this may in part account for its great diversity. In this division the original kami remains in place in his shrine, but a portion of his spirit (*wakemitama*, *bunrei* 分霊) is ritually separated and enshrined in a new location. The technical term for this re-enshrinement is *kanjō* 勧請. Priests explain it as something akin to lighting a new candle from a burning one: the light of the first is in no way diminished as it becomes two. (Smyers 1996: 89)

The *wakemitama* 分け御魂 is a portion of the deity itself and therefore considered to be alive in its new abode. This suggests a fractal relationship to the original kami in which the part contains the whole, as opposed to being a piece of a greater whole.<sup>4</sup>

A similar relationship between a numinous entity and its material trace obtains in the term *bunshin* 分身, literally ‘divided body’. Reader translates it as ‘offshoot’ (1991: 177) of either *kami* or *hotoke*. Different from the relics in Catholicism that work in a *pars pro toto* logic, where the notion of sacred power is based on the finite body of the Saint and their personal objects, *bunshin* created from the deity do not diminish the power of the deity, but distribute it in material form. The power of the

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<sup>4</sup> Smyers points out that *kanjō* is originally a Buddhist term that meant ‘to request a sermon from Buddha with a sincere heart’ and later ‘to call Buddhas to descend to an altar’. In Japan’s syncretistic climate the term came to mean ‘to enshrine a kami or a Buddha for the first time’.

entity (whether Buddhist or Shinto does matter very little to the worshipper who seeks assistance) can be acquired through buying *o-fuda* お札 (amulets) or *o-mamori* お守り (talismans). These talismans are usually made from a piece of wood or paper inscribed with the name of the deity or a short invocation, put into a brocade pouch which again bears an inscription of the place of origin and the efficacy of the talisman (traffic safety, examination success, convalescence from illness are common themes). The inner contents of the talisman remain hidden and one is not supposed to open it, lest the efficacy is undermined:

The person who acquires them, then, does not receive a piece of wood or paper but a charged concretisation of power, the essence not simply of the *kami* or Buddha's power and compassion but of the entity itself. Thus they, the *kami* and Buddhas, may be carried with one or kept in the home or elsewhere to bring in good fortune, ward off spiritual impediments and absorb bad luck that otherwise would afflict the person concerned. Unlike statues, however, their power and efficacy are transient: having absorbed bad luck or having opened the way to good, they may need to be changed. The general custom (encouraged by shrines and temples, for whom the sale of amulets and the like can be an important element in their economies) is to change them yearly, with the major period of exchange being at New Year [...]. (Reader 1991b: 178)

In contrast to the material connection to a numinous entity that has to be renewed and replaced to remain efficacious, the notion of *bunshin* has also been used to refer to fractal relationships of a different kind.<sup>5</sup> In the theology of the new religion Yamakage-Shintō for example, human beings are understood to contain *bunrei* 分霊 of deities within their bodies (Yamakage 2010). Sugiyama, on the other hand, argues that the relationship between mother and child can also be understood as a *bunshin* relationship, in which the mother's sense of self and her purpose in life (*ikigai* 生き甲斐) is felt as 'being one' with her child:

We might look at the instances of divorce avoidance not only from the standpoint of the child's welfare but also from the view of the child as *bunshin* (split part) of the mother's body, in light of the mother's feeling of inseparability. (Sugiyama 1984: 163)

Tanaka Senichi uses the term *bunshin* to refer to the relationship between an artisan and their instruments: *dōgu* 道具 that have been used with affection for many years become one with the artisan's body (*hito to dōgu wa ittai ni natteiru* 人と道具は一体になっている). They are therefore treated differently from other objects of everyday use (Tanaka 1987: 8). In the case of both the mother and the artisan, what is described as *bunshin* is an extension of the 'original' body from the point of view of the subject.

There is a further category of smaller objects that complicate the picture even further, the

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<sup>5</sup> Nakamura and Hisao for example translate it somewhat idiosyncratically as 'alter-ego' in the context of fandom and identification with actors in the Takarazuka theatre (2003).

broad and somewhat vague *engimono* 縁起物.<sup>6</sup> *Engimono* are auspicious objects that are both decorative and symbolic, sometimes taking the form of miniatures, sometimes that of toys or zodiac animals (for an in-depth etymology of the term *engi* see Kyburz 1991). They are sometimes associated with temple and shrine fairs and double as talismans. Indeed, Kyburz seeks to explain them by reference to the karmic links they embody, when he translates the word as “material link” (1994: 8). Their auspicious nature has different sources: sometimes it is an association by homonym, as in the example of the frog *kaeru*, whose Japanese name is homonymous with ‘to return’ 帰る. Sometimes it is a metonymic link as is the case with the rake, the motion of which suggests scooping up positive benefits. They are usually made from widely available materials such as wood or papier-maché. The folklorist Komatsu Kazuhiko calls them “seeds of luck” (1998), a fortuitous coinage: the luck grows not because of human intervention, but as a result of the autonomous presence of the object.

### **Ethnographic Accounts of the Material Culture of Luck**

If we move away from religious centers, explanations in terms of belief weaken considerably. Working in the ethnographic mode, Tanabe and Reader provide an explanation in terms of psychological well-being, a feeling of safety (*anshin* 安心) and calm (*otonashii* 音なし) which is only indirectly linked to an actual belief in the efficacy of an entity that is distributed through the material object. Rather, the sense of security is created by psychological attributions in which a ‘traffic safety’ talisman appears as a sign of the driver’s conscientiousness and care for the customers, for example.

