

Introduction

शङ्खचक्राङ्कितभुजान्वृणीयादन्यसूत्रिणः ।
गर्भे मास्यष्टमे विष्णुबलिं कुर्याद्यथाविधि ॥
नारायणः स्वयं गर्भे मुद्रां धारयते निजाम् ।
तत्करस्थेन चक्रेण शङ्खेन प्रथितौजसा ॥
करोति चक्रशङ्खाङ्कं शिशोर्वै बाहुमूलयोः ।
वैखानसेन सूत्रेण स्यादयं गर्भवैष्णवः ॥
वैष्णवं सूत्रमेतद्वि सर्वसिद्धिकरं परम् ।
वैखानसाश्च मत्पुत्रा दत्तपुत्राश्च दीक्षिताः ॥

क्रियाधिकार ३६.४२-४५

The present work examines and analyses the ritual tradition of the Vaikhānasas, a Brahmanic community in South India.⁶ The members of this group serve as hereditary priests in Viṣṇu temples, large and small, in the Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka.⁷ The repeated reformulations of the Vaikhānasas' identity as a group of ritual specialists dealt with in this book illuminate the development of this Indian religious tradition from the premodern period to the present in adaptation to and encounter with changes in the socio-religious environment. I concentrate on what makes a person eligible to perform the rituals in Viṣṇu temples: does birth, or initiation, create the ideal intermediary between humans and the god? This controversy has been ongoing for centuries among South Indian devotees of the god Viṣṇu (Vaiṣṇavas). For several centuries the discussion centered around the question of whether the Vaikhānasa priests must undergo an initiation including a branding on the upper arms, or whether their life-cycle rituals, and in particular the prenatal life-cycle ritual viṣṇubali, make them eligible to perform temple rituals. As hereditary temple priests the Vaikhānasas' stance is explicit: *only they* are Viṣṇu's children, preor-

6 The Vaikhānasas refer to themselves in English as the "Vaikhānasa community." This community shows several features of a Brahmanic subcaste, such as transregional endogamy, commensality, and the hereditary profession as temple priests or as āyurvedic doctors.

7 There are also temples in Kerala and Orissa which follow the Vaikhānasa ritual system.

daigned for temple service already before birth. Others, who receive an initiation, are only Viṣṇu's adopted children—or even his slaves.

In this book several perspectives on viṣṇubali, the central Vaikhānasa ritual in question, will be examined. First, I will deal with the changes in the interpretation and—along with it—in the description of the “proper performance” of this ritual in Vaikhānasa Sanskrit texts from the the mid-15th century to the 20th century CE. Second, three concrete examples of local conflicts about the question of whether the Vaikhānasas require initiation will be presented and analysed. Third, three examples of present day performances of viṣṇubali will be presented, documented on the accompanying DVD and interpreted in the light of the relation between text and performance, highlighting the importance of the acting priest's ritual competence.

In all parts of this book, an understanding of the rituals in their socio-religious contexts is aimed at. It is presupposed here that there always exists an interdependence and close interaction of ritual and context, and that (when need arises) ritual performances and the meaning attributed to these rituals are readily adapted to changing circumstances. One main reason for this, I argue, is that the rituals dealt with here are “lived religion”⁸ and as such are practices that would become extinct if they lost contact with and relevance for the living world.⁹ This detectable flexibility of ritual stands, however, in stark contrast to the Vaikhānasas' own traditional view. Their texts assume a continuity from time immemorial: the god Viṣṇu incarnated in the form of the school's founder, Vikhanas, and taught the authoritative texts of this tradition, the Vaikhānasasūtras and the content of the Vaikhānasasamhitās to four sages, the Ṛṣis. They then wrote down the content of these texts in abbreviated form. The traditional view is that since the time of the Ṛṣis the Vaikhānasas' ritual texts have been passed down in this

