

Self-Cultivation and Domestic Reconfiguration in Migration: A Heuristic Ethnographic Case Study

Cristina HURDUBAIA

INALCO (Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales),
Paris, France

E-mail: cristina.hurdubaia@inalco.fr

ORCID: 0009-0006-7946-5477

Abstract

This article examines how religious practices come to function as practices of self-cultivation – understood as concrete, repeated forms of work through which a subject acts upon herself and gradually transforms her relation to herself. The analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted among Romanian migrants in Belgium, within an Orthodox context, and focuses on the case of Ioana, a young woman who has lived in Belgium since childhood. The death of her grandfather in Romania triggers a reconfiguration of her religious practices in the domestic space.

The study draws on a qualitative methodology combining participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and a micro-ethnography of domestic space, with particular attention to the relation between objects, spatial organisation, and everyday practices. In this article, transnational mourning is approached as a situation marked by a rupture in ritual mediation, in which access to collective infrastructures of mourning becomes limited.

The analysis is structured around three interrelated dimensions: the writing of a double letter during the funeral, the reorganisation of domestic space through the constitution of a hybrid agencement¹ of religious and self-presentation objects, and the establishment of a daily routine of

reading and prayer. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988), Talal Asad's perspective on religious discipline (Asad, 1993), and Birgit Meyer's material approach to religion (Meyer, 2012), the article develops a processual analysis centred on the articulation of practices, objects, and spatial arrangements.

The argument is that, in the absence of fully accessible collective ritual infrastructures, domestic space can become a site for the relocation of religious practices. Within this space, the articulation of writing, spatial arrangement, and repetition forms a mechanism of self-cultivation through which a moral subject is progressively shaped. The article contributes to the study of religion in migration through its focus on practice, material mediation, and the agencements in which objects become operative.

Keywords: self-cultivation, transnational mourning, domestic religiosity, migration, religious objects

I. INTRODUCTION: LOSS AT A DISTANCE AND THE CRISIS OF RITUAL MEDIATION

Migration reshapes the individual's affective geography, establishing a constitutive tension

¹ **Hybrid agencement:** the organisation of objects and practices within a domestic space in which religious, personal, and everyday elements coexist and interconnect, contributing to the production of functional and symbolic

effects. The concept derives from Deleuze & Guattari (1987), who define it as a configuration of heterogeneous elements that produces specific effects.

between the space of productivity and social integration – ‘here’ – and the space of memory, roots, and primary relationships – ‘there’ (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). This tension stays close to the surface; it becomes particularly acute in moments of biographical crisis, especially in the face of death. Transnational mourning exceeds the level of an emotional experience intensified by distance and takes the form of a situation in which the system of ritual mediation – the ensemble of practices, objects, places, and gestures through which a culture manages loss – becomes partially inoperative. The impossibility of participating in funeral rituals, physical absence from the site of collective mourning, and the difficulty of visiting the grave produce a rupture in mediation: the subject loses access to the infrastructure through which the collective processes death.

Recent studies have highlighted the role of Romanian Orthodox parishes in the diaspora as symbolic resources for preserving identity, maintaining links with cultural roots, and sustaining forms of community belonging across national borders (Saghin et al., 2025). Research on Romanian migrant communities in Southern Europe has similarly shown that religious institutions contribute to the preservation of cultural identity and community cohesion, while migration and adaptation challenges may reinforce religious commitment among some migrants (Suiu, 2016). Recent research on Romanian communities in Western Europe has also emphasized that migration involves ongoing processes of identity negotiation and forms of dual belonging, through which migrants adapt to the host society while maintaining connections with their country of origin (Chasciar et al., 2025). Research on Romanian migrants has also shown that migration may generate divergent religious trajectories, ranging from the reinforcement of religious practices and transnational ties to processes of religious disengagement and secularisation (Dubenská & Souralová, 2018). At the same time, research on Romanian immigrants in Belgium

suggests that migration is often associated with a decline in religious participation and a progressive weakening of regular religious practices, largely due to work constraints, distance from Orthodox churches, and the characteristics of the host society (Mocanu & Bibiri, 2025). The case analysed here points to a different dynamic. Religious reactivation emerges through the experience of bereavement and the impossibility of participating in collective mourning rituals. In this context, the death of a close relative becomes the catalyst for a process of religious reactivation and domestic reconfiguration.

