



The Material Agency of Crystals in New Spirituality Significance of Decay and Failure of Materials

Abstract

This paper¹ studies crystals in New Spirituality in Estonia not only as things, or objects, used in certain practices, but also as agentic materials. My research participants, who wear crystals, take their material properties seriously, finding the properties to have supportive qualities, according to esoteric interpretation. Nevertheless, things and materials, objects and minerals, are never permanent; they have material lives of their own. Sometimes minerals lose their gloss, crack, break or just become lost. Physical decay and displacement, which are the focus of this paper, have meaning-making potential, which my interlocutors interpret within the framework of the esoteric. Their perception of these minerals can be understood in post-humanist and new materialist terms. The paper uses the concept of material agency to demonstrate how natural processes of decay acquire cultural meaning by connecting material properties and human interpretation.

Keywords: Material religion, material culture, new materialism, materiality, materials, agency

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Introduction

Crystals² are currently widespread and popular objects in Estonian New Spirituality,³ as well as in European and Anglo-American New Spirituality in general. People most often wear them as jewellery or accessories that have esoteric⁴ and supportive qualities (see Teidearu 2019). They have gone from being part of a strictly spiritual subculture to becoming more visible, or a matter of discussion, in mainstream culture and media. What is significant about this trend is that it made material objects a focus of New Spirituality, and therefore, these ideologies and beliefs have become more material and tangible. Nevertheless, there has been only moderate interest in the study of crystals among scholars of religious studies, sociology of religion and anthropology of religion internationally (e.g. McClean 2006; Melton 2013).

Based on my ethnographic material on the use of crystals, people most often wear crystals as jewellery in the form of pendants, bracelets, necklaces, earrings or rings, or else they just carry tumbled⁵ stones or raw minerals

2 The crystals popular in New Spirituality are semiprecious minerals that are usually cheap and mined and traded globally. Based on my empirical data, synonyms include 'gemstone' (*poolvääriskivi*), 'gem' (*poolvääriskivi*) or 'stone' (*kivi*). In this paper, I use these three designations as synonyms for crystal (*kristall*).

3 The terms 'New Age' and 'New Spirituality' are occasionally treated as synonyms, but in my paper I draw a distinction between them and prefer the term 'New Spirituality'. I use the term 'New Spirituality' to mean a contemporary Western syncretic spiritual movement or religiosity. The concept 'New Age', however, applies to the New Age movement and 'cultic milieu' (see Campbell 1972) of the 1960s and 1970s. More recent research proposes that this is no longer an emic term and that the main focus in contemporary spirituality has shifted from the cosmological idea of entering into a new era known as the Age of Aquarius to the spiritual development of the self, which Paul Heelas (1996) have defined as 'self-spirituality'. Therefore, several scholars (e.g. Sutcliffe 2002; Lynch 2007; MacKian 2012) propose that the concept 'New Spirituality' is more appropriate for a contemporary setting. The paper does not, however, develop a discussion on the distinctions between these two terms.

4 In my research, I understand the esoteric as an element of discourse that is linked to an absolute or hidden truth or knowledge and that can also be experienced; esoteric discourse is not identical to a specific tradition; rather, it represents knowledge, opinions and the social organisation of a tradition (von Stuckrad 2014: 6–10). Esoteric knowledge, or the esoteric in my paper, is linked with specific knowledge about crystals in New Age or New Spirituality, which is applied in my interlocutors' narratives and interpretations as discursive elements. In my empirical data, the spiritual energy of the human body and minerals (i.e. the hidden properties of crystals) comprise this discursive esoteric knowledge. Esotericism, distinctively, refers to a broader body of specific esoteric tradition. However, Western esotericism and esoteric knowledge can also be perceived culturally as an umbrella term for various associated religious teachings and streams of philosophical thought in Western culture that have been rejected by Christian and academic authority as 'superstition', 'magic' or 'the occult' (Hanegraaff 2012, 230; 2013, 258–266).

5 Tumbled stones are gemstones that have been polished in a rock tumbler.

with them in a pocket or bag. As I have discussed it in a previous paper (see Teidearu 2019), people generally use crystals to solve personal problems and to bring change to their lives by supporting their human capacities and qualities. In esoteric interpretations, crystals have energetic qualities that support people by affecting the chakras of their subtle body.⁶ Every stone supports a specific energy or human quality associated with a particular chakra (Teidearu 2019, 144; cf. Johnston 2009, 27–29). By using crystals, people develop, enhance and (re)construct themselves (Teidearu 2019, 137–145). My informants wear stones every day, often the same stone every day, which they perceive as a mutual relationship having a supportive effect on humans that affects the crystals as well (Teidearu 2019), a relationship that shows bodily intimacy with stones (Teidearu 2022). Therefore, it is a particularly material and interactive practice. Besides perceiving stones as objects, my interlocutors also value crystals as unique and ‘powerful’ materials (i.e. minerals) in their own right (Teidearu 2022), and they take the material and its properties seriously (see Ingold 2007). However, some crystals become lost, break or develop fissures, or their gloss or colour becomes altered over time and through much use, which are the cases that this paper concentrates on.

