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Editors' Preface

The present volume brings together a collection of articles on rituals in South Asia with a special focus on what is said about rituals and how they are done. The papers presented in it emerged out of two different events: the first a panel held at the 28th Deutsche Orientalisten Tag in March 2001, the second a workshop on South Asian rituals held at Heidelberg in November 2003, sponsored by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) under the aegis of the Collaborative Research Centre (Sonderforschungsbereich) on the *Dynamics of Ritual*. Both these events enabled the serious and far-ranging discussions which have now come to fruition in this and the companion volume. Added to this series of articles is an introductory paper by Gérard Colas based on a talk given at a workshop on Indian Rituals at the South Asia Institute in December 2002. A revised and greatly expanded version of a paper on royal consecration originally given at the panel of the Deutsche Orientalisten Tag by Alexis Sanderson will appear in a companion volume of this series.

In his general preface to the *Heidelberg Studies in South Asian Rituals* of which this volume forms a part, Axel Michaels argues for the recognition of religious and ritual texts as products of their time, of specific social and historical conditions, as discourses of power of a particular interest group or groups. In other words, to read them *in context*. Simultaneously, he also makes a plea for a broadening of the definition of what constitutes a "text", to encompass not only "scripture" (often "fixed" in a prestigious lineage of textual transmission, central to Religions of the Book and to Indology as a discipline), but also "fluid" works used as scripts in actual ritual performances and, finally, purely oral texts. These considerations about the nature of texts, their relationship to performance and the specificity of the religious traditions within which the debates about them arise lie at the heart of the collection of essays which appear in these volumes.

The plea for a broader definition of what constitutes a "text" and the methodological implications of adopting such definitions become apparent when we look at a recent and highly influential study of South Asian ritual, Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw's work on Jain *pūjā* (1994). When addressing the

specific relationship between ritual texts, ritual theology and exegesis, on the one hand, and contemporary ritual practice, on the other, Humphrey and Laidlaw arrive at some seemingly commonsensical conclusions about the relationship between the two.

Both the rules people follow in the ritual, and the sources for their ideas about what they might mean, are drawn from practical instruction and a largely local didactic oral tradition, rather than the supposedly authoritative prescriptive texts. In brief, despite the existence of a sacred canon, a long history of debate on precisely these matters, and a corpus of liturgical writings [...]. [R]itual practice prescribes the ritual much more closely than does ritual exegesis. (Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994: 200)

One important implication of Humphrey and Laidlaw's anthropological approach is that, in implying as it does that participants and performers of rituals take recourse to traditions of an oral, didactic kind, there is the affirmation of the need for a broad definition of the category of "text".

We find a similar plea for broadening the definition of what constitutes text or scripture in Jeffrey R. Timm's volume devoted to the context of texts (1992). In the introduction Timm defines context as the hermeneutical context of particular texts and sees traditional, native exegesis as constituting this context. Yet, he cautions against a narrow understanding of traditional exegesis as restricted to written commentaries and speaks of it as "poly-methodic". He further adds:

This methodological diversity mirrors the complexity of sacred texts, a category that is fantastically fluid [...] Connecting sacred texts with the panorama of religious projects supports [the] claim that any generalization about scripture—when it is defined as a fixed body of written material carrying normative, prescriptive status for a given religious community—is woefully inadequate. (Timm 1992: 10–11)

We agree with these scholars that broader definitions of what constitutes the "text" or "scripture" are an important step toward adequately grasping the complexity of the relationship between ritual practice and ritual texts. Yet, this is but one methodological means of understanding the relationship, particularly where rituals are buttressed by centuries of a seemingly unbroken theological or exegetical tradition. It is largely such rituals which are the focus of the two volumes concerned. The methodological solution to the relationship between text and context in such cases, proposed by Humphrey and Laidlaw, takes for granted a gap or even rupture between written, authoritative scripture and ritual practice. We argue, though, that their hypothesis stems from fieldwork based exclusively on an analysis of lay practice. Yet, the Jain tradition which is the object of their analysis as well as classical, Brahmanical ritual traditions have categories of practitioners who cannot be classified as scholastically uninfluenced or unin-

formed laity. Rather, rituals are also performed by exegetically informed lay- and religious experts who are characterized by varying degrees of access to and knowledge of the textual and exegetical levels of a ritual tradition. Hence, the study of the relationship between the text and the context of rituals must also allow for the possibility that different categories of performers can and do subjectively constitute the relationship between their ritual knowledge and ritual practice, between text and context in differing and nuanced ways.

