

5 Variation in life-cycle rituals and the stability of tradition

In the form in which it is available to us now, the text which is central to this investigation—the *Daśavidhahetunirūpaṇa*—is not only the work of its author Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita, but also a product of its transmission. The changes which are apparent from a comparison of the two editions of the text discussed in 1.3, separated by 30 years, are probably only the most recent in a whole series of reworkings in the course of its transmission. Here I am most concerned about the question: why was *this* text in particular chosen for transmission over several generations? The *Daśavidhahetunirūpaṇa* has been edited and published twice. This fact is clearly connected to the socio-religious situation of the Vaikhānasas in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Most importantly, the text provides the Vaikhānasas with arguments, underpinned with quotes from their sūtra and saṃhitās, explaining why they should not undergo an initiation which involved the branding of the upper arms (see 3.1).⁶¹⁹ It is evident that the publication of a text which explicitly opposes such an initiation for the Vaikhānasas and provides detailed legitimation for this opposition is directly connected to external pressure. In the *Daśavidhahetunirūpaṇa*, the religious and professional legitimation of the Vaikhānasas is dealt with on the basis of the dichotomy between “branding” and “viṣṇubali.” This dispute is by no means a passing spat between two competing groups, but expresses fundamental questions that did not lose their relevance over several centuries. However, as can be shown for the Singhaperumāḷ case in 3.1.3, the availability of printed texts of this tradition, beginning in the late 19th century, led to a shift in the Vaikhānasas’ strategies in argument. Instead of “local custom” now through printed texts the authority of the āgamas was successfully invoked. Here, the Vaikhānasas ironically profited from the increasing publication activity from the late 19th century onwards, which was induced by the general accusation of “low performance standards” directed at arcakas.

5.1 The historical context of the *Daśavidhahetunirūpaṇa*

In his *Daśavidhahetunirūpaṇa* Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita ignores his contemporaries and his specific historical setting, such as preceding or contemporary events,

619 The *Daśavidhahetunirūpaṇa* moreover might, with its emphasis on the vedic-ness of the Vaikhānasa tradition, also be aimed at providing the Vaikhānasas with arguments against the Tamilization of temple worship (see Fuller 2003: chapter 4).

personalities, terms or texts. His arguments thereby achieve a timeless relevance. In order to maintain the illusion of this timelessness in this continuous debate explicit mention of Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita and his works is avoided, although his arguments continue to exercise significant influence on the self-understanding and external representation of the Vaikhānasas.

The burning questions of Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita's time are reflected through the *Daśavidhaheturirūpaṇa*'s refutation of anonymous or hypothetical objections which are aimed at devaluating the validity of the Vaikhānasa tradition. The Vaikhānasas' eligibility to perform rituals in Viṣṇu temples was challenged, as is shown by Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita's treatment of the questions concerning entitlement to temple worship, the obligation to undergo an initiation, the method of taking refuge in Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa, and the meaning and function of the Vaikhānasas' life-cycle rituals.

Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita lived sometime between 1370 and 1740 (see 1.2). His texts are to be seen in close connection to the development and establishment of the Śrīvaiṣṇava school in South India. One of the most important figures here was certainly Rāmānuja, whose dates are traditionally given as 1017–1137 CE. Born in a Brahmanic subcaste which pursued vedic scholarship, Rāmānuja became a follower of Viṣṇu, and was himself initiated into Vaiṣṇavism through an initiation now known as *pañcasamskāra*.⁶²⁰ Rāmānuja is regarded as having systematised the vaiṣṇava philosophical movement of Viśiṣṭādvaita, based on the opinions of his predecessor Yāmunācārya, author of the *Āgamapramāṇya*.⁶²¹ In this school the presence of the god in the image (*arcāvatāra*) is emphasized and temple ritual therefore plays a major role (see Appadurai 1981: 74f.). It is above all Rāmānuja's impact on temple ritual which concerned the Vaikhānasas. Rāmānuja altered the structure of temple organization in many South Indian temples (see Carman 1974: 37), often instituting offices which were also available to non-Brahman castes.⁶²² Rāmānuja clearly wanted to open religion and ritual to other social groups to a greater extent than had long been usual and instituted *pañcasamskāra* (including the branding element) as initiation or conversion into the Śrīvaiṣṇava fold.⁶²³ His comparatively inclusive attitude also shaped his policy with respect to temple ritual: a bias in favour of the Pāñcarātrins is apparent. Rāmānuja's relative openness certainly conflicted with the exclusive nature of

620 Rāmānuja underwent this initiation in a small vaiṣṇava community among Yāmuna's pupils in Śrīraṅgam, which he later also led (see Carman 1974: 29).