The description of explicit cognitive belief and metaphysical speculation has only played a minor role in the ethnography of everyday Japanese lives that gained traction in the post-war years. In his seminal “Life in a Tokyo Ward,” Ronald Dore has the following to say about the vagueness of religious notions in everyday life: “[C]hildren are taught to bow to the *kami-sama* as they are taught to bow to visitors, and they grow up with an idea of the *kami-sama* as important beings to whom deference must be shown without ever receiving explicit instruction concerning the nature, abode or function of the *kami*.” (Dore 1958: 307)

Contrary to the strict rules of decorum that obtain in the workplace and other formal settings, religious expression is an area in which considerable freedom is possible. John Nelson found in his ethnographic work at Suwa Jinja in Nagasaki (1996a) and at Kamigamo Jinja in Kyoto (1996b) a broad range of possible behaviors, from unorthodox personal forms of prayers to secret night-time devotions the groundkeepers complained about. Although many of those he interviewed after a shrine visit came away with amulets and talismans, the overwhelming majority were unable to identify the deity that they just visited.

From the perspective of medical anthropology, John Traphagan has described the house altar (*butsudan*), its associated religious paraphernalia, and the rituals that go with them as a “total life care system” (2004: 79), and he identifies “religiously oriented ritual practice [...] as a type of health and well-being management system” (2004: 178) that instead of being directed towards numinous entities

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<sup>6</sup> As votive plaques are not normally taken home from shrines, I exclude them from discussion here. See Robertson 2008 for a historical and Reader 1991a for an ethnographic account.

were a practice of concern for those (still) alive.

Following in this vein, Inge Daniels, working mostly with families in the Kansai area, has argued that *engimono* form part of the “domestic, spiritual defense system” (2010: 98). This functionalist perspective (and I do not use functionalist here as a dirty word) is useful to understand the kinds of relationship that this particular material culture of luck engenders. However, Daniels is not clear about whether this system is her interpretation or whether she attributes it as a form of belief to her informants. The *engimono* in her description do not appear as material traces of the sacred, but as objects whose meaning is contained in their shape and their name. After describing the notions of luck in some detail, she has this to say:

During my fieldwork, however, it emerged that individual attitudes towards *engimono* may vary greatly. For example, the two Miyada daughters, both unmarried and in their late 30s, express contrasting views about the disposal of the luck items displayed in their home. Naoko, the younger, said that because these objects are linked with temples and shrines they should be handled with great care. Kaori, on the other hand, claimed that she does not see any problem in disposing of them in the bin. One way to interpret her words is that the commodification of *engimono* has resulted in a kind of inflation effect, whereby the presence of too many *engimono* in the home might have devalued their power. (Daniels 2003: 630)

Daniel’s reference to commodification, however, does not explain why there should be two diametrically opposed attitudes to the same category of things in the same family. The idea of devaluation also directly contradicts her earlier work on the commodification of rice scoops and how this process extends the aura of the place of origin, in this case Itsukushima shrine. Rather, the above passage points towards individual differences in attitudes towards and relationships with things.

### **The Comforts of Orthopraxy I**

In my own fieldwork with people who had difficulties getting rid of things I found a broad range of individual and sometimes idiosyncratic attitudes towards everyday objects. The following two ethnographic vignettes illustrate some of the tensions surrounding the disposal of ‘religious’ objects, a tension that manifests itself as a desire for orthopraxy.

Doing fieldwork on person-object relationships by getting rid of the latter required a lot of delicate maneuvering: to gain access to people’s private space and handle their possessions I had to be careful not to insist too forcefully on disposal, lest this should jeopardize the relationship of trust I aimed to establish with my informants. Our aims were so different to begin with: I wanted to find out about the objects and they wanted me to help get rid of them, at least when we started in the morning. As the day progressed, a particular pattern would often emerge: our aims would start to align in the early afternoon, as my informants got closer to the dreaded moment of actual disposal. They soon realized that long conversations would stall the process and that they could save objects through

narrative binding: once we had explored the meaning of a particular object, I was no longer able to say “let’s throw this out” with the same ease. The case of Tomohiro<sup>7</sup> illustrates this<sup>8</sup>:

After a day of sorting through mountains of stuff and putting as much as possible of it into bin bags, we stood in the crisp winter air in front of the apartment door on the fourth floor of a residential building in a crowded Tokyo suburb. The sun was about to set and cast a last ray of golden light through the high-rise office towers onto twelve bulging bin bags that waited to be taken down to the rubbish and recycling area. Tomohiro, who lived in the apartment he and I had spent the last few days tidying up, sighed, his breath condensing in the crisp winter air. I knew this was a crucial moment and steeled myself for what I suspected would happen, based on the experience of the day before: after swift progress during the day, doubts about what we were trying to accomplish started bothering Tomohiro, and although we managed to put the bags downstairs, I had noticed the next morning that suspiciously familiar magazines, books, and flyers had reappeared overnight. As suspected, I noticed that among the “returned” stuff we had decided together to throw out were all the objects I vaguely classified in my mind as ‘religious.’ As I did not want to confront him and thus jeopardize our working relationship, I thought that this might be a good opportunity to understand something about what bound him to these objects.

