

THE PRACTICE OF WEARING CRYSTALS  
 IN CONTEMPORARY NEW SPIRITUALITY  
 IN ESTONIA: SUPPORTING ONESELF  
 IN EVERYDAY LIFE

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ABSTRACT

This article concentrates on the practice of wearing crystals in Estonia. The practice is currently a popular phenomenon in New Spirituality on a global scale, although it is not an entirely novel trend. Crystals are part of the materiality of New Spirituality and so the aim of the article is to emphasize the meaning-making process of this materiality and of vernacular interpretations in the practice. Following the methodology of material culture studies, I focus on mutual relationships and interaction between humans and crystals and the significances gained through practice. Based on the perspectives of vernacular religion, the practice is embedded in people's everyday lives. People wear crystals to support their human qualities and daily activities, and in practice crystals as material objects evolve intimate and profound relationship with people.

KEYWORDS: New Spirituality • crystals • material religion • material culture • vernacular religion

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I concentrate on the contemporary usage of crystals<sup>1</sup> in Estonian New Spirituality. The aim of the study is to analyse the meaning-making process of the practice of wearing crystals from the perspective of material culture studies on everyday religion and material religion. The interaction between people and gemstones is a process that generates meanings and significances, and through the context of one's everyday life the practice becomes coherently meaningful.

The practice of wearing crystals in New Spirituality is currently a widespread and popular phenomenon. Use of gems in New Spirituality is not an entirely novel trend.

Due to the lack of previous studies on crystals and the esoteric market in Estonia,<sup>2</sup> I can only draw parallels with other countries and regions. According to John Gordon Melton (2013: 208–209) practices of healing with crystals were widespread in the 1980s in the USA, although this trend had declined by the 1990s and the market for the relevant gems almost vanished. Melton gives no description of the situation after that. In addition, other researchers (for example Wood 2007: 123; Albanese 2008: 499) have indicated that use and sale of gems were extensive in 1980s. Adrian Ivakhiv (2007: 277) even claims that there was a crystal craze in the USA in the 1980s. However, it seems that the use of gemstones has not been sufficiently studied, and the practice of wearing gems has not been studied anthropologically. According to my data about the Estonian case, crystals started to spread more widely in 2012, and the practice of wearing crystals became popular and widespread in 2014. According to journalists, for example Rina Raphael (2017), who have written about the popularity of gems, a similar process has taken place in the USA. There is a new crystal boom taking place globally in contemporary New Spirituality.

My study is based on fieldwork and interviews conducted since 2016 in Estonia. I have analysed 22 interviews with 22 informants, and have had conversations on various occasions. I was previously acquainted with some of my informants, but most I met through fieldwork by using the snowball method. The majority of the informants are women in their twenties or early thirties, five are middle aged women, only two are men, both in their early forties. According to staff in esoteric shops,<sup>3</sup> the practice is widespread among women, especially younger and middle-aged women, but more and more men are also developing an interest in crystals. Most of my informants are “everyday spiritual practitioners” (see Uibu 2016: 37) who wear crystals daily. One of my key informants is Diana, with whom I have had conversations on crystals since 2016; I have also occasionally asked her opinion on my findings. In addition, I have carried out ethnographic observation at esoteric shops to study how people choose and buy crystals. Nearly half of my informants can be classified as ‘occupational practitioners’ (ibid.: 39–41), whose current occupation is linked to crystals and who usually wear them. All are from various backgrounds. Liis, for example, is a crystal therapist who has worn crystals and used them for healing for about 10 years. Tiina worked at an esoteric shop as a seller and has worn and used crystals for healing for more than five years. In spring 2017 she established her own esoteric shop selling mainly crystals. Helene had run her own web shop as a hobby for nearly three years, and in 2018 bought and rebranded an esoteric shop. Anni has worked at an esoteric shop for two years and started to wear crystals herself during this period. I met them while making ethnographic observations in esoteric shops, conducting interviews with them in the shops. However, I concentrate on their personal relationships with crystals in this paper.

My informants wore their crystals during interviews and some of them brought several extra with them. Crystals were at the centre of our conversations with interviewees often touching them when talking about them because it helped to recall memories and feelings (see King 2010: xvi) and to “think through things” (Henare et al. 2007: 4). I have analysed the interview transcriptions using the grounded theory method to understand the associations between different themes and analytical categories, as well as the inherent links between materiality and significances, practices and everyday life. In addition, I have analysed esoteric books on crystals and articles in the media to understand the general statements and knowledge that is circulating in New Spirituality.<sup>4</sup>

Geologist Anto Raukas (2017: 32–60) explains that gemstones are natural minerals that have a specific crystal structure. They are classified by different chemical and physical properties such as molecular structure, colour, opacity, hardness. Different ‘species’ of gemstones form in the Earth through chemical and physical processes. Unlike rare (precious) gemstones the crystals that spread in New Spirituality are semi-precious stones that are found and mined in many countries and are usually inexpensive. Most of the gems on sale in Estonia are imported from Asian countries, especially from South Asia, but there are also gems from other continents. Today esoteric shops in Estonia sell crystals in different forms: pendants, bracelets, necklaces, earrings, rings, jewellery, or just polished or natural. Crystals are currently the most essential article of commerce in the majority of esoteric shops in Estonia. A number of new esoteric shops and web shops has been established over the last five years, most of them specialising in crystals. Crystals and the practice of wearing crystals have gained a central role in the spread of New Spirituality in Estonia and abroad.