621 The orthodoxy of the Pāñcarātra school was laid out in this work (on this see Oberhammer 1971).

622 See Orr 1995: 109; Lester 1994, 39f. and 48; Mumme 1993: 131; Stein 1980: 233.

623 See Jagadeesan 1989a: 194; see Carman 1974: 38f.

the Vaikhānasa system. The rather conservative Vaikhānasa tradition, insisting that only Brahmans are eligible to hold and perform ritual functions, and that Sanskrit is the only language to be used in ritual, left certainly less room for bhakti and participation by non-Brahmins, both of which were very characteristic of the medieval period. It might well be that the Vaikhānasas' rejection of integrating broader social groups into temple activities prompted Rāmānuja to prefer Pāñcarātra ritual over that of the Vaikhānasas. He is even said to have attempted to replace the Vaikhānasa ritual system with that of the Pāñcarātra in some South Indian temples. According to the Kōyil Oluku (the Śrīraṅgam temple chronicle) he succeeded in doing so in Śrīraṅgam,⁶²⁴ in Tirupati he did not.⁶²⁵ In any case, toward the end of the twelfth century the influence of the Vaikhānasas was restricted by Rāmānuja, as he gave stronger support to the Pāñcarātrins. Here it is certainly of some significance that Rāmānuja himself was a convert, who was initiated into Vaiṣṇavism through pañcasamṣkāra. It was this pañcasamṣkāra initiation that he established as the general ritual of initiation into Śrīvaiṣṇavism. Moreover he appointed 74 men from prominent Śrīvaiṣṇava families as so-called ācāryapuruṣas. They were to take over the leadership of the Śrīvaiṣṇava community and were charged with conferring initiation (pañcasamṣkāra) on suitable converts. At the same time these ācāryapuruṣas were responsible for the management of the temples (see Appadurai 1981: 76f.). Thus Rāmānuja established a decisive link between the leadership of the school and the control of temples. The pañcasamṣkāra initiation most probably was developed on the basis of initiations described in the Pāñcarātrasaṃhitās, and was then later (in its final form) included in the later Pāñcarātrasaṃhitās as additional initiation to the Pāñcarātra dīkṣās.⁶²⁶ Śrīvaiṣṇava scholars then combined the soteriological concept of "taking refuge in Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa" (prapatti or śaraṇāgati) with the ritual execution of pañcasamṣkāra. Importantly, pañcasamṣkāra, the initiation into Śrīvaiṣṇavism, then came to be the ritual expression of this "taking refuge." After Rāmānuja Śrīvaiṣṇavism took two different directions, which are represented by the so-called Vaṭakalai saṃpradāya centred in Kāñcīpuram and the so-called Tenkalai saṃpradāya centred in Śrīraṅgam.⁶²⁷ The two branches

624 See Jagannathan 1994: 90; Colas 1984a: 76.

625 See Bhattacharyya 1956: 175; Jadadeesan 1989: 177–178; Jagannathan 1994: 124, 126–127.

626 Even today pañcasamṣkāra is absolutely necessary for becoming a Śrīvaiṣṇava.

627 The Vaṭakalai tradition is generally viewed as emphasizing the "northern" language of Sanskrit as the language of transmission of their sacred texts, whereas the Tenkalais are mainly linked with the "southern" language Tamil. Although both sects recognize Rāmānuja as their religious teacher (Carman 1974: 25), the lists of his successors as spiri-

developed differently in respect of their soteriological ideas, but also with regard to some ritual aspects. The different form of the sectarian mark (*ūrdhva puṇḍra*) is the most visible difference between the adherents of the two schools. Today every Śrīvaiṣṇava temple or religious centre is assigned to one or the other of the two schools, which can be seen already through the painting of the relevant sectarian mark on the temple walls (see Jagadeesan 1989: 196f.). The Vaikhānasas as temple priests also wear the relevant *ūrdhva puṇḍra*. Nevertheless, in terms of doctrine the disputes between the Northern and the Southern school have had hardly any influence on the Vaikhānasas over the centuries.⁶²⁸ Even today, there is intermarriage between Vaikhānasas who belong to the Tenkalai and Vaṭakalai temples, while this is not the case between Tenkalai and Vaṭakalai Śrīvaiṣṇavas. The ritualization of the “taking refuge” in form of *pañcasamṣkāra* was far more important for the Vaikhānasas, because this implied that the branding of the upper arms was part and parcel of the “taking refuge.” For the Śrīvaiṣṇavas, branding of the upper arms developed into a criterion for inclusion and exclusion: only those who underwent the branding had taken refuge in Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa and could be regarded as Śrīvaiṣṇavas. This inevitably excluded the Vaikhānasas, challenged their eligibility (as supposedly non-Śrīvaiṣṇavas) to perform the temple rituals, and induced Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita to identify some elements of the “taking refuge” with ritual elements of *viṣṇubali*, and thus to equate *pañcasamṣkāra* with *viṣṇubali*.