In the study of material religion, the main focus is on how religion takes place through, or as, material culture and how material expressions of religion are part of people’s religious and mundane lives (Arweck & Keenan 2006, 13–14; Meyer et al. 2010, 209; Morgan 2010, 56–70). So as not to treat religious objects as evidence of belief (see Keane 2008, 110) or emphasise belief over materiality (see Teidearu 2019, 134–135), my study departs from a methodological view of crystals as first and foremost just pieces of material culture, and materials specifically. Religious objects, after all, have the same meaning-making qualities as any other objects (Morgan 2010, 70–73). One way to make sense of materiality in religion or New Spirituality, which I focus on in this paper, is to pay attention to the material forms of objects and to their materials as well as to any alterations in or decay of that material.

This paper studies the decay and material failure of crystals and analyses them not only as things, or objects, but as materials also. Materials, as discussed in this paper, are not permanent; they are often affected by decay. Through much use, crystals sometimes happen to fall apart or become lost. Physical disintegration and displacement have a meaning-making potential in the human use of things. I will analyse interpretations of the physical alterations of crystals as viewed through esoteric interpretations and knowledge. Material agency,

6 A holistic understanding based on the concept of the energetic subtle body and its chakras is widespread in New Spirituality and modern Western Esotericism in general (Samuel & Johnston 2013, 1–6).

as a concept used in this paper, aims to apply a new materialist perspective to bring together the material properties of crystals and human interpretation in a posthuman perspective. Instead of just rejecting an anthropocentric viewpoint, my argumentation demonstrates how natural processes of decay acquire cultural meaning through human interpretation. Concentrating on materials and decay by acknowledging natural and essentially material processes offers a new materialist possibility to better understand material religion and material culture in general from subjective, cultural and natural perspectives.

In my ethnological study of the contemporary use of crystals in New Spirituality, I have followed the methods and theories of material culture studies in anthropology that make it possible to analyse the meaning-making processes of things in material religion (Morgan 2010, 70–73), and I have been also inspired by the archaeological approach to objects and materiality, which focuses on the materials that objects are made of, their material properties and decay. Furthermore, my approach in this paper is influenced by posthumanism, and more specifically, by the new materialist perspective on materiality as inherently performative or agential matter, addressing the question of the agency of things and materials. While ethnology has often focused on human relations with the non-human world, the aim of this enquiry has traditionally been to comprehend human culture and the human worldview (Kaarlenkaski & Steel 2020, 1). The discussion on posthumanist approaches in ethnology (e.g. Murawska 2020) is more recent than in the humanities and social sciences.

The study of material culture and material religion has a long history in European ethnology. Since the early national orientation of the discipline in 19th century, together with a focus on salvage ethnography, which concentrated on collecting and preserving the materiality of peasant everyday life, artefacts have long been of interest (Korkiakangas, Lappi, & Niskanen 2008, 8; Löfrgen 2012, 170; Jääts 2019, 2–4). Unlike in Scandinavia or Central Europe, material culture remained at the centre of interest for Estonian ethnographers under Soviet rule until the early 1990s (Jääts 2019, 7–10). Alongside an interest in mundane folklife, early ethnographers in Estonia collected some Christian and folk religious ritual artefacts, but their interest in the materiality of religion remained modest (Johanson & Jonuks 2018a, 203). Folklorists have been active, though, in documenting narratives of folk belief and folk magic, which were also often linked with specific things or natural objects, such as sacrificial stones (see Tvauri 1999), trees and springs (Johanson & Jonuks 2018b, 108–109; see also Mohay 2008, 30–31). However, archaeologists Kristiina Johanson and Tõnno Jonuks (2018a, 203–207) point out that certain types of stones and stone objects are the most abundant exemplars of folk religion, including folk magic and folk medicine, in the collections of Estonian museums; for example, the muse-

ums contain thunderstones, curing stones, witch's stones, raven stones, stones protecting against strokes, stone hearts, stone sticks, ear stones and stone axes linked with thunderbolt folklore. Ethnologist Jana Reidla (2012, 16–61) finds that in Estonian traditional jewellery, beads used mainly as necklaces were widespread until the beginning of the 20th century; most often, the beads were made of glass, but beads made of stone or minerals (usually calcedony or quartz) are also known, spreading mainly between the 13th and 17th centuries. However, the semiprecious stones – i.e. minerals – found in New Spirituality today have not been studied in Estonia before my research (e.g. Teidearu 2019).⁷

Fieldwork material

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork done in Estonia between 2017 and 2022. During this period, I conducted 41 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, combined with ethnographic observations at 17 esoteric shops,⁸ focusing on the sale of crystals across Estonia. During or after the interviews and observations, I kept a fieldwork diary. Also, I took photographs of the crystals that people use and of the esoteric shops. In addition to ethnography, I have analysed esoteric books written on crystals, although the books usually describe the effects that the stones have, leaving aside the human–stone relationship, which is the general focus of my research. This empirical, visual and textual material forms the basis for my PhD research project, as does this article. However, this paper makes use of empirical examples from eight interviews with six research participants. Both in presenting empirical examples from the ethnographic data and when referring to my research participants, I have used pseudonyms and birth years with their approval.

My research participants, in general, do not form a solid community or group. Nearly half of my interlocutors are spiritual practitioners who wear crystals daily, with whom I met through the snowball method. The other half are clerks or owners of esoteric shops, or crystal therapists, whose devotion to stones is more professional. I met with them mainly by visiting various esoteric shops. I also visited one Estonian jeweller and gem cutter who works with minerals as a material. Most of my interlocutors are women, with only four of

7 Some recent research on material religion has been done, for instance, by Estonian ethnologist Laur Vallikivi, (2011) who studied sacred objects of the Nenets people, and folklorist Madis Arukask (2017, 2021), who studied Votian and Vepsian rituals involving trees and the materiality of text and books in Seto oral culture.

