Special Issue:
Sacred Objects in Religions

Introduction

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1.Background and the purpose of this special issue

The purpose of this special issue is to present the results of the workshop "Sacred Objects in Religions", organized by the Field-net Lounge of the Institute of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS) in February 2020. All but one of the presenters are authors, and Professor Masakazu Tanaka (Professional Institute of International Fashion) who was also a commentator at the workshop provides a general commentary. Building on the problematics addressed during the workshop, this special issue aims to reconsider objects and "the sacred" by focusing on the existence of objects in religion and examining how humans relate to objects.

Here, we explain several key terms used in this Introduction. The term "the sacred" refers to something shared as an object of faith, worship, or veneration, or more broadly to anything—including people, things, and places— that has undergone a process of sanctification. Such entities are referred to as sacred objects, and "sacred" is sometimes used adjectivally to modify other nouns. "Sacredness" denotes the power or efficacy of the sacred. By contrast, the term "religious objects" refers to objects in relation to religions in a wider sense, including mass-produced objects and artworks.

2.Objects in religious studies

For a long time, in religious anthropology, religion has been understood primarily as a system of meaning, with an emphasis on symbols. Religious objects were treated as vehicles (symbols) that carried the meaning associated with the sacred or with spiritual beings. There was a tendency to regard objects as symbols to be deciphered by humans. That is, the relationship between human beings and objects was framed within this subject–object scheme of interpretation. In the following discussion, we first provide an overview of how objects have been treated in cultural anthropology.

Social and cultural anthropology, which emerged in the nineteenth century, is closely associated with colonialism. Early anthropologists (e.g. Edward Tylor) were interested in schemes of unilineal evolution, in which Victorian European society was positioned at the apex of the developmental scale. Collected objects were used primarily as a meaning of gauging the technological and social sophistication—that is, the presumed degree of evolution— of a given group (Buchli 2002: 3). In other words, "Western-centered social evolutionary theory and an interest in material culture" were inseparable (床呂・河合 2011: 6).

As functionalism and structural functionalism became mainstream in anthropology in the twentieth century, scholarly attention shifted toward more abstract dimensions, such as social institutions and functions, and interest in objects themselves receded.

By contrast, objects attracted renewed attention through a series of studies on gift and exchange that began with Marcel Mauss's *The Gift* (1925), as well as through symbolic anthropology, which emerged in the 1960s. However, the former focused on the societies generated through objects rather than on the objects themselves, while the latter was concerned with deciphering the meanings that objects carry within those societies.

Since the 1980s, however, scholars such as Arjun Appadurai (1986) and Daniel Miller (1987) have indicated new directions in material culture studies[1]. Their studies demonstrated that social worlds were constituted by materiality as much as human beings (Miller 1998: 3).

In *The Social Life of Things*：*Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (1986), Appadurai argues that commodities have social lives comparable to those of persons. According to him, pre-existing research on economic exchange has focused primarily on the forms or functions of exchange (Appadurai 1986：3-5). He therefore proposed what he termed "methodological feticism" in order to return analytical attention to things themselves, and argued that every time things are exchanged, they create value

or new meaning which is embodied in commodities (Appadurai 1986: 3, 17). In this sense, the link between exchange and value is created by politics, constructed broadly (Appadurai 1986: 3). For example, something that is considered a commodity in one place may be decommodified in another place and acquire new value. The important point is not one kind of thing rather than another, but one phase in the life of a society. Igor Kopytoff agreed with this point. In his article, he argued that commodities, like persons, have biographies endowed with cultural backgrounds and culturally specific meanings (Kopytoff 1986: 68). Kopytoff proposed two poles: "commodified" things, which are exchangeable, and "singularized" things, which are non-exchangeable or limited to exchangeable only within a limited sphere. His theory suggests that through exchange, all things are positioned somewhere between these two poles while constantly changing, thus revealing the instability of value and the identity of things (Kopytoff 1986: 69-70, 90). Following this so-called material turn, "consumption" and "consumer society" have also come to be seen as important keywords.