5.2 Ritual and power struggles

Although the Śrīvaiṣṇavas influenced the concrete form and organization of temple ritual in many ways since the time of Rāmānuja, they have not developed their own ritual tradition. They relied instead on the existing traditions of the Pāñcarātrins and the Vaikhānasas. There is a structural interdependence here: the temple as an institution and its temple priests economically depend on the funds provided by the temple founders, and on other donors who regularly or occasionally provide money and other resources in the maintenance of the temple and who sponsor the rituals performed therein. Many of the regular donors were and are Śrīvaiṣṇava devotees who, in turn, depend on the temple priest who per-

tual and religious leaders of the sects differ. While the “Southern sect” considers Maṇavālamūni (1370–1443 CE) as the spiritual successor to Rāmānuja, and also its founder, this position is attributed to Venkatanātha (trad. dates 1269–1369 CE) by the “Northern sect.”

628 On a dispute between Tenkalai and Vaṭakalai Vaikhānasas at the end of the 18th century in the Pārthasārathi temple in Triplicane see Colas 1995a: 123.

forms rituals for them, through which the donors gain their religious merit.⁶²⁹ This interdependence forces the groups to interact. However, this interaction has many ambivalent facets. On the level of temple rituals the Vaikhānasas and the Śrīvaiṣṇavas belong to two separate but interdependent groups, the Vaikhānasas being the ritual specialists, and the Śrīvaiṣṇavas the sponsors of the temple rituals. Within the vaiṣṇava fold the Vaikhānasas and Śrīvaiṣṇavas are sub-groups of the same category (Vaiṣṇavas). Here, however, the Vaikhānasas have a lower status as the Śrīvaiṣṇavas, since the Vaikhānasas are Vaiṣṇavas without an own theological or soteriological profile (see 2.2.5.4), since they do not have pañcasamskāra, and since the temple priests in general have a rather low status (see 2.1.2). Gellner characterizes these two levels as a hierarchy of “inner-worldly pragmatic religion” (represented by ritual) and “transcendent religion” (represented by soteriology) respectively. On the basis of his work in Nepal, Gellner shows that these two “types” of religion are often represented by different religious specialists (see Gellner 1992: 354f.). This model also applies to the relation of Vaikhānasas and Śrīvaiṣṇavas. The Vaikhānasas’ and Śrīvaiṣṇavas’ mutual recognition of their identity as Vaiṣṇavas is therefore of great significance; especially since, as was shown in 4.5.3, at the beginning of a ritual an identification of the sponsor (yajamāna) with the performing priest (br̥haspati), who also represents divine power, takes place and endures throughout the ritual.

Historically, the establishment of a branding as the mark identifying a Vaiṣṇava went hand in hand with the opening of the Śrīvaiṣṇavas toward groups that had formerly not been included. Simultaneously the ritual competence of the Vaikhānasas was brought into question—no doubt also because for the Śrīvaiṣṇavas there were alternative ritual specialists at hand, the Pāñcarātrins, who underwent the branding during their pañcasamskāra initiation. The popularization of Śrīvaiṣṇavism and the establishment of a conversion ritual was therefore almost inevitably accompanied by criticism of the Vaikhānasas’ birth-right as ritual specialists. In the long run, the Vaikhānasas faced the threat of the loss of their right to temple service.

629 In temple ritual the Vaikhānasas for the time of worship even identify the priest with the god: “No non-Viṣṇu is born as Viṣṇu, no non-Viṣṇu worships Viṣṇu. What is said by the friendly priest in the presence of the god, that is told by the god himself and thus it will be. Who wants to please Viṣṇu should please the arcaka” (DHN^D 39.17–20: *nāviṣṇur jāyate viṣṇur nāviṣṇur viṣṇum arcayet / supṛītenārcakenaiva yad uktaṃ devasannidhau // taddevenaiva samproktaṃ tathaiva ca bhaviṣyati / arcakaṃ toṣayed viṣṇum yas toṣayitum icchati //*). This identification of the arcaka with the deity emphasizes the authority of the priest and his qualification as ideal mediator.