Crystals belong to a variety of material expressions of spirituality – i.e. material religion (Arweck and Keenan 2006: 13–14; King 2010: xv). Crystals are also part of the spiritual marketplace and commerce (Roof 1999: 79, 87; Redden 2005: 236–237, 241–244), and are among the spiritual tools and cultural implements of New Spirituality (Uibu 2016: 59, 64) in general. However, the material aspects of New Spirituality have generally not been studied in depth even though the variety of material expressions and practices associated with materiality is extensive. Paul Heelas (1996: 114) indicates that many spiritual goods became more popular in the 1990s: audio cassettes, video cassettes, CDs, healing potions and herbs, tarot cards and crystals. According to Karlyn Crowley (2011: 40–41), spiritual goods – crystals, books and audiobooks, films, etc. – were available not only in esoteric bookshops but also in bookshops and shopping centres in the early 1990s in the USA. Georg D. Chrissydes (2007: 5, 15) lists popular practices and objects in New Spirituality as crystal therapy, crystals, incense, tarot cards, spiritual self-help books, astrology, Oriental and spiritual esoterica, reiki, healing therapies, yoga, and interest in different religions and traditions. Matthew Wood (2007: 123) makes a generalisation based on his empirical data that the most common practices among healers in New Spirituality are crystal therapy, aromatherapy and use of herbal distillates, all of which are often combined in therapy sessions. Materiality has attracted moderate attention among researchers studying New Spirituality and everyday religion (see for instance Ammerman 2007a; 2007b; McGuire 2008; MacKian 2012), but even in these cases, objects and materiality are usually regarded as a minor topic.

Some researchers have briefly written about crystal use in New Spirituality. Cathrine Albanese (2008: 498–499), for example, indicates that wearing gemstones was believed to protect the person and increase his or her spiritual power; Albanese attributes the ability of mediating spiritual energy to stones. Gordon Lynch (2007: 169) classifies crystals and their use as a spiritual technique that affords therapeutic aid and the possibility to control one’s life. These generalisations reflect generalised spiritual interpretations of the ability crystals have to affect humans. These claims are based on beliefs associated with gemstones, but they leave aside a subject-centred and vernacular perspective on religion and practices. Spiritual literature and widespread understandings in New

Spirituality differ from vernacular meaning-making in practice. The latter is what I am focusing on in my study. It is essential to understand wearing crystals in anthropological terms, i.e. an understanding that is based on empirical data and highlights an individual's meaning-making process in practice and in everyday life. In addition, I find it crucial to pay more attention to materiality and objects in practice.

#### MATERIAL RELIGION AND MATERIALITY

Interest in the materiality of religion has evidently grown since the outset of the material turn in the humanities and social sciences in the 1980s. Material religion as an interdisciplinary field of study concentrates on different kinds of material expressions and practices linked to materiality in religions. As Julian Droogan (2013: 23–24) notes, many scholars who study material religion are critical of the traditional dichotomy between material culture and non-material culture that influenced classical studies of religion. Most of these concentrated on belief, religious experience, philosophy, religious doctrine, myth, texts (such as script and theology) and psychology, with little consideration of materiality as a primary and essential element of religion (*ibid.*). Scholars of material religion focus on the variety of material expressions of religion, spirituality, popular religion and consumption in the everyday context, which – as they say – sacralises everyday life, work and leisure and mediates the transcendental world to bring people closer to that world (Arweck and Keenan 2006: 9–15). Different material expressions – for example mass produced statues, pictures, crosses and crucifixes, beads, oils, water – and religious practices create a religious world based on belief and materiality. From the sociological perspective, material religion embodies belonging; it distinguishes, connects and segregates religions and religious groups (King 2010: xv, 1). What do objects 'do' in religion and for religious people? Frances King takes note of the significance of materiality when he indicates that production and possession, and well as touching and relating to objects and images, are universal phenomena when it comes to practicing religion. Religious objects are instruments of devotion. People learn, maintain, mediate and experience beliefs through material religion, which helps them create and maintain religiosity in everyday life. Nevertheless, based on empirical study of the practice of wearing crosses, King writes that for Catholic Christians the cross is a material and tangible reminder of their belief, family, home and identity. King indicates that the cross is an object of memory and biography (see also Hoskins 1998; 2006) and is significant not only because of religion or belief. (King 2010: 2–15)

In most of the generalisations above, religion, belief and practicing religion are central in understanding objects and materiality; the significance of objects and materiality is reduced to belief, religion and the sacral world. From these generalisations it is explicit that in studying material religion, most researchers have put more emphasis on religion, and less on individuals, everyday life and objects as material culture. In addition, scholars studying New Spirituality generally pay more attention to beliefs, belief systems and practices while any analysis of materiality and objects is often neglected.

Materiality has an essential role in the meaning-making of practice in different theoretical and methodological approaches. Opposed to verbalised belief and speech as a media, Urmilia Mohan and Jean-Pierre Warnier (2017: 371–373) stress the significance

of procedural knowledge based on the bodily-and-material culture of religion. My study departs from a methodological view of crystals as first and foremost material things or objects, and material culture in general. In studying gemstones as things, I follow methodologies and theories of material culture studies. The central idea, and most important here, in material culture studies is that meanings are generated in a mutual relationship between humans and things. People act with things, and things act with people (Löfgren 2012: 173); people create things, and things create people (Lavolette 2013: 13). Moreover, world-making activity that happens in material form is based on material culture and things, while also including feelings, values, fears, and obsessions that inform one's understanding and use of things (Morgan 2008: 228). This world-making activity, as well as the feelings and materiality, are embedded in everyday life.

#### CRYSTALS IN THE CONTEXT OF EVERYDAY LIFE: THE DYNAMICS OF PRACTICE

Spirituality and religion often take place or 'happen' in everyday life and mundane settings. Focus on religious expressions in everyday life is common among folkloristics, anthropology, and the sociology of religion. Leonard Norman Primiano (1995: 42–44; 2012: 383–384) proposes a concept and perspective called 'vernacular religion' that concentrates on how people encounter, understand, interpret, and practice religion in their everyday lives through the verbal, behavioural and material expressions of religious belief (cf. Ammerman 2007a: 5–9). Based on my empirical data, the perspective of vernacular religion and the context of everyday life helps to better understand beliefs, religious practices, materiality, and people themselves. In addition, the practice itself in the mundane context is a process of meaning-making.