However, while the computer magazine of the late 90s led to a prolonged nostalgic meditation about how the internet had changed over the last ten years, a little talisman lead to an embarrassed silence. After a while Tomohiro said: “Well, you know, we Japanese do not really believe in all of this, it’s just custom”. Whatever was bothering Tomohiro, he framed it in terms of orthopraxy: if only there were a ‘correct’ way to throw these things away, it would be so much easier. The *hamaya* 破魔矢, a type of lucky arrow he had bought with his girlfriend last year for New Year’s, and the *kadomatsu* 門松 decoration woven from straw and attached to the door were both past their normative life cycle of one year and not only could, but should be disposed of. Yet to do so properly would require an added effort at identifying the correct pathway of disposal. There was another small item that came back two times: a small portable talisman whose brocade surface had been worn down to illegibility. Tomohiro could not remember where it came from or how long it had been buried under other things. I suggested half-jokingly that maybe we should open it and see what was inside, as every other means of identifying it had disappeared. This was first met with an incredulous look, in spite of the earlier disavowal of belief. What would happen? Would it bring bad luck? Or incur the curse of the unknown deity? Tomohiro just laughed and said, ‘You are the folklorist, you tell me’. When I – somewhat frustrated – threatened to open it, he enigmatically replied, ‘It’s better not to know what is inside.’ This episode made it into my field diary as an example of the kinds of resistance I encountered. It was only much later that an interpretation suggested itself to me.

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<sup>7</sup> All of my informants’ names are anonymized.

<sup>8</sup> The first vignette is a contraction of several days of fieldwork undertaken in January 2012.

The fact that the talisman is thought to work despite – or precisely because of – the owner not knowing what it contains is a material concretization of the argument I am trying to make. Although it was not doing anything in terms of practice, its presence helped to keep something in place. This something was not a particular content of belief, but belief itself. The unwrapping of the talisman would have disclosed the problematic nature of belief and required some kind of engagement with it.

Understanding the relationships people have with their things in terms of substitution instead of representation allows us to make sense of the passive, unperformed nature of much religious paraphernalia and why they become suddenly relevant at the point of disposal. There is an inversion of the usual relationship between utility and function: while something is kept as long as it is used and disposed of once the end of usability is reached, the body substitute is active as long as nothing is done with it. It is the material presence that renders the presence of a matching cognitive belief superfluous.

There are several distinctions that may lead out of the contradiction between the importance of ritual action and the absence of cognitive belief. Ludwig Wittgenstein raised the question of the duration of belief: if we believe belief to be a state of mind, the how long does it continue? Is belief interrupted by sleep for example? (Wittgenstein 1975, Zettel 85) In anthropology, Needham has argued that the idea of belief as propositions about the world that are accepted as true is problematic because they are based on an intellectual, universalist model of belief and there is nothing apart from utterances that provides us with evidence that a mental state as holding a belief exists (1973). The distinction between orthodoxy as the correct way of believing versus orthopraxy – the correct way to behave – has been especially influential in the Japanese case (Bachnik 1995; Shields 2010), as it allows to disentangle cognitive belief from a broader range of nuances to belief:

Cognitive acceptance of the claims made about the efficacy of ritual is not always necessary for the ritual to be efficacious. When pressed with the question of whether or not they believe in the ability of an amulet to achieve its stated purpose – curing disease, for instance – many people we interviewed deny any belief in such magic. (Reader and Tanabe 1998: 127)

In contradistinction, Reader and Tanabe suggest “affective belief” (which aligns with the distinction in philosophy of belief as statement and belief as disposition). Critiques such as Anderson (1991) and Fitzgerald (2003) have argued that the often-reported absence of belief disqualifies the concept of religion from being used in this context altogether. The ethnographer in their view is more accurate when speaking of ‘custom’ when talking of buying amulets and talismans, complete with the

unreflected automatism that this suggests.<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, Swift (2010) has argued that we may act rashly if we dispose of belief itself, only from the assumption that it is something that is inaccessibly ‘deep,’ that is, buried in people’s minds or their interiors. Swift suggests that cosmologies can be superficial: not only concerned with surface by also limited to it. I would add that instead of searching for belief in people’s minds, assuming that they are somewhere hidden on the inside, we can find them rather hiding in plain sight: that in order to understand the particular religion of modernity we need to think of belief as physically distributed in space. This notion also contributes to the problem of the duration of belief raised by Wittgenstein. By externalizing the purported state of mind, it acquires some of the temporal extension of material objects. Religious paraphernalia in this approach do not then express or symbolize belief, but they are the beliefs themselves *tout court*.

### **The Comforts of Orthopraxy II**

The second vignette addresses the problem of emotional attachment that is sometimes (but by no means always) an obstacle when getting rid of personal objects. From my own observations, I could see that a sense of attachment played an important role for both my male and female informants. Unsurprisingly, however, given the gendered nature of the Japanese language and the gendered subjectivities it enforces, my female informants were more vocal about the emotional aspects of disposal. One of the challenges when tidying up was to find ways in which the ambiguity between the wish to get rid of something and the emotional attachment to it can be given a social form, as illustrated below.

On a sunny and still fairly warm October afternoon in 2012 I visited Fushimi Inari Taisha in the south of Kyoto with Noriko, a single woman in her 30s who worked for a small publishing house. On a previous visit a year earlier, I had noticed an official disposal place for religious paraphernalia on the boundary between the formal shrine buildings and the less regulated backstage of the mountains on which different forms of personalized worship were practiced (see Smyers 1993 for a description of the site). I had helped Noriko with cleaning up her apartment over the last three months in small incremental steps. As somebody with a strong sense of responsibility who constantly worried about the wellbeing of things, it was hard for her to get rid of stuff, especially as her friends and family would continue to give her more of the things that they themselves wanted to get rid of. Noriko was frustrated by this, especially because her parents also exhorted her to be tidier, lest she be permanently unable to find a husband. I suggested that we could ‘say goodbye’ to the kawaii

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<sup>9</sup> The scholar of religion Isomae Jun’ichi (2012) has pointed out that the distinction between religion and ritualism was crucial for the establishment of State Shinto. These apparently neutral analytical categories therefore need to be deconstructed themselves before they can be uncritically applied to the present day.