8 The term 'esoteric shop' (*esoteerikapood* or *esoteerikakauplus*) is an emic term among customers and shopkeepers. Other emic terms that I use in the paper are 'crystal shop' (*kristallipood*) and 'stone shop' (*kivipood*), both of which are used by customers and shopkeepers alike. The terms illustrate the recent and common trend of selling mainly crystals in esoteric shops in Estonia. In this paper, I use the term 'esoteric shop' without developing a further discussion on the recent trend, and characteristics of 'crystal shops'.

them being men. This percentage may just be a random outcome of the snowball method, but it does correspond with the claims by shop owners and clerks that crystals are popular mainly among younger or middle-aged women. The informants who reportedly just wear crystals, and are also clients of esoteric shops, are mostly women in their twenties or thirties. The shop keepers, clerks and crystal therapists whom I met and interviewed are mainly middle-aged women.

The main method used to study the practice of wearing crystals (see Teidearu 2019) and their physical alterations was 'object interview', in which stones were the main focus of the semi-structured in-depth interviews (both thematically and physically). Sophie Woodward (2019, 35) explains that the object interview as a part of a 'material methods' approach is an interview method that 'incorporates objects into the process of doing an interview'. The physical presence of such objects in interview situations helped me and my interlocutors to think with things (Woodward 2019, 12–20), and moreover, to 'think through things' (see Henare et al. 2007, 4) as they appear in their lives. I asked my research participants to bring their crystals to our interviews. This allowed both me as a researcher and my interlocutors to have stones physically present in the centre of the interview space, providing both a material and thematic connection. My informants occasionally touched their crystals or held them during the course of our conversations, which helped them to recall memories and feelings and to contemplate their relationship with the stones (see King 2009, xvi). Objects evoke and recall experiences, narratives and emotions that would not necessarily emerge otherwise in a conventional inter-subjective interview situation (Woodward 2019, 37). The materiality and material form of objects are also present in the object interview, and both researcher and research participants are able to pick them up, touch, feel, smell and inspect them closely. This allows the material form, materials and material properties of the crystals to be part of the interview. For me as a researcher, the physical presence of stones highlighted the significance of their material nature (see Ingold 2007). By taking close-up photographs, I was able to document these material details. Moreover, material traces of any damage or alterations, such as fissures, erosion and lost gloss, became part of my interlocutors' narration. In those cases, material alteration and decay as natural processes, too, became part of the object interview. Narratives of decay reflect human interpretations and explanations of natural processes, which sometimes are less materialist and more cultural, i.e. linked with other types of cultural knowledge and interpretations.

All the interviews were transcribed for further analysis. The transcriptions were analysed using the grounded theory method to prevent forming an initial hypothesis or following initial theoretical categories during the analytical process. The analysis revealed clear links between different categories and topics, which allowed me to situate my interlocutors' statements in a broader con-

text. For example, clear links emerged between the material form and material of crystals and their physical alteration and the concept of spiritual energy.⁹

Materials and agency

Things are not passive, as material objects have an effect on people in various ways (Woodward 2019, 20–22). Objects have many qualities that are part of their meanings, as is evident from the study of material culture in anthropology or ethnology. The material form of things is significant because materiality has tangible and sensuous qualities that shape human experiences and identities (see, e.g. Alftberg 2017). For example, the materiality of homemaking is full of mnemonic and affective significances,¹⁰ and even the materiality and sensuous qualities of books can have affective and emotional agency upon people (Kajander 2022). Agency is generally understood as a socio-cultural ability to act (Hoskins 2006, 74; Gell 1998), which can also be applied to non-human actors, such as things, machines and technologies that affect both human behaviour and ways of being in the world. Agency can also be applied to religious objects and entities (Lynch 2010, 49–50), which are experienced as having an active role in human use or interactions.

However, objects are not static or permanent, as the unexpected may happen. Things sometimes fail or misbehave, which is experienced as a rupture of their functionality, or they just become lost, which also sometimes affects human actions and feelings. Anthropologists Timothy Carroll, David Jeevendrampillai and Aaron Parkhurst (2017) propose that things sometimes falling apart or becoming lost can be theoretically understood as a ‘material failure’, in which material stuff behaves contrary to human intention. Things have a temporal dimension, although they are often expected to continue in the same situation in the future as in the past or present; people expect that things will be permanent (Carroll et al. 2017, 2–15). Therefore, ‘material failure’ in cases of breakage or loss is perceived as a significant event, which encourages human meaning-making practices. This approach opens up an understanding of things, for example crystals, as potentially unstable objects, which I aim to apply by analysing my interlocutors’ interpretations of losing stones.

In the case of crystals, besides being valued as things, they are perceived as meaningful and valuable because of their unique material – they are natural minerals. In the simplest terms, ‘minerals are naturally occurring, macro-

9 The reference to ‘energy’ in the concept ‘spiritual energy’ is a widespread holistic notion in New Spirituality (see Lynch 2007, 11–47); it forms the basis for the use and valuation of minerals in esoteric interpretation (Teidearu 2019, 144; Melton 2013, 203–207).

