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Rites Among Vaikhānasas and Related Matters: Some Methodological Issues

The study of Sanskrit texts that govern technical practices raises specific issues in comparison with the rest of Sanskrit literature. This is the case with the texts on temple rituals. This workshop on Indian rituals¹ afforded me the opportunity to give my colleagues an informal talk² on some of the issues which I had to deal with when studying Sanskrit ritual handbooks.

My paper will focus on the problem of making sense out of rites. I shall look at the subject in a pragmatic not an abstract way.³ By the “meaning of rite”, I understand here a subjective attitude, that is, an urge towards, or desire for, seeing sense in rites. The issue is not so much whether rites have any intrinsic meaning (which is a rather metaphysical question equally applicable to any other human activity), but how the performer of the rite, the spectator or the exegete (who may be a modern researcher) attempts to invest them with meaning.

I shall first of all briefly introduce the Vaikhānasa ritual texts because my reflections are mainly based on these texts. Then I shall discuss the notion of rite within the Indian context. This will be followed by an inquiry into a number of issues confronting the researcher who is trying to make sense out of ritual handbooks. I shall then see how the texts themselves indicate the meaning of the rites. Lastly, I shall point out how an epigraphic study can contribute towards enriching the debate.

Vaikhānasa Ritual Handbooks

Most of the following thoughts are based on the Vaikhānasa corpus of ritual handbooks published by 1996. This corpus contains six texts which can be dated be-

1 Organized at the University of Heidelberg in December 2002. I thank Prof. Dr. Monika Boehm-Tettelbach for inviting me to participate in this meeting, and the participants for their observations.

2 This transcription includes some elements of the discussion which followed my talk.

3 Nor shall I follow the problematic raised by Staal (see, for instance, Staal 1996).

tween the ninth and thirteenth centuries, two of which were probably composed after the thirteenth century (including the *Prakīrṇādhikaraṇa* from which I shall quote), and another text (partly published) which I was unable to date. I shall call this corpus the Vaikhānasa medieval corpus in contrast to late Vedic Vaikhānasa ritual texts, which consist of the *Vaikhānasaśrauta-* and *Vaikhānasa-smārtasūtra* and which predate the medieval corpus.⁴ The Vaikhānasa medieval corpus consists mainly of prescriptive texts relating to public rites performed in Vaiṣṇava temples, such as the installation of divine images, daily services, festivals, periodical and special rites, and expiations. These rites resemble those found in texts of the traditions popularly known as Pāñcarātrāgama (which is Vaiṣṇava) and Śaivāgama, though the theological background of these three traditions differs.

The prescriptions in the Vaikhānasa medieval corpus were intended for Vaikhānasa temple priests who perform rites at the request of a patron known as *yajamāna*. The fruits of the rites accrue not only to the patron but also to the entire village or city where the temple is situated. Once the temple and its images have been installed, the welfare of the community as a whole depends upon the conservation and continuation of the enjoined regular rites. In actual fact, the establishing of worship in a new temple creates a mutual interdependence between the temple and society. Temple rites are conceived as a sort of science that aims at relieving social and natural evils such as war, famine, etc. They have a beneficial effect on action in society as a whole.

One feature which distinguishes the Vaikhānasa from the Śaiva and Pāñcarātra traditions is the fact that it forms a Vedic *śākhā* with its own ritual Sūtras. These can be dated to before the sixth century and contain both known Vedic *mantras* and other *mantras* not otherwise known. The Vaikhānasas do not see any discontinuity between their Sūtras and the medieval corpus and many Śrauta and Smārta ritual devices form part of their temple rites. However, the notion of ritual continuity between the Sūtras and the medieval corpus is contradicted by the fact that the *Vaikhānasa-smārtasūtra* is imbued with an ideology of renunciation, while the temple rites are said to be a means of attaining mundane ends such as prosperity, peace, and welfare for the individual and society as a whole. The medieval corpus forbids hermits and renunciators from regular priesthood in temples which follow the Vaikhānasa regulations.

4 For more information about the Vaikhānasa corpus, see Colas 1996. Ute Hüsken informs me that another Vaikhānasa handbook, the *Vāsādhikāra*, has been published in 1999, but I could not procure this edited text.

Defining What Is and What Is Not a Rite

Defining what is a “rite” would involve a lengthy discussion without any assurance of reaching some universal agreement. Hence, I have decided to limit myself here to an initial definition whose validity will be applicable to this article and will be general enough to be accepted by all. What I mean here by a “rite” is a prescribed ceremonial arrangement of a religious nature.⁵

S. Lévi stressed the mechanical aspect of *yajña* or *yāga* in the Brāhmaṇas,⁶ where sacrifice is an entity in itself, since the gods do not play a central role in the ritual itself. For the Mīmāṃsaka exegetes too gods had a solely linguistic reality,⁷ which reinforced the concept of a ritual “mechanism”. According to this “mechanical” perspective, a perfect performance of the Vedic sacrifice is supposed to bring the expected results by itself. Though the notion of *yajña/yāga* has been variously interpreted both in ancient India as well as by modern scholars,⁸ it consistently represents the ritualizing tendency, i.e. a building process which is bound by routine and whose efficiency is conditioned by a strict application of the technical rules of praxis rather than through a direct connection established by the performer with the gods. In contrast to this tendency *pūjā*, in the strict and literal sense of the term and in a religious context, is not a ritual but refers to devotion expressed by making offerings to a personal god, chanting his glory, making donations, etc. The Mīmāṃsaka author Śabara (4th–5th cent. C.E.) drew a distinction between *yāga* and *pūjā* but on another ground: according to him, *yāga* is based on Śruti whereas *pūjā* is based on Smṛti and on the conventional belief that gods possess a body (Colas 2004: 151–155).