*engimono*<sup>10</sup> by bringing them to this official place. Although most of the stuff did not originate with the Fushimi Inari Taisha, I knew that the Inari deity (in fact three or five distinct entities depending on the site of worship) was thought to be tolerant and welcoming to human beings who seek solace of some kind. We carried a large cardboard box up the hill and she reluctantly deposited it in the designated small building. There was some trepidation when she saw how carelessly some of the *o-mamori* had been tossed in, but eventually she carefully put the box in and we stood in silence for a moment. I suppressed the desire to root through the kind of things that were disposed, as I had been warned on an earlier visit that this was inappropriate (as rooting through people's garbage is in general). I was curious as to how this 'correct' (or at least institutionally backed) disposal felt to her, but did not want to ask any leading questions. We strolled through the large shrine grounds and when we left her mood had visibly brightened: she felt refreshed (*sappari shita* さっぱりした) and relieved (*kaihōkan* 開放感). This sense of refreshment that many of my informants reported once things were gone, had to do with the sense of 'having done the right thing' (*tadashii sutekata* 正しい捨て方) rather than with any belief in the entity revered at Fushimi Inari.

In a subsequent interview Noriko reflected upon her own double bind and said that she did not want to refuse things given to her, but nor did she want to pass them on to burden someone else. The attachment she felt for the things in her case had to do more with her self-image as a caring and trustworthy person than with the particular characteristics of the objects. Even who had given them to her was less important than the sense of stewardship that she felt for them. The reason why the 'official' disposal route worked for her was that it allowed for a sense of closure. It was not that she later missed the objects or regretted disposing of them, as sometimes happened with other informants. Quite the opposite: she took pride in having been the last person to look after them and to have found a solution that did not burden anyone else. In that sense they became terminal commodities: the objects had to be destroyed in order not to become alienable possessions again. More than anything else, it was the finality of this process that gave Noriko peace of mind.<sup>11</sup>

### **Dolls and How to Get Rid of Them**

In the introduction, I argued that the notion of 'body substitution' as a heuristic device can be applied to religious paraphernalia more widely. But there are also cases in which 'body substitution' can be taken in a much more literal sense. Ichimatsu dolls present an interesting case in point:

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<sup>10</sup> We used the term *engimono* loosely to refer to a broad range of things, some of which were marketing gimmicks using popular culture characters, key chains and decorative figurines made from plastic, all therefore technically not *engimono*.

<sup>11</sup> This sense of finality is predicated on the fact that we did not know what would happen to the things once they were disposed. Some visitors I had talked to on an earlier visit suggested that they would be burned, others said burial would be the proper mode of disposal at a Shinto institution. The point is that disposal is enabled by willful ignorance.

elaborately crafted and originally made with human hair, they are traditionally given to new parents by well-off grandparents as a toy, but also to protect the child by offering it a second body, a target for everything that is negative: illnesses, bad luck, and more implicitly evil spirits. These practices go back all the way to Heian court rituals for purification and childbirth (see Law 1997: 35f). But like the body substitution talismans that spread as a commodity for soldiers only during the Russo-Japanese war in 1904/05 (Bond 2014), and the bride dolls of Northern Japan that were a phenomenon triggered by the Pacific war (Schattscheider 2001; 2005), the view that Ichimatsu dolls function as body substitutes seems to be a Meiji and Taisho period development. While an association between *engimono* and toys is evident at least since the medieval times (Kyburz 1991) and *migawari* beliefs are documented in Buddhism and Shinto in a range of different contexts,<sup>12</sup> an overlap of these two categories only happens once the Ichimatsu doll travels from the Kansai area to the new capital of Tokyo, where its original likeness to the Kabuki actor Sanokawa Ichimatsu (1722-62) is only retained in the name. The Ichimatsu dolls are a modern development of Edo-period *Mitsuore-Ningyō* 三つ折れ人形 (three-jointed puppets) and because they had articulated limbs and could be dressed and made to sit and stand independently, they served both as children's toys and as decorative items (Plate 2008: 238).

In “Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan”, first published in 1894, Lafcadio Hearn described the Ichimatsu dolls as so life-like that it was sometimes hard to tell the difference between children and dolls, and that photographers would often substitute real children with dolls that were easier to handle when it came to long exposures (1976: 266).<sup>13</sup> The verisimilitude to a living child came from innovations in the coloring of the dolls' faces and hands. While the traditional color was based on a white, lustrous pigment made from powdered oyster shells and animal glue called *gofun* 胡粉, doll makers added more gloss (egg-white) and pink to the face of the Ichimatsu dolls. Lifelikeness both in terms of size and appearance – but not in resemblance to a particular person – lent them to be conceptualized as body substitutes. Western collectors who travelled to Japan bought large quantities of them and their lifelikeness inspired fantasies of animation in Western artists (see the Japonism-inspired paintings of Charles Dater Weldon, reprinted in Pate 2008: 234). As evidenced in the case of

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<sup>12</sup> A familiar figure in folklore is the body substitute version of the bodhisattva Jizō, the *migawari Jizō*. This benevolent entity is thought to take on suffering and pain by standing in for the body of the supplicant (Yanagita 1951: 257). This is framed in Buddhist terms as *daijuku* 代受苦, a voluntary taking-on of human pain, one of the virtues of the bodhisattva. Some of these stories have their origin in the *Konjakumonogatari* 今昔物語, compiled at the end of the Heian period. The folklorist Miyata Noboru reports another, slightly less benign form of body substitution in which a Jizō figure is tied up with ropes by the supplicant to experience the pain that they feel. The bound Jizō (*shibari Jizō* 縛り地蔵) is only released once the relief that is prayed for has taken place (1975: 131f). Body substitution in an early Shinto context most likely had the function to protect the supplicant from the dangers of an encounter with the untamed nature of the deity (*aramitama* 荒御魂).