As noted by Appadurai and Kopytoff, it is illuminating to observe how the value and meaning of things change through practices of exchange. Maurice Godelier (1999) also discusses inalienability that creates the sacredness of the things. Conversely, as demonstrated by the Kula trade, the continual circulation of objects among people can increase their value (Malinowski 1922). Nevertheless, these studies continue to assume that objects convey meanings or values that are imbued unilaterally by humans.

In recent years, a relational perspective has emerged. It liberates the relationship between humans and objects from this subject-object schema of interpretation and considers objects as agents that act on humans in the world (e.g. Latour 1993; Gell 1998; Henare, A., M. Holbraad & S. Wastell 2007; Tanaka 2011)[2]. Among these scholars, Alfred Gell (1998) rejects an epistemological approach. He proposed an "anthropology of art" as social relations in the vicinity of objects mediating social agency (Gell 1998: 7). Gell argues that both people and things—such as art objects and religious images—are social agents that mediate social relations by acting. For Gell, when humans and objects are social agents, it means that they are in relation of agent who has the capacity to initiate causal events in his-her vicinity, and patient who is counterpart of an agent. (Gell 1998: 19, 22-23, 26). In this framework, objects are also entities that exercise their agency. Gell's agency is exclusively relational.

Within contemporary studies of materiality, attention has increasingly shifted toward the mutually constitutive interactions between humans and objects, as well as the practices of what humans and objects do. From the perspective of religious studies, religion may likewise be understood as a domain in which both things and people participate.

3.Religion and objects: From text-centered studies to material religion

In religious studies as well, a trend has emerged since the 2000s that challenges the longstanding bias toward research focused on texts and doctrines. Scholars working in this vein seek to understand religion through the lens of material culture studies (cf. Whitehead 2013). In 2005, the journal *Material Religion* was founded in the United States by scholars of religion, proposing an approach that examines how religious practice is carried out in relation to objects, the body, and the surrounding environment (Meyer, Morgan, Paine and Plate 2014). David Morgan, one of the editors of this journal, has focused on Western Europe and the United States, as well as on Christianity. Because the academic study of Christianity has been precisely the study of texts, Morgan introduced the new perspective from visual culture—such as religious icons and works of art—into the study of religion. In his edited book *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (2010), he makes a series of claims concerning the concept of "belief." According to Morgan, belief is not "symbolic system" (Geertz 1973). Belief is what I know with my body (Morgan 2010: 9). Belief itself is a concept that is inseparable from Christianity (Asad 1993), and it is not a universal mental or "inner state" (Needham 1972). Morgan argues that belief is not formed by dogma or creed, but by religious behavior repeated everyday life (Morgan 2010: 4). He emphasizes that materiality mediates belief, insofar as material objects and practices both enable and enact it, and he points out that previous research on belief largely lacked attention corporeality and materiality (Morgan 2010: 11-12).

In recent years, active discussions have also emerged in Japan. These studies cover a wide range of religious traditions, from world religions to local religions, and examine religion and materiality in a comprehensive manner. For example, one

edited volume offers new insight to the study of magic by focusing on materiality and sensory experience (川田・白川・飯田編 2020). Another publication examining the materiality of the sacred from the perspectives of anthropology and art history has been published (木俣・佐々木・水野編 2022). The latter argues that the materiality of the sacred must begin with that human beings are embodied, and that they relate to the materiality of the world through the materiality of their own bodies. From this perspective, it is impossible to contemplate transcendent being or to perceive the sacred without a sensory relationship with the world mediated by the body (木俣 2020: 13). Both works are highly suggestive for present special issue in their emphasis on the intertwined relationships between materiality, the body, and the sacred in religion[3].

This shift in both domestic and international research trends has expanded the scope of inquiry from text-centered methodologies to people's practices and materiality.

However, the central argument of this special issue is that, when such a relationalist perspective is applied uncritically to the study of religion, it risks overlooking the sense of sacredness that objects evoke in people and obscuring the distinctions between religious objects and everyday objects[4]. In other words, the core problem addressed in this special issue concerns the sanctification of objects: on what basis does an object become sacred, and what distinguishes sacred objects from other material objects?