10 For example, see the current Finnish ethnographic project ‘Material and Sensory Memories: Explorations on Autobiographical Materiality’ (SENSOMEMO).

scopically homogeneous chemical compounds with a regular crystal structure', formed by geological and chemical processes (Wenk & Bulakh 2014, 3–11). For some of my interlocutors, their esoteric qualities and their ability to support people are caused by their molecular structure. For them, scientific knowledge is embedded in the esoteric framework. Nearly all of my informants feel that their esoteric qualities are an outcome of their long-term formation in the ground, with their unique material identifying them and their use as things. Kaia-Liisa Reinut (2015, 104), the most well-known crystal therapist in Estonia, writes in her handbook of crystal therapy that 'every person who has studied crystal therapy knows that crystals emit positive energy according to their chemical constitution, colour and physical form'. It is evident that my interlocutors who wear gemstones, including practitioners of crystal therapy and shopkeepers, take the material and its properties very seriously. Similarly, the evaluation of diamonds in the buying and selling of precious stones is based on an investigation of their material, its properties (flawlessness) and qualities (colour, opacity) (Calvão 2015, 201–204). However, instead of assigning financial value to them, my interlocutors value the material of inexpensive crystals, i.e. semi-precious stones, because of their esoteric meaning and because they perceive minerals as 'powerful' material (see Teidearu 2022).

Tim Ingold (2007) writes that when material culture and materiality are under discussion in anthropology, and in material culture studies in general, materials and their properties are often neglected. Instead, we should take materials and their properties seriously. Materials are not permanent, however; they alter and decay, as do the objects made up of those materials. From an archaeological standpoint, decay is a natural part of material culture, an outcome affecting all materials and their properties. Archaeologist Bjørnar Olsen (2010, 162–166) stresses that material culture is never static or permanent since its primary property is to decay with use and time. Similarly, archaeologist Ian Hodder (2012, 68) states that things have material lives of their own, which is their primary agency; not a secondary agency that is delegated to things by human intentionality (see Gell 1998). As archaeologists Eleanor Conlin Casella and Karina Croucher (2014, 95) put it, '[d]ecay is not only essential, but an inevitable process'. The objects in people's lives change, wear out and decompose, which is a function of their material properties; or they just become lost. In their engagement with human life, the decomposition of objects and materials provokes reactions, feelings of unease, discomfort or curiosity (Casella and Croucher 2014, 95–96), and often requires explanation (*cf.* Carroll et al. 2017). Scholars in the field of archaeology appreciate and apply the study of the intrinsic properties of objects and materials from geology, mineralogy, chemistry and biology, as well as a focus on the process

of decay (Casella and Croucher 2014, 92–93). From this perspective, a form of agency can be ascribed to material properties and physical alterations (see Olsen 2010, 157–173; see also Ingold 2007, 12). As a result of this instability, people become entangled with the material life of things through human contributions to the maintenance and persistence of objects (Hodder 2011). An appreciation of materials and of decay and material alteration in archaeology provides things with their explicitly material agency, or the agency of material and material life, which opens up new perspectives also in an anthropological study of material culture and the everyday use of things.

The approach of focusing strictly on material processes can be associated with the quest for new materialist strands of thought, which aims to detach itself from the anthropocentric view of things as passive objects. It seeks to understand things as matter, which itself is intrinsically active or inter-active, affective and agentive, or even vital (see Bennett 2010, vii–xiii). In this paper, and in accordance with my empirical data, I highlight Karen Barad's (2007) perspective, which emphasises the performative nature of matter and can be categorised as a 'performative new materialism' (see discussion in Gamble et al. 2019, 122–123). According to Barad (2007, 137–178), matter is productive, it is both generated and generative in the sense that matter is constantly in motion and in formulation, similarly to the flux or flow of materials (see Ingold 2007, 11–14); agency, for its part, can be understood as 'doing' or 'being', or an 'enactment' that occurs only in intra-active¹¹ performances. Matter in new materialism has inter-active and performative potential often specifically because of its substance or material. Sonia Hazard (2013) writes that new materialism in general is based on the assumption that things have unique properties because of their material form, which users or consumers are not always aware of, i.e. things have agency of their own, which is not clearly perceived or understood. Therefore, we need to pay more attention to the materiality and properties of things (Hazard 2013, 64–67). Due to their chemical and physical properties and processes, materials are an active party in interactions with humans and human use or with other materials; according to the natural science perspective, materiality is not static or persistent (Jones 2016, 4–6; Coole & Frost 2010, 5–15). When humans use things, these things sometimes break. This is usually caused by physical wear, usage that does not correspond to the properties of the material, or it is just the natural decomposition of materials over time. However, the material failure enacts human

11 Instead of using the term interaction, Barad (2007, 141) proposes using the term intra-action to address agency within matter that in itself and in its occurrence with other matter or forces is performative and generative and not to treat items or agents as pre-established objects.

meaning-making practices. This phenomenon, which is an outcome of both physical alteration and human interpretation, can be understood strictly as 'material agency' (see Woodward 2019, 20–22) in this paper. Similarly, post-human mutual interactions can be perceived by focusing ethnographically on everyday life encounters, for instance with natural objects such as lakes (Murawska 2020).

The focus on materials and interpretations of their alteration provides an approach that seeks to understand both material causes and human intentionality, and their interrelations, grounded in ethnographic data. New materialism is an interdisciplinary field of thought with its own aims and intellectual sources, which sometimes manages to provide a connection to both human and natural sciences (Jones 2016, 2–4). Material agency, as I conceptualise it here, includes processes long known in natural sciences and gives them cultural meaning.