This article examines how an individual in such a situation constructs, using her own resources, a substitute infrastructure. The focus lies on the conditions under which religious practices can function as practices of self-cultivation – forms of concrete, repeated, and materially grounded work through which a subject acts upon herself and progressively transforms her relationship to herself. The analysis is grounded in an ethnographic case: Ioana, a young Romanian woman who has lived in Belgium since childhood and whose grandfather dies in Romania. The choice of this case lies in its heuristic value: within a relatively bounded analytical space, it brings together several dimensions of the mechanism under examination. The purpose of the case is the analytical exploration of a mechanism that may be observed in other migratory contexts.

The second section presents the theoretical framework, bringing together the perspectives of Michel Foucault, Talal Asad, and Birgit Meyer. Sections three, four, and five form the core of the ethnographic analysis and follow three central dimensions: writing, spatial arrangement, and repetition. Section six offers a concise comparison with other domestic configurations observed in the same corpus, in order to isolate the specific mechanism at work in the present case under study. Section seven formulates the theoretical and methodological conclusions.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SELF-CULTIVATION, RELIGIOUS DISCIPLINE, AND MATERIAL MEDIATION

2.1. Foucault's Technologies of the Self

The concept of self-cultivation used here as the article's central analytical tool has its origins in Michel Foucault's later work, especially in the Collège de France lectures of 1981–1982 and in the American seminars published under the title *Technologies of the Self* (Foucault, 1988). Foucault defines technologies of the self as

practices which permit individuals to effect, by their own means or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves. (Foucault, 1988: 18)

Central to this definition is the practical character of transformation: transformation happens through concrete, repeated, and situated work on the self – gestures, objects, texts, and relationships.

Self-cultivation cannot be reduced to introspection or to a narcissistic relation to the self. It implies a relation to truth – to statements about oneself, about the good, and about duty – and a relation to others, whether living or dead, present or absent. Self-cultivation is, in this sense, constitutively relational: the subject takes shape within a field of moral and symbolic references that precedes and structures it.

It is therefore articulated along both a vertical dimension, oriented toward transcendence and norms, and a horizontal dimension, tied to filiation, memory, and continuity. This double articulation provides a framework for reading the case analysed here, in which the relation to the divine and the relation to ascendants take shape simultaneously within the same space of practice.

2.2. Religious Discipline in Asad

The Foucauldian framework is complemented by Talal Asad's perspective on religious discipline. In *Genealogies of Religion* (Asad, 1993), Asad criticises symbolic and cognitive definitions of religion, arguing that religion should be understood as an ensemble of disciplinary practices that form subjects. These practices produce dispositions, capacities, and forms of attention, shaping a particular moral relation to the self.

The daily repetition of gestures, texts, and rituals participates in producing belief rather than expressing one that already exists. Practice precedes and shapes interiority. Prayer organises attention, structures bodily rhythm, and shapes the relation to oneself. Over time, it produces a particular kind of subject.

The analysis focuses on how Ioana's practices take hold, how they are repeated, and what they gradually do to the way she inhabits her own experience.

2.3. Meyer's Material Mediation

The third theoretical pillar is Birgit Meyer's material approach to religion. In *Mediation and the Genesis of Presence* (Meyer, 2012) and in her work on 'aesthetic formations' (Meyer, 2009), Meyer argues that religion does not exist outside material mediation. It takes shape through objects, images, sounds, gestures, and architectures that make perceptible what is not directly accessible.

Religious objects produce effects of presence by activating the senses and structuring perception. An icon does not stand in for the Virgin Mary – it makes a particular kind of presence available to the senses.

For the present analysis, objects are treated as active components of the domestic arrangements under study. They contribute to the organisation of practices, relations, and forms of attention.

2.4. Articulating the Analytical Framework

Taken together, these three perspectives – Foucault’s technologies of the self, Asad’s religious discipline, and Meyer’s material mediation – make it possible to construct a coherent analytical framework. This framework allows a detailed account of the processes through which a subject is formed over time, through situated practices sustained by material supports and spatial organisation.