4.“The sacred” in religions

This special issue discusses case studies drawn from Hinduism, Shinto, Christianity (Catholicism), Tibetan Buddhism, and Bön. The objects examined are diverse, ranging from prayer objects and everyday objects to art works and commodities, with a single object sometimes encompassing multiple dimentions. Unsurprisingly, each religious tradition conceptualizes the sacred differently and engages with sacred objects in distinct ways. In what follows, we briefly outline the understanding of the sacred in the religions addressed in each article.

Within Hindu thought, sacredness is not understood as an inherent or mysterious essence, but rather as a relational force that emerges through interactions among humans, objects, spaces, and ritual acts. A wide range of entities—including images of deities, rivers, temple spaces, offerings, and fire—are believed to hold or convey sacred power (*śakti*), though this power is not uniform. Its intensity varies according to mythological origins, local narratives of blessing, geographical features, ritual calendars, and modes of human engagement. Fire and water, for instance, functions as potent media of purification, while rivers and landscapes are sacralized through their associations with divine stories and pilgrimage networks (Fuller 2004; Eck 2012).

In this sense, sacredness in Hinduism is not a fixed property but a force that becomes operative within particular contexts. The sacred status of an object may be intensified or diminished depending on how it is handled, where it is placed, and how its origin is remembered. Sacredness is therefore often layered and graded, exhibiting multiple levels of potency rather than a singular, stable state (Babb 1975). A temple image, for example, is understood to embody divine presence only after the consecration rite (*prāṇa pratiṣṭhā*), while offerings or lamps acquire sacred quality through their association with the deity (Eck 1998; Fuller 2004). Sacredness thus emerges as a dynamic relationship formed through the interweaving of divine powers, material forms, spatial environments, and human actions.

Shinto, is the indigenous religious tradition of Japan, does not posit a one single omnipotent Creator. Instead, it venerates the myriad *kami* (deities) believed to reside in natural phenomena, objects, and persons. Shrines function as central sites of ritual practice and devotion.

In Japan, sacred objects typically receive their status from their connection to sacred sites, such as shrines and temples. They are also brought back to these institutions after a year, therefore maintaining the connection to their place of origin while also indicating the geographical reach of religious institutions (Gygi 2018). Often placed in homes, sacred objects also allow a democratic diffusion of spirituality from these institutions to the domestic sphere (Daniels 2003).

In Tillonen's article about the objects of Shinto religion, the sacred is examined from the perspective of the circulation of sacred objects. The article focuses on *kumade*, or good luck rakes, which belong to the category of Japanese *engimono* (good luck objects) and are believed to bring their owner this-worldly benefits, such as business success or household safety. The status of *engimono* as sacred objects is somewhat ambiguous. While they are often bought at shrines and temples, they are already understood to possess efficacy through their material form and

embedded meanings. A *kumade* is thought to "rake in" luck for their owners, just like a garden tool would gather leaves.

The *kumade*'s status depends on the sacred space of the shrine, even if it does not rely on the shrine's institutional authority. The shrine acts as a stage where *kumade* participates in a series of performances. They also require lighting and props (decorations, cash), the performances of actors (vendors), and the active participation of the audience (buyers, other festival-goers). Through these elements, *kumade* become a part of a dynamic network of social, spatial, and ritual practices that connect the objects and their owners to the festival on both a physical and a symbolic level. This illustrates how sacredness is material, performed, and relational, and not limited to institutional authority or "official" rituals.

Christianity is a monotheistic religion centered on the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—of which the Son refers to Jesus Christ. Within Christian doctrine, the sacred is fundamentally defined through its separation from the profane. God is conceived as transcendent, invisible, and extraordinary, which has historically resulted in a strict prohibition of idolatry. As a consequence, the distinction between the veneration of images and idolatry has been a persistent concern within Christianity.

Following periods of iconoclasm, the Eastern Church justified the veneration of images from the sixth century onward through the concept of *acheiropoietos* (not made by human hands). According to iconic legends, Christ's face cannot be elusive even when drawn, but that his likeness is created through the miraculous powers of Christ himself. This logic holds that if Christ himself created it, it would be a sacred image, not an idol (水野 2014: 52). Relatedly, it was said that the works of artists lacking human traces are more sacred.

