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General Preface to the  
“Heidelberg Studies in South Asian Rituals”<sup>1</sup>

It is the holy and written word that has attracted attention in the European study of cultures. However, this focus on scripture and the criticism of idolatry, idols and visualisations discriminated not only against cultures that did not have any written text but also against the oral and folk traditions within book religions as well as against all those social groups which remained for long illiterate, i.e. women or subaltern groups. It also widely disregarded rituals and religious practice.

For centuries, it was the book religions that were recognised as superior. New subjects such as Indology could justify themselves in the canon of academic fields and institutions, especially the faculties, only by demonstrating that non-Christian cultures were also based on scriptures. The focus on written sources in book religions was so extensive that for long scholars in the West could not adequately recognise the peculiarity of Indian, especially Vedic culture, i.e. the fact that scripture was based on a great mnemo-technical capacity for the transmission of texts or, in other words, that scripture was ideally not a written text.

There have been good reasons for the preference for written texts in book religions. It is through the book that knowledge can be easily kept, preserved and transported to other regions and, thereby, have the greatest impact on culture in the media. The holy book creates a common point of reference and, thus, a centre for religious communities. It separates texts from their subjective, regional, emotive contexts and, thus, from their creators as well as from their historical limitations. Moreover, the wisdom of books is, in principle, available to everybody, it is not necessarily related to a personal and intimate relationship between author and recipient. The book, therefore, makes the reader or listener independent of the author, preacher and priest even if in many religions the forms of reading, writing and listening have been restricted or ritualised. The principle of *sola scriptura* according to which only the reader of the Bible is responsible for

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1 This contribution is partly an extract of my article Michaels 2004b.

its proper understanding and that none shall come between him and the text is basically part of the medium itself. You can find out for yourself what the scripture means which also implies that there is what Jack Goody has called the "individualizing tendency" of books (Goody 1991: 28). Finally, the book is a durable collective expression of the memory of cultures and a constant source of popularization and canonization.<sup>2</sup> Written texts or books mean cultural memory but also a culturally independent point of reference and the possibility of diversification. These many advantages imply that the medium of the written text, especially the book or, more specifically, even the printed book was and still is the most important source for the study of cultures. Moreover, if one looks at how religions and cultures are spread and mixed through the new medium of internet the power of written texts is again confirmed. In short, with regard to religion, written texts and their exegesis establish not only "sacred persistence" as defined by Jonathan Z. Smith (1982: 36–52) but also cultural persistence. They remain the best source for any historically orientated study of cultures.

The preference for written sources in the West has long led to the neglect of other forms of texts understood in a broader semiotic sense, i.e. forms of non-verbal signals and communication, e.g. visual and acoustic signs, gestures, behaviour etc. It also led to the lack of respect paid to the importance of oral texts (cp. Graham 1987) and to the anthropology of texts. It generated little concern for the context of the texts, i.e. its agents, users, readers etc. This has changed since the cultural turn in the humanities. Since then the study of texts has also become a study of the social structures that generated the texts, a study of the application of texts (for e.g. in rituals), a study of the performance and reception of texts, and a study of their historical conditions. To be sure, all this has been considered in previous indological research but due to the cultural turn in the humanities such an approach has become a theoretical programme which could be outlined as follows:

Firstly, culture is claimed as an entity that encompasses everything that is made by human beings. It is, thus, not another realm alongside others such as politics, religion or law. It is the cover term for the study of all arte- and mentefacts. Culture is defined as an assembly of complex and dynamic signs which reveal social, material and mental dimensions. Each cultural object or sign presupposes a class of users, belongs to a group of signs (texts, pictures, gestures etc.) and is generated through mental codes, but none of these symbolic forms is beyond history and can thus be established as an ahistorical entity. What is most

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2 See Assmann & Assmann & Hardmeier 1983, Assmann 1997, Coburn 1984, Coward 1988, Levering 1989, Timm 1992.

important in this theory, is that it deconstructs any form of essentialism. Instead, essentialism and dogmatism are avoided, naive empiricism can no longer be applied and orientalist arguments can no longer be easily formulated. Given the great amount of works which purport to reveal the soul of India, given the holistic errors that have been presented so often and which have often been unveiled as overt or covert racist arguments, this cultural turn was not only necessary but it also helped us to focus on the agents. In doing this a number of new and fascinating topics were raised: the gender aspect, the subaltern perspective, the importance of every-day life, the relevance of rituals and the performative as well as the transformative aspects of texts. All this furthered the understanding that culture is more than high culture, and it was due to such a turn in the humanities that Indology came to question the relationship between little and great traditions and stress the importance of regional studies, field-work and vernacular languages.

Another outcome of this turn was that texts were no longer understood as monolithic documents but as produced by particular interests and conflicts. This meant that in reading texts one must also consider those who are not directly visible within the text. Texts are often produced as arguments against dissenting positions—this is particularly true of ritual and philosophical texts—and thus reflect a more or less hidden reality. Texts are not only passive store-houses of information but are also generated for reasons of power, influence, honour or prestige.