Such a framework avoids two common reductions. The first one is psychologisation, which reduces mourning and associated practices to individual emotional states. The second is symbolisation, which treats objects as passive representations of already constituted beliefs. The analysis proposed here moves in a different direction, one centred on processes.

This is where the mechanism becomes visible: the way an *agencement* – understood, following Deleuze and Guattari (1987), as a configuration of heterogeneous elements (objects, practices, bodies, spatial arrangements) whose relations produce specific effects – of objects, repeated practices, and spatial organisation progressively produces a moral subject and reconfigures its relationship to itself. This mechanism constitutes the central analytical stake of the analysis that follows.

III. FIELDWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The data presented in this article form part of a broader ethnographic corpus assembled within a doctoral research project dedicated to the religious practices of Romanian migrants in Belgium. The methodology combines participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and a micro-ethnography of domestic space – understood as a detailed description of domestic space, the objects

present within it, and the practices that unfold there. Ioana is twenty-five years old at the time of the research and has lived in Belgium since childhood. She speaks Romanian and English fluently. She identifies as Orthodox, although, prior to her grandfather’s death, her religious practices had been sporadic and lacked regularity. Her grandfather, who remained in Romania, represented, in her own words, ‘the only pillar still holding up my authentic connection to Romania’ (Interview with Ioana, Brussels, 2025)² – a formulation that condenses both the identity function and the emotional dimension of that relationship in a migratory context. Fieldwork with Ioana consisted of three extended meetings held in her apartment in Brussels over a period of four months following her grandfather’s death. The first meeting included a tour of the apartment, accompanied by comments on the objects present and on the ways they were integrated into everyday life. The following two meetings took the form of semi-structured interviews focused on daily practices, the history of the objects, and the transformations that occurred after the death. This combination allowed narrative discourse to be articulated with situated observation of practices.

The participant was informed about the aims of the research and agreed to take part in the study on the basis of informed consent. She explicitly consented to the use of her first name in the publication, while no surname, photographs, address, or other identifying information are disclosed. Given the sensitive nature of bereavement and family loss, particular attention was paid to the participant’s comfort during interviews, which could be interrupted or redirected at any time. The researcher shared the participant’s linguistic and cultural background, a factor that facilitated communication and access to the field

² Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Ioana are drawn from the interview corpus collected by the author in Brussels in 2025 and preserved in the author’s personal research archive.

while requiring ongoing reflexive attention throughout the research process.

The recordings were transcribed in full and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), with particular attention to recurrent practices, sequences of action, and objects that were repeatedly activated. The analysis addressed not only discursive content, but also the relationship between discourse, gesture, and materiality.

Ioana's case is heuristic. It allows the analytical exploration of a mechanism that becomes visible in a particularly concentrated form. The case allows the articulation between objects, practices, and spatial organisation to be observed with unusual clarity.

IV. WRITING AS A TECHNOLOGY OF THE SELF: THE DOUBLE LETTER

Ioana's first analytically significant gesture takes place during the funeral, which she is able to attend. She writes two identical letters: one is placed in the coffin beside her grandfather, the other is brought back to Belgium and kept in her room. This gesture falls outside any codified Orthodox ritual tradition. It takes shape as a biographical innovation, a form of ritual invention produced in response to a personally unprecedented situation.

As Ioana recounts in the interview, the content of the letter brings together several registers: a direct address ('Dear Grandpa'), an implicit request for forgiveness for her absences during the last few years, a promise of continuity ('I will tell my children and my boss about you'), and a projection toward the future. This structure – address, recognition of duty, promise, projection – is not accidental. It follows the logic of a moral commitment. The letter does not describe a feeling; it institutes a relationship, formulates an obligation, and establishes continuity.

The function of the letter kept in Belgium differs from that of the letter placed in the coffin,

although the text is identical. The letter in the coffin belongs to the funerary register, as an offering addressed to the dead. The letter on the bedside table becomes a stable support for the same utterance: it fixes the address, anchors it in a physical object, and gives it a material presence that counteracts the absence of the person. Ioana expresses this in a striking phrase: 'the conversation didn't stop.' The dialogue with her grandfather continues, transferred onto another support.