<sup>13</sup> *Hitogata* 人形 are rudimentary paper shapes that can be rubbed on the body to remove pollution, thus functioning through touch. The shift towards transmission through resemblance could arguably have been influenced by the introduction of the new medium of photography. If we understand these carefully staged early photographs to be simulacra of the real world, then it would only be befitting that the figures in the picture are simulacra of human beings.

the photographers, the semiotic notion of body substitution is much more flexible than just ‘a religious belief.’ Another example of this flexibility is demonstrated by the curious case of the *Tōreiningyō* 答礼人形 or friendship ambassador dolls in 1927. In 1926 Frederick Starr, an avid doll collector, instigated a U.S.-wide doll friendship project that was aimed at creating friendly relations between the U.S. and Japan in an increasingly hostile international climate. 12,739 blue-eyed dolls collected from all over the U.S. were sent to Japan as a gesture of friendship. Japan responded by sending fifty-seven life-sized Ichimatsu dolls representing the provinces of Japan. Each of them came with a friendship passport and they were distributed all over the United States to be displayed in libraries, museums and schools. In exchange for the children’s toys sent by the Americans, the Japanese answer was to send friendship-by-substitution. Enthusiastically received in the beginning, as diplomatic relations began to sour the dolls were removed from display. The American dolls in Japan were eventually destroyed by imperial edict as harbingers of foreign influence, a treatment that can again be understood through the cultural logic of *migawari* (Pate 2005: 219).

Interestingly, these dolls are now widely considered to be creepy and scary (Daniels 2009). Although they are thought to have considerable value if they have been made by one of the doll masters of the early Meiji or Taishō periods<sup>14</sup>, when I undertook fieldwork on Tokyo’s and Kyoto’s flea markets in 2011, I found that they were very hard to sell to fellow Japanese. While such doubts were never quite voiced in a specifically ‘religious’ way, a few people I talked to told me that as they belonged to strangers it was best to keep away from them, because you never know what happened to the person it was originally bought for. Furthermore, one middle-aged woman told me that the Ichimatsu dolls start to resemble their owners and that you would not want to have a stranger staring at you in your own house (they are usually displayed in glass cases). Conversely, a mother who visited the market with her ten-year old daughter said that it was because they resembled a lost, stylized ideal of beauty that modern people no longer relate to, which made them look like children from the past who never aged. A male collector of antiques who I briefly talked to at the Setagaya *boroichi* argued that it was the tension between lifelikeness and the eerie immobility that rendered them uncanny.<sup>15</sup> But the explanation given most often was that they were creepy because they were opaque, unknowable.

If we presume that the body surrogate absorbs everything that does NOT happen to the person it substitutes, then the doll becomes more ‘other’ as both child and doll age together. Under the increasing verisimilitude, the doll’s ‘content’ becomes a kind of negative inversion of the person. In

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<sup>14</sup> The first living national treasure in the field of doll making was Hirata Gōyō 平田郷陽 (1903-1981).

<sup>15</sup> Unsurprisingly Ichimatsu dolls feature in several horror films (most explicitly in *Kono ko no nanatsu no oiwai ni* (Shōchiku 1982, written and directed by Masumura Yasuzo) and *Shinsei Toire-no-Hanako-san* (Tōei 1998, directed by Tsutsumi Yukihiko). For the Halloween season in 2016 Universal Studio Japan opened a Japanese doll-themed attraction called “Tatari: Curse of the Living Dolls” which drew the ire of the Tokyo Association of Toy and Shopkeepers for its negative depiction of the dolls (Japan Times, October 19, 2016). Piquantly, many of the dolls were leased to UFJ by Awashima Myōjin in Wakayama, a shrine associated with dolls.

other words, the doll becomes a container - both in the meaning of containing and delimiting – for everything that the person it was bought for was protected from. These dolls are very difficult to get rid of, because breaching the containment risks dispersing whatever is contained. The doll as protective form only works, however, as long as the person is alive. The fact that the doll survives the person it is doubling renders it doubly uncanny. Although the connection to *migawari* is rarely voiced, the association with death is implicit: the sheer presence of the doll without its owner suggests its freedom from the earlier relationship.

The unease people voiced about these dolls on the flea markets was in some measure counterbalanced by an appreciation of their beauty and craftsmanship, but the former outstripped the latter by far. Their sense of presence was augmented by an unspoken sense of taboo: what had been an inalienable object connected to a particular individual now reentered the market place, looking to attach itself to a new owner. When I tried to draw out one seller, a young woman who was working for a large antiques shop, on the implications of hosting such an uncanny object, she guardedly said “it will certainly change the atmosphere in your house” (interview on 16. January 2016).

