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Fresh Twigs, Drying Blood, and Popped Corn: The Ephemeral Materiality of Eastern Minyag Ritual Objects

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Abstract: The Eastern Minyag is a small community located east of Gangkar Mountain (Chinese: *gongga shan*) in Southwest China. Their complex rituals, performed by ritual specialists (*sutcywu*), serve various purposes: diagnosing the causes of individual psycho-physical ailments, investigating the misfortunes affecting entire families, making offerings to the ancestors, and banishing the ghosts of the deceased. While research on the ritual traditions of communities in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands often subsumes Eastern Minyag rituals under the general category of Tibetan Bon, this article adopts a context-oriented approach that highlights the environmental conditions and cosmology of the Eastern Minyag community. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the author in 2018–2019, the article examines the material aspects of Eastern Minyag rituals occurring in domestic spaces. Specifically, it first explores how natural elements of animal and plant origin are selected and manipulated to create ritual objects. Secondly, it offers an overview of the setups and processes involved in the *vivi* ritual. Lastly, it reflects on the temporary agency of ritual objects contingent upon their ephemeral materiality.

Keywords: Eastern Minyag; rituals; material culture; materiality; material agency; Sino-Tibetan borderlands; Bon

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Academic Editors: Aleksandra Wenta and Amanda Brown

Received: 10 March 2025
Revised: 20 April 2025
Accepted: 21 April 2025
Published: 23 April 2025

Citation: Punzi, Valentina. 2025. Fresh Twigs, Drying Blood, and Popped Corn: The Ephemeral Materiality of Eastern Minyag Ritual Objects. *Religions* 16: 539. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16050539

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1. Introduction: Ritual Objects in Context(s)

Ritual objects described in ethnographic writings, as well as those displayed in museums, have often evoked exotic places and distant times. Echoing this perception, audiences have long appreciated them as both extraordinary and typical hallmarks of Otherness, even when their material and aesthetic features are not exceptional compared to ordinary objects one is familiar with. A drum, the anthropomorphic representation of a deity, or a bronze vessel easily fits into the imagination and expectation of what a ritual object ought to be. However, once a basket for collecting wood, a bowl from the cupboard, a cheap bottle of spirit, or a bunch of eggs is used during a ritual performance, they enter a different epistemological framework and cease to be the same objects that we experience in other contexts.

In her pivotal work, Catherine Bell discussed several classical theories of ritual while proposing an analytical framework that "return[s] such ritual activities to the context of human action in general" (Bell 1992, p. 219). As a result, she further argued that "ritualization is fundamentally a way of doing things to trigger the perception that these practices are distinct and the associations that they engender are special. [...] Hence, ritual acts must be understood within a semantic framework whereby the significance of an action is dependent upon its place and relationship within a context of all other ways of acting"

(Bell 1992, p. 220). The implications of this argument are highly relevant to understanding ritual objects: any object temporarily acquires ritual agency within a specific context rather than possessing inherent qualities that define it as such. Consequently, both extraordinary and ordinary objects share the same context-dependent capacity to impact reality in inscrutable ways.

The study of ritual objects first arose from the earliest anthropological interest in material culture and alongside the musealization efforts that introduced the public to tangible examples of "primitive" art and religion (Myers 2006; Soares 2019). Considered ancient, prototypical, beautiful, bizarre, or a combination of these qualities, objects, including ritual ones, found a place in glass cases under special lighting—which enhances the aesthetic appreciation of texture, color, and shape—while also undergoing a classification process based on quantifiable information, i.e., measures, materials, and dating. In the second half of the twentieth century, anthropologists and curators began to question the ethnocentric foundations of this enterprise. (Morgan 2017b). At the same time, their professional awareness gradually evolved into a collective sensitivity and a call to action, influenced by the wave of postcolonial critique that highlighted the colonial extraction upon which many collections were initially based (Paine 2013; Abiti and Mbewe 2024).

Fostered by dialogue among anthropologists, museologists, archaeologists, and artists, interdisciplinary approaches have emerged today to analyze the subject–object relationship across various fields of knowledge production (Olsen 2006; Thomas 2006). As a result, the anthropological study of material culture is shifting away from the previous emphasis on social significance and symbolic interpretation.[1] Recent ethnographic studies explore the subjective experience of objects through sensory engagement (Howes 2006), conceptualize the agency of objects (Santos-Granero 2009; Joyce and Johnson 2022), and challenge the very divide between subjects and objects (Empson 2007; Pedersen 2007; Comeau 2024). At the same time, contemporary museums not only demonstrate an institutional commitment to presenting objects in more culturally sensitive ways that reflect the original context of production and circulation, but also allow us to appreciate the direct involvement of source communities in making choices about the exhibition of their artifacts. In this regard, the dialogue between museum curators and religious practitioners has highlighted the significance of the intangible dimension of religious art while also raising questions about the ownership of religious objects displayed in secular museums (Wellington Gahtan 2022). New themes in museum exhibitions challenge the traditional concept of preservation linked to museum spaces, as demonstrated by a recent cross-cultural exhibition on impermanence (Johnsen et al. 2022). In anthropological writing, a recent collection of articles in a special issue edited by Katherine Swancutt demonstrates the heuristic potential of the anthropology of display, which "throws light on how people and spirits push at the edges of the social and cosmic order" (Swancutt 2023, p. 19). Amidst these welcomed changes contributing to rebalancing power relations between, on the one hand, the source communities–often politically and socially marginalized indigenous groups–and, on the other hand, the academic community and the larger public, our encounter with ritual objects remains mediated by various academic discursive contexts at the intersection of religious studies and material culture, as well as between ethnographic representations and museum practices.