The present volume also presupposes that a comprehensive definition of "ritual" does not exist. Influential scholarship in this regard, such as that of Handelman (1990), for instance, argues persuasively for a doing away of the term on the basis that existent definitions of ritual are abstract statements which, while establishing a set of common features that facilitate the characterization of "ritual" as signifying social order, do little beyond this to investigate the logics whereby such order is made and maintained. Buc (2001) is critical of the naïve application of the anthropological construct of this term to describe the social and religious practices of other, medieval societies. The common-sense definition we adopt, in the light of such a critical scrutiny of the term, is based upon the similar features between the different "rituals" which are examined in these volumes, which allows for a possible polythetic definition of the concept. All the rituals dealt with here are religious, they are performed by religious specialists or devotees mainly in a religious context, they are highly repetitive, they are structured and as such governed by rules, they refer to a transcendent power which is at the same time endowed with performative agency, they are complex and consist of individual elements (rites) which are grouped and arranged in sequences, they are standardized and can be subject to a certain degree of "mechanization" on the part of the performer.

The typology of those actions defined as rituals in this fashion must further incorporate other categories of classification. Among these would be, as the papers in this volume illustrate, the occasion which the ritual marks in a life (life-cycle rituals, crisis rites), the transformation in status effected (boy becomes man, novice becomes initiate, householder becomes ascetic), time and duration and degrees of complexity (a short, daily morning prayer or a complex temple ritual), and the nature and numbers of the participants involved (individuals or groups consisting of performers as well as spectators). The rituals examined in this volume incorporate one or more of all these elements.

The paper with which this volume begins reflects in the broadest terms on the issues of ritual, text and context. Gérard Colas, in contrasting the anthropological with the philological approach to the study of rituals gives us a considered critique of both methods. He points out that the anthropological approach has the

great advantage of refusing to extrapolate from text to context. However, a reliance on field observations should not induce one to read ancient texts in the light of present day practice, for this would be tantamount to assuming that such texts corroborate actual practice despite obvious discrepancies between the two. Those who are philologists, though, should be clear about the distinction between theological literature and ritual texts. The latter are often meant to be read and understood in close connection with particular ritual actions, their prescriptions being permanently connected to interpretive performances. A philological approach which narrowly and exclusively focuses on linguistic criteria is not appropriate for the study of texts composed in order to communicate a subject-matter which should be comprehensible within a milieu of ritual practitioners. Hence, Colas makes a strong plea for situating ritual texts within their historical context. The challenge his article poses is addressed in one way or the other by all the papers in these two volumes.

Four of the contributors—Raman, Rospatt, Hüsken and Gengnagel—have in common the attempt to combine ethnographic evidence with prescriptive texts. Raman compares two contemporary performances of a South Indian Śrīvaiṣṇava initiation ritual with a relatively late normative text on it and argues, on the basis of this evidence, for a close link between theology and ritual practice, since the soteriological dispute leading to a sectarian split within the Śrīvaiṣṇava community also ultimately led to differences in the performance of the ritual. Rospatt deals with a temporary ordination for male members of certain Buddhist communities in the Kathmandu valley. He compares the Buddhist ritual of ordination, the *upasampadā* as prescribed by the Tibetan Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya and a medieval prescriptive account of the ritual with the present day performance of it. In doing so, he shows that the Brahmanical life-cycle ritual of *upanayana* serves as the model for the ritual of the Mahāyāna Buddhist in Nepal, since elements of the former *saṃskāra* are incorporated and subordinated within the latter, as stages to be transcended. Hüsken traces the history of a pre-natal life-cycle ritual (*niṣeka*) of the Vaikhānasa communities of South India. Through an analysis of the layers of the diverse ritual texts dealing with this ritual she shows that no clear perception of it existed in the Vaikhānasa literature. Her depiction of the contemporary perceptions about and performances of this ritual, articulated by ritual specialists, also reflects this long-standing uncertainty in the textual tradition. Gengnagel analyses processions in Vārāṇasī in relation to their textual sources, the ritual actions prescribed in these sources and their actual performance. After introducing the relevant *yātrā* texts with a focus on the Pañcakrośīyātrā, he undertakes a detailed comparison of the relevant passages, concentrating on the contemporary performance of the *yātrā*, where spatial texts

are used. The examination of the sources shows that even today ritual specialists rely ultimately on historically validated textual sources for determining correct performance.