Crystals are worn in various situations and occasions, and this practice is meaningful specifically in the context of everyday life, as my empirical data demonstrates. While some crystals are worn occasionally to give support in accordance with the necessities of daily life, those that are worn permanently give physical and material meaning to the practice of intimacy with objects (see Thomas 2006: 48–47; Olsen 2010: 68). The frequency and the duration of wearing particular gemstone vary according to personal needs. Kristel, for example, wears different jewellery with crystals every day, which she chooses in the morning based on her schedule and her assessment of what support she needs during the day.

I think, of course I think when I am in the process [of choosing crystals]. Some days I know exactly what I want, what jewellery I want to wear. However, if it is not a day like that then when I go to my box and shelf I try to feel what I want. Well, I think about this day, where I will go, with whom I will meet, what I will do and what I would like to experience. Then I think which crystals could support me in reaching this experience. (FM: Kristel)

Kristel lives near the city of Tartu. She adds that sometimes she takes extra jewellery with her when she goes to the city because unexpected changes in her schedule or unpredictable encounters with people may require different jewellery – and therefore a different kind of support. In addition, according to other informants, choosing the right

crystals is linked to their daily duties and activities. However, some crystals, which are linked to solving personal problems or are needed for constant support, are used permanently. Rasmus stresses the need to wear crystals permanently to have an effect: "Some can give you rapid aid, but crystals generally function much slower than pills or injections. [Laughs.] It takes time, that's why wearing [crystals] is useful." (FM: Rasmus) Based on various empirical accounts, wearing one specific gemstone permanently also brings about a stronger personal relationship with the stone. Diana told me how her first crystal, magnetite, has become a natural part of her:

Well, when I bought this magnetite, it was something external to me at first. From the beginning, I hold it in my hand very often. And I prayed for it, to make it work because I really needed it. Then, it gradually became [a part of me], I just did not take it off anymore. At first, it was like a magical object for me in some sense, because it was my first one. It was as if I could turn to it externally if I need help. Like through that I could reach something that helps me. [...] Now it is like part of me. It is like, I do not know, my guardian animal or my element. And it is crucial to have it just in front of my heart. (FM: Diana)



*Photo 1. Left Diana's magnetite, right tourmaline. Photo by Tenno Teidearu.*

In this example, it is evident that the meaning and significance of Diana's gemstone is not static, it evolves in practice and over the course of time. Igor Kopytoff (1988: 66–68) writes that we can ask the same questions about objects that we usually ask about people's lives in a way that creates a cultural biography of things. Describing the biography of crystals in narratives opens up a process of meaning-making for them and the practice of wearing them. However, meanings in this process are unstable – they spring up, evolve, change and vanish, and are conditional. In addition, physical contact and closeness with crystals are meaningful in the phenomenological perspective. Bodily experience of an object mediates and expresses closeness and significance to a person (Olsen 2010: 68, 130–133). In different narratives that are linked to the practice of wearing crystals, the process of meaning-making is also bound to temporality. Gemstones that have been in use permanently over a longer period of time become biographical objects that stay in people's lives, becoming interwoven with personalities and biographies (cf. Hoskins 1998: 7–8; 2006: 78). However, the relationship between human and a gemstone can also develop in the opposite manner:

Then, at one moment, I woke up in the morning and I had such a feeling, that this [necklace] is hanging around my neck. [...] At first, I didn't want to wear it anymore, because I had this feeling of being hanged. (FM: Anna)

Anni expresses similar feelings: "It doesn't mean that I don't like this stone anymore. It is rather that at the current moment in your life you just don't need more of these qualities in your life." (FM: Anni)

If one feels uncomfortable and stops using or wearing a crystal, it does not mean that it has lost its meaning or its ability to give support. Rather, it indicates that the person does not need that specific support anymore, and the gem has done its job, as my informants have told me. The relationship between subjects and objects is inherently dynamic, never static (Miller 1987: 33). As these examples demonstrate, the relationship between people and things, which is at the core of material culture studies, is rather a dynamic process of meaning-making. The practice of wearing gemstones is one of everyday religion and meanings in this practice are conditional, biographical, temporal and dynamic. Crystals that people wear permanently gain their significance and evolve deep personal and intimate relationships with people. They are closely linked to people's everyday lives and the self, and to the process of changing one's self and life.

#### MOTIVATIONS FOR WEARING CRYSTALS

Crystals are attributed various healing and supportive qualities and effects on human beings, according to esoteric books (for example Hall 2009) and descriptions at esoteric shops. Albanese (2008: 498–499) proposes a generalisation, that wearing crystals is believed to protect the person and increase his or her spiritual power. Based on my data, I can agree with the importance of the quality of protection, with which many crystals are associated. All of my informants who work in crystal shops indicate that protection is one of the most important and common qualities or keywords that clients use when choosing and buying crystals.

People often ask for protection stones. [...] Tourmaline, black agate, hematite, obsidian, all black stones and dark coloured [crystals]. It is no wonder that people ask for protection crystals, because there are many malicious people around. [...] But yes, there is a lot of negativity around. However, there is no negative energy, since energy is neutral. It is just how we receive and perceive things – we perceive it as negative. Then these dark and black crystals help to filter it, so that we wouldn't perceive it as negative. (FM: Helene)

Helene, who owns a crystal shop, associates the need for protection mainly with other people, their acts and intentions, and says that this is based on spiritual energy. As my informants have explained, protection is linked to negative instances and encounters in life. Protection is associated mainly with black and dark coloured crystals, but it is also the most common and widespread quality among various crystals in general, as every crystal is often associated with several healing and supportive qualities.

A need for protection is just one reason for the use of crystals. According to descriptions of healing and supportive properties, the effect on a person is psychological, physical and worldly, and is linked to everyday life, while for some crystals it is also spiritual. In general gemstones are claimed to help in solving emotional problems and physical illnesses, and to bring a change into one's life. In esoteric shops, where crystals are usually bought, keynotes, short descriptions of healing qualities, or esoteric books are also available for customers. However, these given meanings cannot be regarded as significances and beliefs *per se* – in practice and in people's lives meanings and significances are formed in a much more individual and variable manner.