Based on the following empirical examples, I will discuss how crystals as things have agency when people lose them, and how stones as materials have material agency in cases of breakage and physical alteration. Furthermore, I analyse interpretations of such unexpected occasions. These significant events, in which gemstones are claimed to act upon people, are often interpreted in an esoteric framework.

Losing stones as 'material failure'

My interlocutors wear or carry crystals with them in various ways every day, and they rarely take them off or leave the house without their stones. Most of my research participants have experienced losing a crystal, having a crystal falling off or finding somebody else's lost crystal. On such occasions, they often attribute agency to crystals. People develop strong intimate and emotional bonds with the crystals that they wear daily, which I have conceptualised, based on discussions about 'my stone', as an analytical concept (see Teidearu 2019, 143–144). Losing such a personally significant object, one that supports their human qualities and aspects of everyday life, is perceived as the stone leaving the owner's possession against their will. My interlocutors often interpret such an occurrence as accidental and unexpected, and therefore meaningful. They have described how and why their stones have fallen off or been lost, for example a pendant band snaps, a clasp or attachment breaks or comes off, a stone falls out of a setting due to poor glue or a loose guide setting, or the stone or jewellery piece itself is lost. Maya (b. 1991) related how her lazurite pendant, which she got from her older brother, was lost:

In a way, it was very important to me, and I was disappointed when it was lost. I thought that probably I didn't need it. However, this stone gave me so much power and strength, I really felt it. When I didn't have it anymore, I was in a situation where I had to cope by myself somehow. I was even thinking [about buying a new one]; I was looking for jewellery with the same stone. Eventually, I thought that it was lost once and for all, and I wouldn't buy it for myself again. I had just gotten it, and then it just went away. I didn't choose this stone or this jewellery at all. If I was going to have contact with this stone again, it would be in just the same way: I would get it as a gift. I wouldn't obtain it myself, but I would like to have it. It feels right somehow, that if I didn't choose it, it just came to me and then it went away; so, I can't acquire it just like that.

Maya interprets the loss of the stone as coincidental, but also as a natural occurrence. An instance of failure, for example losing a crystal, is also a moment of reinvention and meaning-making (Carroll et al. 2017, 10–14). Perceiving it as just a random occurrence is often not enough to explain or overcome the loss. Maya and many others among my interlocutors understand losing gems as stemming from the fact that the gems have agency to act in a certain way towards humans. Their main argument is that a crystal is lost when a person no longer needs the support it affords. This means, in my informants' own words, that the stones 'have done their job', they have supported the person in solving some specific problem and are no longer needed for their specific quality. Using an esoteric interpretation, my interlocutors say that the crystal has balanced the human subtle body, or chakra, compensating for a deficiency. Once this action has been accomplished, the gemstone can leave that person's possession. Tiia (b. 1966) said that the angel aura quartz¹² pendulum she had for a short period did a great job for her, and after that it may have gone to another person who also needed its support:

It was really very strange how it got lost. I got a marvellous crystal pendulum, an angel aura quartz pendulum, and it stayed with me for only two weeks. Then it left me, and I don't have a clue how. One day it was simply gone, and I couldn't remember where I put it. It was 2014, I think, and it hasn't returned. It did its job; I even perceived what it did and it was wonderful. It did its job and went where it should inexplicably. Perhaps it went to somebody else who found it where I, so to speak, lost it. Well,

12 Aura crystals are quartz or amethyst crystals that have been chemically treated to colour the surface with different metals, giving them an unusual sheen. The base mineral is heated and treated with vapour from a precious metal (gold, platinum, titanium, silver, iron, magnesium or nickel), which coats the crystal. Angel aura quartz is treated in this way using silver or platinum.

anything can happen in the subtle realm. ... For me, it still means that it has done its job. It can go to another person. It has shared the information with me that it should.

Tiia admits that the human mind is sometimes unable to comprehend how things happen in the subtle world,¹³ which is the basis for the agency of crystals according to her understanding. In fact, this perception is shared among my informants and in common esoteric discourse on crystals in New Spirituality. In the words of my interlocutors, stones know better what humans need, and they act accordingly. Therefore, people try to accept such instances as losing personally significant crystals, even if it is experienced as a 'material failure' (see Carroll et al. 2017, 5–6). For example, Daisy (b. 1991) told me that the two crystals that she wears every day no longer stay around her neck. She had the stones hanging around her neck on a leather band, but now they always come off, whatever type of knot she makes. Therefore, she cannot wear them anymore, and there is nothing that she can do about it. Like Maya, when she lost her jewellery, Daisy concluded that probably she should not wear the stones anymore.

My informants have great respect and empathy for stones, and therefore, they tend to think about stones not only in anthropocentric terms, but also in 'stone-centric perspective' ways, i.e. they interpret events from the perspective of the stones. Gordon Lynch (2010, 49–50) writes that people often tend to attribute subjectivity and agency to religious entities and things in a specific cultural context. Graham Harvey (2012, 198–201) explains in animist terms that people attribute human qualities, such as intentionality, to non-human entities or objects only if they can relate to and communicate with them in a particular and meaningful way; only under such conditions can a thing or entity be perceived as a 'person' or 'other-than-human person'. In another paper (Teidearu 2022), I have analysed human relationship with crystals as 'other-than-human persons', as a kind of animist materialism, which is in my empirical material based on a specifically bodily, i.e. a phenomenological, relationality and intimacy with the stones (*cf.* Harvey 2013, 135–151). As my interlocutors in general pay respect to crystals, and sometimes claim that stones are alive and have an agency, they regard gemstones as equipotent actors with humans. This can be understood as an example of a 'flat ontology', in which everything exists equally and humans as individual actors are just one part of a larger whole (see Harman 2018, 54–58). The way in which my interlocutors perceive crystals shows clear parallels with animism and flat ontology. People who use gemstones often think about losing them from a 'stone-centric per-

13 'Subtle world' as an esoteric term indicating the subtle materiality and reality based on spiritual energy, which forms the basis for a holistic worldview in New Spirituality.

spective', which, for them, implies that crystals have agency and cause events in case of instances of 'material failure'. Specifically, they perceive the material displacement as a physical reaction on the part of the crystals. Similarly, my interlocutors think about material and the material alteration of stones from the perspective of crystals and their relationship to human interactions.