The letter is not sacralised. It is not framed, displayed, or treated as a relic. It remains folded, slightly crumpled, placed on the chest of drawers. This detail is analytically important: the object remains within the register of human utterance and does not enter the liturgical register. It does not enter the category of canonical religious objects (icons, Bibles, candles), yet it functions as a technology of the self in the Foucauldian sense. Through this practice, the subject works on her own relationship to herself, stabilises a diffuse emotion within a structured discourse, and reformulates loss in terms of obligation and continuity.

The temporal dimension of the letter deserves a separate emphasis. The promise made to her grandfather – to speak of him to future great-grandchildren and to those around her – shifts the act of writing from the register of mourning toward a formative one. Writing configures a subject oriented toward the future, committed to an assumed continuity. Through writing, the relationship is extended beyond the moment of remembrance.

According to Ricœur, self-understanding is fundamentally an interpretative process, and narrative provides a privileged mediation through which the self is interpreted and progressively configured over time (Ricœur: 1990: 138). In this perspective, narrative contributes to the constitution of the self (Ricœur, 1990: 167) by developing a dynamic conception of identity (Ricœur, 1990: 170). Narrative identity is therefore not fixed but continually formed through the

organisation and interpretation of experience. The identity of the subject emerges through narrative itself, as the configuration of a life story gives coherence to personal identity (Ricœur, 1990: 175). Writing thus functions as a practice that stabilises the self over time by organising lived experience into a coherent and meaningful account. These ideas are consistent with Ricœur's broader theory of narrative identity, the constitution of the self, and selfhood (ipseity), as developed throughout *Soi-même comme un autre* (Ricœur, 1990: 12–13, 138–150, 167–177, 196–197, 210–211, 340–343, 368–369).

V. ARRANGING DOMESTIC SPACE: THE HYBRID AGENCEMENT

5.1. Constituting the *Agencement*

In the weeks following the death of her grandfather, Ioana reorganises a chest of drawers in her bedroom. It already held personal-use objects: perfumes, a display stand for watches and jewellery, and body-care items. Ioana adds or moves several objects into this space: an icon of the Virgin Mary connected to her parents' wedding, a Bible that had belonged to her grandfather, a book of Orthodox prayers printed in Cluj, a small candle, and the letter.



Ioana's Altar

The result falls short of a domestic altar in the classical sense – a separate, delimited, consecrated space. What takes shape is a hybrid space: the religious coexists, on the same material support, with objects of self-presentation. The perfumes and jewellery remain where they are. This coexistence is analytically significant and constitutes the core of the *agencement*.

The form of self-cultivation that emerges here does not follow an ascetic logic and does not require withdrawal from the world. No separation appears between the religious register and the everyday one. Religious objects, family mementos, and objects associated with everyday bodily routines occupy the same domestic space. The practices associated with them are carried out in continuity rather than in separate domains of activity. In this sense, the *agencement* is something more than an arrangement of objects – it is a way of organising everyday life in which different registers of existence are held together.

5.2. Objects and Their Regimes of Presence

A closer analysis of the objects composing the *agencement* reveals distinct mechanisms of presence and different analytical functions, organised around three types.

1. *Sacred texts and their supports.* Her grandfather's Bible and the prayer book make religious utterance possible – reading, recitation, prayer – anchoring the vertical dimension of the device. Her grandfather's Bible is not just any text: it is his copy, with yellowed pages and a distinctive smell. Ioana describes touching the pages as a form of mediated physical contact that reduces distance. The Bible functions simultaneously as a sacred text and as a relic. Its materiality carries a presence and sustains a relationship. This double function – vertical, oriented toward transcendence, and horizontal, oriented toward the relationship with the dead – is characteristic of the densest objects in the *agencement*.

2. *Objects of the domestic sacred space.* The icon and the small candle (a candle holder used as a lamp, the result of a material bricolage) structure the visual centre of the chest of drawers. This luminous device makes the presence of light possible without resorting to a proper Orthodox oil lamp, adapting a traditional form to domestic conditions. From Meyer's perspective (Meyer, 2012), the icon functions as an operator of presence rather than a representation. It institutes a regime of visibility in which the divine becomes perceptible to the subject. Ioana describes a recurrent gesture: before falling asleep, her gaze falls on the icon. The gesture is minimal, without explicit intentionality, yet it organises the transition from the active day to the vulnerable moment of night. The icon functions as a point of attention and as a silent witness to this threshold.