Most of the difficulties that people try to solve using crystals are emotional and psychological problems such as an anxiety or even depression. As Lea Altnurme (2013: 29) states, people reach for different practices and beliefs associated with New Spirituality in order to find a solution to their problems. However, people use and interpret the use of gemstones in different ways understanding meanings in esoteric books based on their everyday lives, personal interpretations of specific problems, the effect of the crystals, and the way they solve problems. The use of crystals is vernacular and based on individual creativity (cf. Primiano 1995: 43–44; 2012: 387–390). For instance, Merlin has struggled with depression for years, receiving a course of medication each year, every year in recent years. Since summer 2016, she has worn sunstone to support positivity.

And I just had a difficult time back then, then I thought maybe this supports me. [...] I felt I would have sunstone just like this one and I would actually carry it with me. I have it around my neck usually, but when I have a difficult moment, I sometimes grab it and hold it. Then I think and wish that I could support myself. (FM: Merlin)

For Merlin, it is crucial to have the gem around her neck permanently, to hold it in her hand and to hope for help from the stone. Similarly, other informants sometimes sought support through physical contact with gems, highlighting more intimate and emotional relationships with crystals (cf. Olsen 2010: 68, 130–133). Some of my informants also searched for crystals in order to cure physical illnesses: "As I had problems with benign genital neoplasm or cancer, I know that I have this stone in my combination or kit. [...] This big brown-red stone works to ward off cysts or benign neoplasms." (FM: Anna)



She also noted that she used gemstones to cure migraine. Other informants have also indicated that crystals reduce pain and inflammation.



*Photo 2. Anna's crystals and the 'kit' she usually has with her. The biggest one on the right prevents cysts or benign neoplasms. Photo by Tenno Teidearu.*

Fluorite has some meaning for me. Fluorite is a very good protective stone for flu and viruses when people are prone to illnesses. Also, if a person has fallen ill already, it gives immunity to the body. In general, it is like a filter, it drains all sorts of negative energy away from body. [...] This Fluorite is like flu tea for me. (FM: Anni)

My informants who work at esoteric shops, have told me that some customers are looking for cures for physical illness. People with severe disease, who have had different medical treatments with no outcome, wish to try alternative methods. In addition, some people like Anni do not wish to use medication when they are ill. In these cases crystals are seen as alternative or supplemental medicine.

Another motivation for wearing gemstones is to bring positive change into one's life. Anni, who works at an esoteric shop, said that the most common keywords relating to what clients want to bring into their lives are abundance, prosperity, and love. To bring something desired into one's life means supporting oneself and one's qualities

in specific ways. However, this is interpreted in the context of one's personal life in a vernacular manner.

It's the same case with citrine, that is an abundance stone. It has taught me. It hasn't made me a millionaire suddenly, but it has taught me what is the basis for abundance and prosperity, that it could come into your life in the first place. [...] To have this quality yourself personally at that moment, you should have the stone with you. (FM: Anni)

Anni explains that this gemstone itself does not bring prosperity into one's life, rather it teaches and leads a person towards accomplishing desired ends. In the practice of wearing gemstones, the mutual relationship between human and stone actualises, which is based on materiality of the practice, vernacular interpretation, and involvement in one's everyday life. The effect of crystals is a concurrence between a stone and a person, requiring a personal contribution.

#### SUPPORTING ONESELF IN EVERYDAY LIFE

The way stones work for the people I have studied is a specific process. The use of gemstones in New Spirituality is not a magical practice in classical and functionalist terms (see, for example, Frazer 1974 [1922]: 44, 99–101, 112; see also Malinowski 1948: 57–59). Crystals do not solve problems – weather psychological, physical or mundane – themselves, rather they support people in achieving these goals.

These stones, like I already said, you have it all in yourself already. Still, it's the stone, maybe it is the contact with the stone, that sets off this work in you. Maybe these things didn't work in you without the stone or the colour. (FM: Kristiine)

Kristiine emphasises that the effect a gemstones has on a person is actually already within the person. The central idea or narrative in New Spirituality is a spiritual development towards a person's true nature or 'higher self' (Heelas 1996: 18–21; Altnurme 2013: 22–23). It states that personal development is not about mastering novel knowledge, abilities or qualities, but discovering and realising one's true nature, the higher self within. The same applies to personal qualities and gemstones. The effect of wearing crystals is a concurrence between the stone and the person; gems bring forth qualities and abilities that are already within the person, learning from the effect of crystals is a concurrence: "These things help me change, I can understand some aspects of myself better. [...] I do believe that I have been able to improve myself with these things, to change myself, to become a better person." (FM: Rasmus); "These things, why [I wear crystals], are the same qualities, these things and these problems, for those things that I have set stones to work – these are the same things that are missing currently" (FM: Anna).

As Anna notes, she wears stones because of qualities she thinks she lacks herself. The support of gemstones is the most individual and variable, as it is directly linked to one's life, personality, goals, and problems. Some common qualities and abilities my informants wish to support by wearing gemstones are as follows: positivity, calmness,

equanimity, self-awareness, concentration, stop being stuck to thoughts, living in the moment, creativity, self-expression, communication, love, femininity, spirituality.



*Photo 3. The bracelets Anni wore for one of our interviews. Photo by Tenno Teidearu.*

On this [hand] I have amethyst, it is like calmness and balance. This is lemon chrysoptase, it is like creativity and inspiration. Tourmaline – it is like a protection and grounding. And here are many things, like love, femininity, energy; these are blend bracelets, there are several crystals together. (FM: Anni)

Anni was wearing seven bracelets that all supported different personal qualities for one interview. She has worn black tourmaline permanently for about two years, although she also uses other gems according to what she feels is happening in her life; sometimes she wears different crystals every day depending on her feelings and needs. Although people can wear several different gemstones at the same time, reasons for wearing each are explained and interpreted in a personal way.