Physical alterations as material agency

In addition to losing stones, some of my research participants have experienced physical alterations or breakage of their stones as well, or they have heard stories about such occurrences from their acquaintances. As with lost stones, my interlocutors perceive the breaking of stones as the stones' ability to react to humans. They often interpret these instances in esoteric terms and associate them with subtle energy. Annika (b. 1987) explains the breaking of stones in an esoteric framework as their energetic ability to absorb and store, transform and emit, spiritual energy (see also Teidearu 2019, 144):

When a stone gets lost, then I believe that it did its job for me and it took what it absorbed away from my energetic field. Or, if a stone breaks, then it has done its job – it absorbed as much as it could, and it broke.



Figure 1. Bella's (b. 1990) moonstone necklace, which has developed a fissure in the middle of the largest stone because, as Bella explains, it transforms energy and supports her and other people she is working with, but they has not cleansed the stone recently. Photograph: Tenno Teidearu.

The subtle energetic essence of crystals is directly linked to the materiality of stones, or to be more precise, to the material of which the minerals are made. Annika and Bella (b. 1990), like many others, associate the breakage of stones with a saturation of negative energy. In my interlocutors' personal experience narratives, crystals change over time physically by breaking or developing fissures or by their colour or gloss changing or fading. For example, Daisy's moonstone,¹⁴ which she had been wearing permanently as a pendant against her chest for more than half a year at the time of our interview, has faded and developed fissures:

This is moonstone and its gloss have faded. It was very glossy before. I have been wearing it since June. I graduated from the EAA [Estonian Academy of Arts] and was about to apply to university and I felt that the pressure I had at the EAA was off me and everything was beginning anew. I heard the name of this stone in a dream, in my dream and during the day, I heard it repeatedly in my mind – moonstone, moonstone, moonstone. Therefore, I started to search for information about this stone. I found out that it symbolises a new beginning; it was a stone of new beginnings. It was glossy. Perhaps it is because of wearing it physically, maybe it is like erosion or something like that, I don't know. ... Now, I don't really know whether I should wear it or not, to be honest. It is the first time, I guess, when I have taken it off for a long period, for several days, since I got it. Look, it has completely eroded! [Daisy is inspecting the stone closely and asks me to look it – it has eroded and developed fissures and lost its gloss.] It was completely smooth before. Can you believe that! It means that it gets too much pressure; it has to work too hard. It just can't keep it up; it doesn't manage to do its duty anymore. It is hard for them [laughs], but it is because of me. ... It also means that it's job is done; now you have to buy a new one, if you wish. Yes, it has fissures all over. [Daisy shows me the moonstone.] What!? It really was glossy when I bought it! Yes, I had a lot of faith in that now everything new begins. Yet, now I haven't had this faith for more than two months, and I still don't have it. I have fallen back to the same state. Perhaps therefore it [the moonstone] is having a hard time. However, I haven't been cleansing it much. I also think that it is hard for the moonstone that I quit smoking every day. It is a new beginning every day, isn't it bothersome? [...] Actually, the moonstone is the first one that has quit by itself, like that: 'Daisy, enough!'

Daisy bought the moonstone when facing positive changes in her life; she associates it with having a supportive effect and with changes and new beginnings in her life. In addition, she associates the fading shine and fissures with the fact that, actually, she has been unable to change her life. Therefore,

14 *Kuukivi* in Estonian.



Figure 2. Daisy's crystals, which she cleanses in salt. Her moonstone, which has faded and eroded, is at the bottom right. Photograph: Tenno Teidearu.

it has been more difficult for the gemstone to support her. Alterations to the surface and appearance of the stone represent a change in the meaning or story of the stone itself (see also Ingold 2007, 15). Regarding the physical alterations, Daisy says that she has not cleansed the energy of the crystal enough, and therefore it has absorbed too much negative energy.

Cleansing crystals is the practice of taking care of them, and in doing so of maintaining their supportive effect (Teidearu 2019, 146–149). Taking care of them is linked to the practice of wearing them, and in doing so people are involved in the life of minerals. Hodder (2011) argues that humans and material objects depend on each other – people depend on things, but things depend on people as well, because they need human interruption in order to maintain their functionality. This mutual dependency in Hodder's terms is entanglement, which he finds to be the primary agency of things and material culture in general (2011, 155–162; 2012, 68–86). My informants find it essential to cleanse their stones energetically, to maintain their support but also to prevent physical alterations, as this will decrease or negate their effect. As my empirical data demonstrates, the intention underlying the need to take care of the esoteric energy of the crystals is also a desire to maintain their material qualities. The tangible material forms of crystal, and their maintenance and impermanence, is inherently and causally linked with esoteric interpretations. Estonian jeweller and gem cutter Arne (b. 1947) told me that clean-

ing stones and jewellery with soapy water and a brush is essential because cleaning maintains their gloss and water prevents them from becoming too dry, which may cause fissuring. From his perspective, the esoteric approach to the effect of cleaning crystals is peculiar, but it may be therapeutic from a psychological standpoint. He emphasised that within an esoteric framework, cleaning the jewellery is often accompanied with certain beliefs, but the intention of taking care of the stone physically is still the same.