Where does that leave us in terms of a theory of practice? In terms of materiality, there are two connected understandings at work: absorbency and containment. As body substitutes absorb bad luck, bad intentions, and other kinds of negative energies, their own substance becomes compromised. They are not thought to be ‘alive,’ but they become more than mere things. To dispose of them is difficult because those negative energies could always escape and return to their owners. It is safer to live with them, but the settlement is never an easy one: the contemporary Ichimatsu dolls never entirely join the family (as toys for example), they remain aloof in their display cases and are rarely touched. If they are stored, their owners make sure that they are comfortable, lest they should feel a grudge (Daniels 2009). In other words, they are always treated as guests.

It is clear then that the function of *migawari* is linked to both proximity and passivity. It is precisely because nothing happens to the object that it can function as a body substitute. As long as the trajectory or life course of owner and object align, the relation of substitution works and the objects are inalienable (but not necessarily held to be important: quite the opposite, they can be forgotten). The moment that this alignment ceases, things start to light up (in Heidegger’s terminology), that is, in the case of the death of the owner or the disposal of the object.

## **Rites of Disposal**

When I first visited the monthly *Kitano-Tenmangu* market in Kyoto<sup>16</sup> to find out about beliefs about materials I was often told that whatever is stuck in matter owned by someone else – and this could be articulated as dirt, pollution, a curse, or unspecified bacteria depending on the person I talked

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<sup>16</sup> First monthly from October to December 1999, then on a less regular basis from 2010 to 2013.

to – would not affect me as I was foreign.<sup>17</sup> A similar discourse was in evidence regarding dolls, specifically the larger Ichimatsu dolls in and out of glass cases. Foreign tourists were considered to be the best buyers for them, as they would then be taken away to a place where they could do no harm. In other words, removing the dolls from Japan to where they would be valued as souvenirs and mementos, would interrupt the connection to individual persons and turn the doll into a more general representation of Japan. A similar thing happened to Karen Smyers during her fieldwork at the Fushimi Inari Taisha mentioned earlier. The shrine was committed to burying the discarded statues of foxes that are associated with the Inari deity, but soon ran out of space (especially as the mountain behind the shrine is - contrary to public perception - not owned by the shrine). When she showed an interest in the material culture of Inari worship, the shrine was more than happy to ‘dispose’ of an unwanted surplus of what often had been private devotional statues and objects by donating them to what was to become the Inari collection in the Kenneth Starr library at Columbia university.<sup>18</sup>

But to get rid of something by sending it abroad is not always a possibility and memorial services for dolls, *ningyō kuyō* 人形供養, have seen a remarkable increase in popularity over the last forty years. This is part of a boom in all sort of ‘memorial services,’ especially for pets (Ambros 2012) and aborted fetuses (for example Hoshino and Takeda 1987; Anderson and Martin 1997). Inanimate objects, too, are ritually disposed of, usually sponsored by the local association of trade and manufacture involved with the production of the thing in question (see Kretschmer 2000 for needles and glasses, Ōsaki 1995 for dolls and Ōsaki 1997 for scissors). Memorial services for inanimate objects, despite indication that some already existed in the Edo-period, are a recent innovation. The Tokyo Association of Toy and Doll Shopkeepers only started sponsoring a ‘memorial service for dolls’ in 1958. Rambelli argues that the meaning of leaving dolls at a temple has changed considerably and that what originally may have been a sacrificial prestation has become a way of getting rid of unwanted objects (2007: 215). The folklorist Tanaka Senichi on the other hand maintains that memorial services for inanimate things hark back to ancient folk beliefs about the animate nature of things:

The expression of gratitude is only the superficial reason; I argue that in reality, it is the wish to dispel a sense of unease and gain a sense of security<sup>19</sup> that motivates memorial services. Is this sense of unease [...] not a latent

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<sup>17</sup> Such assertions usually took two forms: either they were formulated with reference to the sturdier bodies of foreigners as compared to the more susceptible constitution of the Japanese, or they were expressed in terms of belief: “Where you come from there surely is no such belief, therefore it cannot affect you.”

<sup>18</sup> [http://library.columbia.edu/news/libraries/2009/20090604\\_inari.html](http://library.columbia.edu/news/libraries/2009/20090604_inari.html) (pers. comm. Max Moermann)

<sup>19</sup> *hikkakaru kimochi wo fusshoku shite anshin wo ete okitai* ひっかかる気持ちを払拭して安心を得ておきたい (All translations from Japanese are my own).

fear<sup>20</sup> that the some kind of spirit of the thing that is thrown away could cause misfortune? [...] We can therefore say that memorial services are undertaken to prevent the activation of the spirit through its extraction from the instrument.<sup>21</sup> By removing the spirit and turning the instrument into just a thing, it can disposed of calmly.<sup>22</sup> (Tanaka 1987: 7-8)

While this makes sense in conceptual and emotional terms, my informants never spoke of objects as possessed or inhabited by spirits. While emotional attachment clearly plays an important role, this is rarely if ever expressed as explicit belief that the object is imbued with life. It also does not explain why these memorial services are increasing in popularity while folk Shinto beliefs are on the decline. The social psychologist Ikeuchi Hiromi undertook a survey of people who participated in a memorial service for dolls at the Mondo Yakujin Tōkōji 門戸厄神東光寺 in Nishinomiya (Kobe) in 2007 and found to her surprise that it was the younger generation who scored significantly higher on the animism scale アニミズム尺度 (2010). She explains this as the influence of popular culture such as TV programmes (both infotainment and anime) that feature all kinds of magic and New Age spirituality.

An emphasis on economic rather than religious explanations is also apparent in contemporary folklore studies. In his work on the rites of disposal for shoes, the folklorist Matsuzaki Kenzō for example links memorial services for inanimate things specifically to creating smooth circles of production and consumption and to organizing solidarity among competitors in the same profession (1996).