2. Material Agency

Beginning in the mid-1980s as a response to constructivism and discourse analysis, the material turn introduced new methodologies and theoretical frameworks across various disciplines that reignited interest in concrete matters (Olsen 2006; Bräunlein 2016). This paved the way for exploring non-anthropocentric approaches to the study of material culture and for questioning the division between the social and the material, as well as the

ontological boundary between humans and objects. In connection with theories of materiality, the key concept of material agency emerged as part of the debate. While materiality first appeared in the context of archaeology to describe the relationship between the social and the material as distinct from social relations (Gosden 1994), it soon gained ground in other disciplines. In the study of religion, the emphasis on materiality has contributed to a shift from the classical textual approach as the privileged domain of analysis to a focus on objects. By extension, materiality has come to be used as a broader concept that refers not only to the objects but also to everything that involves their materials, craftsmanship, and the processes of using, circulating, and consuming them (Morgan 2017a).

In its most basic definition, "material agency denotes the possibility that things can act" (Van Oyen 2018). However, based on the different understandings of agency, we encounter a variety of theoretical approaches that can be grouped into three main categories: anthropomorphized, relational, and phenomenological. Earlier theorizations of material agency essentially project human agency's characteristics onto objects. Accordingly, objects' agency is defined in anthropomorphized terms: things act *as if* they were humans. Alfred Gell and Arjun Appadurai can be considered the pioneers of this approach. By arguing that art objects influence viewers and trigger them into action, Alfred Gell prioritized his interest in "social relations in the vicinity of objects mediating social agency" (Gell 1998, p. 7), thus considering the agency of objects as secondary to that of humans. Previously, in a similar vein but within the field of economic anthropology, Arjun Appadurai (1986) demonstrated that once things, i.e., commodities, acquire meaning in a social and cultural context, they exhibit a form of subordinate agency. According to Appadurai, the production, circulation, and exchange of commodities construct social relationships.

The later-developed relational and phenomenological approaches to material agency share the premise that agency is to be separated from the volition and the intentionality that characterize human agency. Consequently, instead of viewing agency as an intrinsic human attribute extended to objects, they perceive it as relational and contextual (Robb 2010). With the Actor-Network Theory (ANT), Bruno Latour (2005) made a decisive move towards decentralizing agency by placing actors in a relational network in which human and nonhuman agencies are equally recognized and not hierarchically defined. Pointing in the same direction but further emphasizing the collaboration of human and nonhuman agencies in co-producing effects, Lambros Malafouris (2004, 2008) elaborated the Material Engagement Theory. Drawing on the earlier work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Manuel Delanda's Assemblage Theory (DeLanda 2016) takes the relational interpretation of agency in a more materialistic direction, emphasizing the temporary arrangement of contingent components into assemblages. Based on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, phenomenological approaches share similar premises with the ones mentioned above but emphasize flow and process rather than relations in the emergence of agency (Thomas 2006; Ransom 2017).

Tim Ingold's distancing critique of materiality and material agency highlights significant issues that the study of material culture must address. In his work (Ingold 2007, 2008), Ingold defined materiality as a jargon with excessive and yet vague polysemic applications that overlook the essential role of materials in shaping objects and their affordances. As a more precise critique of material agency, he argues that "bringing things to life, then, is a matter not of adding to them a sprinkling of agency but of restoring them to the generative fluxes of the world of materials in which they came into being and continue to subsist" (Ingold 2007, p. 12). Therefore, according to Ingold, if we are to explore the possibility of detecting the agency of objects, this can be found only in the properties of their constituting materials and their ever-changing life flow. Ingold's concept of deep materiality is further asserted in his critique of ANT, which he illustrates through an imagi-

nary dialogue between an ant and a SPIDER (Skilled Practice Involves Developmentally Embodied Responsiveness) (Ingold 2008).

In conclusion of this non-exhaustive overview of the debate surrounding material agency, particularly concerning the study of material religion, I agree with Manuel Vásquez that to thoroughly investigate the potential of the material turn to religious studies, "we need a fully 'vascularized' study of religion" (Vásquez 2017, p. 239) to keep the debate alive and open to further growth.

While material agency is still seeking a stable definition, pursuing the question of when there is agency, rather than who or what possesses agency, is likely to yield greater success. Additionally, what do materials and ritual objects provide? To what extent are ritual objects within and beyond the ordinary? How do objects act in the ritual process? How do they achieve results? In what follows, I will address these questions by exploring the lifecycle of several ritual objects used in the contemporary ritual context of the Eastern Minyag community in Southwest China.

3. The Lived Context of Eastern Minyag Rituals in Southwest China

The Eastern Minyag are a Qiangic-speaking rural community of about seven thousand people living to the east of Gangkar Mountain (Chinese: *gongga shan*) in Shimian County (Ya'an City, Sichuan Province) (Figure 1). They speak a language not mutually intelligible with the one spoken by the Western Minyag community, which is settled west of Gangkar Mountain in Ganze Prefecture.[2]



Figure 1. An Eastern Minyag village in Shimian County. Photo by author, winter 2019.