At least two factors restrict the validity of the ideal and ideological contrast between *yajña/yāga* as merely a technical chain of acts and *pūjā* as the manifestation of personal devotion. Firstly, the ritualization process of *pūjā* implies a mechanization of actions, especially in public worship where professional priests are called upon to perform acts of devotion on behalf of their patrons. “Honouring”, i.e. “worshipping” tends to become a rite. Mechanization does not necessarily refer to a general historical process, but can result from standardization at

5 For an interesting discussion on the definition of “rite”, see Mauss 1968: 402–409. For a recent approach, see Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994.

6 He devoted an entire chapter to “le mécanisme du sacrifice” in his *Doctrine du sacrifice* (see Lévi 1898: 77–151). However the depiction of the Vedic sacrifice “as a purely mechanical device to be employed for the maintenance of cosmic creation” is exaggerated, as rightly pointed out by Smith (1987: 36).

7 See, for instance, Malamoud 1989: 272.

8 For more details, see Colas forthc.

an individual or local level. Vedic sacrifice, on the other hand, has not always been simply construed as a series of mechanical actions. Until it became standardized, it involved competition between different performers and the successful outcome of *yajña/yāga* was never taken for granted (Renou 1949, Heesterman 1997). Furthermore, even when the Vedic sacrifice had become standardized, it required specific inner attitudes from the performer in order to bring about the expected results (Smith 1987: 36–37).

A second factor which limits the contrast between *yāga* and *pūjā* is the commingling of both within the context of a “Hinduisation” of Vedic sacrifice despite the resistance to such tendencies, among groups or movements such as the Mīmāṃsā school.⁹ It is, of course, impossible here to describe the various aspects and dimensions of this commingling (Smith 1987: 32–38). Though the *yāga/yajña* has been preserved technically unaltered among several circles of Śrauta ritualists, it has come to be seen as a devotional practice dedicated to a deity, as is evidenced, for instance, in the work of Śaṅkara (7th–8th cent.) (Cloney 1988: 288). Another aspect of this commingling was the introduction and adaptation of *yāga* or parts of *yāga* in temple worship. Sometimes parts of *yāga* were systematically re-interpreted; sometimes they appeared to be arbitrary additions or, at least additions whose rationale is not immediately obvious to us. The technical and social bi-polarization between the performer (the temple priest) and the patron of the temple rites were interpreted along Vedic lines: the patron came to be called *yajamāna* like the patron of a Vedic sacrifice. Specific aspects of the deities came to be associated with fires whose shapes and names were of Vedic (Śrauta and Gṛhya) origin.¹⁰

The various genres of Sanskrit ritual texts such as the Sūtras, Āgamas and Paddhatis, do not encompass all the rituals or ritualized actions. If we confine our thoughts to the Vaiṣṇava temple rites alone, we note that handbooks for priests describe only some of the ritual activities of the temple, namely those which involve priests. Priests undoubtedly played an important role since they are considered to be the only people qualified to enter the *sanctum sanctorum* and touch the major images. A study of their handbooks leads the researcher to adhere, implicitly, to a spatial hierarchisation between the central cella where the priests officiate and the other parts of the temple where devotees perform other more or less ritualized actions. This leads to a distinction between a ritual core of primary importance and a periphery consisting of ritualized performances

9 Mention must also be made of the Buddhistic reinterpretation of Vedic sacrifice, both in early times and, later, within the Buddhist Tantric traditions: see Colas forthc.

10 See, for instance, Colas 1996: 119–122, 267–276.

whose ritual essence and importance is of secondary import. Such a concept in actual fact only takes into account the priestly point of view. The main concern of the priest is to conform to the techniques and prescriptions as laid down in his handbook. From the devotee's point of view, however, priestly ritual activity is of secondary importance compared to his own devotion to the deity. According to his view, which is global and less professional, the priestly rites are understood within the wider concept of devotion to the god.

But in fact, any act of worship or devotion performed by non-priests within the temple precincts tends to be ritually organized. For example, the *Kōyiloḷuku*, chronicles of the Shrirangam temple, describes the entire reorganization of worship by Rāmānuja in that temple in great detail (Rao 1961). It depicts the temple as a large devotional institution to which many different kinds of specialists are attached such as temple priests; some specialists are responsible for reciting Vedic texts, others recite Tamil devotional poems from the *Divyaprabandham*, and still others have an administrative function. The *Kōyiloḷuku* presents these various functions as privileges not as lucrative activities. Most of these activities are organized on the basis of the yearly and daily liturgical calendar, and as such could be considered as ritual. However the *Kōyiloḷuku* describes them as various expressions of devotion. This perspective envisages ritual merely as an outpouring of devotion. A second instance is that of the Araiyaars (Colas 2002: 291–306). Though the Araiyaars do not possess ritual texts, they may perhaps be considered ritual performers since their activities are closely linked with the temple images and the temple ritual calendar. Araiyaars are singer-mimes whose tradition is still alive in four Vaiṣṇava temples of South India. They perform two kinds of ritual or ritualized actions in the temple of Shrivilliputtur. One is the chanting of the *Divyaprabandham*, the other is enacting a simple story accompanied by the recital of selected poems from the *Divyaprabandham*; the main means of enactment consists of specific gestures which differ from the South Indian classical dance, Bharatanāṭyam. According to tradition, the practices of the Araiyaars arose out of the devotional performances of two Vaiṣṇava Tamil saints, Tirumaṅkai Āḷvar and Madhurakavi, enacted in the temple of Shrirangam.