Like other memorial services for inanimate objects, doll memorial services are known by a range of names, *ningyō kuyō* being perhaps the most traditional term, modeled on Buddhist funerary rites that are meant to transform the deceased into an enlightened entity. The Meta-jinja 賣太神社 in Nara calls it *ningyō-shōtensai* 人形昇天祭, literally ‘doll ascension festival.’ This annual occasion, held on May 5, Children’s Day, involves the reading of *noritō* 祝詞 prayers and the actual burning of all kinds of dolls, which are said to ascend to heaven as deities. It is the purifying agency of fire in these various rites that expresses the inalienable nature of the doll as *migawari*. Whatever is contained is erased or transformed in the process leaving nothing behind.

Other recent ceremonial innovations are much brighter in tone and part of a secular ethos of recycling and gratitude to be inculcated in children. In these cases, usually organized by local

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<sup>20</sup> *sono mama suteta no dewa rei no wazawai ga shōjiru dewa nai ka to iu senzai-teki ifukan* そのまま捨てたのでは霊の災いが生じるのではないかという潜在的畏怖感

<sup>21</sup> *Dōgu no shōki-nuki, shone-nuki, tama-nuki no tame, sunawachi komoru rei wo nuki-totte sono hatsudō wo mizen ni fusegō to shite okonawareru* 道具の正気抜き・性根抜き・魂抜きのため、すなわち籠る霊を抜き取ってその発動を未然に防ごうとして行われる

<sup>22</sup> *Rei wo nuite tan-naru mono ni shite* 霊を抜いて単なるモノにして

business associations in cooperation with schools, the occasion is called a ‘festival of gratitude’ or *kansha-sai* 感謝祭, which removes it from a more religious institutional frame. A monk is still invited to read the Heart Sutra to the assembled stuffed animals and dolls, but more emphasis is put on the participatory element.<sup>23</sup> Some temples, such as the Jōganji 成願寺 in Matsuyama on Shikoku, allow participants to throw their dolls onto the pyre themselves, which creates a more festival-like atmosphere, also helped by the summer date of their ceremony.<sup>24</sup>

While the burning of the dolls is an integral part of the rite as *kuyō*, this is often no longer possible after temples began accepting a much broader range of items beyond the traditional dolls made from wood, silk, and papier-mâché. Stuffed animals and plastic dolls are particularly problematic and many temples that used to burn the dolls, such as the famous Shōryakuji 正暦寺 in Nara prefecture, now use the services of specialist disposal companies. While Shōryakuji<sup>25</sup> receives dolls to dispose of throughout the year, the big ceremony called *daigoma kuyō* 大護摩供養 takes place on March 9. For each individual box of dolls received by post a brief service is held on the day of arrival, but on March 9, the dolls are put on the altar of the sub-temple Fukuju-in 福寿院 and a special service is performed.<sup>26</sup> When I observed the ritual in 2012, there were about hundred people in attendance. The sound of the conch shell marks the start of the ceremony at 14:00. Gagaku music is performed by the monks, followed by recitations of Buddhist scriptures, mainly the Heart Sutra *Hannya Shingyō* 般若心經. The visitors can then step forward and light incense in front of the dolls. After about thirty minutes, the priests line up and leave the main hall to where a smaller altar with representative dolls is set up in front of the wooden pyre, covered with green branches. In 2012, the center piece was a warrior doll (*musha-ningyō* 武者人形) surrounded by five decorative *isho-Ningyō* 衣裳人形 dolls on the upper level of the shelf, five Western style dolls in elaborate baroque dresses under them, four Ichimatsu dolls (one boy and four girls), one seated *hina-ningyō* 雛人形, and a stuffed Miffy and Winnie the Pooh on either end of the shelf.

The pyre is ceremoniously lit from an eternal light with a large bamboo torch. At first this creates a dense grey smoke, which slowly gives way to flames while the monks continue to chant the Heart Sutra. Only then do they start to throw the wooden sacrificial sticks (*goma* 護摩) that had been collected over the year into the fire, where they burn in the presence of the dolls and those who came especially today to bring dolls and to witness the ceremony.

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1PhBowg1Kpw>, accessed November 20, 2017

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1sn4ar-0wUo>, accessed November 21, 2017

<sup>25</sup> Founded in 992, the Shōryakuji is the main temple of the Bodaisen Shingon 菩提山真言 sect. The main hall contains a rare Asuka-period bronze statue of Yakushi Nyōrai, depicted sitting down, with both feet on a lotus flower.

<sup>26</sup> The service in 2012 cost five-thousand yen for a cardboard box of fifty centimeters or a plastic bag of approx. 45 liters.

What is burnt, however, is no longer the dolls, but a further substitution: the participants are asked to write their names on the *goma* sticks which are then burnt in the presence of the dolls. Tanaka Masaru (2005) argues that this substitution was forced by the ministry of the environment's reduction of dioxin policy. But as an unintended consequence of this environmental concern, another interpretation becomes possible, in which the compromised nature of the doll's materiality manifests itself in a different form: on one side as indestructible toxic matter in the case of dolls and stuffed animals made from plastic; on the other as embodiment of considerable value in the case of the antique dolls. Both forms resist destruction by fire and therefore the severing of the ties to their former owners. Because of this, the modern form of the rite appears as inversion of the older: Instead of burning the dolls in the presence of their former owners, the names of the owners, written on to the *goma*, are burnt in the presence of the dolls. Seen from that perspective, what is severed is the attachment that the dolls have to their owners, who, after all, have already decided to dispose of them. By burning their names, the link between subject and object is destroyed: the dolls relinquish their existence as possessions and return to a neutral commodity form. This suggests the possibility that the dolls would not be finally destroyed but sold or passed on by the disposal companies. I have not been able to verify this so far, as the psychological efficacy of the rite depends precisely on the fact that the attendants do not know what happens to the dolls. The monks were understandably reluctant to shed any light on the onwards trajectory of the dolls.