3. *Objects of memory and genealogy.* The icon has an additional function: it is her parents' wedding icon. It anchors the *agencement* in filiation and genealogical continuity. The letter introduces a second level: it links the grandfather, Ioana, and the future children within a single act of address. Together, the icon and the letter configure what, following Hervieu-Léger (2000), may be understood as a chain of memory – a transmitted and assumed continuity extending across generations.

5.3. Spatiality as Micro-Infrastructure

The spatial organisation of the chest of drawers has direct effects on the repeatability of practices. The placement of religious objects in the bedroom, near the bed, makes encounters with them part of the daily rhythm – in the evening before sleep and in the morning upon waking. Access happens without an explicit decision; it is already organised by space.

The arrangement creates a discreet centre. It functions as a point of gravity that structures practices without formal constraint. Space functions as a support for discipline: it makes

repetition possible, stabilises it, and integrates it into everyday life.

In this sense, spatiality can be understood as a micro-infrastructure. It makes practices possible by providing the conditions in which they can emerge and be repeated. The objects, their positioning, and their proximity to the body produce the conditions for repetitive gestures to emerge. The *agencement* thus operates as a device in the Foucauldian sense: a material and practical configuration in which relationships between body, objects, and forms of attention are articulated.

This spatial organisation contributes to the progressive transformation of the relationship to the self. Practices become integrated into the rhythm of everyday life, forming part of the way the subject inhabits space. Self-cultivation takes shape here through this discreet insertion, through repetition, and through the stabilisation of gestures that gradually acquire consistency.

VI. DAILY REPETITION: DISCIPLINE AS THE FORMATION OF THE SUBJECT

Alongside the constitution of the material *agencement*, Ioana establishes a daily practice: biblical reading, reading from the prayer book, and personal prayer. This routine did not exist before her grandfather's death – or appeared only sporadically, without regularity. The change is qualitative: the objects were present, yet inactive. Through the institution of repeatability, they become operative. The shift from presence to activation corresponds, in Asad's terms (Asad, 1993), to the transformation of the object from a decorative element into an operator of discipline.

Daily repetition introduces several dimensions simultaneously. There is temporal regularity – the practice takes place at relatively stable times, especially in the evening. There is spatial stability – the practice occurs in front of the chest of drawers or in bed, in proximity to the objects. There is gestural continuity – the touching of the Bible, the

lighting of the candle, and the reading of prayers. These dimensions do not overlap accidentally; together they configure a stable framework of action.

Within this framework, what Asad calls religious discipline takes the form of a progressive formation, through repetition, of a moral habitus – a particular way of relating to oneself, to time, and to obligation. Practice produces regularity, and regularity stabilises attention and conduct.

Ioana describes the function of prayer in a striking way: at moments when grief tends to become formless and overwhelming, the canonical words of prayer offer her ‘a borrowed voice.’ Prayer functions as a structured linguistic framework that organises breathing, attention, and thought. It introduces form where experience risks remaining diffuse.

Prayer contributes to the formation of a particular kind of subject – calm, regulated, and oriented – out of the raw material of experience. This corresponds closely to the way Foucault describes the transformation of the self through technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988: 18): a transformation carried out through repeated practices acting upon the body, attention, and thought.

An implicit bodily dimension is also visible here: the rhythm of breathing, the position of the body, and the sequence of gestures all contribute to stabilising experience. Discipline does not operate exclusively at the discursive level; it also involves a reorganisation of the way the subject inhabits her own body and her own time.

One thing also stands out about what Ioana does not do: she does not seek organised communal support – she does not attend a Romanian parish in Brussels and does not take part in regular services. The self-cultivation she constructs is domestic and solitary. This says something specific about the logic of relocation at work here.

In the absence of collective ritual infrastructure – the parish, the cemetery, and the kin community – Ioana builds a substitute infrastructure in her own

bedroom. The domestic thus becomes a ritual site, a space in which practices are reconfigured and sustained through objects, spatial arrangement, and repetition.