The overall tendency to ritualize devotion did not take place without some ideological struggle. For instance, the Vallabha tradition in the sixteenth century viewed the conventional mode of worship such as *pūjā* as inferior, and promoted the notion of disinterested service to the god known as *sevā*. *Sevā* consists of praises chanted by the whole assembly before the image of the god, constant contemplation of the god, the donation of wealth to temples, etc. Such issues show how fluctuating the boundaries are between what is usually considered as rite and what is not.

Making Sense of the Handbooks on Temple Rites

Over the last few years I have been working with ethnologists and anthropologists at the Centre d'Études de l'Inde et de l'Asie du Sud in Paris. I do not claim to have gained a thorough knowledge of ethnology and its methods, but this experience helped me to gain a better understanding of my work as a philologist. The study of rites based on ancient texts differs considerably from the ethnological study of them. Ethnologists do not isolate rites from their context but place them firmly within their context in order to interpret and understand them. Rites are not absolute performances in themselves. They are necessarily associated with and permeated by social, practical, and other realities, since they only take shape through and due to these factors. From the ethnologist's point of view, isolating a rite from its context is necessarily an artificial exercise, a sort of abstraction. Furthermore, ethnologists are not conditioned by a rigid discourse on ritual as suggested by textual prescriptions (though many of them take textual prescriptions into account). In this sense, they appear to have greater freedom than philologists to construct and invent concepts based on observation. Moreover, their research does not need to be based on earlier ones: they may adopt a totally different theoretical perspective on a topic previously explored by other scholars.

By contrast, indologists, that is, philologists who specialize in Indian documents, are restricted by their methodology and material to a narrower point of view. Of course, the perspective of the indologist who studies ritual texts is historical and diachronic rather than synchronic, which is the perspective adopted by the ethnologist. Furthermore, indology is still a relatively young science. It is hardly in a position to "contextualize" the object of its research. An obstacle seems to be the dearth of documentation, but if we take textual material into account, a huge quantity of Sanskrit and other ancient Indian texts remains unstudied. A sense of historical urgency haunts any honest indologist who, in order to reach a more balanced picture of the history of Indian literature, cannot confine his research to well-known texts and Indian and Western views on them which took definite shape in the twentieth century. He has to save, edit and publish many manuscript works that are literally on the point of disintegrating.

Indology has yet to invent its own instruments of textual analysis and develop its own methodology in this regard. By comparison, for instance, Greek and Latin studies show a higher degree of refinement and diversity, the result of many centuries of erudite study and, more recently, due to the impetus of contact with other disciplines. Indological research still requires a hyper-specialisation that is hide bound by the division into genres and corpuses which Sanskrit liter-

ature, and not modern scholarship, has defined at some point in its history. Each genre has its own rhetoric, its own notions and techniques which have evolved over time and which the specialist has to master. Indological studies and analyses are often conditioned by textual views which impose a rigid classification into literary genres. Hence a thorough understanding of the texts as per their tradition (which is of course necessary) should be accompanied by an objective study of their rhetoric. The difficulty in distancing himself from the textual viewpoint is yet another obstacle which hampers conceptual innovation by the indologist. Under such conditions, renewed efforts towards a periodisation of Indian classical texts irrespective of their division into genres are necessary. This will help obtain a clearer picture of how the literature evolved and pinpoint various trends as they arose over time. One issue which is both current and crucial for indology is the search for at least an approximate date for a given text and its origin.

The philologist who studies rites is not only bound by the limitations of the object of his research, but also, as we will see, by his own attitudes towards the ritual text. These differences could be serious obstacles in the dialogue between ethnologists and philologists. The philologist can derive immense advantages from the dialogue with ethnologists. The latter elaborate concepts that would be difficult to construct based on a study of the ritual texts alone. They also help us to understand what is not obvious in the textual prescriptions. Observing an actual ritual performance helps us distinguish between textual prescriptions and actual practice. My observations in South Indian temples revealed the gap between the Vaikhānasa medieval corpus and practices which are supposedly based on the texts from that corpus. While being useful for our understanding of ritual, field observations can also be misleading since they may induce us to read ancient texts in the light of present practices. Reading the texts in this manner would be tantamount to what priests often do, which is to take the ancient text as corroborating actual practice despite obvious discrepancies between the two. Since the philological approach is historical, we must disconnect the past from the present as much as possible or, at least, evaluate as precisely as possible the limits of our understanding and be aware to what extent our view of the past is conditioned by our understanding today.

It would be interesting to ascertain to what extent the present practitioners of rites consciously position themselves in relation to textual knowledge (whether derived from an ancient corpus or modern ritual handbooks of the Prayoga genre) and how they adapt this textual knowledge. I observed, for instance, that Vaikhānasa priests in a temple in the Godavari delta in Andhra Pradesh followed the prescriptions of the medieval corpus more closely than those in another temple

in Chennai. In Chennai ritual activity was characterized by a sort of exuberance, which manifested itself, for instance, during the ritual installation of an image, in the setting up of more fire-pits than sanctioned by ancient texts. The disparity between ritual attitudes in Andhra and Chennai perhaps serves to illustrate two concepts of ritual tradition and transmission, one of which deliberately clings to ancient sources, while the other accepts evolution in a more passive way. Each of these attitudes involves a specific set of values and shows how the ritual performance and its evolution or lack of evolution, is dependent on the social and intellectual background of the practitioners.