Following the Chinese state-led ethnic identification conducted in the 1950s, the Minyag were officially classified as part of the Tibetan group (Chinese: *zangzu*), which

means they are not recognized as a distinct ethnic group. While the Minyag tend to practice endogamy, their social and economic context is quite multiethnic, as they maintain regular contact with the Ersu, Tibetan, Yi, and Han communities in the nearby mountain villages, as well as in the nearest urban center of Shimian. Due to the remoteness of this area and the late development of infrastructure, the local economy is primarily based on subsistence agriculture and small-scale herding of sheep and goats. In the past decade, state-incentivized cash crops like walnuts (Figure 2) and kiwi have generated little additional income (Zinda and He 2019); overall, the Minyag remain minimally involved in the cash economy.



Figure 2. Walnuts collected in a hand-woven basket after the harvest and before sorting. Photo by author, late summer 2019.

Currently, similar to other rural areas in China, mountain villages are experiencing a significant demographic decline, as young people migrate to urban areas in search of paid employment, leading to a linguistic and cultural disconnect between generations. In the 1980s, Chinese national laws regulated the exploitation of forestry resources. For the Minyag, these laws translated into contradictory policies. On the one hand, reforestation was promoted at the expense of traditional small-scale wood collection in the name of forest protection. On the other hand, state-owned and private companies were supported in carrying out large-scale logging, asbestos mining activities, and road building projects. In parallel, since the promulgation of wildlife protection laws in the late 1980s, the state banned firearms and wildlife hunting, which had been an essential component of the Minyag lifestyle for securing an additional food source and protecting cultivated fields against wild animals, such as wild boars, monkeys, and badgers. Furthermore, the restrictive regulations introduced for managing the Gangkar Mountain National Nature Reserve, a key biodiversity site, have intensified the divide between the Minyag and the environment. Nonetheless, the Minyag continue to benefit from the abundant natural resources in the forests surrounding their villages, where they gather wild species of plants and animals to enrich their diet, such as bee larvae (Figure 3), wild mushrooms, fruits, and vegetables. They also collect construction materials, including slatestone, stones, and logs, as well as firewood and natural fibers, for crafting everyday items like baskets.



Figure 3. Bee larvae collected by my host family in the forest behind the village. Photo by author, late summer 2019.

The classification of the Minyag as Tibetan undoubtedly contributed to considering their contemporary rituals as the surviving traces of the early diffusion of Tibetan Bon in geographically and culturally peripheral areas of the Tibetan Plateau. While Bon is a controversial umbrella term used to identify both the pre-Buddhist religions of Tibetans and the later organized *g.yung drung bon* religion that emerged after the eleventh century, in the contemporary Minyag ritual context, Bon is more narrowly used to refer to beliefs and

rituals concerning mundane purposes that the later Bon tradition categorized under the rubric of *srid pa'i bon*. In general, contemporary Minyag rituals can be reasonably connected to the "bon-identified phenomena" described by Toni Huber in his monumental work on the ritual traditions of the Eastern Himalayas. He refers to these as "those local and regional traditions of rites, myths, and ritual specialists that are designated as bon/Bon by the peoples who practice and maintain them as 'insiders', and which are directed towards achieving purely mundane goals relevant to life in the here and now" (Huber 2020, vol. 1:3). While the aforementioned definition is certainly relevant to the Minyag ritual context, and more broadly, to the ritual traditions in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, this remains a somewhat uncertain, albeit intriguing, field of research that requires significantly more ethnographic data than has been available to date.

For the scope of the present article, given the limited scholarship on Minyag rituals and the preliminary nature of my research, I choose to focus on ritual objects without comparing them to other data from the broader geographic and cultural area. This approach allows me to remain anchored in the Minyag ritual context while avoiding prematurely applying a Tibetan or Bon reductionist framework. In contrast, the study of Minyag rituals, as well as those of other communities in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, must fully incorporate indigenous cosmological elements, local environmental knowledge, mythologies, and the textual, material, and performative aspects of rituals encountered across the transethnic landscape of Southwest China. The Minyag refer to their male ritual specialists as *sutcywu*, who are alternatively addressed as *lama* or *bombo*. These individuals act as "household male ritual specialists that predominantly carry on family traditions and perform a range of ritual services without adhering to any religious establishment" (Punzi 2021, p. 432). During the ritual process, *sutcywu* read and chant a corpus of Tibetan-script manuscripts that complement the ritual actions. However, the content of the manuscripts is neither descriptive nor explanatory of the latter. The knowledge and practical skills of the ritual specialists are acquired through experience and are not documented in writing.

4. Fieldwork Methodology and Data Collection

The article is based on two ethnographic fieldwork trips conducted in two Eastern Minyag villages in Shimian County (Sichuan Province, PRC) between 2018 and 2019, totaling three months. The data were primarily collected during my participant observation in six domestic rituals, which were performed at the request of different families on various occasions. Although my presence at these rituals resulted from fortuitous circumstances, my fieldwork was made possible thanks to the hospitality of one family residing in one of the two villages.[3] During my stay, I was regularly involved in various daily activities, such as cooking, collecting wood, visiting neighbors, walking to the woods behind the village, and sitting in a minivan on the way to the township. These activities allowed me to engage in spontaneous conversations with family members from different generations, as well as with other villagers, about rituals, folk stories, socio-economic changes, and daily life. Additionally, I interviewed two ritual specialists while they crafted objects before the ritual performances and on separate occasions at their homes, where I could inquire further about their practices. Since I do not speak the Eastern Minyag language, I conducted the interviews in Mandarin with occasional assistance from Eastern Minyag students on summer vacation, who kindly reported the names of all ritual objects along with their approximate pronunciations in Eastern Minyag. After recording about twenty hours of audiovisual material during the ritual performances, I watched a selection of it with my host family and one of the ritual specialists to clarify specific details about the names, origins, uses, and powers of the objects.