8 I do not, however, subscribe to the view that all ritual is necessarily religious ritual.

9 On the extinction of ritual systems, see Hüsken 2007b. I use the term “ritual” in this work in a rather narrow sense, because the concrete actions I deal with *are* rituals in a narrow sense: they are actions characterized by repetition and a verbal as well as cognitive framing, they are formally stylized, they refer to scripts and models, they are perceived and enacted as different from everyday behaviour, they are invested with (diverse) meaning(s), they consist of building-blocks (rites), they are culturally constructed and traditionally sanctioned, they take place at a specific place and/or time, they are structured, ordered, sequenced, and rule-governed (see Snoek 2006). Moreover, unlike Grimes (for example, in 2006b: 13), I use the term “ritual” for the idea as well as for the specific action. “Rite” here denotes an element, a building block within a ritual. However, “ritual” is not a term usually used in the Vaikhānasas' discourse. There, rather the type of ritual is named. One example is saṃskāra, which I refer to as a “life-cycle ritual.” On the term and concept “ritual” in South Asian languages, see Michaels 2006.

form and the rituals have been performed in accordance with these texts ever since.¹⁰

From a textual scholar's point of view, however, it is evident that a major change has in fact taken place in this tradition: a vedic "branch" (*śākhā*) with its own sūtra turned into a community of temple priests with an extensive literature on temple ritual. The oldest extant works of the Vaikhānasas do not even mention their profession as vaiṣṇava temple priests: the Vaikhānasasūtras are ritual texts which describe the solemn sacrifices and the domestic rituals for this vedic branch. In these works the cult of Viṣṇu as Nārāyaṇa is not yet prominent, although a sectarian tendency towards vaiṣṇavism is discernible (see Krick 1977). Only in inscriptions from the 9th century CE onwards are the Vaikhānasas described as ritual specialists who also serve god on behalf of others.¹¹ It appears that it was also in this period that the Vaikhānasas began to compose texts for temple rituals, the so-called Vaikhānasasamhitās. The history of the Vaikhānasas during the centuries which elapsed after the formulation of the sūtras (3rd /4th cent. CE) and before the formulation of these inscriptions and the early samhitās is unknown.¹² However, as temple priests they produced many texts on temple ritual, but also on the domestic rituals of their tradition. For it is above all with their specific domestic rituals, which they derive from the *Vaikhānasasmārtasūtra*, that the Vaikhānasas identify themselves, and distinguish themselves from other (ritual) traditions. This emphasis on the specific domestic ritual tradition is inextricably bound up with a shift in the balance of religious power in South Indian vaiṣṇavism, which made itself felt after the 12th century: the so-called Śrīvaiṣṇavas established themselves as the dominant power among the Vaiṣṇavas; at the same time this tradition opened itself also to non-Brahmanic groups. As a consequence of this development the Vaikhānasas appear to have been increasingly marginalized as temple priests. The prenatal life-cycle rituals (*garbhāsamskāra*) of the Vaikhānasas then played a key role in their efforts to assert their position as ritual specialists in temples through a reformulation of their religious and ritual identity. This change, manifest in the change in the interpretation and performance of the prenatal life-cycle ritual viṣṇubali ("the offering to Viṣṇu"), is presented and analysed here.

Some of the questions guiding this investigation are the following: How ought we to understand the notion of "unchanging rituals" in the Vaikhānasas?

10 On the legendary origin of the Vaikhānasas see the detailed account in Colas 1996: 16ff.

11 See Colas 1996: 58ff.; see also Pathak 1959.

12 It is even uncertain, whether we in fact can speak of an uninterrupted Vaikhānasa tradition (see Colas 1996: 42–44).

case? Why is this notion of the rituals' stability so important for the self-perception and representation of this group? What this group perceives as an attack on the "core" of their identity is of most interest here. It is evident that in the context at hand, rituals—and especially rituals of initiation—are an important marker of identity.¹³ These rituals serve to determine the boundaries of the group.¹⁴ However, as rituals not only reflect, represent and alter identity, but also are subject to changes themselves, the present work addresses both the question of the function of rituals in the formation, maintenance, and alteration of identity, as well as the question of how rituals are transformed as a consequence of a changing self-perception of a group in a specific historical and local setting.

