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Introduction

This volume is dedicated to Maya Burger, professor emerita at the Faculty of Arts, University of Lausanne. It gathers contributions from friends, colleagues, and former students who have shared some of their intellectual journey with her. Initially planned as presentations to a symposium in 2021, the contributions not only illustrate several aspects of Maya's wide-ranging intellectual interests, as in the classical *Festschrift* genre, but also provide innovative material that explore the relevance of a study of encounters for the fields of South Asian studies and history of religions. We hope that the volume will in turn kindle the curiosity of Maya and other scholars, and perhaps open up new perspectives of research in the collaborative, interdisciplinary, and iconoclast spirit that she has always championed.

After studying at the University of Lausanne and at Rajasthan University as a doctoral fellow, Maya defended her doctoral thesis in 1985 on the study of two villages in Rajasthan. She completed her training at the University of California, Berkeley, and became a private docent at the University of Lausanne in 1987. In 1995 she was awarded the chair of Professor of Comparative History of Religions in the Faculty of Theology at the same university. She taught for many years classes on methodological issues in the study of religion, Hinduism, and Hindi. Convinced of the necessity of a strict separation between the study of religions and theology, she decided to move to a different faculty and since 2009 has been working in the Department of Slavic and South Asian Languages in the Faculty of Arts.

Throughout her career, Maya has been particularly committed to the institution, to teaching and transmitting her knowledge to the next generation. She was the driving force behind the Interfaculty Department for the Study of Religion when it was created in 1995, a particularly original interfaculty unit at the University of Lausanne. She introduced the study of the Hindi language, first as an elective module, then as part of the full curriculum. She has invested a great deal of time and effort in teaching and supporting her students, and has trained many doctoral students and researchers to whom she has communicated her curiosity, her taste for languages, and her methodological rigour. For a generation of young women scholars, she has also represented a model career in an academic world that is still struggling to achieve full gender equality. Maya has been president of the Swiss Society for the Study of Religion (SGR-SSSR) for many years, and was

president of the European Association for the Study of Religion (EASR) between 2008 and 2013.

As can be seen from her bibliography below, Maya's research stands out due to its broad thematic scope: comparative history of religions, history of yoga, history of bhakti movements, modern and premodern Hindi literature, cultural history of Swiss–Indian relations, and so on. She has opened up many new fruitful perspectives for further research by using original methodological tools and focusing on neglected sources. She has co-directed two projects of the Swiss National Science Foundation: “Yoga between Switzerland and India: The History and Hermeneutics of an Encounter” (with Peter Schreiner) and “Travels, Missions, Translations: Mechanisms of Encounters between India and Switzerland (1870–1970)” (with Angelika Malinar).

The present volume

The volume is organised to echo the multiple dimensions of Maya's work, with a division into four parts: Indology, History of Religions, History of Orientalism, and Hindi and Translation. The contributors explore different examples of encounters with “significant others”, a concept that we take in a broad sense; that is, not only with spouses or partners but friends, teachers or students, scholars, opponents, movements, literary motifs, languages, texts, images, or objects. We conceived this framing as an invitation to contributors to focus on various processes of interactions and exchanges between the Indian subcontinent and the wider world and within the subcontinent itself, through the examination of relevant cases.

The study of such interactions has often been discarded as of secondary importance for two reasons: the conception of Indology as focusing exclusively on Indian history and cultures (with a preference for the old period) and practical disciplinary boundaries. Since the groundbreaking work of Wilhelm Halbfass's *Indien und Europa* (1981), however, it appears clear that there cannot be a history of Indian traditions and cultures without taking into account connections with the rest of the world. Such a perspective has helped to “decompartmentalise” Indology and turn it into a discipline that is well prepared to deal with the dynamic processes of exchange between India and the rest of the world: grounded in philology and linguistic skills, the discipline is indeed uniquely situated to address questions of intercultural exchange without giving in to generalist and vague discourses. This evolution is perfectly in line with historical disciplines, where a focus on interactions, encounters, and connections appears more important than ever. Breaking away from “national” boundaries, which still often (most of the time, implicitly) command the selection of topics and methods, many historians have

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been advocating for various declinations of transnational history writing and “global micro-history”, from Carlo Ginzburg to Christopher Bayly and Sanjay Subrahmanyam.

Thus the historical study of encounters with “significant others” – from the same or a different cultural background – can prove particularly helpful: it highlights the highly dynamic nature of identity and knowledge production, a concern that has been in the heart of most of Maya’s work. This perspective also shows us a way out of the aporias of “postmodern” approaches, which have (inadvertently) tended to compartmentalise cultures even more, by bringing the actual data back to the centre.

Encounters are at the heart of literary texts, and the analysis of intertextual references is a major axis of literary studies. Paying attention to encounters with foreign or external elements to a literary milieu or genre – which can be external elements such as a foreign style, motif, or “code-switching” but also references to foreign protagonists, locations, or cultures in narratives – is a particularly fruitful way to analyse a textual object: besides the narrative role that the literary inclusion of external elements can play (as in the figure of a *Deus ex machina*), such an approach emphasises the open-endedness of textual traditions and their ability to enrich an audience with novelty rather than providing it with “domesticised” content. This can act as a powerful corrective against stereotypical views that emphasise the purity of a literature or language, often for political reasons. Similarly, translations are in themselves witnesses to processes of encounters with a textual significant other. Sometimes at the origins of “creative misunderstandings”, they are by necessity produced in a perspective that deals with the otherness of the translated text and constructs commensurability between different cultural and textual universes. As Maya has often emphasised, translation studies can offer important insights for the study of cultural encounter.

Taking inspiration from these perspectives and analysing specific cases of encounters with all kinds of “significant others”, the contributions in this volume attempt to connect local and global dimensions, different linguistic and cultural contexts, and/or different disciplines. They explore cases studied on the basis of historical or literary sources, highlighting their importance to our understanding of broader processes and remaining critical in the evaluation of the phenomenon: situations that one would imagine to be crucial can turn out to be entirely unproductive – and conversely, seemingly negligible serendipitous encounters can have important legacies. The book is also an opportunity to reflect on the methodological dimension, both in the presentation of sources and in the interpretation of these examples: comparisons and contrasts, reflections on conditions, concepts and theories – these are all in the background of the featured studies.