In contrast, the Western Roman Catholic Church adopted iconophilism during roughly the same time, and since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the veneration of objects has been explicitly recognized. In this context, sacred images are understood as media that mediate between God and believers. As one Mexican Catholic priest explained in an interview, "We do not venerate the image itself, but what it represents." The practice of veneration is thus justified by distinguishing representation from material substance.

This distinction rests on a dual understanding of images as both material vessels and representations of transcendent beings. Catholic theology differentiates between "adoration" (*adoración*), directed exclusively toward God, and "veneration" (*veneración*), directed toward saints and images, in order to avoid idolatry. Even in colonial Latin America, missionaries prohibited indigenous idol worship and "rationalized the power of images through the concept of representation" (岡田・齋藤 2007: 298). As a result, sacred images and a wide variety of other religious objects continue to play a significant role in everyday religious life in Mexican Catholicism, as discussed in Kawamoto's article.

While sacredness in Christianity is often perceived as innate in its doctrine, Kawamoto's contribution highlights its constructive dimensions by examining devotional practices and the modes of sanctification performed by priests.

In Tibetan Buddhism and Bön, the efficacy of sacred objects is generated not only through formal acts of making—such as measurement, drawing, pigment preparation, consecration, or the ritual opening of the eyes—but also through the everyday religious practices of their makers. Artisans and ritual specialists do not merely construct images; they sustain a disciplined regime of recitation, moral conduct, and devotional acts that permeate objects during their production. The sacredness of *thangkas*, statues, and stupas thus emerges from a continual interplay between technical procedures and the lived religious dispositions of their creators. Rather than being inert representations, sacred objects become active and efficacious presences that connect practitioners with deities, ancestors, and territorial spirits, and that anchor broader cosmological and ethical orders. In this sense, the sacred is both a theological category and a practice-based, relational process enacted through material engagement and the maker's embodied piety. Sacred objects thus acquire their meaning and force not simply through ritual consecration, but through the sustained devotional life in which they are embedded.

5.The sacred and the profane

Considering the difference among the religions and the discussions presented thus far, we can say that the term "sacred" has generally been understood as something set apart from the profane, that is, from the sphere of everyday life. This tendency has been particularly strong in Christianity.

In classical studies of the sacred (e.g. デュルケム 2004(1912), Otto 1958, Eliade 1959), the sacred—defined in opposition to

the profane—has often been considered ambiguous and ambivalent in nature (Biles 2010:138-139). It has also been pointed out that what is considered impure or polluted, and therefore taboo, may possess a power that renders it fearful in a manner comparable to the sacred (Douglas 1966).

R. L. Stirrat, however, examined what he termed the Durkheimian sacred (social and timebound) and the Eliadean sacred (personal and timeless), arguing that these two different notions of time are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary. In terms of this complementarity, Stirrat demonstrated that there is no fundamental difference between so-called "primitive" and "world" religions (Stirrat 1984). His work thus clarified not the ambivalence of the sacred, but its multilayered nature. Similarly, Eade and Sallnow (1991) showed that the sacred of Christian pilgrimage sites is constituted through the interaction, competition, and conflict of multiple discourses and practices. They revealed the constructed nature of the sacred, which had previously been viewed as static and autonomous.

At the same time, scholars have emphasized the importance of the profane as an analytical category. Evans-Pritchard noted that the line dividing the sacred from the profane is fuzzy because the Zande use the sacred place or object for the purpose of ordinary life flexibly (Evans-Pritchard 1965). Parry likewise provided a "profane perspective" by examining the commercial aspects of the cremation of corpses in Banaras, which he treated as analytically distinct from cosmological interpretations of mortuary ritual (Parry 1994).