Other papers in the first volume—those of Michaels, Steiner, Rastelli, Freiburger and Horstmann—concentrate primarily on textual materials and the study of ritual texts within their historical rather than contemporary context. Michaels focuses on the rite of *saṃkalpa*, the preliminary declaration of intention to commence any ritual, by looking at manuals of *saṃkalpa* such as the *Samkalparatnāvalī*, a 20th century digest on the subject. Focusing on the complexity of this rite, a complexity which is not immediately apparent, Michaels shows us what is articulated (both verbally and in gestures) in several typical *saṃkalpas*, which he sees as a rite which both contextualises as well as transcends the concrete context of its performer. Steiner's study of the Vedic *vājapeya* sacrifice adopts a synchronic approach, aiming at a hermeneutic or semantic reading of the ritual. As a framework for understanding the processual aspects of the ritual, Steiner has taken van Gennep's and Turner's model of the three phases of life-cycle rituals comprising of separation, transition and integration. She demonstrates that these phases are integral to the *vājapeya* and to *soma* rituals in general. Rastelli in her paper presents a detailed analysis of the *pūjā* described in the pañcaratric *Ahīrbudhnyasaṃhitā* and the Viśiṣṭādvaitic *Nityagrantha*. The analysis establishes that both texts give an identical description of the external features of the ritual even while there are essential differences in their cosmologies, in the purpose of the worship and in the views expressed by the texts on the relationship between god and the worshipper. Freiburger deals with the Brahmanical rite of renunciation, focusing on this rite's irreversibility. Texts such as the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads provide the basis for the institution of renunciation and codify rules which emphasise its irreversibility. However, other works such as the *Arthaśāstra* make it evident that the renouncer did, in fact, return to real life. In addition, Buddhist sources show that the return of a renouncer did not so much pose a ritual as a social problem: if persons of standing renounced without transferring their duties and property to their heirs, the household was left behind in an ambivalent state. Freiburger argues that such varied textual evidence may indicate that the Brahmanical tradition had to, in anticipation of such developments and with a view to mitigating them, strongly come down in favour of the irreversibility of renunciation even while leaving open the door to alternative procedures which contradicted this conception. Horstmann's paper details a theological debate within the Gauḍīya tradition in the 17th–18th centuries. She shows that the community, in the figure of the seventeenth century teacher Rūpa Kavirāja, threw up a leader who raised critical

questions regarding ritual which had been virulent since the founding of the community. The assumption of the Gauḍīya tradition was that the greater the spiritual level of a devotee the more the likelihood that he/she had attained a transformed state of passionate love towards Kṛṣṇa. Both Rūpa Kavirāja and his critics seemed united in the assumption that the practice of ritual for further self-fulfilment seemed inimical to one in this state. But, at this juncture, they parted ways on what the perfected devotee should do. Kavirāja argued for the further abandonment of all ritual in favour of an oscillation between a male and female identity where one became, as it were, Kṛṣṇa's female companion. The Gauḍīya tradition, as a whole rejected this stance and was careful to endorse orthopraxy and, hence, the upholding of the traditional social and religious order.

The papers also have many overlapping theoretical implications three of which are particularly prominent: "ritual transfer and transformation", "ritual and religious identity" and "ritual meaning". Hence, Rospatt deals with ritual transfer in time and space as well as from one religion to another in the transfer of the life-cycle thread ceremony from Brahmanism to Newar Buddhism. Raman shows the transfer of theological conceptions of self-surrender to God onto the Śrīvaiṣṇava initiation ritual while Rastelli, through her study of *pūjā*, describes both the increasing ritualization of devotion and the devotionalization of ritual. Michaels' paper on *saṃkalpa* shows that the ritual performer identifies himself according to spatial, chronological and genealogical criteria, where space and time are ideational and not necessarily empirical. Identifying a *saṃkalpa* as a certain kind of promissory speech-act Michaels argues that it can permit the transfer of religious ideas as well as specific sectarian and political considerations onto the ritual, thus functioning as an important means of creating flexibility within what might be seen as prescribed ritual actions. Gengnagel's paper illustrates the dynamic relationship between the descriptive, prescriptive and performative dimensions of rituals—a tension which inevitably leads to contestation and the subsequent "re-invention" of a ritual.