Printed Sanskrit texts of the Vaikhānasa tradition form the starting point of the investigation. Here, this work breaks new ground with respect to the texts on which it is based. Since the mid-twentieth century Indian and Western indological research has engaged with the Vaikhānasas mainly as a vedic tradition, based solely on their sūtras (see 1.1). An exchange of letters between the Sanskritist Willem Caland and the Vaikhānasa scholar Pārthasārathi Bhaṭṭācārya (see 1.3) in the late 1930s brought the extensive literature and the living ritual traditions of the Vaikhānasas to attention in the West.¹⁵ Between 1944 and 1959 Pārthasārathi Bhaṭṭācārya published several articles, and later Rāghavaprāsada Caudharī and Lakṣmīnaraśiṃha Bhaṭṭa likewise published several shorter works on the Vaikhānasa tradition.¹⁶ Prompted by Willem Caland, some scholars of the Utrecht school also worked on this tradition's texts on temple ritual, the Vaikhānasasamhitās. Thus, Jan Gonda gave attention to the change in the use of the mantras prescribed in the sūtras in some of the samhitās,¹⁷ and in 1965 Teunis Goudriaan published what remains so far the only complete translation of a Vaikhāna-

13 The Vaikhānasas' specific identity as a group of ritual specialists is here understood as one of many social identifications, which together constitute the Vaikhānasas' social identity. "Vaikhānasa identity" thus refers to their orientation to, and interaction with others, as well as to their recognition and acknowledgement by others. As the demarcation line between both self and other is here always defined through ritual, the Vaikhānasas will in what follows be treated as first and foremost representatives of a ritual tradition, even though other factors (theology, soteriology, etc.) also constitute important components of their religious identity.

14 Rituals can establish a group's boundary as forms of social practice (see Mol 1978a: 7) or even, as in the present case, as manipulation of the body through branding and wearing of a visible sign on the forehead.

15 See especially Caland 1928, also the foreword in Caland/Vīra 1941.

16 See Caudharī 1967, 1972, 1986 and 1995; Bhaṭṭa 1972a and b; see also Gode 1961; Naraśiṃha Reddy 1983; Rāmānuja Tātācārya 1990.

17 See Gonda 1954 (234–262), 1972, 1977b, 1979 and 1981a.

sasamhitā into a western language.¹⁸ Almost two decades later V. Varadachari, in his seminal work *Āgamas and South Indian Vaiṣṇavism* (Madras, 1982) offered a precise and insightful summary of the contents of many edited and unedited Vaikhānasa texts on temple ritual.¹⁹ Since the late 1970s, the French scholar Gérard Colas has worked continuously on these texts in particular. He studied the connection of the Vaikhānasasūtras to other texts of the same genre and probably of the same period,²⁰ discussed individual questions of rituals and the specific tradition of the Vaikhānasa school on the basis of their samhitās and other texts,²¹ and published a partial edition and translation of the *Vimānārcanakalpa*, the ritual text of this school most widely used in contemporary practice.²² The results of his dissertation on the Vaikhānasasamhitās²³ informed his seminal work, *Viṣṇu, ses images et ses feux. Les métamorphoses du dieu chez les Vaikhānasa* (1996). Therein he deals in detail with the ritual texts ascribed to the four mythical Ṛṣis.²⁴ The further extensive literature of the Vaikhānasas has nevertheless until now scarcely been studied;²⁵ still less has the contemporary situation of this vaiṣṇava group and its rich tradition been granted scholarly attention.²⁶

18 In addition Goudriaan dealt with the Vaikhānasa tradition in two articles in 1970 and 1973. For a review of Goudriaan's translation, see Brunner 1969.

19 In India in the 1990s two works were published, entitled *Vaikhānasāgama* (Ramachandra Rao 1990) and *Vaikhānasa Āgama Kośa* (1991; the series was continued 10 years later). These contain extracts from the samhitās, arranged according to content.