In the above quote, Daisy indicates the possibility that her moonstone has lost its gloss because of physical impairment or erosion due to constant use. Apart from esoteric interpretations of changes to crystals, people sometimes highlight material effects and causes. This knowledge is also spread in the general discourse about crystals, but mainly among experts and dedicated practitioners. For example, Kaia-Liisa Reinut (2015) explains in her handbook on crystal therapy that sunlight damages some minerals, causing their colour to become lighter or cloudy. Water or salt can also damage some minerals. (Reinut 2015, 71–78.) However, people use – and are taught to use in esoteric shops and in books about crystals – water, salt and direct sunlight to cleanse and recharge the energy of crystals (see Teidearu 2019, 146–149). Rinsing them in cold running (tap) water and placing them in the sunlight are the most common methods of taking care of stones, but Daisy, for example, also uses salt to cleanse her crystals.

A moonstone, for instance, may crack when soaked in water for an extended period. A moonstone in general is categorised as having poor wearability because it is not a very hard mineral (6–6.5 on the Mohs Hardness Scale) and can be scratched; it is also brittle and can easily crack or develop fissures, just like Bella's moonstone did (see figure 1). Moreover, it is vulnerable to salt, sweat and cosmetics, such as lotions, which may cause the stone to take on a matte appearance, just like Daisy's moonstone (see figure 2). Arne told me that many minerals, including moonstone, can be damaged by cosmetics and creams, seawater and salt, direct sunlight, too hot a temperature or a sudden change in temperature. Therefore, people should take into consideration these factors when wearing their jewellery and stones. For instance, people should not wear jewellery on a beach in the summertime, where it is exposed to sun, sun cream and seawater. In addition, it is better to wear, for example, a necklace on top of clothing rather than under it in direct contact with the skin because sweat contains salts. However, my interlocutors, who regularly wear crystals, usually wear them in contact with their skin. Tumbled minerals are sometimes coated with oil, wax or lacquer, which conceals small fractures and gives them a high gloss (Wenk & Bulakh 2014, 542), or treated chemically in the case of aura crystals, despite the fact that the treated surface can be damaged by physical wear or through contact with skin, sweat, detergents or cosmetics.

Knowledge of the technology used in the production of commodities and the constituent materials used to make them can diverge from what could be called consumption knowledge, used for example when buying and wearing crystals. Consumption knowledge is often vernacular, although the two do not contradict one another in essence. Interruptions in the distribution of production knowledge may be caused by distance (spatial and temporal) between the manufacturer and consumer as well as the commodity chain (Appadurai 1986, 41–56). For consumers, and for my informants, knowledge about the technological treatment and production of crystals, their physical and chemical properties, and chemical reactions with different substances is often limited. In my empirical material, only the owners of esoteric shops and experienced clerks have told me about their physical and chemical properties and about stones that react to water, sunlight or salt. If they are aware of such reactions, they usually inform clients of the possible damage that such substances can cause to particular minerals, but not every clerk is aware of the details. My informants who wear stones have experienced breakage or fissuring of their crystals, snapped pendants, the breaking or detaching of clasps, and fading or alterations in their colour. Due to a lack of knowledge, my informants only rarely included material (chemical or physical) explanations in their personal experience narratives. Usually, their argumentation was based on esoteric knowledge and an interpretation of the esoteric properties of crystals, with them associating the absorption and emission of spiritual energy as the reason crystals break or become altered physically. However, even if my informants sometimes had a material explanation, they still tended to explain matters in esoteric terms as well. Esoteric interpretations can accompany material causes, which expands the meaningfulness of such instances and provides further explanation for the material properties and alterations of crystals.

The material agency of crystals comes about due to their instability as objects, and moreover, as materials that are meaningful to the people who use them. Olsen (2010, 158–160) writes that people often assume that things and the material environment are stable and permanent, a perception that feeds into our imagination of the existential security of human life, and this has culturally constitutive significance. The materiality and tangibility of crystals, and wearing them, creates feelings of security and trust in the stability of one's life. Stones are biographical objects (see Hoskins 2006, 78) that are interwoven with their owners' lives and personalities. However, minerals can be damaged by inappropriate wear and exposure to damaging substances. Every change or alteration in the material form of things is more or less unpredictable and unexpected (Hodder 2012, 85). 'Material failures', such as physical alterations of stones or their loss, are always unpredictable and unexpected

for my informants, and they are accompanied by feelings of unease (*cf.* Casella & Croucher 2014, 95–96; Drazin 2015, 4–24). To avoid this predicament, they become entangled (see Hodder 2012, 95–98) with crystals by taking care of them. My interlocutors, for example, cleanse gems physically, which maintains both their spiritual energy in esoteric interpretations and their material form. However, some methods for cleansing stones, for example the use of salt, can damage some minerals and therefore cause unintentional results.