For instance, in addition to this tiger eye, blue jade has been important for me, which is linked to the throat chakra and the world connected to it – this helps to express yourself, as far as I have read. Yes, I really have felt this way. (FM: Kristiine)



*Photo 4. The fluorite that Kadri's wore around her neck during one of our interviews. Photo by Tenno Teidearu.*

Kristiine associates the effect of blue jade with self-expression, the throat chakra and the neck (FM: Kristiine).<sup>5</sup> She feels that she sometimes has problems with self-expression, self-assertion, and courage in social situations, as she told me; these are qualities and abilities she wants to support and develop by wearing gemstones. Many of my interlocutors have read about the effects gems have on a person from labels on crystals at esoteric shops, from the Internet or from esoteric books, or they have heard about the esoteric qualities from shopkeepers. These are the main sources of knowledge. Nevertheless, the effect and efficiency of a crystal is valued according to personal experience and interpretation. The support of stones and the need for support commonly manifests itself in everyday situations. Kadri wears a crystal at work for protection against other people, as she is a hair dresser.

At work, I feel very often that it is good to have it. [...] I meet so many different people there. For some of the people, I don't know, I feel like I need more protection. As it is, like, you [are] so close to these people all the time, I am a hair dresser and sometimes I shave beards. It is like being in contact with others, and in the energy field of other people. I don't know, whether it affects or not. But usually it's just when I feel in the morning, that yes, I need to put something around my neck today – then I do it. (FM: Kadri)

Apart from Kadri's way of wearing crystals and the context, her preference is evidently linked to different beliefs, for example human energy and the subtle body (see Samuel and Johnston 2013), and the need for energetic protection. Such a description and interpretation helps to understand the significance of this practice from her own perspective, furthermore, beliefs associated with New Spirituality help to understand herself, her life and her own way of acting in everyday life. For another example, Liis is a crystal therapist who uses specific gems to support herself, to cope with everyday life more efficiently.

Usually, I wear some kind of grounding stone. As my work is spiritual, I [wear] it to manage mundane things better, to be more present in everyday life as well. Then, I usually wear tourmaline, for example, black stones are grounding and protecting ones. [...] When I have very many daily duties – I need to do the shopping or go to the dentist with my child, stuff like that –, then I take some kind of grounding stone in order to get everything done quickly and easily. (FM: Liis)

For instance, if I need to meet a person with whom I have difficulties reaching the same understanding, I put, for example, a rose quartz around my neck, to keep my heart open so that I can accept the person the way he/she is. That I could cast aside all the bias and see the best of him/her. Then I can make use of [the properties of the stone]. This helps me to keep my heart open. (FM: Liis)

Specific crystals have certain effects, the effect of grounding that Liis associates with tourmaline means living in the present moment, which helps to get things done with ease in her everyday life. These examples demonstrate the situational nature of the practice, which is bound to everyday duties and activities and particular stones that Liis uses according to specific occasions. The practice of wearing crystals according to everyday situations is generally conscious and reasoned practice for people themselves. However, using crystals in mundane situations and interpreting this practice does not always follow spiritual qualities that are presented in esoteric shops or esoteric books. For example, the effect of rose quartz that Liis described is in not linked to difficult social encounters, but according to esoteric books (see for example Hall 2009: 235–236) to bringing love and relationships into one's life and keeping one's heart open. The vernacular use and interpretation of the effect are based on the most accurate manner of solving a problem, which, for Liis, is accepting others by keeping her heart open. In this vernacular interpretation, individual creativity in everyday religion is evident (see Primiano 1995: 43). People interpret meanings<sup>6</sup> and the way of putting them to work based on personal understanding, specific situations and their manner of coping with them.

Supporting oneself in everyday life should be understood within the perspective of material culture studies as a process of objectification. Daniel Miller (1987: 27–30, 81) writes that in the process of objectification the subject develops and enhances him- or herself by possessing and using material objects, the meanings of the subject and the object changes and they evolve into new being. In the case of wearing crystals, people develop and enhance themselves and change in this process – they (re)construct themselves using the support of gemstones. Things – and crystals – enhance human capacities through the process of objectification (see also Miller 2010: 59). Wearing gems is a practice of transforming and (re)constructing one's self and one's personhood (see also Fowler 2010). Solving one's problems, supporting oneself and bringing something desired into one's life is to support, enhance and change one's life and self.

Things gain their meanings and significance through practice and personal relationships with people. Crystals that my informants wear permanently become more significant, a practice which itself is a process of meaning-making. In this case, crystals are singular objects that have personal meanings and are associated with identity and personhood (cf. Kopytoff 1988: 73–76; cf. Hoskins 1998: 194–195). My informants often used the term 'my stone' when talking about their most significant crystals. To understand these gems in the way my informants do, I take up an emic term 'my stone' in my analyses. New concepts generate new objects from the ontological perspective on material culture as objects do not carry or represent meanings in the ontological perspective, but meanings and concepts are identical to objects (Henare et al. 2007: 3–4, 15–18). In the framework of effects associated with certain crystals, crystals that can be used to gain love, for example, are called 'love stones', or crystals that are associated with self-expression and the throat chakra are called 'throat stones'. At the individual level,

'my stones' are biographical objects that are linked with my informants' personalities, personhoods and everyday lives – and relating to a biographical object is relating to oneself (cf. Hoskins 1998: 7–8; 2006: 78). Furthermore, 'my stone' is a singular, unique and personal gemstone that is significant only for the person who possess it.