Mention must be made of the concept of “innovation” in ritual matters observable during field studies. The ritual texts do not seem to admit this as a part of the main ritual process. New features are integrated in the ritual, sometimes in the ritual texts themselves, not as something new, but tacitly, for example through an aesthetic approach to the rites. This statement requires a brief explanation. It is said that the god should enjoy the ritual actions (Colas 1996: 302–304); dancing, songs, and music are prescribed and performed for his pleasure (*ibid.*: 246–247). The observation of actual practices shows that aesthetic innovation plays a clearly defined role in ritual performance, whether it concerns the physical surroundings or what the priests do. For instance, a priest in Andhra Pradesh proudly explained to me how he had used modern white ceramic tiles in the cella to enhance its beauty. In Chennai, another priest drew my attention to a particular dancing gait adopted by bearers carrying the holy palanquin to the cella in the *Ādikeśavaperumāḷ* temple in Mylapore. In his opinion, this gait is connected with a legend of the temple. Aesthetic features which contribute to enhance the “main” ritual are an indirect means of introducing innovations and particular features which are gradually accepted over time while not endangering the feeling that the rites remain unaltered.

Not only ritual practices but also doctrinal interpretations by contemporary performers and exegetes can be seen to diverge from those prescribed in the texts. I would like to cite two examples in this connection. The first concerns how Vaikhānasa temple priests interpret rites. The texts of the Vaikhānasa medieval corpus which I have studied emphasize the importance of the ceremonial introduction of power (*śakti*) in the image at the end of the rite of installation (*pratiṣṭhā*). This can be said to be a main though not the only meaning which can be adduced from ancient texts in order to explain the existence of this rite of installation. But when I discussed the subject with the priests who had performed an installation rite at Rāmaghāṭṭakṣetra in Andhra Pradesh, I realized that what they were seeking was not the meaning of this rite as such in ancient texts but rather their own personal understanding of what it meant, even though their

ritual performance closely followed ancient prescriptions. For instance, one of them evoked Vivekananda's views on yoga as the authority for interpreting the rite. Another priest insisted on the necessity of closely following tradition in order to achieve a successful performance of the installation, etc. Neither of them, however, mentioned the concept of power which appears to be essential for the ritual as a whole in the medieval Vaikhānasa texts. Thus a ritual notion, which appears to be important for understanding the rite by the researcher on ancient texts, has apparently lost all its weight today, although the performers believe that they are following ancient prescriptions and do in actual fact follow them.

Another example is related to the position of the pandits, "traditional scholars", whose point of view needs to be taken with caution, since they may interpret the ideology behind the ritual in an anachronistic way despite their knowledge of ancient texts. For instance, Parthasarathi Bhattacharya, the Vaikhānasa pandit in Tirupati, who has edited several texts of the Vaikhānasa medieval corpus, held that the Vaikhānasa doctrine conformed to Viśiṣṭādvaita.¹¹ If we consider that he was a Vaikhānasa pandit and, as such, a doctrinal representative of the community, his opinion was true in the latter half of the twentieth century, but a number of doctrines held by the medieval corpus are in disagreement with those in the Viśiṣṭādvaita.¹² Some pandits, who are also modern scholars, tend to see the past in an unhistorical way, as if the beliefs and techniques of the past have remained unchanged until today. As far as rituals are concerned, pandits (including erudite temple priests) can sometimes delude both themselves and modern scholars as to their understanding of ancient texts, and more so, paradoxically, the more they are familiar with the rites as performed today, since practice may have distorted their understanding of ancient prescriptions. While the ethnologist probably does not need to base his work on a clear distinction between the remote or recent past and the present, the philologist should ascertain whether "anachronistic" views expressed by a pandit stem from a received transmission (and thus represent a comparatively late understanding shared by tradition) or merely reflect a personal opinion. As we will see, modern Western scholars may also fall prey to anachronism.

11 See the introduction to his edition of the *Khilādhikāra*, p. 5; see also the note of Parthasarathi Bhattacharya cited by W. Caland (1991) in the introduction to his edition of the *Vaikhānasaśrautasūtra*, pp. xxix–xxx.

12 See, for instance, Colas 1996: 100.

Limitations and the Problems Posed in the Study of Ritual Handbooks

Ritual handbooks make no claim to be perfect works either from a linguistic or literary point of view. Their ideal is not *l'art pour l'art*. Therefore, a philological approach focusing exclusively on classical grammatical and linguistic criteria is less appropriate for their study than it is for works of classical literature to which Paninian ideals and criteria of literary excellence are applicable. Like any other work, they were composed in order to communicate subject matter which should be comprehensible within a given milieu. Nor are they always devoid of linguistic worth. Handbooks of Vedic rites, that is, Śrauta- and Smārtasūtras, are often well-written, and some of them have been commented upon. Hindu ritual handbooks attributed to historically traceable authors, not gods or mythical sages, like Nārāyaṇa's *Tantrasamuccaya* (probably 15th cent.), are also often well-written. I shall however confine myself to temple ritual handbooks in the Vaikhānasa medieval corpus, the Sanskrit of which shows a fair number of obviously irregular, easily identifiable features which are not an obstacle to their understanding. Only two of these texts have been commented upon, one of them in full (the *Ānandasamhitā*), the other one chapter only (the *Ādisamhitā*).