20 See Colas 1992 and 1994.

21 See Colas 1986a, 1986b, 1988, 1989 and 1992.

22 See Colas 1984b and 1986b.

23 See Colas 1995b.

24 On pp. 94–97 Colas presents a relative chronology of the Vaikhānasasamhitās and shows that the oldest group of samhitās was probably composed after the ninth century and before Vedāntadeśika (14th century). The newer samhitā texts are considerably more diverse, which makes even a preliminary dating virtually impossible.

25 Even though Caland had already been made aware of the *Daśavidhahetunirūpaṇa* by Pārthasārathi Bhaṭṭācārya (see Caland 1928: 235f.), this text was not subsequently dealt with (see also Ramachandra Rao 1990: 24–26). Of the extracanonical works, until now only the *Sūtrabhāṣya* of Nṛsiṃha Vājapeyin (Muttu 1996) and the *Mokṣopāyapradīpikā* (Colas 1985) have been studied.

26 At present, apart from Gérard Colas (see bibliography, s.v. Colas), only Guy R. Welbon (Philadelphia, U.S.A.) studies this tradition. From the 1960s he collected material on his many research visits to South India. He also photographed and filmed some rituals in Vijayawada and Machilipatnam (see Welbon 1984). Welbon's fieldwork in Andhra Pradesh was acknowledged in detail in an issue of the monthly journal *Vaikhānasapattrika* in the 1980s. He informed me in 1998 that he is writing a monograph on two great Vaikhānasa scholars of the 20th century, namely Pārthasārathi Bhaṭṭācārya (see 1.3) and Anantapadmanābhācāryulu Gāru (see 4.6.2).

In this book special attention is given to those texts in which the Vaikhānasas seek to distinguish themselves from other religious groupings, and in which they demarcate their own tradition over against other vaiṣṇava traditions. The Vaikhānasas strove to define and defend their unique identity through Vaikhānasa texts on temple ritual, the saṃhitās and still more in the domestic ritual literature. These texts continually—albeit rarely explicitly—use the arguments which were first systematically developed by the Vaikhānasa scholar Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita in his text *Daśavidhahetunirūpaṇa*, “the description of the tenfold reason (why the Vaikhānasas are superior).” This text gives information on the situation of the Vaikhānasas and on their strategies to establish their superiority over other traditions. Therefore, the *Daśavidhahetunirūpaṇa* lies at the heart of this investigation. The central issue which runs through the *Daśavidhahetunirūpaṇa* concerns the legitimation of the Vaikhānasas, as priests, to establish contact between the devotees and god. This right seems to have been challenged and the relevant discussion remained alive until well into the twentieth century.

Part 1 is entirely given over to the Vaikhānasa Sanskrit text *Daśavidhahetunirūpaṇa*. Its author Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita is introduced (1.2) after the background and aims of this text, together with its position within the literature of the Vaikhānasas is given (1.1). Then follows an evaluation of the relation of the *Daśavidhahetunirūpaṇa* to its Sanskrit commentary. Particular attention is paid to this commentary’s author, Pārthasārathi Bhaṭṭācārya, as it is his influence which was decisive in the formation and representation of the Vaikhānasa community of the twentieth century (1.3). To this is added an overview of the literary, historical and intellectual context from which the *Daśavidhahetunirūpaṇa* emerged (1.4). The text itself is available in electronic form at the website “Göttingen Register of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages” (http://www.sub.uni-goettingen.de/ebene_1/fiindolo/gretil.htm).