More recently, Roy (2025) criticizes Durkheim in his article about the cultivation of mortal remains in left-handed Tantric beliefs and practices. Focusing on a major initiation ritual, Roy shows how corpses resulting from what is considered a "bad death" (i.e. untimely death) are mobilized for spiritual advancement (Roy 2025: 3). While orthodox Hinduism considers that the dead body is in the realm of the impure sacred, Roy argues that this ritual transforms the otherness of death into an existential condition comparable to routine acts of everyday life, such as eating or bathing (Roy 2025:2). As Roy notes:

> …he (Durkheim) could not exploit the notion of the profane profitably as a force within religion that is not reducible to magic (Roy 2025: 16)

He calls this notion as "religious profane", and insists that it constitutes a zone of ambiguity between "cosmic, sacramental forces (sacred)" and "mundane, material existence (profane)" (Roy 2025:2; see also Stanner 1967). His analysis of Hindu ritual thus introduces a new dimension into the study of religion by foregrounding the productive role of the profane within the sacred.

This special issue likewise takes seriously into account the relationship between the sacred and the profane. It considers not only ritual practices, but also objects and activities conventionally categorized as mundane. In doing so, it reconsiders "the sacred," particularly insofar as it is associated with material objects. Based on the studies presented here, this special issue proposes an understanding of the sacred as something that is fluid rather than static, which is created in a moving continuum between the domestic sphere and that of the religious and other-worldly.

Accordingly, the focus of this special issue is on how people behave towards objects. In the context of religion, such behavior is often first associated with rituals of sanctification.

The act of sanctifying objects is a religious process, or more specifically, a ritual. Rituals have been understood as formal acts performed by people in response to the sacredness that was assumed from the beginning (Tachikawa 1983: 105). However, Catherine Bell (1992) proposes "ritualization," which is a way of acting that separates and privileges certain actions from everyday activities, thereby suggesting that the sacred is rather created through ritualized action itself. As Tanaka similarly argues, "ritualized action creates the institution of religion," and it is through the practice of ritual that the institution of religion is established (Tanaka 2017: 68). Bell's framework, however, largely presumes a unidirectional process in which human actions operate upon objects. In contrast, this special issue builds on the insights of Bell and Tanaka while adopting a relational perspective in which humans and objects interact to generate the sacred. From this standpoint, the articles examine what kinds of practices are carried out *with* and *toward* objects, not only in formal ritual settings but also in everyday spaces. This approach rejects an epistemological model that assumes belief in sacred beings as a prior condition. Instead, it emphasizes that sacred beings emerge through diverse practices involving humans and objects, including but not limited to ritual action. Furthermore,

this special issue explores how objects may be fluidly positioned between sacred or profane on a case-by-case basis rather than treating objects through rigid dichotomies.

This special issue is not a comprehensive study in itself, nor does it attempt to fully clarify the basis of sanctification or how the practice of sanctification differs from other practices. Instead, this special issue begins with examination of the specific practices in which objects and humans are involved as participants in the religious world. Looking ahead, the contributions suggest that the result of sanctification practices in the mutual relationship between humans and objects may extend beyond the so-called "singularized" (Kopytoff 1986: 69), whereby an object becomes "important" to an individual actor. Because the relationship between humans and objects is mutual, the way of being of both may interfere with and transform each other. In other words, the mutual interference between humans (devotees) and objects may alter the sacred given to the objects. Such mutual interference may, in turn, alter the sacred qualities attributed to objects and enable the emergence of what might be termed a "new sacred" shared collectively.

To address these issues from a broader perspective, this special issue does not confine itself to a single region or religion. Instead, it seeks to deepen our understanding of various religious practices by examining the relations between humans and objects through the combined perspectives of cultural anthropology and religious studies.

6.Overview of the special issue

This special issue consists of an introduction and four research articles. Together, these contributions examine how sacredness emerges, transforms, and circulates through interactions between humans and objects across diverse religious contexts. Rather than treating sacredness as a fixed property, the articles collectively highlight its relational, processual, and material dimensions. The contents are as follows.

Mayumi Iizuka's article, "Generating Sacredness in the Domestic Sphere: Wedding Rituals and the Navaratri Golu Festival in South India," explores how sacredness within Tamil Brahmin households is produced, transformed, and sometime dissolved through ritual action, material circulation, and everyday boundary-making. The study analyzes two key ritual contexts: wedding first-night ritual (*canti mukurttam*) and *Navarātri kolu* festival. Iizuka argues that domestic sacredness emerges through the dynamic interplay of embodied practice, miniature objects, and gendered ritual labor. Wedding rituals transform the bridal chamber into a temporary sacred zone through song, gesture, and the activation of ritual doubles such as the *marappācci* dolls. These same dolls and miniature utensils reappear during *Navarātri*, linking life-cycle rites with annual festivals and demonstrating how ritual objects move across contexts, shifting in meaning as they circulate.