5. Materials and Objects

Minyag ritual objects are primarily understood as temporary supports for receiving, transferring, and casting away psycho-physical afflictive conditions caused by humans, such as gossiping and cursing, as well as non-human sources, like bad omens or spirits' interventions. Therefore, the qualities of these ritual objects are not intrinsic to the materials used in their crafting but are transitory and removable (Patera 2012). Due to the economic and social circumstances described above, the Minyag community has limited access to manufactured goods. Instead, a variety of locally available organic resources is utilized in the production of ritual objects. These include materials of plant origin, such as bamboo, fresh twigs, grass, wood, corn, and flour, as well as animal-derived materials, like butter, horns, and other body parts from sheep, boars, and chickens. In general, to be usable for ritual purposes, all materials must undergo a multi-step transformation process. After the ritual specialist or family selects and collects the materials, they are purified by being sprinkled with water. Next, the ritual specialist may enlist the help of one or two skilled community members to manipulate the materials using knives, strings, fire, water, charcoal, and wooden molding tools, transforming them into distinct and recognizable objects before finally arranging them on supports and inside containers placed at specific points in the room. In most cases, the prescriptions for the materials or tools are not very strict, allowing for adjustments and substitutions as the situation requires. For example, for the preparation of dough-made effigies made of a mixture of flour, water, and a fat component, the *sutcywu* interchangeably use ground barley, wheat flour, or cornmeal (the only cereal among the three to be locally grown), depending on what is available to the family and regardless of the specific ritual occasion (Figures 4–6). Similarly, butter can be easily substituted by lard when a ritual is sponsored by families with no cattle to produce dairy products. Regarding the containers and supporting bases, plastic or metal basins, tiles, or cardboard obtained by cutting open beer cans or instant noodle boxes are readily available alternatives to the traditionally used woven baskets and slate stones.



Figure 4. Ground barley dough effigies *ngimi lu ndcywae tima* placed on a tile. Photo by author, late summer 2019.



Figure 5. White flour dough effigies placed on a slatestone. Photo by author, summer 2019.



Figure 6. Cornmeal dough effigies placed on a slatestone. Photo by author, winter 2019.

This flexible approach to materials, however, is not uniformly applied. For instance, animals whose blood and body parts are used during the ritual should exhibit specific

physical traits: they should be spotless, without any imperfections, and, depending on availability, preferably black. The color prescription is often overlooked for boars, as black ones can rarely be found in the market and are not bred in Minyag households. In contrast, the requirement for using black rams in exorcistic rituals is usually followed, as they are deemed the most effective at warding off evil spirits. Lastly, the choice of chickens based on their feather color depends on the ritual being performed: while white ones are offered to mountain gods, black ones are preferred as vessels for addressing bad omens in *tsholo* rituals. Specific requirements also apply to the plants used for crafting certain ritual devices. A relevant example is the *ngili*, a composite object made of one reusable animal part, specifically the horn of a Tibetan antelope (*Pantholops hodgsonii*), and three disposable plant parts (Figure 7). The latter include *ndu*, a bundle of vertical bamboo stripes (*Bambusa vulgaris*) tied together with cotton string in either seven or nine stalks—depending on whether the ritual addresses a woman or a man; *tcywaeku ndi*, a bundle of green grass (*Imperata cylindrica*) knotted at one edge; and *litciaewu*, a leafy twig (*Clematoclethra scandens*).



Figure 7. The *ngili*. Photo by author, winter 2019.

The antelope horn is part of the ritual specialist's paraphernalia, and its use metaphorically recalls an old Minyag folk story about an antelope calf that is unaware of its grown horns and accidentally kills its mother by piercing her udder in an attempt to suck milk. The faultless yet tragic consequence of the calf's behavior serves as a metaphor for the actions of the ritual specialist, who violently casts away evil spirits but avoids taking direct responsibility, thereby preventing any revenge against himself. The three plant components—representing *mikhae* (gossip), *tikhae* (violent death), and *tcikhae* (curses)—are cut during the ritual process. In contrast to the materials and objects described thus far, the main paraphernalia owned by the ritual specialist are passed from generation to generation. While the dating, origins, sourcing of materials, and crafting are difficult to assess, most

of them closely resemble or are identical to those used in Tibetan ritual contexts, such as the drum, the bell, the molded wooden stick, the conch-shell, the trumpet, and the cards representing deities.[4]

6. Basic Setups

One ubiquitous object found in Minyag rituals is the *junku*, a large container established at the beginning of indoor rituals (Figure 8).



Figure 8. The *junku*. Photo by author, summer 2019.