At the end of the ceremony, while the fire was still smoldering, the abbot gave a short speech thanking the visitors and the dolls, "that have taught us serenity and gentleness."<sup>27</sup> It was difficult to interview informants who took part in the rite without disturbing the smooth flow of events, especially since questions as to the nature of the attachment of the dolls and where people thought they were going could disturb the sense of closure that people came to achieve in an officially sanctioned way. I was able to speak to several people who gave a range of individual interpretations. One middle-aged local woman who brought her dolls to the service had recently lost her mother and was fairly business-like about the whole affair. She did not want to keep these traditional dolls in her modern, Western-style house. When I asked her why she did not just throw them away, she simply answered that they had come to the end of their utility<sup>28</sup> and that this was the correct, official way to end it. Another woman in her 60s said after some trepidation that she did not want to leave them to her children, because they may not want them. For her, the memorial service was an expression of gratitude, but also a way to alleviate her guilt (*zaiakukan* 罪悪感) about disposing of something that could still be used.

The recent popularity of memorial services represents an increasing desire for an orthopraxis of disposal for problematic materialities. For many people who are using those services, they provide

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<sup>27</sup> *Yasuragi to yasashisa wo oshiete-kureta ningyō ni kansha shimasu* 安らぎと優しさ教えてくれた人形に感謝します

<sup>28</sup> *O-ningyō no yakume ha kore de owatta* お人形の役目はこれで終わった

the comfort of an officially sanctioned way of getting rid of unwanted objects, which conveys a sense of closure instead a sense of guilt. On the side of temples who seek to extend their business beyond the funeral industry (Suzuki 2002), it is an investment that connects financial gain with pastoral care in new and innovative ways.

## **CONCLUSION: Things that Believe**

Looking at things from the point of view of disposal, two particular formations of materiality emerge: the circulating minor material culture of belief which seems to do nothing in particular until its disposal, which I argue allows for an externalization of the problem of belief. The other is matter that requires more careful disposal as the substance itself is understood to be compromised. This understanding can take different, sometimes overlapping forms: from the notion that matter – either through its material qualities in the case of paper or through resemblance in the case of dolls – can absorb and contain misfortune and unspecified negative energies, to concerns that burning such things releases toxins into the environment.

In both cases, the material presence is crucial in bringing out the meanings these things are imbued with. While my informants would sometimes go as far as to ridicule the notion that one could believe in the powers of charms and talismans, they would still be reluctant to discard them. What the material presence of these objects enabled was not a psychological projection of interior belief onto the external world, but rather the ability to externalize the problem of belief – to hold it, literally, an arm's length away. Making belief part of your material environment protects you from having to articulate or verify what you believe. Like the Ichimatsu doll that works as a body surrogate for a particular person, paraphernalia of a religious origin (*ofuda*, *omamori*, *hamaya*, etc.) act as surrogate holders of beliefs. To put it more provocatively, folklorists and anthropologists have sometimes misread religiously coded paraphernalia as expressions of belief while in fact they were believing surrogates.

This raises questions about the relationship between religious practice, objects and belief. Rather than to conceptualize objects as 'things to believe with' that become meaningful through ritual, I have argued that they outlive ritual contexts and become substitutes for a general and vague notion of belief. But this is only possible because nothing is done to or with them. Contrary to the relational view that humans and objects continuously co-construct each other in a smooth dialectical process (Miller 2005), a more fine-grained approach shows that for long amounts of time, it is precisely the autonomous existence of the object in time and space that allows it to become a substitute. From the point of view of the objects, rituals such as the memorial services for inanimate objects change their status from personal possessions to 'waste,' with the potential to return as commodity, as in case of the antique dolls for example. The doll watching the removal of its connection to its owner is acting

as a surrogate for the owner removing their connection from the doll. When these rituals are described as having a cleansing function (*jōka* 浄化), what the informants pointed towards was the fact the matter was cleansed of meaning, thus reinstating the dichotomy between meaning and matter, that has become blurred through substitution.

Finally, if we accept what such a statement would mean, then we can readdress some of the debates on whether the Japanese are religious or not. Depending on the perspective of the researcher, either the Japanese are entirely secular and for the most part not interested in religion at all (Fitzgerald 2003; Anderson 1996); or religion is so tightly woven into the fabric of everyday life that almost everything can be understood as being inflected by religion (Reader 1991c; Reader and Tanabe 1998). Both of these extreme positions are based on a clear distinction between the meanings of the words 'secular' and 'religious,' a distinction which is in itself an epistemological artefact of the Western history of religious studies and its particular Protestant assumptions (Asad 1993). Talal Asad has argued that we should instead aim to describe and understand culturally and historically distinct "formations of the secular" (2003). I would add (if such a generalization is permitted) that in the particular case of Japanese modernity, what emerges in the post-war years is a formation of the secular in which the work of belief has shifted from persons to religious objects, which, in a materialist view of the world, have the distinct advantage of being physical presences. In other words, the work of belief is accomplished by religious objects, which goes some way towards explaining the confusing and often contradictory attitude towards religion and belief in secular Japan.

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