

Understanding *Butsudan* through Material Religion Perspectives

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This paper examines the relationship between Buddhist home altars (*butsudan*) and individuals from the perspective of material religion. Firstly, it provides an overview of the background and discourse of material religion, followed by a discussion of three households' *butsudan* in the Tsugaru region as specific examples. Recent religious studies has seen the emergence of material religion, responding to the long neglect of materiality due to the assumption that religion is primarily about belief. Material religion, influenced by discussions surrounding objects in philosophy and anthropology, emphasizes the generative aspects of religious sensibility (affection) within the context of materiality and practice, rather than viewing objects merely as expressions of human faith.

This perspective is valuable for the study of *butsudan* as well. Traditional research has viewed *butsudan* as expressions of Japanese beliefs regarding spirits and family, aiming to elucidate the underlying thoughts through *butsudan* and *ihai* (ancestral tablets). However, the perspective of material religion underscores the need to reconsider *butsudan* and its space in terms of the relationship between *butsudan* and individuals, without assuming the presence of fixed ideologies behind them. Examining specific cases from this viewpoint reveals that what is significant to people is not just the Buddhist implements or *ihai*, but also the multitude of miscellaneous objects placed around the *butsudan*, which accumulate to create an atmosphere evocative of the deceased. It can be said that the existence of *butsudan* is sustained by an involuntary relationship with objects that cannot be reduced to individual will.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that different households have varying relationships with *butsudan*, ranging from a focus on family lineage, family members, or individual perspectives. This prompts a reconsideration of existing perspectives in *butsudan* studies, such as memorialism or *ihai*-centered view, suggesting that what sustains the significance of *butsudan* is not a uniform "Japanese ancestor worship," but rather the unique relationships between the living, family, deceased, and objects.

Key words: Butsudan, Material Religion, Belief