It is usually a flat basket made of woven straw, but it can be substituted with a metal or plastic basin. During the ritual, the *junku* is placed in the innermost part of the room, near the ritual specialist. It hosts a set of various items that remain fairly standard with minor variations. In its more complete arrangement, the *junku* contains a base of yellow corn and the incense burner (*buku*) in the center. The latter is a small woven conical basket with the internal surface covered with a layer of clay, which used to be molded with a knife from a place sheltered from the wind. Once shaped, the clay was heated under the sun or exposed to the wind to dry out. Nowadays, when a *buku* breaks and needs to be substituted, it is usually made with bamboo and a layer of cement. Inside the *buku*, traditional Minyag wood incense (*Juniperus squamata*), known as *bu* (Chinese: *huangxiang*), is burnt. *Bu* is collected from the inner parts of trees that grow in the wild by first cutting down a tree and then letting it ferment naturally in situ. After several months, the outer layer is peeled off, revealing the black inner layer, which is ready to be used as incense. The *buku* also maintains its ritual function beyond the specific ritual occasion where it is used. It is typically located in the attic—the most intimate place of the house—near the pole where the horned skulls of animals hunted two generations prior are kept. It is only relocated to the most visible and central position within the *junku* for ritual occasions.

Surrounding the *buku*, arranged in a circle near the basket's edge, there are a bowl of clean water with a small twig inside, a bowl of raw rice and eggs, a bowl of barley flour with either a piece of butter or lard, dough effigies, bottles of spirit (Chinese: *baijiu*), money, cigarettes, intestines, seven cards featuring deities, and a bell. Another item placed inside the *junku* is the *xwawo*, a bundle of seven fresh twigs of loquat leaves (*Eriobotrya japonica*), which must be cut by the family sponsoring the ritual and then arranged into a bundle by the *sutcywu* (Figure 9). At the beginning of the ritual, the *xwawo* is used to sprinkle hot water on the afflicted person's body as a preliminary cleansing step, and it is discarded at the end of the ritual. A Minyag saying holds that "only when using the *xwawo* to sprinkle hot water, the body will not be burnt".



Figure 9. The *xwawo*. Photo by author, summer 2019.

The two dough-made effigies inside the *junku* are called *visae* and *twalwa*. Their primary function is to ward off evil spirits and misfortunes. They are kept indoors during the ritual and fed to livestock after three days. The eggs serve as receptacles to temporarily host the lost soul of the afflicted person upon its return. In some cases, the ritual specialist places the egg and a handful of rice on the afflicted person's palm, facing up, to be held until it shakes, signaling the soul's homecoming. The *junku* also features a third dough-made effigy shaped like a mountain, with two birds (*ciatciatchiog*) piercing it with sticks. This entire effigy is called *tcingkhu ndimae*, representing a couple of male and female birds sent to fetch the wandering soul (Figure 10). Three days after the ritual is completed, it should be fed to the livestock or placed on the roof.[5] The *junku* is set up as a self-contained microcosm in which ordinary and extraordinary ritual components are gathered and bonded into an interdependent relationship. As the ritual unfolds, visible traces of their addition and subtraction are left inside the *junku*.



Figure 10. The *tcingkhu ndimae*. Photo by author, summer 2019.

Additional dough-made effigies are placed on the floor near the door to ward off misfortunes that could affect the family in the future. To host the *ndukwa* dough-made effigy, the *sutcywu* crafts a three-dimensional, three-legged support made from a fundamental structure of bamboo, symbolizing the bones, to which fresh grass is added, representing the veins. The *ndukwa* is made to dispel various potential sources of curses (*tcikhae*): those from a *sutcywu* cursing on behalf of someone, those from relatives, those from parents to children, those from close family members, those from widows, those from orphans, or those from an unknown source in any of the four cardinal directions. The wings on both sides of the *ndukwa* can be made of wood or bamboo and represent the ribs of the human body. The dough-made effigy, with eyes crafted from two pieces of charcoal, is placed on a piece of cardboard within the three-dimensional support. Next to the *ndukwa* is the *munwa*, a dough-made effigy placed inside a three-dimensional, four-legged support. The *munwa* is made to cast away a variety of bad omens (*taenae*): from those caused by non-human entities to those manifesting through unusual animal behavior and abnormal natural phenomena (Figure 11).[6]

Next to these two figures is the *tikhae*, a horse-like effigy with an open mouth that symbolizes greed and insatiability. It is crafted from grass and small pieces of bamboo or wood, all tied together with strings. Anyone capable can assist the *sutcywu* in making it. But the *tikhae* must be made inside the home of the family sponsoring the ritual and must never be taken to another's home. The *tikhae* is exclusively used in the *vivi* rituals (explained in the next section) to ward off potential causes of violent death (*ti*), which may include lightning strikes, drowning, falling from a cliff, being crushed by falling rocks, or being attacked by wild animals (Figure 12).



Figure 11. The *dukwa* and the *munwa*. Photo by author, summer 2019.



Figure 12. The *tikhae*. Photo by author, summer 2019.

Two additional sets of dough-made effigies are arranged on cardboard and placed directly on the floor. One is called *ngimi lu ndcywae tima*. Its individual components are *ngimi lu ndcywae* (two anthropomorphic figures), *litchiae* (long stripes), *ndisimae* (pressed with nail marks), and *khwagir* (cup shape) (Figure 4). The two anthropomorphic effigies serve as receptacles for the evil spirits that can affect the male and female members of the household, respectively represented by a hat and long hair, while the smaller dough-made effigies in this set symbolize the family's properties. The anthropomorphic effigies are made by pressing the dough against the front (for the female figure) and the back (for the male figure) sides of a wood-carved molding tool (alternatively called *ngimi lu ndcywae* or *tsholo pici*) that is sprinkled with white flour (Figure 13).