In the *Daśavidhahetunirūpaṇa*, still more than in the Vaikhānasasamhitās, reference is made time and again to the fact that the Vaikhānasa tradition is “vedic”: because the Vaikhānasas follow the vedic Vaikhānasasūtra, they are “vedic.” In this regard it is particularly important that they have undergone the eighteen life-cycle rituals (*saṃskāra*), prescribed by their sūtra. Only then are they, and they alone, entitled to perform the temple rituals.²⁷ On the basis of the ritual texts of the Vaikhānasas, it can be shown that the meaning and function attributed to several life-cycle rituals—and with them their execution—have undergone considerable changes. Above all, of the five prenatal life-cycle rituals, only one has developed into an essential characteristic of the Vaikhānasas and up to

27 See also Colas, 1996: 137 and 150f.

the present day plays an important role as marker of their specific identity. At stake in the debate with other vaiṣṇava groups is the right to perform temple rituals, and at the heart of this discussion lies the question whether a temple priest must bear a branding on the upper arms as part of an initiation, or whether for the Vaikhānasas the prenatal life-cycle ritual called viṣṇubali serves the same purpose. Also in question is the Vaikhānasas' contention that initiation and branding does not entitle one to perform rituals, and thereby serve as an intermediary between humans and the god.

In establishing a causal connection between the vedic-ness (*vaidikatva*)²⁸ of their tradition and eligibility to perform temple ritual the Vaikhānasas use two frames of reference: the Veda and temple ritual. The Veda, in which temple ritual is largely unknown, is declared the primary factor which legitimates the Vaikhānasas to practise temple ritual as their profession. What idea lies hidden behind this connection of opposites? Most promising here is the Vaikhānasas' discussion of why the pejorative term for temple priests, *devalaka*, is not to be used for them (2.1.2). This discussion ultimately concerns the central issue, whether group membership and religious legitimation is achieved through descent or through initiation: is one born, or made, a true follower of Viṣṇu? For the Vaikhānasas, who emphasize their prenatal saṃskāras, their specific identity is directly linked to descent and marriage. Initiation and/or conversion into their group are thus impossible. As this inherited identity is constituted without freedom of action or will, it is felt to be beyond discussion.²⁹ By contrast the notion of initiation includes a certain permeability: although certain preconditions have to be fulfilled, it is in principle possible to become member of a group through initiation. The Vaikhānasa author Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita is distinguished by the fact that he connected both ideas hierarchically, and thus adapted the Vaikhānasa tradition in the course of the debate over this life-cycle ritual to competing groupings who favored initiation. Nevertheless it is precisely by doing so that he secured the continuance of the Vaikhānasas' own distinct tradition. In order to trace this process, in this work reference will also be made to sources from the rival vaiṣṇava ritual school, the Pāñcarātra. Although the sources allow neither a relative nor, still less, an absolute chronology for this process, at least glimpses of it can be presented on the basis of the inner logic of the textual traditions.

In part 3 the recent past and the present are dealt with. The conflict over 'initiation versus viṣṇubali' apparently remained current for centuries—at times

28 In this model, the Vaikhānasas are above all characterized by their vedic-ness (*vaidikatva*), by contrast to other traditions, which are described as "tantric" (*tāntrika*).

29 See Michaels 1998b: 88; see also Giesen 1999: 18ff.

seeming to lie dormant, while at other times flaming as open dispute. For the 19th and 20th centuries some external textual witnesses are available. The dispute in part led even to physical clashes and in many places a solution was sought through resorting to legal courts. Here court records for one such clash in Singhapērumāl (Tamil Nadu) are presented and analysed, occasionally supplemented by statements of individuals who were involved in these conflicts. It is apparent here that such clashes were never limited to the religious arena, but also significantly influenced, and were influenced by, other contextual factors. The function of ritual in social interaction will be highlighted in the light of what the sources reveal about the rituals' significance for diverse interest groups, who sought to advance their religious, economic and political interests simultaneously. The materials are sifted to show which arguments are brought forward for the diverse positions and how these arguments changed in the course of the documented development. The analysis points to fundamental shifts in power relations, which are expressed by the changing course of the debate. It is apparent that here too the dichotomy of family descent and voluntary membership to a group plays an essential role, even though over several decades arguments other than those substantiated in textual sources were used.