How can we explain the linguistic laxity found in temple ritual handbooks? The answer that the authors and readers of ritual handbooks were not "good Sanskritists" or were ignorant of classical grammatical and rhetorical rules, seems a rather short-sighted view. Ritual texts quite simply are not addressed to literary scholars but to ritual practitioners. They do not need to be written in high literary style or even a very regular Sanskrit. On the other hand, within the ritual context, the transmission of practice is as important as the transmission of the text itself. The purpose of the texts is external to their subject matter. They were composed to be read and understood in close connection with particular actions, not to be read or enjoyed for themselves. For comparison's sake, one would not expect a technical work on motorcars in the West to be read as if it were a poem by Goethe or Racine. At the same time, the comparison with modern Western technical treatises is limited, for, the Vaikhānasa handbooks lack their definiteness. They are employed in a sort of continuous dialectical relation with the person who uses them. Their prescriptions need to be permanently connected with interpretative performances. Practice is their touchstone.

Given the close connection between these handbooks and practice, the main challenge to understanding them would be the definition of their historical context. One would at first sight think that epigraphy might be of some help in determining this context. This is however not always the case as we will see later. Another, less direct approach, is to compare the teachings of a text with other

contemporary works, by highlighting the similarities and the differences. This would be of little help in defining the historical context, but would, at a more modest level, throw light on issues such as innovations in ritual, for instance. But this approach is not problem-free either since these texts were compiled separately not as a pre-scheduled set of complementary productions or a collection, even though they may have been written at roughly the same time. In building interpretations through their comparative study, we necessarily obliterate the oral explanation given by a preceptor or a teaching based on a specific local tradition, which accompanied the elaboration and transmission of the texts. We replace this context by establishing a hypothetical connection between the various texts, as if their respective authors had a precise knowledge of all the other texts and practices. This amounts to imagining a situation other than the original historical conditions which rendered the composition of this or that text necessary.

Philological work on ritual handbooks is probably more fraught with pitfalls than ethnological work, though often, it tacitly or openly claims that it is "based" on firmer ground, that is, written testimonies. The philologist is bound by the constraints and the implicit or explicit rules of the philological work and is not expected to say or write anything which could be contradicted by textual evidence. He establishes the texts in a so-called critical way. He believes and is thought to base his work on a historically stable ground. But research on historiography and orientalism over the last few decades has questioned the ideology behind this value-system. While not engaging in the debate here, we must observe that research on Indian ritual handbooks, though philological, raises more questions than other indological research.

Embarking on the study of texts such as the Vaikhānasa medieval corpus raises the question whether one should undertake the critical edition and translation of a single text from the corpus or make a comprehensive study of all the published texts.

The critical edition of ritual texts not only raises many issues specifically related to the transmission of ritual texts but also general issues related to the transmission of texts in India (Colas 1999). As I said earlier, indological research is a comparatively young field. It is unlikely that editorial practices adopted for the editing of ancient Greek and Latin texts for instance,¹³ could be applied blindly to Indian texts which have been subjected to totally different lines of transmission and conservation. Moreover, Western classical studies have developed a high degree of critical acumen applicable not only to literary but also

13 The establishing of genealogical stemmas on the basis of Indian manuscripts is highly debatable (see below), for example.

to technical and popular works. They have developed their own epistemology within the field of critical editing.¹⁴ By contrast, discussions about the methodology used to create critical editions of Indian texts are still rare, timid, and often confined to the assertions of the well-meaning editor.

Both the composition of texts and their transmission in India depends on the historical and geographical characteristics of the milieu (family, religious group, erudite or literary circle, etc.) in which they were produced. The role played by a text in a given milieu and the motivations behind its transmission also affect how it is transmitted in that milieu. The transmission of temple-ritual texts belongs to what has been called "fluid forms of transmission" (with regard to early Western technical and popular literature (Reynold & Wilson 1991: 234–237)) and is susceptible to alteration. Any observable discrepancy between prescription and practice may induce the priests to question the transmission of the text and "correct" it, and in so doing introduce a new reading which may or may not be in keeping with the other prescriptions in that particular text. Such is the case when the ritual prescription in a text is contradicted by practice or no longer applied. Local or historically new practices may give rise to interpolations which are alien to the original text. Such contradictions and interpolations may tempt the philologist to unduly suspect the authenticity of the text as a whole.

On many occasions, tracing the lines of transmission of an Indian text through its manuscripts can only be hypothetical. The material circumstances surrounding the preservation of manuscripts goes some way towards explaining the hazardous nature of textual transmission (Colas 1999). The fact that bibliophilism (in the Western sense) was not common in traditional Hindu circles, with a few exceptions, also explains this phenomenon. The haphazard nature of textual transmission often renders the establishing of stemmas (a technique much debated among philologists working on Western texts) questionable. The question of the critical edition also depends on the genre of the text,¹⁵ its popularity, in what milieu it was transmitted and other factors. Two contemporary versions of a manuscript may portray two different pictures of the text and the fact that one copy is linguistically better than the other does not necessarily indicate whether it is an earlier or later version. Nor is it easy to draw historical conclusions by comparing the readings of manuscripts from different periods; for instance an

14 For a summary of the ongoing discussions and bibliographical references, see, for instance, Reynold & Wilson 1991: 206–241; Greetham 1994: 295–347; Cerquiglini 1989: 105–116.

15 Colas 1999: 49–53. On the necessity of distinguishing genres in critically editing Western literature, see Cerquiglini 1989: 62, 78.

earlier manuscript may show readings that are less genuine than a more recent text.¹⁶ A linguistically poor copy may preserve groups of syllables, words or passages that have disappeared from certain lines of the transmission and may correspond to an earlier stage of the text, that is, before these groups of syllables, words or passages were deleted by copyists who deemed them unreadable.