VII. VERTICALITY AND HORIZONTALITY: ARTICULATING THE AXES

What gives Ioana’s *agencement* both complexity and coherence is the articulation of two distinct axes, which I call vertical and horizontal. The distinction is analytical: it helps organise the relations that structure the observed practices.

The vertical axis organises the relationship with transcendence: the icon, prayer, biblical reading, and the candle lit before the icon all function as operators of this relationship. They place the subject before a presence that exceeds her, judges her, and sustains her. Through these objects and practices, Ioana is constituted as a religious subject – in a non-doctrinal, non-clerical sense – as one oriented toward a moral and cosmic order that precedes and exceeds individual existence.

The horizontal axis organises the relationship with filiation and genealogical continuity. Her parents’ icon, her grandfather’s Bible, and the letter function as operators of this axis. They anchor the subject within a chain of transmission: Ioana receives from previous generations – the wedding icon, the inherited Bible – and projects this transmission toward future generations through the promises formulated in the letter. Death renders this chain visible and transforms it into an assumed obligation.

The two axes meet within the *agencement*. The same object – the icon – functions simultaneously as an operator of transcendence and as an object of filiation. The overlap of these functions does not produce confusion; it gives consistency to the device. The *agencement* holds together because of this functional density, in which the same material element sustains multiple registers of relation.

Ioana's subjectivity is constituted at the point where these axes intersect. She is at once granddaughter and believer, anchored in genealogical continuity and oriented toward a transcendent order. The relationship to the past and the orientation toward the future are held together within the same practical framework. Self-cultivation appears here as a process of articulation between these registers.

The linguistic dimension occupies a central place in this articulation. The *agencement* brings into circulation two regimes of utterance: religious utterance, mediated by canonical texts – the prayers and the Bible – and personal utterance, addressed and stabilised in the letter. She moves between these registers, and through this movement she takes shape.

From Ricœur's perspective (Ricœur, 1990), narrative identity is constituted through discourse, through storytelling, and through the organisation of experience into a coherent temporal sequence. In the case analysed here, this construction takes place at the intersection of religious and personal utterance. The subject is formed through this double mediation, through the articulation between what is transmitted and what is formulated.

VIII. COMPARISON: STRUCTURED ACTIVATION VERSUS DECORATIVE PRESENCE

Ioana's case gains analytical sharpness through contrast with other domestic configurations observed in the same corpus. Two contrasting types of configuration are presented here in order to isolate the mechanism of structured activation and to clarify the conditions under which religious practices become operators of self-cultivation.

1. *The decorative configuration.* In several homes, icons are present on walls or shelves without being associated with regular practices. They function as markers of identity or heritage – 'we are Orthodox,' 'this has always been in our family' – without sustaining a regime of discipline

or work on the self. The objects are visible, accessible, and integrated into domestic décor, yet they are not activated through recurrent gestures.

In these configurations, the relationship to the object remains declarative or symbolic. The icon indicates belonging, evokes memory, and marks continuity, without structuring practice. The absence of repetition and the lack of a stable framework of use prevent the object from producing effects on conduct or on the relation to the self. It does not organise time, regulate attention, or introduce discipline.

The distinction matters: the analytical focus lies in their regime of activation. A materially identical object may function either as a decorative element or as an operator of transformation, depending on how it is integrated into practices and spatial organisation. Self-cultivation emerges through the articulation of objects within a device of use.

2. *The miniaturised configuration.* In situations of pronounced material or housing precarity – temporary rentals, shared accommodation – religion tends to become miniaturised. One finds objects worn on the body (medallions, small crosses) or stored in boxes, without the constitution of a stable domestic centre. Space does not allow the installation of a point of gravity around which practices can be organised.

Under these conditions, the institution of repetition becomes difficult. Practices remain fragmented, dependent on fluctuating contexts and momentary availability. The relationship to objects is intermittent, without the stabilisation of recurrent sequences of action. Self-cultivation appears in a more fragile form, less materially supported, with a lower density of repetition and spatial organisation.