#### ESOTERIC INTERPRETATION OF INTIMACY WITH CRYSTALS

The meaning of wearing crystals for my informants is linked more to the self, personal life and everyday life than to religion or spirituality. However, explanations of gemstones and their function are based on the understandings that spread in New Spirituality. Systematic and detailed knowledge of how and why gemstones affect human beings are not as essential as accomplishing desired ends through the practice (cf. McGuire 2008: 15), knowledge and practical coherence, which are often not distinguished in practice (see Stein and Stein 2005: 138–143; see also Frazer 1974 [1922]: 15). Many people among my informants understood crystals and their effect not exactly the same way as explained in esoteric books, instead the knowledge is rather vernacular. Belief and knowledge in New Spirituality, in general, are not dogmatic, rather personal interpretation and experience are essential in reaching one's own coherent understanding (see Heelas 1996: 18–21; Bowman 1999: 182; Aupers and Houtman 2006: 203–206; Altnurme 2013: 28–30). Several informants found that they could not actually explain the effect of crystals for themselves profoundly enough. Instead they interpreted them in an esoteric framework – associated with spiritual and esoteric properties crystals are believed to have, and human energy body and chakras. Crystals have three esoteric qualities – they emit spiritual energy,<sup>7</sup> they store cosmic or negative energy, and they transform personal energy.

Several informants have mentioned that particular crystals are associated with a specific part of the body, or a chakra. Holistic interpretation of the human body and the model of the subtle body is widely acknowledged and embedded in the practices of New Spirituality (Barcan 2013). These state that the physical body is inherently linked to immanent human nature. Geoffrey Samuel and Jay Johnston (2013) explain that the term 'subtle body' originates from Indian and Tibetan Tantric traditions and the Chinese Daoist tradition, and was first incorporated into Western esoteric thought by the Theosophical Society in the late 19th century. The subtle body as a concept describes the immanent system of chakras and energy channels. Chakras are points along the channels of spiritual energy that flow through the subtle body. In another model, chakras link the human physical body to astral bodies<sup>8</sup> that extend out of the physical body. This concept bridges together spiritual and material aspects of the human body. (Samuel and Johnston 2013: 1–6; Johnston 2013; Johnston 2014: 20–35; see also Koppel 2013: 51–55) My informants used both of these interpretations, usually in combination.

In relevance to the subtle body model, crystals are linked to chakras and have a specific effect on the body parts and organs.<sup>9</sup> Every chakra and energetic layer of the subtle body is marked by a particular colour, which is often coincident with the colours of specific gemstones. Many of my informants emphasised that crystals need to be close

to a physical body to have an effect. This interpretation is through the system of the subtle body – a gemstone needs to be within the subtle body to support the person on an energetic level.<sup>10</sup> My informants have explained the need for physical closeness with crystals in spiritual terms.

When I, for example, take this stone into my hand, I feel it is full of power. It becomes part of my system; if it starts to work for me or I communicate with it, then it must be alive. (FM: Maari)

For Maari and other informants, crystals are more than just objects. Relations and communication are processes of meaning-making that determine the nature of subject and object from the ontological perspective. The new animism, according to Graham Harvey (2012), is based on mutual communication between human and non-human beings or objects. The key question is not being alive, but the possibility of being engaged in a meaningful relationship with somebody or something. The category of person is only applicable when beings are relating with each other in communication or action. (Ibid.: 198–201) Ontologies arise from human and non-human interactions, but meaningful relationships are determined through interpretation (Paleček and Risjord 2012: 16). For my informants, crystals are things to relate to and communicate with, while from the new animistic perspective, crystals are rather subjects, or non-human persons. Communication between humans and crystals, in esoteric interpretation, takes place on the energetic level through energy or information. The subtle body and chakras are often associated with human emotional states, mind and thoughts (Samuel and Johnston 2013: 6–7; see also Koppel 2013: 57–60).

Communication between crystals and people expresses itself often through feelings and emotions that are assumed to be indicative of, or attributed to, the effect. Chakras and crystals are also linked to various personal qualities, as I discussed earlier. The support that a crystal can give to a human being is believed to be a communication between human and gemstone that takes place through physical closeness, spiritual energy and human emotions.

In a holistic worldview like New Spirituality, different human, mundane and spiritual aspects are inherently and coherently bound together. Liis, for example, used rose quartz to cope with difficult relationships and to keep her heart open. According to spiritual books, this crystal brings love into one's life by opening one's heart, and it is recommended that it be worn over the heart.<sup>11</sup> On the physical level, it is associated with the heart, on the energetic level with the heart chakra, and in terms of human qualities and emotions, it is associated with love. The effect of a crystal is linked to both subtle body and physical body, and it is claimed that the effect is expressed through feelings and emotions. According to the esoteric interpretation of crystals, intimacy and closeness with materiality is interpreted within an energetic and spiritual framework. In the practice of wearing crystals and its vernacular interpretations, personal motivations, human qualities, emotions, everyday life, and esoteric interpretations interweave and mingle with materiality. In their relationship with people crystals are not inert. Crystals are perceived rather as non-human persons, from the new animist perspective, and have their own ontological condition, which sometimes needs a human contribution.

## TAKING CARE OF THINGS

There are also two practices that are based on the condition of gemstones which can be understood as taking care of crystals – cleansing and charging. The term cleansing, in this case, does not refer to physical cleaning. It is based on the esoteric properties of the gems, i.e. their capacities to emit, store, and transform energy within the esoteric framework. For example, when a crystal is bought it is essential to cleanse it before wearing it. Both sellers in esoteric shops and people who buy gems explain this in spiritual terms, that crystals store the energy of people they come into contact with at the shop, and that these energies can be negative and have a potentially harmful effect. From the perspective of economic anthropology, by cleansing the crystals they depart from the status of a commodity (cf. Appadurai 1988: 13–17). In their biographies, they become singular and unique objects that are not saleable and have spiritual meaning (cf. Kopytoff 1988: 73–74). In addition, cleansing gems is a practice of domestication. Through this action a person can possess and use the crystal to its full potential allowing it to become a biographical object, ‘my stone’.

According to my informants, apart from wearing crystals, there is a need to cleanse them occasionally, usually by rinsing them in running water. But other methods are used too – holding them above or in a candle flame for a moment, placing them in the light of the sun or moon, placing them in salt, burying them in the soil, using the sound of singing bowls, or just using a breath.