Perhaps the most fascinating result of the cultural turn in the humanities has been the growing collaboration between philologists and anthropologists. The need for such a collaboration has been stressed several times before. The indologist Sylvain Lévi, for example, did pioneering work on Nepal considering the anthropological aspect of texts to such an extent that the anthropologist Andrés Höfer wrote an article on him with the significant sub-title “What we anthropologists owe to Sylvain Lévi” in which he aptly remarked:

Lévi is generally considered as an indologist. In reality, he saw himself as an historian. Although a philologist by training and acquainted with an amazing number of languages (cf. Renou 1936: 57), the documents of the past were, for him, not ends in themselves, but sources of information to be decoded with the suspicion of the historian. As Renou (1936: 8–9) aptly states, Lévi developed a particular sensitivity for meanings hidden “beneath the words” (*un sens profond des réalités sous les mots*). In fact, Lévi extended his quest for meaning into the realms of what we now call ideology, ethnotheory and contextual analysis. [...] he kept a close watch on the social functions of his sources. What fascinated him was the intricate relationship between the author and the public, rather than the mere literary value of a source, the process which produced a source, rather than the product, the source itself. (Höfer 1979: 176)

An important reason for combining indology and anthropology is, of course, the link between tradition and modernity in South Asia—a point that has led to a number of seminal articles: L. Dumont & D. Pocock, “For a sociology of India” (1957), M. Singer, “Text and Context in the Study of Contemporary Hinduism” (1972), McKim Marriott, “Towards an Ethnosociology of South Indian Caste Systems” (1977), and St. Tambiah, “At the confluence of anthropology, history, and Indology” (1987). Dumont and Pocock argued that “the first condition for a sound development of a sociology of India is found in the establishment of the proper relation between it and classical Indology” (1957: 7), and St. Tambiah even claimed that “today virtually no South or Southeast Asian anthropologist can afford not to engage with Indology and history even if his or her work is focused on the study of contemporary phenomena” (1987: 188). However, old prejudices between anthropology and Indology have remained. Anthropologists often still believe that indologists are primarily concerned with diacritics, and indologists often still believe that the study of contemporary phenomena are popularizations and vulgarizations that do not matter, or deviations and corruptions of the ancient traditions (cp. Tambiah 1987: 188).

Given this situation, the study of rituals in South Asia had for long been sandwiched between philology and anthropology. It is only since field-work and the study of texts have been combined, that rituals are studied *in situ* by indologists and classical ritual texts are used by anthropologists. The present series tries to do this by focusing on two aspects.

Firstly, it aims at a textual and (audio-)visual description, documentation and preservation of rituals, for which South Asia offers an unparalleled richness and variety of material which falls under basically three categories: a) Vedic and post-Vedic literature on still practiced sacrifices (*yajña*, *iṣṭi*, *homa*), rites of passage (*saṃskāra*) and optional rituals (*vrata* etc.), b) performative rituals such as dance, theatre and musical performances which are partly based on a rich Sanskrit literature, and c) theoretical works on exegesis of rituals as well as texts on the aesthetics of performances developed, for instance, as a special theory of aesthetical moods (*rasa*). This material has been increasingly studied and compiled<sup>3</sup> by a number of scholars. There have also been impressive examples of works on rituals which combine textual studies with field-work.<sup>4</sup>

3 See, for instance, Hillebrandt 1897, Kane 1968ff., Pandey 1969 or Gonda 1980.

4 To mention some examples: Gonda 1980, Staal 1983, Tachikawa 1993, Einoo 1993, Witzel 1986 and 1987, Tachikawa & Bahulkar & Kolhatkar 2001 on Vedic rituals, or Bühnemann (1988), Einoo (1996) and Tachikawa (1996) on *pūjā*. For further such literature on life-cycle rituals see Michaels 2004a: 71–158 and the on-line bibliography on rituals in

Secondly, the present series aims at a theoretical analysis of such rituals. Most indological studies on South Asian rituals do not refer to the general discussion on rituals.<sup>5</sup> If at all, one finds a perfunctory mention of V. Turner. Other authors such as E. Durkheim, B. Malinowski, M. Douglas, I. Goffman, R. Schechner, C. Bell, C. Humphrey & J. Laidlaw, or R. Rappaport are generally non-existent in indological literature on rituals. F. Staal, J. Heesterman and B.K. Smith remain the only exceptions as far as one can gauge. However, it was a great insight of the cultural turn in the humanities that there is no way without theory, in other words, that any work of culture is already theoretical by definition. Clifford Geertz, the most famous proponent of this argument, demonstrated that culture had to be studied as texts and as creating texts. Culture can only be construed, and it is the anthropologist (or indologist) who does this job. As a consequence the interpretational work of the researcher and author becomes more and more important. Culture itself becomes a text, there is no culture without text. Culture is written, not discovered.

If, thus, Indology opens up to an intensified study of the contexts of texts, if it also accepts fieldwork as a legitimate, adequate and proper (and not just supplementary) method for an appropriate analysis of the contents, functions and productions of texts, if it tries to combine the results of the textual and contextual studies with anthropological theory, it then situates itself at the confluence of philology, anthropology and history. It is this confluence which I call Ethno-Indology, and I hope that the present series, which aims at the practice of it, can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of what people in South Asia think, write and do.

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South Asia on the homepage of the Department of Classical Indology at the South Asia Institute: <http://www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de/abt/IND/index.html>

5 For an annotated bibliography on the study of rituals see Kreinath & Snoek & Stausberg forthc.

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