Material culture and materials have their own temporalities and material lives (Hodder 2012, 98–101). As Ingold (2007, 7) puts it, people are involved in ‘a world of materials’. The agency of matter resides in the flux of materials, and materials often become evident at the moment of their transformation (Ingold 2007, 11–14; see also Drazin 2015, 23–24). Material agency emerge out of this motion or flux of materials that enacts material performances. Similarly, in a new materialist perspective, matter is constantly in motion and in formulation, and agency in this case emerges only via an enactment of intra-active performances (Barad 2007, 137–178). Hazard (2013, 64) points out that new materialism aims to address the capacities of matter that people, including my interlocutors, are often not aware of, but which causes things to have agency of their own. Importantly, unexpected and unintentional occurrences are moments of human reinvention and meaning-making (Carroll et al. 2017, 10–14). Unstable and performative matter, or material, enacts human interpretation. Any change or alteration in the physical form and material of crystals needs interpretation, which is usually based on an esoteric framework. Ultimately, the material nature and esoteric interpretation of crystals are intertwined because their physical alteration is understood as an energetic process.

Conclusion

In the tradition of the ethnological study of material culture, artefacts have changed from being representations of everyday peasant life to being affective and tangible things in people’s lives. Some recent ethnological studies have also applied a posthuman perspective, and my paper contributes to this emerging approach. In research done on Estonian culture, stones and minerals as artefacts, natural objects or materials have occasionally been linked to folk religious beliefs and magic, and traditional jewellery is no exception. However, crystals as part of contemporary spirituality have not yet been studied. My ethnological study of semiprecious stones is influenced by the anthropological study of material culture, an archaeological perspective on the materials of objects and their material properties, and the new materialist approach.

The meaning and significance of crystals, as a form of material culture or material religion come from their tangibility, material form and materials, all of which are associated with their supportive and esoteric qualities. Materi-

ality has an abundance of various characteristics and significances. In doing research on material culture and things, we should take materials seriously (Ingold 2007). This applies to my empirical material explicitly because crystals are valued not only as things, but as special material – minerals – as well. Based on my empirical data, the esoteric qualities of crystals are the outcome of their chemical molecular structure (crystal structure) and formation in the ground; therefore, they are valued primarily as a material.

However, crystals do not have permanence as things. In losing stones, people often attribute agency to the stone itself because they aim to understand such instances in esoteric terms from the perspective of gemstones. The displacement of stones that they wear close to their body constantly is perceived as unintentional loss, a kind of ‘material failure’, which needs an interpretation. My interlocutors often explain the loss of crystal from a ‘stone-centric perspective’, and they transfer the agency involved in leaving a human’s possession onto the stones themselves. It is evidently a non-anthropocentric viewpoint that emphasises the life of things.

Moreover, crystals are not static or permanent as material. The breaking or physical alteration of stones, which my informants interpret in terms of energetic qualities, is nevertheless a material process. It is the material of crystals that alters. Material culture is essentially unstable and impermanent because of its materials and the properties of materials, which causes things to become worn out, decompose or break apart over the course of time and through human use. Material agency, as I understand it in my paper, is based on materials and their chemical and physical properties and processes, which are interpreted as part of another category of knowledge.

Decay is an inherent and meaningful property of all material culture in general as well as material expressions of religion and spirituality, as discussed in this paper. This process of decay and resulting impermanence of things opens up new methodological possibilities for studying material culture or material religion, and the question of agency. Therefore, how people interact with things, and how these things become part of creating, maintaining and changing culture and religion, is hugely significant. Relatedly, what people do when the instability of things offers resistance to their intentions is equally important. In other words, just like the permanence, durability and stability of things has cultural significance, so too does the impermanence and decay of things. The main agent here is the material life of things or matter, i.e. the chemical and physical processes that are the causes of decay and ‘material failure’. Apart from concentrating on objects and material practices when studying material culture or religion (see Keane 2008, 124) and thinking through things (see Henare et al. 2007, 4), we should also think through materials

(see Ingold 2007) as they are exposed to decay or alteration, and therefore, have material lives of their own. This opens up a new materialist perspective on material culture as being constantly in a state of formulation and having performative power.

Material agency, as I have discussed in this paper, is not primarily anthropocentric or cultural because it is caused by the instability and decay of material culture, which is an inherent property of matter in general. Rather, it is a natural process caused by materials and their material life. I call this inherently material process 'material agency' to distinguish it from the social dimension of objects, by which agency is often understood. Material agency becomes evident when the temporalities and lives of humans and materials meet in a situation where things escape out of human control and act independently. To make a broader generalisation, this approach emphasises the physical decay of material culture and the human interpretation of this material process, in which material nature and cultural interpretations are entangled. In an ethnological study of material culture from emerging posthuman and new materialist perspectives, material processes can have cultural significance.

AUTHOR

Tenno Teidearu is a PhD student in ethnology at the University of Tartu. He works as a researcher at the Estonian National Museum. His PhD project concentrates on the use of crystals in contemporary New Spirituality and their trade in esoteric shops in Estonia. His main research interests are material religion, vernacular religion and material culture and consumption.

SOURCES

Fieldwork materials

All the interviews, photographs and fieldnotes are in the possession of the author.

Interview materials

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Annika, female, b. 1987, January 2017, Tartu, Estonia.

Bella, female, b. 1990, January 2017, Tallinn, Estonia.

Daisy, female, b. 1991, January 2017, Tallinn, Estonia.

Maya, female, b. 1991, January 2017, Tallinn, Estonia.

Tiia, female, b. 1966, January 2017 and August 2019, Tartu, Estonia.

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