The fundamental relationship between power and religious hierarchy, formulated by Louis Dumont (1970) for the varṇa system, is also structurally apparent here, although in the case at hand *within* the Brahmin varṇa. Here too there is an absolute separation of religious hierarchy and power: in the temple the Śrīvaiṣṇavas, representing economical and political power, do not have the privilege of worshipping god themselves, but are obliged to have this worship performed by the temple priests. Here, power is theoretically subordinated to the priesthood, and religious status and worldly power are separate. This relation based on religious hierarchy is expressed only in ritual, not in other contexts. Outside the ritual context the priesthood is subordinate to power. However, while Dumont assumes that through the subordination of power to religious status in the ritual context there emerges a kind of solidarity between the representatives of the two groups, this is not the case here: the Śrīvaiṣṇavas put the Vaikhānasas under pressure and attempted to gain influence on the ritual level as well. This special situation is based on the relationship between the Vaikhānasas and the Śrīvaiṣṇavas in which two different levels of identity overlap. On the one hand the Śrīvaiṣṇavas in many respects represent worldly, including economic power, in their role as temple founders, as donors and as those who finance the rituals.⁶³⁰ On this level there is a clear distinction between the Śrīvaiṣṇavas as sponsors and the Vaikhānasas as ritual specialists. On another level, the Śrīvaiṣṇavas represent a religious group which supplies the dogmatic, soteriological and theological ideas of the adherents of Viṣṇu. On this level the Vaikhānasas belong to the same religious group: they are a Vaiṣṇavas, albeit with particular ritual responsibilities. The division of roles and the interdependence within the religious group as Vaiṣṇavas does not correspond to the relationship of the sponsor (officiator) and priest in the context of temple ritual.

As became clear from the Singhaperumāḷ case (see 3.1.3), the conflict is primarily based on Śrīvaiṣṇava attempts to extend their competence to the context of temple ritual and thus—like the Pāñcarātrins but on a different level—to challenge the Vaikhānasas' authority and eligibility.⁶³¹ It appears that this overlap of separate layers of identity led time and again to the disturbance of the delicately balanced relationship between the Śrīvaiṣṇavas and the Vaikhānasas. In all three

630 In addition, since the time of Rāmānuja the management of the Viṣṇu temples has largely lain in their hands.

631 Even when Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita occasionally attacks the Pāñcarātrins in the *Daśavidhahetunirūpaṇa* it is nevertheless likely that the dispute is really being carried on with the Śrīvaiṣṇavas. The position of the Pāñcarātrins was similar to that of the Vaikhānasas: although indispensable during temple worship, as temple priests they nevertheless were and still are of low status among Brahmins.

cases described in 3.1 the Vaikhānasa were compelled to undergo branding. In the course of the conflicts the first request of the Vaikhānasas always was that the branding not be performed by a Śrīvaiṣṇava, but rather given within the Vaikhānasa tradition. In a hereditary system it clearly is easier to integrate an initiation performed by a member of one's own family than to accept an initiation from a different group. Pañcasamṣkāra is conferred by a religious teacher and the initiate acknowledges the religious authority of this teacher. The Śrīvaiṣṇavas' demand that they be the ones to confer this initiation on the Vaikhānasas ignores the different levels of identity that shape their relationship to the Vaikhānasas; it is aimed at transferring their hierarchical superiority within the vaiṣṇava groups to their position in the context of temple rituals, in which they were hierarchically subordinate to the Vaikhānasas. This is explicitly formulated in the District Judge's verdict in the Singhaperumāḷ case:

Samasrayanam [= branding] at the hands of the plaintiffs [= Śrīvaiṣṇavas] could not be insisted on, as nobody could be compelled to choose a particular person as his Guru [...] There is again the difficulty of the plaintiffs, who happen to be the Acharyas of their cult throughout India [...] The said Samasrayanam moreover, is not part of a ritual which takes place in the suit temple but one which is performed in the plaintiffs' mutt or places of his pilgrimage and, as such cannot be said to be a duty connected with the temple in the strict sense (see 3.1.3).

The dispute is thus not on the branding itself, but about the Vaikhānasas' recognition of the Śrīvaiṣṇavas' superior religious authority the branding stands for. If the Vaikhānasas accepted the branding, the religious and ritual hierarchy would be reversed and the mutual interdependence would become one-sided. The Śrīvaiṣṇavas would be recognized as simultaneously the representatives of worldly power *and* the ones who decide about ritual competence. If the Vaikhānasas were to receive their legitimation to carry out temple ritual through members of another tradition, this would mean subordinating themselves and acknowledging their power to confer, or also to withhold, this legitimation. The Vaikhānasas resist therefore primarily the religious hierarchy which would be established through such an initiation, and the conflict is the result of the overlapping of different aspects of group identity among vaiṣṇava groups.