While in part 1 and 2 it is demonstrated that not only textual prescriptions but also the meaning attributed to a ritual can change, depending on the contextual necessities, and while in 3.1 the changing discourse on ritual in the context of a legal dispute is traced, part 4 accounts for the fact that ritual is informed not only by texts, but is a practice and performance in the first place.³⁰ Ritual is obviously a kind of action, and the analysis of concrete enactments at a specific time, in a specific place, and by specific groups and individuals is crucial for understanding central factors informing a ritual's change or stability. However universal the rituals may be, they are always also particular (Grimes 2006b: 2). This is obvious from the comparison of the primary ritual handbooks with three actual performances of the viṣṇubali ritual in part 4: the performance is not a one-to-one enactment of the textual prescriptions (4.4).³¹ Three enactments of viṣṇubali that I witnessed and documented are described and compared with the texts that are used during the performance, and with each other. This documentation is il-

30 Grimes says (2006: 42): "'The real rite' is a construct that glosses over the differences among three things: ritual texts, ritual performances, and ritual memories."

31 Tambiah (1979: 115) already indicates this "dual" aspect of rituals: on the one hand they appear invariable and stereotyped, on the other hand no performance is ever one and the same ritual as another. For a critique of Tambiah's still too static view on ritual see Grimes 2006: 136. On the structure and the 'individualizing' factor of vedic sacrifices and saṃskāras, see B. K. Smith 1989: 127–137.

lustrated with photographs. Additionally, this book contains a DVD; and the material presented on the DVD is part of the primary material used in the writing of part 4. Despite almost identical wording in the ritual handbooks the enactments diverge greatly from one another. The analysis deals with the questions of how the connection between text and performance can be characterised and what this implies for our understanding of ritual texts in the given setting. Here it becomes clear that the acting priest decisively contributes to a ritual's actual form, whereas not a single word is said about his role in the ritual texts. How does such a serious discrepancy between text and performance come about? A still more informative question here concerns the reasons why this discrepancy is not felt to be such by the participants themselves. During the ritual the priest embodies theoretical and practical competence. Therefore the socio-religious context in which a priest acquires his special abilities and qualifications will also be discussed. Section 4.6 is concerned with the individual careers of three such ritual specialists.

The present work is dedicated to diverse dimensions of those rituals which substantially mark the specific Vaikhānasa identity. Through changes in these rituals, the Vaikhānasa tradition is "invented" anew, and canonized again.³² In part 5 answers will be sought to the questions which arise in the light of the historic conflict of the Vaikhānasas with the Śrīvaiṣṇavas. In what ways did the religious tradition of the Vaikhānasas change, how did it adapt to other competing movements, where did it seek to differentiate itself? What role did rituals play in this process? It is clear that rituals change with (religious) identity. Rituals are nevertheless generally perceived rather as eternal and invariant.³³ Therefore sequences of actions repeated in the same way are in popular parlance frequently termed 'ritual.' However, the rituals to which the Vaikhānasas constantly appeal are quite clearly neither static nor closed systems. The tradition evidently tends to incorporate innovations very quickly.³⁴ Causes of change in rituals are to be sought both within as well as outside the Vaikhānasa tradition. The Vaikhānasas themselves perpetuate the view that their tradition is unaltered "since time immemorial." They thus see their own tradition through just those glasses which are usually willingly put on in the observation of rituals: rituals are felt to be fixed and unalterable, which in fact they are not. Do theoretical approaches, which seek to explain why flexible rituals are felt to be fixed, there-

32 What Tambiah (1979: 136) says of poets in purely oral traditions is equally valid for the performance of rituals: "in fact he preserves the tradition by the constant recreation of it."

33 See Staal (1979: 11): "rituals are always guarded jealously and with extreme conservatism" and Platvoet (1995: 28): "Ritual is an ordered 'flow', or sequence, of social interaction, conventionalized and formalized by repetition and thereby made customary."

34 Platvoet (1995: 30f) calls this "traditionalizing innovation."

fore also explain the image which the Vaikhānasas themselves form of their tradition? Or conversely, does the investigation of exactly this dimension of the Vaikhānasa tradition offer solutions to the question of why rituals in general are perceived to be fixed? In part 5 such questions are contemplated.