Figure 13. Wood-carved molding tool–alternatively called *ngimi lu ndcywae* or *tsholo pici*. Photo by author, summer 2019.

Traditionally, artisans carve it by hand using a durable wood like *silae* (*Cinnamomum camphora*). The last set of dough-made effigies is called *tcwando* and consists of two groups of effigies. The small ones arranged in the front are thrown outside one at a time during the daytime. After concluding a chanting session, one small effigy is brought to the afflicted person and moved in counterclockwise circles above their head. The four big effigies arranged in the back are thrown outside in the late evening, at the end of the ritual, each in one of the four directions (Figure 14). Similar to the *junku*, slates, cardboards, tiles, and three-dimensional supports delimit the space and create temporary altar surfaces for the micro-arrangement of groups of dough-made effigies.[7]



Figure 14. The *tcwando*. Photo by author, summer 2019.

7. Operating the Ritual

Vivi is an umbrella term encompassing various kinds of rituals addressing four broad categories of affliction: *taenae* (omens appearing as phenomena that do not adhere to natural laws), sickness, childhood illness, and infertility. The ritual lasts one day and night, always involving slaughtering a ram or boar. The process is quite complex, and a detailed description exceeds the scope of this article. Based on my participant observation in the summer of 2019, I will briefly outline some of the ritual steps that involve the objects discussed in the previous section. On the day before the ritual, the *sutcywu* prepares the three-dimensional supports for *ndukwa*, *munwa*, and *tikhae* in the house of the sponsoring family. The following morning, the ritual formally begins with the purification of all the ritual paraphernalia, arranging items in the *junku*, crafting all the dough-made effigies, and the first chanting (*yidae*). By noon, a boar and the afflicted person are brought into the room in front of the *sutcywu.* The afflicted person sits on a chair, his eyes cast downward. The boar's bent legs are tied with a rope, rendering any movement impossible and forcing the animal to lie on the floor.

The *sutcywu* promotes the transfer of any afflictive condition from the person to the animal in three steps. First, he repeatedly and alternatively touches the head of the afflicted person and that of the boar with the *ngili*; then, he drags the boar counterclockwise on the floor around the person for three rounds; finally, he requests the afflicted person to exhale towards the boar's snout three times. Once this process is complete, a relative or acquaintance of the family sponsoring the ritual takes the boar to the courtyard, where it is slaughtered (*xeniae*) and divided into parts. While the blood is collected into a basin and part of the meat is cooked and shared with the people in the room, the four feet, the head, and one-half ribs are directly brought near the *sutcywu*. The feet are left on the floor where

the boar was originally lying, next to the *ngili* (Figure 15). The head and the ribs are placed close to the *junku* (Figure 16) while the intestines are directly put inside it (Figure 17).



Figure 15. The cut feet of the boar next to the *ngili*. Photo by author, summer 2019.



Figure 16. The head and the ribs of the boar. Photo by author, summer 2019.



Figure 17. The intestines of the boar inside the *junku*. Photo by author, summer 2019.

Shortly after, all the dough-made effigies placed on the floor near the entrance door are sprinkled with blood, popped barley, and corn (Figure 18).



Figure 18. Dough-made effigies placed on the floor near the entrance door, sprinkled with blood and popped barley and corn. Photo by author, summer 2019.

In the evening, towards the end of the ritual, the *ngili* is separated into its constituent parts, and the plant components are disposed of. The *ndu* is discarded directly. After the knotted part of the *tcywaeku ndi* is cut off, the remaining part is rearranged into a *toze* and tied to the antelope horn to be thrown out together to pierce through the evil spirit. Once the ritual is concluded, the ritual specialist takes back the antelope horn, but the *tcywaeku ndi* is hung near the door entrance to ward off evil spirits. The *litciwu* is cut into a cross and is repeatedly cursed until it is brought outside and placed in the direction determined by combining a geomantic calculation with the zodiac sign of the person being treated. A Minyag saying states that "not even one ngili was cut", indicating that a family was so poor it could not afford to sponsor rituals requiring the intervention of a *sutcywu*.[8] Soon afterwards, the *tikhae* is thrown out together with an axe in the direction of the entrance door, where someone immediately picks it up and cuts the *tikhae* into several pieces, then ties the chopped parts with a string and nails it on top of the axe. Finally, the *tikhae* is taken to a crossroad, where it is pressed under an odd number of stones.

8. Ephemeral Materiality and Temporary Agencies

Based on their material characteristics, the objects used in the Minyag ritual context fall into one of the following four categories: paraphernalia owned by the *sutcywu*, like the antelope horn; repurposed domestic daily life objects—both mundane ones like the bowls containing flour and water and ritual ones like the *buku*; ordinary food items, such as corn, rice, and eggs, or the purchased goods, like alcohol and cigarettes; objects made of ad hoc materials sourced from the natural environment, like the *ngili*. All these different objects do something at specific steps or for the entire duration of the ritual, thus displaying a temporary agency contingent on the ritual framework.