Here it is clear that rituals—in this case the branding which the Vaikhānasas refused—are not only the expression and staging of existing social and socio-religious structures, but that they also can be means to reshape existing structures and, to that extent, instruments of power.⁶³²

632 See Burkert 1997: 17f.; see Tambiah 1979: 115: “[...] however prescribed they are, [rituals] are always linked to status claims and interests of the participants, and therefore

5.3 Strategies of integration and demarcation

The Vaikhānasas sought to advance their position in this conflict on two levels. Both argumentative strategies constantly refer to one another. The Vaikhānasas distinguished themselves over against the Pāñcarātrins by seeking to prove that as temple priests they were not only equally competent but in fact superior to the rival Pāñcarātra group. Their own “superior vedic” tradition was contrasted to the “inferior tantric” tradition of the Pāñcarātrins.⁶³³ Simultaneously the Vaikhānasas sought to integrate themselves into the vaiṣṇava groups primarily by identifying the viṣṇubali saṃskāra with the initiation of other vaiṣṇava traditions. The Vaikhānasas thus sought to maintain a fine balance between demarcation and integration with regard to different levels of their identity, as Vaiṣṇavas and as temple priests.

For the Vaikhānasas, proof of superior ritual competence was primarily a matter of acceptance of the religious authority of the Veda. Being of divine origin, the Veda has the highest authority and its truth cannot be called into question. Consequently, Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita took the Veda alone as his point of reference, and did not refer to contemporary authors or events. Rather, he based his argument on authoritative texts which he summarized as “smṛti, śruti, itihāsa, purāṇa” (see 1.4). He thereby freed the discussion from his own historical context and thus showed his tradition’s eternal validity, in accordance with the Veda. As the Veda is preserved in Sanskrit, Sanskrit as the language of divine tradition is also a central element for Vaikhānasa identity. The authority of the tradition became connected to its linguistic form, the purity of the language became equated to the purity of the tradition. By contrast, according to Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita, the Pāñcarātrins have an inferior tantric tradition. From this assumption he went on to prove that the term *devalaka*, a pejorative term for a temple priest, cannot be used for the Vaikhānasas (see 2.1.2). Here Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita combined familial

are always open to contextual meanings.” Bell (1997) goes one step further and sees all rituals as strategic action.

633 In the process of distinguishing themselves from the Pāñcarātrins within the Vaiṣṇavas, the Vaikhānasas nevertheless adopted several ideas which had hitherto been characteristic of the Pāñcarātrins. Thus the *Daśavidhahetunirūpaṇa* reveals an understanding of the concepts “veda,” “vaidika” and “śruti” which is directly connected with the portrayal of the Vaikhānasa branch of the Veda (*vaikhānasaśākhā*) as “Ur-Veda.” This relies on the Pāñcarātra concept of the (lost) *ekāyanaśākhā*, which is here claimed for the Vaikhānasas. The idea of the ritual division of the day into five sections (*pañcakāla*) is claimed for the Vaikhānasas in the same way. The adoption and integration of elements from other traditions in this way is a clear example for the phenomenon described by Platvoet (1995: 38) as a “window” between coexisting groups.

descent with an ethicization of profession: only a temple priest who follows the rules should not be called a *devalaka*. Since only the Vaikhānasa tradition provides for (vedic) rules for temple worship, it necessarily follows that only the Vaikhānasa temple priests are not *devalakas*. It is significant therefore that even a non-Vaikhānasa who knows the Veda is to be regarded as a *devalaka*. The virtue of “being in accordance with the Veda” (*vaidikatva*) became identified with membership of the Vaikhānasa tradition, as the Veda only prescribes temple service for the Vaikhānasas.

This provides a starting point for answering the question posed in the outset, namely how two unconnected models, namely temple service and the Veda came to be causally combined. Time and again to the vedic tradition and the vedic-ness of the Vaikhānasas is mentioned as entitling the Vaikhānasas to practise temple ritual as a profession. However, temple ritual is not prescribed, or even described, in texts which may be called vedic in a strict sense. This combination of opposites is also achieved by identifying the one with the other. Temple ritual is identified with vedic śrauta ritual; the five images of the god in a temple are identified with the five sacrificial fires of a śrauta sacrifice; iconic (*samūrta*) worship is equated with aniconic (*amūrta*) worship through fire, and so on. Thus the Vaikhānasas seek to integrate (and thus justify) non-vedic elements into their “Vedicism,” by identifying them with the Veda. B.K. Smith (1989: 169–71) notes that *grhya* ritual may in principle substitute for śrauta ritual as both types of ritual follow a common paradigm. In the case of the Vaikhānasas, temple ritual is substituted for śrauta ritual, and temple ritual is explained by reference to the paradigm of śrauta ritual. According to contemporary Vaikhānasa scholars this is moreover the reason why the Vaikhānasas do not carry out śrauta rituals: for the Vaikhānasas the temple rituals are their śrauta rituals. Just as the *grhya* rituals (*saṃskāra*) in general are the precondition for being able to perform śrauta rituals, for the Vaikhānasas it is their *saṃskāras* which are the precondition for being able to perform temple rituals.