The article also highlights the fragility of domestic sacredness. Kolam designs fade, lamps extinguish, and decorations must be dismantled, requiring continual practices of cleaning, arrangement, and renewal. Such cycles of sacralization and desacralization reveal sacredness as a dynamic, processual state. Iizuka further shows how digital sharing and online kolu competitions extend sacred presence beyond the home, giving ritual objects new social lives. Overall, the article demonstrates that domestic sacredness is not a static condition but a fragile accomplishment shaped by material practices, aesthetic creativity, and negotiated ritual authority.

Mia Tillonen's article "From Festivals to the Everyday and Back: The circulation of *kumade* at Tori no Ichi festivals" examines the relationships that people form with *engimono*, or good luck items, commonly sold at shrines and temples in Japan. By tracing the itinerary of *engimono*, specifically of *kumade* (decorative good luck rakes), from their creation to their role within the Tori no Ichi festival and in everyday life, she investigates how these objects function within the festivals and its different performances. People buy these rakes at the festival, keep them in workplaces or homes, and return the next year to exchange their old *kumade* for new ones. Through the rhythms of the festival and the act of returning them for disposal, we can also see that their value is tied not simply to the shrine as a sacred site, but to the Tori no Ichi as a temporal and spatial gathering of people and objects.

Naomi Kawamoto's article "'God' is Coming to My Home: Catholic images and the sacred in the case of a rural village in Western Mexico" examines the dynamic aspect of the sacred that the image is imbued with, focusing on a Catholic practice in current rural village of western Mexico. In the classical studies of the sacred, it has generally been considered to be disconnected from the profane, and to have an ambivalent nature. Later stud-

ies have revealed that the multi-layered nature of the sacred and its constructive aspect. In contrast, this paper discusses a form of sacredness that comes to involve a performative and intimate one arising from the interaction between humans and objects. Thus, Kawamoto's analysis include the everyday and contingent acts, not bound by formality. In doing so, it demonstrates that the sacred also become containing a part of the profane caused by that the Catholic images go back and forth the realms of "the sacred" and "the profane".

Shijun Zhang's article "Depicting Buddha: Practice, Prescription and Perception" will focus on the depiction of Tibetan *thangka*, a genre of pictorial art widely produced in the Tibetan cultural region. Within the frameworks of Tibetan Buddhism and Bön religion, thangkas are not merely visual representations of various transcendental deities; they are venerated as the "supporter of Buddha" (*sku-sten*), the physical embodiments of divine presence. Their creation and veneration are rigorously guided by canonical doctrines that prescribe the technical, iconometric, and ritual aspect of artistic practice. At the same time, the creation and veneration of *thangka* has constituted a continuously evolving aesthetic system, within which artists have repeatedly integrated realist elements into the sacred canvas. This paper offers a micro anthropological examination of thangka depiction, focusing on how it oscillates between the canonical inscription of the divine and expressive rendering of the real. Through critically engaging with theory of agency of art, and the analysis of writing and drawing, this study explores the dialectical relationship between rendering the sacred image and depicting worldly reality, and how such practices unfold in the tension between prescriptive authority and embodied perception.

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Notes

1) *The Journal of Material Culture*, of which Miller was one of the editors, was first published in 1996.

2) Many studies on materiality have also been published in Japan (e.g. 青木・内堀他編 1997; 床呂・河合 2011; 古谷 2010; 古谷・関・佐々木編 2017).

3) 八木編 (2025) also analyzes religion as something that is extended and developed through relationships among objects and between people and objects, alongside transformations in times and societies.

4) A similar problematic perspective is also identified in Wei-Ping (2013). Wei-Ping points out that, when considering religion in terms of objects, researchers have tended to focus too much attention on the objects themselves, and argues that it is necessary to analyze them in conjunction with religious practices.

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