The geographical differences with regard to the availability of Indian ritual manuscripts can also be misleading. Indian manuscripts have on the whole been better preserved in the Himalayas (where the climate is more conducive to their preservation) and where dated manuscripts from the ninth century or earlier can be found. By contrast, in South India the extant dated manuscripts, which were generally written on palm-leaves and subject to difficult climatic conditions, most often postdate the sixteenth century (Colas 1999: 39). Therefore, the fact that a South Indian manuscript records a later stage of a rite does not necessarily imply that the original structures of this rite came from the Himalayan areas and that this evolution did not take place in South India. This immense gap in terms of the availability of manuscripts does not so much concern Vaikhānasa texts (which have been composed probably in South India) as Tantric texts.

In addition to issues connected with the transmission of the texts, there are also those connected with the preparation of a critical edition of ritual handbooks (Dain 1997: 169–186). There are probably no ready-made attitudes to adopt with regard to critical editions of ritual texts and other texts. The practice of the heavy critical apparatus has been often criticized in Western philology (*ibid.*: 172, 174). However, in the Indian context, where the conditions of manuscript preservation are not ideal, the editor must somehow find a way of systematically providing the main variants from the extant manuscripts even though they do not represent immediately useful readings.¹⁷ That ritual texts are rarely great literary achievements does not mean that all the linguistically incorrect readings should be automatically accepted on the assumption that the original style of the text is poor. Nor does it make sense to correct systematically “corrupt” forms according to strictly Paninian grammatical rules. The quality of a critical edition depends not only on the scholarship of the editor himself or herself, but also on his or her experience in dealing with ancient texts and manuscripts and his or her openness, that is, ability to avoid preconceived views (especially his or her own) about the text and its contents.

16 “Un manuscrit récent n’est pas nécessairement un manuscrit mauvais” (Dain 1997: 146).

17 Computerizing opens new scope for critical editions in terms of flexibility, exhaustiveness and of understanding the text (Cerquiglini 1989: 113–116).

Therefore, embarking on a critical edition of a ritual text is always a complicated venture, the necessity of which is not absolute depending as it does on several factors. In the case of the Vaikhānasa corpus, critically editing and translating one of them obviously implied entering a vicious circle, because such an enterprise would have had to rely on all available Vaikhānasa texts, for which in turn we needed critical editions. The task proved impossible. The final product would have been in actual fact the result of an arbitrary process of editing which would have purified the text according to classical grammatical and metrical conventions, and the acceptance or rejection of readings on the ground of disputable criteria, and so forth. Another possible approach to the Vaikhānasa corpus consisted of studying the entire corpus of partially or uncritically edited texts and this is the approach I adopted. Its feasibility depended on a number of factors: for instance, whether a satisfactory chronology could be established, whether the corpus was composed over a short or long period of time and whether the philological quality of the published editions was reasonably acceptable or not. While the situation of parallel corpuses like Śaiva or Pāñcarātra is difficult, this is not the case with the Vaikhānasa corpus which is comparatively late and where the ritual prescriptions are generally uniform, proving that it was composed within a short time period. With the exception of one text, it was possible to establish a relative chronology on the basis of quotations both internal and external. Once this relative chronology had been established, it was easier to read the various texts critically each in the light of the other. Obvious interpolations could be detected and clearly erroneous readings could be identified in order to circumscribe textual difficulties. The conclusions drawn from such a comprehensive approach towards a reasonably well-knit ritual corpus can help further philological research. They can bring to light issues to be taken into account for critical editions of the texts from that corpus in the future.

How Do Early Texts Make Sense of Temple Rites?

How do Indian texts on rites make sense of Hindu rites? The following observations will on the whole be confined to temple rites as described in the Vaikhānasa medieval corpus. A philological study of ritual texts implies that we rely on a transmitted written documentation, which implies that we have to go through the intermediary of an organized recording or interpretation of rites by authors who sift the facts through their own phraseology and conventions. The two main written sources which one would require for understanding rites are, firstly, works dedicated to the interpretation of rituals and, secondly, works which contain ritual prescriptions.

Texts offering a systematic interpretation of temple rites are almost non-existent in Sanskrit literature. By contrast, the exegetic literature on Vedic rites is rich. Brāhmaṇas provide a variety of often symbolic interpretations. Subsequently, the Mīmāṃsāsūtras and especially the *Śābarabhāṣya* made a more systematic attempt at interpreting Vedic rites. The Mīmāṃsā school does not consider *pūjā* a ritual practice based on Śruti and does not interpret this rite as it is performed in temples. The *Tantrāloka* of Abhinavagupta (10th–11th cent.) offers a philosophical interpretation of Hindu rites, however it concerns the metaphysical significance and evaluation of Tantric systems rather than a real exegesis of rites and does not deal with public temple worship as such. In fact, we do not have a systematic discipline of interpreting temple rites, whether Vaiṣṇava or Śaiva.

The only significant source for interpreting temple rituals are the handbooks themselves. Although they aim at recording and legitimising ritual prescriptions and not at interpreting rites, they often express the intended meaning of rites in a number of ways. We may, rather artificially though, distinguish four different textual areas which provide meaning, the fourth being the richest in meaning.