However, in addition to their demarcation over against other ritual schools, through which the Vaikhānasas emphasize their distinctive identity and thus make themselves indispensable, they also have to fit in with the group of Śrīvaiṣṇavas in order to be able to perform rituals for them. Here the Vaikhānasas adopted the terminology that explicitly states that they are Vaiṣṇavas, followers of Viṣṇu. At the same time they are different from others because they are *garbhavaiṣṇavas*. But even more significantly, they also adapted their ritual practice: the prenatal viṣṇubali *saṃskāra* was compared with the branding of other Vaiṣṇavas (*pañcasamskāra* and “taking refuge”) and enriched with their own branding element, the milk porridge branding.

These issues can be interpreted as indices for the fundamental function of rituals as “adaptive” behaviour. Thus, for example, transitions from one phase of life to the next are marked by ritual and ritual thus makes the person concerned “fit” for the new life situation (see Michaels 1998a: 30). At the same time ritual is also adaptive in the sense that the ritual itself frequently adapts to changing circumstances: a change in the context is likely to bring about a change in the rituals. The changed context here is the demand that all Vaiṣṇavas should undergo branding (initiation); the change in the ritual consists in integrating the branding of the milk porridge into the viṣṇubali saṃskāra. The ritual is thus adapted to the environmental changes and reflects them. Nevertheless, in the Vaikhānasa literature and especially in the *Daśavidhahetunirūpaṇa*, viṣṇubali is always presented as superior to branding the upper arms. Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita’s understanding of initiation and saṃskāra is that they are not identical but equivalents for one another (see B.K.Smith 1989: 47f.). The process of adaptation and integration encompassed at the same time a hierarchical differentiation within the category “Vaiṣṇava”: the Vaikhānasas are presented as superior *garbhavaiṣṇavas*.

5.4 The role of the saṃskāras—from śākhā to jāti

The Vaikhānasas repeatedly seek to prove their ritual competence through their being in “accordance with the Veda” (*vaidikatva*). Yet what is meant by “Veda” here? The relationship of a member of the Hindu traditions to the Veda described by B.K. Smith (1989: 20) applies in this case: although the Veda is appealed to, the content of this textual corpus is rather independent of actual religious practice. “Veda” is defined in such a way as to extend vedic authority to parts of the tradition that are beyond that which is contained in the vedic saṃhitās themselves.⁶³⁴ The Vaikhānasas appeal time and again to the vedic authority of the Vaikhānasasūtra, which is described as a “vedic branch,” or simply as “Veda.” The central characteristics of this “Veda,” which according to the Vaikhānasas serves to distinguish them from other ritual traditions, are the 18 saṃskāras listed at the beginning of the Vaikhānasasūtra, together with the demand that they carry out ritual “for others” (*parārtha*).

There are significant variations in the practice and interpretation of the individual saṃskāras, as could be shown. Nevertheless the saṃskāras, referred to together as *niṣekādi*° (“niṣeka and so on”), always remain a marker for the unique-

634 B.K.Smith (1989:20–29) isolates several methods for declaring texts and practices to be “vedic.” In the present context, equation with the Veda, derivation from the Veda and the assertion of agreement in content with the Veda are relevant.

ness of the *Vaikhānasas* as ritual specialists both in relation to other *vaiṣṇava* groups and also in relation to other *sūtra* traditions. The 18 *saṃskāras* therefore not only serve to differentiate the *Vaikhānasas* from other groups, but also to mark them off as the only legitimate ritual specialists.

According to classical Hindu ideology, humans overcome their natural deficiencies only through ritual, each according to their inherent potential. This is based on the vedic principle that it is only through ritual that biological and natural imperfections can be formed and structured (see B.K. Smith 1989: 51). This overcoming takes place through *saṃskāras*: through ritual acts humans are made “perfect” and “fit,” step by step they are “developed” (see B.K. Smith 1989: 82, 92f.). This is explicitly expressed by Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita when he states that a *Vaikhānasa* who has undergone *niṣeka* etc., has “the body of *Brahmā*.” The *saṃskāras* of the *Vaikhānasa* constitute their “ritual body” and as such produce their entitlement to perform ritual.⁶³⁵ The *saṃskāras* therefore have the same function as an initiation: they “perfect” man and “realise” the qualities latent within him. The prenatal *saṃskāras* in addition involve the aspect of being chosen before or through birth, emphasizing the familial connection as socio-ritual differentiation. This is emphasized even more by Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita when he states that the mother too must have undergone the prenatal *Vaikhānasa saṃskāras*: she must come from a *Vaikhānasa* family.

Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita always emphasizes that only someone born in a *Vaikhānasa* family who has undergone the 18 *saṃskāras* may perform temple ritual, and that at the same time the *Vaikhānasa* tradition is “vedic” in so far as it represents a “vedic branch.” He thus makes use of two conceptually different categories. A vedic school is in principle a tradition of learning with its own authoritative texts, passed on from teacher to student once the student has been initiated by the teacher. This involves the potential of a free choice of vedic schools, and also a change of tradition. By contrast a descent group is a family in a broad sense. Membership is derived from the parents and therefore lies beyond the free choice of the individual.

In seeking to show that the *Vaikhānasa* tradition is simultaneously a vedic branch and a group based on descent, Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita formulates two points, for the most part implicitly. He equates the decision to be initiated for the *Vai-*

635 Here the *saṃskāras* “*niṣeka* to *śmaśāna*” represent just such a framework for the construction and dissolution of the ritual body of a *Vaikhānasa* as the “formal declaration” (*saṃkalpa*) and the “dismissal of the god” (*visarjana*) which mark the beginning and end of a ritual action on the concrete level of performance (see Michaels 1998a; see B.K. Smith 1989: 91).

khānasas with their status before birth.⁶³⁶ He thereby creates a transition from a vedic branch of learning (*śākhā*) with authoritative texts (*sūtra*), which is not necessarily inherited within the family, to a Brahmanic caste (*jāti*), membership of which is determined by birth. To do so he makes use of the points where the two intersect. An important unifying factor is the *sūtra*, which is a text of a vedic branch, but simultaneously contains, in its *gṛhyasūtra*, the description of the *saṃskāras*, and thus provides the foundation of hereditary membership.

The tension between the two conceptions of caste (*jāti*) and vedic school (*śākhā*) still exists today for the Vaikhānasa tradition and was discussed in the mid-twentieth century in relation to the question of whether Vaikhānasa men could take marriage partners from Brahmanic families of other *sūtra* traditions. Of primary importance was the question whether the children of such a partnership would have the right to carry out temple ritual in a Vaikhānasa temple. At a conference of the tradition it was decided that such children would only be recognized as “half pure,” because the mother had not undergone “the *saṃskāras* according to the Vaikhānasasūtra, which begin with *niṣeka*,” but that children of the next generation could be considered “pure” Vaikhānasas.

The Vaikhānasas thus use two concepts: as a vedic branch the tradition claims vedic authority, as a Brahmanic caste the borders are outwardly secured by familial descent on both parents’ side and are therefore insurmountable. Thus through the connection of these conceptions the vedic tradition of the Vaikhānasas is limited to the Brahmanic caste of the Vaikhānasas. It was the strategy of Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita to connect the aspects of prenatal consecration through *viṣṇubali* (divine grace, being chosen by Nārāyaṇa himself) with those of initiation (choice, a personal sense of calling, qualification). This connection comes about in the discussion of the “taking refuge in Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa.” On the basis of diverse *upaniṣads* he shows that the child in the womb can make the decision to take refuge in Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa, and therefore can decide to undergo an initiation which, according to Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita, takes place through the prenatal *viṣṇubali saṃskāra*. This assumption of the unborn child’s capacity for decision-making in the eighth month of pregnancy is also very clear from the observation of the performance of *viṣṇubali* in the performance in the temple setting in Vijayawada, when the father of the child speaks on its behalf the formula by which the

636 In addition Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita explains that one should follow the *sūtra* according to which one received the *saṃskāras*, and should not change the *sūtra*. He compares this with the initiation in one of the four Pāñcarātra ritual systems (*siddhānta*), which also entitles one only to perform in one tradition, and not in all. Here Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita projects the ban on conversion in the Vaikhānasa tradition to the Pāñcarātra tradition.

child takes refuge. The ritual for the unborn child thus expresses on the one hand the idea that it is able to make a “conscious” choice for a becoming a Vaiṣṇava, while on the other hand its choice of vocation and marriage partner is nevertheless already prescribed by its birth in the Brahmanic caste of the Vaikhānasas (see Michaels 1998b: 87f.).

On the basis of sectarian and ethicizing arguments,⁶³⁷ Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita introduces the idea that the religious identity of the Vaikhānasas is based on descent. In this way Śrīnivāsa Dīkṣita finally establishes boundaries over against other groups, based on the natal status of the Vaikhānasas, which are perceived as inalterable and objective (see Giesen 1999: 19f.).