*Photo 5. Diana cleanses her crystals in salt. Photo by Tenno Teidearu.*



Cleansing and charging crystals are practices in which people and things commingle. Ian Hodder (2012) points out that as people depend on things, things depend on people. In the mutual relationship between things and people, maintaining things and their function is essential and requires human contribution and effort, thus helping people and things to interweave. As things are vibrant and have lives of their own, people are drawn into the lives of things through labour, involvement, and contribution as an entanglement. (Ibid.: 68–70, 86) Entanglement differs from Alfred Gell's (1998: 16–19, 69–71) concept of agency, i.e. the ability of something to act as an agent in relation to a human, is still the outcome of human (for example artist) intention. According to the conception of entanglement, people are involved in the lives of things, which is the primary agency that things and materiality have. My informants did not cleanse crystals according to a specific schedule, although they claimed it is recommended to cleanse gems at least once a month. In practice, people sense the need to cleanse crystals based on their feeling towards them, and about themselves.

I feel that it actually stores something. This is like what I feel, when the stone gets heavy or I do not want [to wear it]. Well, then I feel that it is necessary to cleanse it. Perhaps it is negative energy or the energy of other people or something, from which it protects me. (FM: Eva)

Many of my informants have described the feeling they sometimes have towards crystals and how they can become unpleasant and heavy. When this happens people feel the same way themselves. Using spiritual terms it is explained that a crystal becomes full of negative energy. In this state crystals are claimed not to support themselves anymore and can have a negative effect, which is why gems need to be taken care of. After cleansing, crystals become lighter and brighter, and the same applies to human feelings, as Anni described:

Well, it is said that at least once a month it should surely [be cleansed]. But stones that one wears and uses frequently [should be cleansed] more often. It is like that. For me, if I have some stones uncleansed for a long time, I come to feel a bit depressed. I feel, when I haven't cleansed stones, that I need to do it. And when I have cleansed them, then I feel like everything becomes lighter and easier, absolutely everything. I become lighter and easier inside myself, everything becomes easier around me and things become easier at home. (FM: Anni)

The more a crystal is in use the more it is affected. A gemstone that is worn permanently is a biographical object that becomes like a part of the person (cf. Hoskins 2006: 78) and the person's everyday life. It is like an extension of the person, and so the feeling is that what is done to the stone, is done to the person (cf. Miller 1987: 119). Cleansing crystals is a practice of cleansing oneself, and one's thoughts and feelings.

Another way of taking care of crystals is the practice of charging their energy. Usually, this is done by placing stones in the light of the sun or moon, although the same methods as for cleansing are also used. Charging gems is not as common as cleansing them. About half of my informants said they do this, but that it is usually done by cleansing, or at least they link the process of charging to the practice of cleansing.

However, sometimes, when I take it off, when I take a shower for example, then I sometimes rinse the stone. Because I have heard that a stone needs to be cleansed sometimes, not only worn, because it stores negative energy. Then, if you rinse it in running water, this negativity should flow out. I usually do this procedure, I hold it in running water and let it flow out, and think and wish that all this negativity should leave and go into the ground. Well, it will be grounded. And [I wish] to fill it with love, calmness, and everything that would support me. Then I thank the stone, I say “thank you for helping me and I hope that you will help me evermore.” (FM: Merlin)

Charging is often one part of cleansing. In case of cleansing, the aim is to eliminate the negative energy and information that has been stored; the aim of charging is to fill the gem with universal and divine energy and information. In New Spirituality, the green ideology manifests itself through a holistic worldview and a harmonic relationship with nature and the Earth. Nature and materiality are perceived divine by essence, based on universal energy (Allaste 2011: 41–51; Altnurme 2013: 26–28). In the holistic worldview of New Spirituality, material and spiritual realms exist in unity, i.e. the essence of material world is spiritual and energetic, and vice-versa (Dawson 2011: 310–311; Altnurme 2013: 27). Natural elements – for example the sun, the moon, water, air, the ground and soil – are believed to have energy and the ability to cleanse and charge gemstones with universal energy.



*Photo 6. Miina's jewellery with crystals. She had buried the large earrings and artistic ring in the middle in the ground to cleanse and charge them. Photo by Tenno Teidearu.*

And then I buried these [earrings and ring] in the ground for a while. [Laughing] [...] Then I thought that it was a kind of symbolic move, that it [the ring] could accumulate power somehow in the ground. However, it is always like that – I do it with jewellery, but it is addressed to myself also, to think about it as a metaphor. Say, if I feel that some things become deficient inside me. It's like, how to clear myself, isn't it? It's like I do it with jewellery, but I do it mentally with my thinking too. I put these things in the ground, but part of myself goes to rest as well. Ok, jewellery has some kind of properties, this is one thing. But in general, it is like I can use them as a symbol of part of myself. (FM: Miina)

In Miina's example, crystals accumulate energy from the ground, and it is explicitly evident that what is done to stones, is consciously and metaphorically done to oneself. Taking into account other examples, and earlier discussion, charging and cleansing crystals is more than just a metaphor (cf. Harvey 2012: 204–206). It is rather an act towards oneself and an object that is related to one's personhood, since crystals are like extensions of the individual (cf. Miller 1987: 119). It becomes especially apparent in case of 'my stones', since relating to biographical objects is like relating to oneself (see Hoskins 1998: 7–8; 2006: 78). Through the practice of wearing crystals, which I understand as a process of objectification, people enhance themselves (see Miller 2010: 59), and by taking care of things (see Hodder 2012: 68–70) people take care of themselves. The practice of wearing crystals, which is involved in human action and everyday life, requires human effort to maintain and empower desirable an essential relationship with crystals. Humans and crystals are mutually entangled through practice and ways of acting in the world. People support themselves in everyday life by taking care of crystals and benefitting from their long-term positive effects.

## CONCLUSION

Crystals are evidently popular in contemporary New Spirituality on a global scale, but rarely discussed in academic studies. My research is based on the Estonian case, where gemstones have gained popularity in the present decade. I have concentrated empirically on the practice of wearing crystals in the context of people's everyday lives. My approach is based on the perspective of vernacular religion, and the perspective of material culture studies on crystals as material religion, but first and foremost on the perception of crystals as material culture. Meanings and significances are generated in a mutual relationship between humans and gemstones. In my paper I have also indicated that materiality has an essential role in meaning-making as it relates to the practice of wearing stones and effectuating significances.