Several of the papers deal with the function of ritual as legitimizing religious identity and as an identity marker of groups. This is as true for the *bare chuyegu* initiation ritual described by Rospatt as for the *pañcasamskāra* initiation/conversion ritual described by Raman, the pre-natal rite of *niṣeka* described by Hüsken as the Brahmanical rite of renunciation described by Freiburger. In this context, Hüsken's paper is particularly important for raising the question of how relevant even the actual practice of such a ritual is as opposed to the mere claim of doing it. She suggests that rituals which function as identity markers need not even necessarily be performed to remain invaluable for the self-representation of a group.

Finally, several papers also consider the complex issue of whether rituals are “meaningful”, against the background of the theory of the meaninglessness of ritual acts first proposed by Frits Staal and subsequently refined upon by Humphrey and Laidlaw. Humphrey and Laidlaw understand “meaning” in a very specific sense to refer to the disconnection between the intention and identity of an act, when it comes to ritual action.

A review of Humphrey and Laidlaw’s work by James W. Boyd and Ron G. Williams in the *Journal of Ritual Studies* succinctly sums up their thesis:

Beginning with the commonplace notion that ritual acts are prescribed, Humphrey and Laidlaw focus on what happens when ordinary actions become ritualized actions. We will risk our own illustrative example. In François Truffaut’s film “The Green Room”, a morose protagonist builds a chapel full of burning candles to keep alive the memory of friends lost in the Great War; each day fresh candles must be lit from the spent ones in a prescribed way. [...] In non-ritualized cases, candles are lit to illuminate a room, to set a romantic mood, or for any number of other reasons. Illuminating a room is not the same action as setting a mood even when both acts involve lighting a candle. In other words, in the ritualized case, apparently different acts—acts done with different intentions [...] count as the same *ritual* act, whereas in the non-ritualized case, apparently similar acts (candle lightings) are differentiated by their differing intentions. (Boyd & Williams 1996: 136)

Rastelli’s paper supports this argument in that she shows that the meaning attributed to ritual can and does change without the ritual itself undergoing modification. Hüsken also concurs by demonstrating that the meaning of ritual can become divorced from actual ritual performance even while the ritual itself becomes invaluable for self-representation. In contrast to this, Raman argues that rituals change, structurally and evidently, once they are endowed with new meanings. Horstmann’s paper on the Gauḍīya tradition brings an entirely different dimension to the problematic of the meaning or meaningfulness of ritual in that it reflects on an emic discussion about this very issue. The very intensity of the Gauḍīya debate on whether ritual is necessary or not for the perfected devotee seems to indicate, at the very least, that the emotional state, or *bhāva*, could pose and was seen to pose a very real threat to and criticism of ritual.

One way of understanding and reconciling these seemingly contradictory viewpoints on rituals and their meaning was proposed by Stanley Tambiah when he stated:

But we should guard against attributing to all ritual the priority of functional pragmatics over semantics. For in periods of religious revivalism or when new cults are forged by charismatic leaders, there is a deliberate attempt to coin new

doctrinal concepts and mould new rituals bursting with meaning attached to the contents of the acts *per se*. [...] But these enthusiasms of revivalism can be relatively short-lived. Most of the time between messianic hope and indolent routine, the rituals of ordinary times carry both symbolic and indexical meanings in different mixes, and the participants too understand these meanings in varying measure, according to their lights, interests, and commitment. (Tambiah 1979: 165–66)

It is to the study of such rituals, carried out faithfully in times both of messianic hope as well as indolent routine, that these two volumes are dedicated.

Finally, we would like to thank Bao Do, Till Luge, Sarah Roeckerath and Maritta Schleyer for their invaluable help in preparing this volume. The publication of this volume has been made possible by the generous funding of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft within the framework of the Collaborative Research Centre, *Dynamics of Ritual*, at the University of Heidelberg.

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