In the previous sections, I described how organic materials of plant and animal origins undergo a process that turns them into ritual devices. Yet, such transformation does not alter the living status of their materials. Objects are crafted by and interact with the *sutcywu* based on their distinctive material characteristics until consumed, destroyed, or disposed of according to a specific sequence. While ephemeral materiality intuitively describes sound, smell, and other intangible elements of rituals (Kosyk 2022; Zotov 2024), it can equally qualify the short lifecycle of Minyag tangible ritual objects. At the beginning of the ritual, grains are manipulated in different ways: the cornmeal at the bottom of the *junku*, the wheat flour in the bowl inside the *junku*, the ground grains mixed with butter to prepare the dough for the effigies. During the ritual, the intestines, the head, the ribs, and the meat are arranged and distributed while different plant parts are first bunched together and then split apart. In the closing stage, the popped grains and the blood are sprinkled on the effigies. Lastly, the objects' disposal is determined by their respective constituting materials. Among the perishable leftovers, the edible components are never treated like waste. The meat of the slaughtered animal, as well as the dough used for crafting the effigies, and the grains contained in the *junku* are destined for immediate human and animal consumption. A different case is represented by the *tcingkhu ndimae*, which is entrusted to the household and placed on a dedicated shelf for three days after the ritual is concluded, until it is eventually fed to the family's livestock or placed on the roof to be eaten by birds. Plant-made ritual objects meet a different end: the *tikhae* is cut with an axe and pressed under the stone; part of the *ngili* is destroyed, part is preserved for long-term protection of the entrance, and part is taken back by the *sutcywu*.

Are ritual objects just material tools handled by the *sutcywu*, or do they have agency of their own? Following Ingold's argument on material affordances, I argue that the answer to both questions is no. In Ingold's words, "bringing things to life, then, is a matter not of adding to them a sprinkling of agency but of restoring them to the generative fluxes

of the world of materials in which they came into being and continue to subsist" (Ingold 2007, p. 12). This certainly applies to the Minyag tangible, yet ephemeral, ritual objects. Throughout the ritual process, the agency of objects is determined by the affordances of the materials they are constituted of—grains, animal parts, and plants. Furthermore, Tim Ingold's approach to material(ity) can be brought into a productive dialogue with Tailer Ransom's definition of agency as "an emergent structure that involves a diverse coalition of contributors that actively shape or modulate the accomplishment of a goal-directed process" (Ransom 2017, p. 2). In the *vivi* ritual, such structure is the temporary yet recognizable process in which agency manifest at the interface between human and nonhuman contributors. Rather than being an ontological characteristic, the agency of Minyag ritual specialists and ritual objects is expressed through their relationship at the temporal and spatial nexus of the ritual. How does this synergic agency work?

Together, the affordances and the limits of the human and the nonhuman materials connect, transfer, and disconnect the suffering from the afflicted person. The items arranged inside the *junku*, the alcohol, the cigarettes, the money, and the fresh intestines lure the evil spirits to gather in one place, but it is the *sutcywu* who expels them. The egg on the hand palm of the afflicted person eventually shakes and rolls down, but it is the *sutcywu* who interprets it as the soul's homecoming. The *sutcywu* rotates the small dough effigies around the afflicted person, but it is the dough effigies that remove the source of suffering. The *sutcywu* touches the afflicted person and the boar with the *xwawo*, but it is the *xwawo* that makes the transfer of suffering effective. In the meantime, the agency of the ritual specialist is equally affected by his physical affordances: the tiredness, the elderly age, the hours of uncomfortable sitting posture, and the worsening eyesight while reading the manuscripts impose a limit to his practice.

The expert knowledge of the *sutcywu* and the audience's familiarity with the ritual steps and the cosmological and mythical references recognize ritual objects' agency. However, as the following case shows, such agency may or may not comply with human expectations. After separating the *ngili* into its components, the *sutcywu* throws the antelope horn towards the door. The accidental fall in the "wrong" place—pointing in the direction of someone or too far from the door entrance—is not blamed (or even ascribed) to the fault of a human action but involves the inscrutable dimension of the object's agency, which delivers an unwanted result. In another type of ritual, similar to the *vivi* but on a smaller scale, a chicken is killed and thrown in the direction of the entrance door, together with the antelope horn. Despite being dead, the chicken does not fail to display its agency by not pointing its beak in the "correct" direction and thus acting like an object that falls in the "wrong" position. For the successful accomplishment of the ritual, the *sutcywu* repeats the action of throwing the chicken until he achieves the much-awaited pointing at the "correct" direction, thus once again showing that any agency manifests at the interface between human and nonhuman. Only the entanglement of the *sutcywu* and the ritual objects generates a successful—or unsuccessful—result. The dynamic interaction between the two reveals a relationally constructed agency that is temporarily tied to the ritual occasion. If we keep them separate, neither would be able to operate independently from the other. Based on the example mentioned above, the agency of Minyag ritual objects is not only context-dependent and temporary, but it is co-emerging with human agency. While the ritual framework anticipates the "correct" ways for objects to enact agency, the result is not ensured. The concluding destruction of the objects signals their material end and reminds us of their affordances. Moreover, the environmental circumstances and the time constraints contribute to suspending the exercise of their temporary agency. Darkness is falling, electricity is suddenly cut, people are waiting for dinner, and the slaughtered animal needs to be cooked.

Ritual objects are tasked with dispelling misfortunes encountered in the past, but they are equally expected to guard against future adversities. While the *visae* and *twalwa* dough-made effigies inside the *junku* ward off already-present evil spirits, those placed near the entrance door prevent future ones from manifesting. Through its ephemeral material devices, the ritual is a point in the flow of time, a photogram between the past and the future, which offers the opportunity to redefine the relationship with both.