This miniaturisation corresponds to a different mode of distribution: dispersed, mobile, and adapted to unstable conditions. The effects on the formation of the subject differ accordingly. The absence of a stable spatial framework limits the possibility of constituting daily discipline and continuity of practice.

By contrast, Ioana's case highlights a different configuration: the constitution of a stable domestic centre in which objects, space, and gestures sustain one another. The difference lies in the organisation of practices, their spatial anchoring, and their repetition.

What distinguishes the case under study is the structured articulation of three elements: writing, spatial arrangement, and repetition. Writing stabilises a personal utterance and reformulates the relationship with the dead in a register of obligation and continuity. Spatial arrangement creates a stable domestic centre that makes repeated encounters with the objects practicable. Daily repetition produces, over time, a progressive formation of the moral relation to the self.

These dimensions function through their articulation. Writing gains stability through repetition. Spatial arrangement provides a framework for practice. Material supports sustain repetition over time. The effect emerges from their articulation, from the way each element supports and conditions the others.

In this sense, Ioana's case allows a more general analytical distinction to be formulated between presence and activation. Presence refers to the existence of objects in space. Activation refers to their integration into a regime of repeated practices, stable spatial organisation, and a framework of meaning that makes them operative. Self-cultivation takes shape in this second register, as the effect of sustained activation over time.

This distinction makes it possible to shift analysis away from the inventory of objects and toward the processes through which they become effective. The analysis focuses on the conditions under which objects are set to work, repeated, and integrated into everyday life. The *agencement* – objects, space, and practices articulated together – is where the analysis is anchored.

IX. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of Ioana's case allows several theoretical and methodological observations that contribute to the study of religion in migration and to the anthropology of practices of the self.

In this case, transnational mourning appears as a situation marked by a rupture in ritual mediation. Distance affects the conditions through which mourning practices can be sustained and through which relationships with the dead are maintained. Access to the collective infrastructures that organise death and memory becomes limited, creating the need to assemble alternative forms of support through available resources. Domestic space emerges as a site in which practices are relocated and reorganised through objects, material bricolage, and gradually established routines. Within this configuration, the domestic environment becomes a medium through which processes of self-cultivation take shape.

Religious objects participate in the production of effects of presence and in the organisation of practice. Their efficacy depends on the regime of activation in which they are embedded and on the relations they establish with gestures, routines, and spatial arrangements. A decorative icon and an icon integrated into daily practice share the same material form while occupying different analytical positions. The distinction lies in the ways objects become incorporated into repeated actions and domestic configurations. The study of material religion therefore benefits from attention to *agencements*, processes, and relations between objects and practices.

The double letter introduces a type of object that occupies a singular position within the domestic configuration analysed here. As a technology of the self in the Foucauldian sense, it supports a writing practice through which the subject works on her relationship to herself, to the past, and to the future. The letter stabilises a personal utterance, gives form to an otherwise diffuse experience, and formulates a moral

commitment. Its proximity to religious objects creates a broader field of interaction between religious practices and biographical objects involved in processes of self-formation.

The model developed in this article – the articulation of writing, spatial arrangement, and repetition – offers a way of describing a mechanism of self-cultivation in a migratory context. The mechanism identified here is not restricted to Orthodoxy and may be explored in other religious and cultural settings characterised by disruptions of collective infrastructures and the emergence of individual reconfigurations. Its heuristic value lies in providing a framework through which different configurations can be compared while preserving their specificity.

From a methodological perspective, the analysis relies on the articulation of discourse, practice, and materiality. Interviews provide access to the participant's formulations and interpretations, observation makes visible gestures and sequences of action, and the description of space and objects reveals the conditions within which practices become possible. Self-cultivation emerges through the interaction of these dimensions and through the organisation that links them together.

The study also has clear limits. The analysis is based on a single case and therefore remains exploratory. The narrative material captures practices only partially, depending on what is articulated during interviews and what can be observed within a limited period of time. Future research could examine the longitudinal evolution of *agencements* and develop comparative perspectives across generations, social milieus, and different degrees of housing stability.

At the same time, the concentrated character of the case makes it possible to observe the mechanism with particular clarity. The analysis brings together objects, practices, and spatial organisation within a dense configuration whose internal relations can be followed in detail, offering a useful basis for future comparative research.

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