According to descriptions in esoteric books, crystals have various healing qualities. In practice, gemstones are mainly used in solving emotional problems and physical illnesses, to bring a change into one's life, or for protection. By studying this practice through the perspectives of material culture studies and vernacular religion, I have indicated that the significance of this practice is not based primarily on pre-set descriptions of crystals in esoteric books or crystal shops, or on religion and beliefs in general. The meaning-making process of the practice of wearing gemstones for my informants is more about themselves, and their personal everyday lives than about religion or

belief. In addition, the meaningfulness of the practice is based on practical coherence and materiality (see McGuire 2008: 15; see also Mohan and Warnier 2017). As a vernacular religious practice, it is embedded in people's everyday lives and closely linked to personhood, therefore meaning and significance are conditional, biographical, temporal and dynamic. Crystals that people wear permanently, gain significance and evolve deep personal and intimate relationships with people; in phenomenological terms, sonorous experience mediates significance and closeness (cf. Olsen 2010: 68, 130–133). Being involved in one's life, gems become biographical objects, and relating to a biographical object is relating to oneself (cf. Hoskins 1998: 7–8; 2006: 78). Furthermore, the most significant crystals my informants have are called 'my stones', which are closely linked to their personality, personhood and everyday life, and are perceived as part of themselves (cf. Hoskins 2006: 78); from the ontological perspective, it should be taken into use as an etic term also (see Henare et al. 2007). Crystals are things to relate to and communicate with, and in new animistic terms crystals are rather subjects, or non-human persons. According to the esoteric interpretation, need for intimacy with stones is interpreted within the framework of energy, the human subtle body and chakras; it is claimed that crystals need to be worn close to the body – in the human subtle body – to have an effect. According to this holistic view, gems have an effect to both the subtle body and physical bodies, something that is believed to be expressed through feelings and emotions. Therefore, when cleansing or charging crystals, people clear their own thoughts and feelings as well. Since crystals are like extensions of the self (cf. Miller 1987: 119), cleansing them is also an act towards oneself.

On the practical level, people and crystals are entangled because people are involved in the lives of things (cf. Hodder 2012: 68–70) and so crystals become involved in human everyday life. The aims of wearing gems is to support oneself in everyday life, to enhance and change oneself and one's life, or to solve personal problems. Crystals support and bring forth various human qualities. Mohan and Warner (2017: 376) indicate that the study of the material culture of religion should focus on the subject as generated by practice. In the perspective of material culture studies, people develop, enhance and (re)construct themselves by wearing crystals, which enhance human capacities in the process of objectification (cf. Miller 1987: 27–30, 81; 2010: 59). By taking care of crystals, people cleanse and charge themselves emotionally, and by maintaining desirable relationship with them they support themselves in everyday life. I find intimacy and mutual entanglement with things significant in meaning-making as it relates to the practice and the study of material religion in general.

By concentrating on materiality and following the perspective of material culture studies I have demonstrated in my study of crystals that there are aspects other than religious meanings and beliefs that make material religion significant and meaningful. Studying the vernacularity of material religion, associations between the self, religious practices, practices of everyday life, mundane situations and materiality should be highlighted. Ultimately, the categories of religion, the mundane, personal and material are not pre-set, they form and mingle through analysis; in everyday life, epistemological categories are often conflated.

## NOTES

1 Based on my empirical data, synonyms people use are 'gemstone' (*poolvääriskivi*), 'gem' or 'stone' (*kivi*). In this paper, I use these three designations as synonyms for crystal (*kristall*).

2 Here I indicate commerce, market and esoteric shops that sell crystals and other goods used in New Spirituality. I do not refer to 'marketplace' as a metaphor for variety and availability of religious denominations or spiritual practices (see for example Berger 1963; Roof 1999; Redden 2005).

3 The term 'esoteric shop' (*esoteerikapood* or *esoteerikakauplus*) is an emic term among customers and shopkeepers, for instance *Loitsukeller* and *Allikas* both describe themselves on their homepages as an 'esoteric shop'. Other emic terms are 'crystal shop' (*kristallipood*) and 'stone shop' (*kivipood*), used by both customers and shopkeepers.

4 The majority of popular literature in Estonia on crystals is written by English or American crystal therapists and healers and translated from English. The most influential and widespread series in Estonia, *The Crystal Bible*, was written by Judy Hall, an English crystal therapist and astrologer. There are also several books written by well-known Estonian crystal therapists in Estonian. In my article I refer to *The Crystal Bible* and use this well-known esoteric book as an example, and compare it with empirical data in my analysis.

5 The effect of crystals is usually interpreted within the framework of human energy body and chakras, which are likened to human physical body. Several crystals are likened to one specific chakra and qualities associated with it. Judy Hall (2009: 364–367) explains this framework in her book *The Crystal Bible 1: Godsfeld Bibles*.

6 Descriptions of the properties and effects of crystals in esoteric books, on the Internet, on labels at esoteric shops, or information and guidance from shopkeepers.

7 Some of my informants have claimed that energy is also a form of information.

8 My informants used the terms energy, energy field, aura and biofield instead.

9 See for example Hall 2009: 364–365.

10 Cf. Hall 2009: 366–367.

11 See Hall 2009: 235–236.

## SOURCES

FM = Author's fieldwork materials from 2017–2018. Materials are kept in the author's personal collection. Interviews:

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Anni (b. 1987), January 16, 2017

Diana (b. 1991), January 19, 2017

Helene (b. 1990), December 11, 2018

Kadri (b. 1992), January 21, 2017

Kristel (b. 1982), January 27, 2017

Kristiine (b. 1991), January 20, 2017

Liis (b. 1976), January 18, 2017

Maari (b. 1991), January 12, 2017

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