9. Conclusions

According to Bill Brown's definition of "things" (Brown 2001, p. 4), "the story of objects asserting themselves as things is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation." This relational definition aptly describes the relationship between the *sutcywu*, the ritual objects, and the Minyag community at large. The stories of ordinary objects can be important links to a community's past as much as those of more revered ones (Ramble 2020). The change of materials used for crafting a *buku* is a tangible link between, on the one hand, the memory of the ancestors' crafting skills, and on the other hand, the rituals still being performed in the present. The antelope horn preserves the memory of the Minyag hunting tradition while the folk story of the antelope calf discloses further information about Minyag cosmology and the role of the *sutcywu*. The folk saying about the *ngili* can epitomize the material poverty of a family, while the one about the *xwawo* is an indirect reference to the object's extraordinary power.

It should be clear that by characterizing the materiality of Minyag ritual objects as ephemeral, I do not intend to downplay their importance. Quite the opposite, ephemerality is a trait that has allowed Minyag to be resilient through the dramatic times of the Cultural Revolution, when manuscripts and ritual paraphernalia were hidden in mountain caves to be protected from the fury of the anti-superstition and anti-religion movement, only to be retrieved much later, often severely damaged. Yet, the ritual objects described in this article did not survive, not due to their material perishability but because, in the first place, they were meant to be destroyed within the context of the rituals. However, after the political circumstances changed in the 1980s, people's memory enabled the revival of rituals and their ephemeral objects, even without any material trace to rely on. While creating new copies of manuscripts or producing new ritual paraphernalia required a much greater effort, crafting ritual objects was immediately possible since the essential components required—grass, wild plants, flour, etc.—were available even in times of material scarcity. Nowadays, ephemeral ritual objects continue to be crafted from inexpensive materials that hold little economic value in the market economy but serve as gateways to deepening our knowledge about the environmental resources available to Minyag and their cosmology in continuity with the past.

To conclude, a relational and temporary understanding of agency is an essential premise for exploring the potential definitions of material agency. Future research on material culture in ritual studies would benefit from comparative data across various ethnographic contexts. Additionally, materials and their affordances should be acknowledged as playing a primary role. In the Minyag ritual context, this is made more evident by the ephemeral materiality of objects. While ritual specialists might claim to follow identical sequences in their practice, rituals are, in fact, context-specific and take shape through unique subject–object interactions. Because they are not made of precious or lasting materials, ephemeral ritual objects can be easily recrafted each time a ritual requires it, while they ensure their power by being destroyed.

Funding: This research was supported by the European Union (ERC, PaganTibet, project 101097364). However, views and opinions expressed are those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect

those of the European Union or the European Research Council Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study did not require ethical approval.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: I wish to thank Baobao Chimi for his friendship and assistance during my fieldwork in his village in 2018 and 2019 and, most recently, for generously sharing additional data he collected during his fieldwork trip in summer 2024. I am also immensely grateful for the generosity, knowledge, and support of the Eastern Minyag community. However, I alone am responsible for the analysis presented in this article and any possible misinterpretation of the data.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

1 An extended overview of the development and the pluralization of the anthropological debate on the study of ritual objects is provided by Davide Torri (2024).

2 For more details on the linguistic and religious differences between the two communities, see (Punzi 2021). As stated in the title, the present article is exclusively concerned with the Eastern Minyag. The figure of twenty thousand reported in Punzi (2021) refers to the total Minyag population (Western and Eastern). In what follows, all the references to "Minyag" are to the Eastern Minyag. When not otherwise specified, the terms in italics are all in Eastern Minyag language and are reported with their approximate pronunciation rather than with IPA to simplify the reading. Tibetan terms are rendered in Wylie while Chinese terms are in pinyin.

3 To respect the privacy of my interlocutors, I anonymized the villages as well as the names of the Eastern Minyag family members and ritual specialists.

4 The deities' cards are approximately palm-size, and they are basically identical in size and iconography with the *tsakali* cards that are widely used in Tibetan Bon and Buddhist initiation ceremonies as visualization supports for meditation practices. Despite the evident Tibetan origin of these cards, they do not perform the same function in the Minyag ritual context, where they are placed inside the *junku* for the duration of the ritual but are not linked to any visualization technique. Further research is needed to provide more information about the specific deities featured on the cards, their specific uses, and their place of origin.

5 Like Tibetans, Han, and other communities in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, the Minyag believe that a condition of psycho-physical affliction can result from the soul roaming outside of the body and becoming vulnerable to the attacks of evil spirits. If the soul is not fetched, but roams too far away and for too long, it will eventually forget the way back to reconnect with the body. For this reason, the longer the separation the more intense the exposure to the risk of worsening one's symptoms up to the point of threatening life. In this case, a prompt ritual intervention is required. For soul-retrieval rituals in the Tibetan context, see Karmay (1998) and Ramble (2010).

6 For a detailed description of omens in Minyag cosmology, see Baobao Chimi's MA thesis "The Omen System of Eastern Minyag (Sichuan, PRC)".

7 The same happens during rituals performed in the outdoors when animals are offered to the mountain deities. Huber (2020) describes a similar use of base-supports for arranging offerings among Qiangic-speaking people and in eastern Bhutan.

8 Small-scale domestic rituals were and still are performed by elder family members without inviting a *sutcywu*.

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