The way in which the handbooks present and classify the rites reveals to some extent what meaning they attribute to them. Ritual taxonomies superimpose an overall articulate view on the rites which the texts describe. Our philological understanding of rites is determined by that view. As we saw earlier, Vaikhānasa handbooks usually distinguish between the installation of divine images, and daily service, etc. The taxonomy of rites in ritual handbooks helps the priests to systematize rituality, isolate and separate significant ritual elements, and classify rites according to their aim and function within the ritual itself. For instance, some texts divide the daily service into five sections, each of which is supposed to produce a particular effect (Colas 1996: 317). This classification leads the researcher to ask different questions. For instance, when and how did the division into several different categories of rites take place in the handbooks of temple rites?¹⁸ To what extent does this division rely upon the extant divisions found in the handbooks of so-called Vedic rites? Standardization is the foundation of taxonomy. Ritual texts themselves tend to provide standardized ritual structures, acceptable to all, while retaining their sectarian tendencies. A twofold concomitant process is at work in standardization: the tendency of rituals to evolve over time, on the one hand, and a universalising tendency, on the other. We already looked at some of the evolutionary aspects. The universalising tendency appears frequently in texts. For instance, the *Brhatsaṃhitā* (6th cent.) describes the installation rite of an image as a universal paradigm which

18 See, for instance, *ibid.*: 257–264, 314–320.

can be practised by the followers of various religious groups: Pāśupatas, Bhāgavatas (that is, Vaiṣṇavas), devotees of the sun-god, etc., and even Buddhists and Jains. The only variations within the paradigm are said to be, firstly, the priests and secondly, the *mantras*.¹⁹ Let us take another example: in the Vaikhānasa medieval corpus the ritual is presented as a homogenous structure common to all traditions. Thus, according to the *Samūrtārcanādihikarāṇa*, “the ritual structure (*kalpa*) is said to be common (to all traditions); it is the *mantras* which distinguish (a tradition)”. The *mantra* is considered to be the “significant” element. Furthermore, the Vaikhānasa texts constantly distinguish between “general” (*sāmānya*) rules and “particularities” (*viśeṣa*), that is, particular rules (Colas 1996: 199). In fact, “particularities” in some cases at least, could be significant innovations which thus receive textual legitimacy. They could also be ancient unwritten practices inserted in the text at a later date, as secondary rules, while not affecting the rules of the text as a whole.

This attempt to achieve standardization seems to show that ritualists tended to reduce rites to a regular structure, which was recurrent among religious groups in its main aspects, but which varied in detail. In this structure which is supposedly common to all rituals, the significant variants are the god who is worshipped and the corresponding *mantras*, etc., depending on the religious tradition. On the other hand, the concept of the rite as a structure provided a means whereby ritualists could integrate and homogenize new ritual elements. The modern researcher who is tempted to follow ritualists in this concept, could end up with an ideal ritual model, a notion that runs counter to the basic idea of historical evolution. In fact, an apparently common structure which ritual texts tend to emphasize, may conceal significant differences.

A second area which provides meaning lies in the proclamation of the aims of the various rites in the handbooks themselves. In this regard, we must distinguish between the specific aims of the performance of rites and the eulogising statements of the *arthavāda* type which tend to attach maximum results to the performance. In the medieval Vaikhānasa corpus, for instance, whereas a black magic rite has a specific aim, many other rites are said to bring well-being in this world and final release in the other (Colas 1996: 200–203).

A third area which reveals meaning consists of what we could call symbolic though ritually “passive” statements in the handbooks. Such statements provide an occasional and unsystematic symbolic interpretation of ritual elements or objects. For instance, in the *Kriyādhikāra*, the temple is identified with water, the fixed image of the temple with mud out of which the lotus grows, and the

19 Chapter 60 in the edition of Ramakrishna Bhat (1982).

movable image with the lotus flower. Elsewhere, a pestle is identified with Viṣṇu and the corresponding mortar with the goddess Lakṣmī. Often, these symbolic interpretations do not have permanent import. For instance, in one place the tree from which a divine image is carved is identified with Viṣṇu and in another with Soma (Colas 1996: 208–210). Such interpretations, however, remain purely rhetorical. Since they do not produce, lead to or sanction a specific ritual action, they may be considered “passive”. They occur only occasionally and are often eulogistic.

A fourth area corresponds to what we could call “active” interpretation, because it determines specific ritual actions. This type of “active” interpretation may have influenced what ritual performers thought about the ritual itself, and determined and/or strengthened certain main ritual trends. For instance, the *Kāśyapajñānakāṇḍa* states that the fixed image of god in the temple represents the immovable and unmanifest aspect of the god, whereas movable images represent the god’s movable and manifest aspects. This theological exegesis probably reinforced a technical differentiation (in terms of the material used, for instance) between both types of images. It may also have guided the ritual performance accordingly, since the major parts of the rites are addressed to the movable (manifest) aspect not to the fixed one (unmanifest) (Colas 1986: 71–73).

Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between the active area of meaning and the above “passive” interpretation. For instance, the equivalence, which the *Samūrtārcanādhikaraṇa* draws, of the installation of the image with the installation of the fires (*agnyādheya*) in the Vedic Śrauta ritual (Colas 1996: 212) may appear purely rhetorical at first sight, but it is in fact significant. As Vaikhānasas gave a major role to the (Vedic and non-Vedic) fires in the installation of the image (which precedes the regular worship), they tended naturally to identify the installation of the image with the installation of Vedic fires (which precedes Vedic Śrauta rites). The equivalence drawn by the *Samūrtārcanādhikaraṇa* confirms this tendency.