5.5 On the rigidity of rituals

The entitlement to perform temple rituals is at issue in the religious dispute analysed here. This entitlement is contested by contrasting an initiation based on choice that includes a branding, with a life-cycle ritual based on birth right and family descent. The discussion goes hand in hand with a change in the interpretation and performance of the rituals, as can be clearly shown in the case of the viṣṇubali saṃskāra. However, these changes are not perceived as changes by the Vaikhānasas themselves. Why are these actually flexible rituals perceived to be fixed?⁶³⁸

I conjecture that this is directly connected with the role of rituals in the identity of those concerned. In the present context ritual is the defining element in the drawing of boundaries between groups. The ritual here has an integrative dimension, in that it expresses the collective identity of the group.⁶³⁹ However, it also has a strong excluding function in that it clearly defines who is *not* a member of the group. Rituals thus serve to assure religious identity through both the including and excluding sides.⁶⁴⁰ Constituted by ritual, this group identity is per-

637 These are, in Giesen’s terminology, “traditional” arguments. Giesen (1999) categorizes basic methods of drawing boundaries between strangers and insiders in the construction of collective identity. He distinguishes in principle between patterns of demarcation (“codes of collective identity”) which are based on descent (“primordial”), on tradition (“traditional”) and on a particular idea of salvation (“universal”).

638 The idea that rituals are fixed structures has also long been dominant in research on ritual. Only in recent times has attention also been paid to the dynamic aspects of ritual (see e.g. Tambiah 1979: 115 and 136; see Kapferer 1979: 6; see also Kapferer 2006).

639 See Platvoet 1995: 36, see Kapferer 1979: 5.

640 See Platvoet 1995: 36 and 41. Mol (1978: 5f.) describes rituals in this connection as actions which reinforce order; Gephart (1999: 236) emphasizes the stabilizing function of rituals for the community.

ceived as “prefabricated,” not as authored or created by the performers themselves. A redefinition of religious identity of this sort at the same time expresses a reinterpretation of the tradition.⁶⁴¹ This can be clearly seen from the texts and ritual practices. In fact this reinterpretation of the tradition also gives the Vaikhānasas a new history, although it is not perceived by them as such. The new history also adds legitimation to their contemporary claims as the only legitimate ritual specialists, and gives a foundation for their aspirations looking towards the future. We should note that this reinterpretation takes place not only on the conceptual level, but also on the practical level: the rituals themselves change.

With reference to the vedic sacrifice, B.K. Smith (1989: 202) understands rituals as “a category that acts to provide explanatory power, traditional legitimacy, and canonical authority.” Through rituals the new is conceptualized and articulated in terms of the old, and the transformed is traditionalized. As such the innovation is short-lived, as it quickly becomes normative and is declared to be “traditional.”⁶⁴² There are, however, always limitations to this innovative ritual creativity. These limitations are set by such factors as the concrete local and historical context or a sense of appropriateness.

In the present example the element of the branding of the milk porridge is introduced as a reaction to a new situation in which there is massive pressure on the Vaikhānasas to accept a branding of their upper arms as part of the pañca-saṃskāra initiation.⁶⁴³ This new ritual element is interpreted as the “marking of the unborn by Viṣṇu himself.” The god Viṣṇu’s personal intervention before birth makes the Vaikhānasas Viṣṇu’s sons. In contrast, those who undergo an initiation after birth are seen by the Vaikhānasas as Viṣṇu’s adopted sons, or worse, even as his slaves. This drawing of boundaries through ritual rather than through theology or mythology is the major focus of the *Daśavidhahetunirūpana*. In this text performance of rituals in accordance with the rules is clearly placed above theoretical knowledge.

Innovation and reform of ritual is not recognized as change by the participants.⁶⁴⁴ One function of rituals is to express and to confirm the belief in

641 See J.Z. Smith 1987: 223–224: “[...] for a given group at a given time to choose this or that way of interpreting their tradition is to opt at a given time to choose this or that way of relating themselves to their historical past and their social present.”

642 See Platvoet 1995: 30; see also Hobsbawm 1983.

643 On the introduction of new symbols in ritual due to a dispute between two groups see Platvoet 1995: 30.

644 See Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 12 and 105.

unchangeability and continuity and thus to cope with change.⁶⁴⁵ This belief also extends to the performance of the rituals itself.⁶⁴⁶ At the same time, rituals are also designed by their performers and interpreters; they are powerful dynamic means to initiate change.⁶⁴⁷ Rituals represent and preserve traditions, yet constantly create traditions anew.

645 See Mol 1978a: 5: “[...] optimal functioning is the result of unresolvable tension or constant dialectic between change and stability, or differentiation and integration. [...] Integration without differentiation, or stability without change is as doomed as differentiation without integration, or change without stability!”

646 See Michaels 1998a: 44f.; see Giesen 1999: 28.

647 See Mol 1978a: 6, and 1978b: 180.