Examples of obviously “active” interpretations abound. The installation rite (*pratiṣṭhā*) (a term sometimes translated “consecration”) of a divine image shows that a single text can provide multiple “active” interpretation of a rite during its performance as prescribed. It would be tempting to privilege one interpretation in favour of others found in the same text. For example, in the *Vimānārcanākālpa*, the opening of the eyes of the image appears as an important operation which links the image with the cosmos and brings the image alive. But, this takes place at an early stage in the rite and, if it were to be seen as a fundamental ritual act, it would render many subsequent ceremonies of the rite unnecessary from a semiotic point of view. On the other hand, the image is

treated as a living being even before its eyes have been opened. The meaning of the *pratiṣṭhā* rite is also closely related to the concept of *śakti*, that is, divine power,²⁰ as the rite culminates in the transmission of this power to the image through a libation of empowered water over the image. Even after the *pratiṣṭhā*, the image is sometimes considered merely as the residence of a god, who can leave it at will. Thus the installation rite suggests a number of interpretations which are not strictly homogenous. This may be the result of a conflation of several viewpoints which are technical, metaphysical, and devotional.

Another type of “active” interpretation is the remodelling or creating of a ritual procedure to yield sense, that is, answer a question about the meaning of the rite. In the Vaikhānasa texts, the fire-ritual and image-ritual cycles are almost independent of each other. Some Vaikhānasa ritualists apparently saw this as posing a problem which they have attempted to solve by linking both cycles. Two passages from the *Kriyādhikāra* will serve to illustrate this attempt. According to the first one, at the end of the daily fire-sacrifice, the fire is absorbed in a small fire-log or the performer’s self as is usually prescribed in the Vedic S tras. But the text goes further and adds that the fire can also be absorbed in the fixed image of the god of the temple from which it can be drawn daily. The second passage comes from a description of the installation rite. According to normal rules, once the image has been ritually installed, a fire-sacrifice is performed daily. The passage, which is an interpolation, enjoins a special ritual procedure if, for some reason, the fire-sacrifice cannot be performed every day. By that special procedure the fire is absorbed in the image. The prescription which envisages the daily ritual without the fire-sacrifice is clearly an attempt to legitimise the abandoning of offering a fire-sacrifice, which may have been frequent when the interpolation was added and consequently required a textual sanction and regularisation. Both passages illustrate an “active” interpretation by remodelling the rites.

The authors of ritual handbooks probably needed to preserve the existing prescriptions and include new ones. The fact that new ritual texts were composed proves that existing handbooks did not reflect the whole range of practices which the authors of new texts could observe during their own time and in their own place. It is not possible to ascertain to what extent the performers of temple rites were involved with the meaning of the rites performed. However, the authors of their handbooks probably felt the need to give meaning to the rites. The phenomenon which I called “active” interpretation testifies to this tendency

20 Cf. Colas 1989: 146–147, especially about the opening of the eyes and its place in the series of the ritual actions.

which is furthermore proved by exegesis or rationalization of the prescriptions in ritual handbooks.

The Testimony of Epigraphy

As we have seen, practice is the ultimate reference point for ritual prescriptions. Inscriptions on stone and copper-plate form the main historical testimony of rites as practised, in contrast with ritual texts which convey an idealized, prescriptive view of rites. Epigraphy also reminds us of the gap between historical facts and the knowledge derived from the texts.

For instance, both early and recent Vaikhānasa and non-Vaikhānasa Sanskrit texts usually seem to imply that Vaikhānasas are exclusively Vaiṣṇavas.²¹ The medieval corpus of the Vaikhānasas does not mention the fact that Vaikhānasas were allowed to officiate in non-Vaiṣṇava temples. Modern historiography and Pandits agree that Vaikhānasas are Vaiṣṇavas and that Vaikhānasa priests today officiate exclusively in Vaiṣṇava temples. However, a copper-plate inscription (in Sanskrit and Kannada) from Maṅṅe (Karnataka), dated 828 C.E., overthrows this common view (Colas 1996: 58–59, 150). It mentions a Vaikhānasa named Devaśarman who was expert in the application of treatises, favoured by the goddess (*devī*) holding a drawn sword. A prince named Mahendra gives him a village which enables him to a regular *bali*-offering of incense and lamps to the goddess. Since she carries a drawn sword she is clearly not a Vaiṣṇava deity. The fact that Vaikhānasas could have been priests of non-Vaiṣṇava deities has been forgotten. This epigraphic evidence also raises the question of whether the extant Vaikhānasa medieval corpus addressed only the Vaiṣṇava section of the medieval Vaikhānasa community and not the non-Vaiṣṇava section of that community. In this connection, we may recall that several Vaikhānasa medieval texts prohibit Vaikhānasas who are devotees of non-Vaiṣṇava deities, from holding the office of ritual master.

One advantage of comparing textual prescriptions with epigraphic data is illustrated by another instance (Colas 2003). Since the Gupta age, epigraphy records that images of Hindu gods and the Buddha received donations of land. Śābara, who belongs to that period, mentions the ownership of land and villages by deities, although he considers this to be a convention, as the lands and villages

21 However, that Vaikhānasas were apparently accused of practising Śaiva cults could be inferred from the description of the *Vaikhānasāropitadevalakatvanirākaraṇa* as “a tract in Sanskrit and Telugu, proving that Vaikhānasas are not ministrants of Śaiva cults” in Barnett 1928: col. 888.

were in actual fact “used” by temple priests. The Vaikhānasa corpus enjoins patrons to donate lands to the temple priests to enable them to live in exchange for their regular service in the temple. The *Prakīrṇādhikaraṇa* like other handbooks in the Vaikhānasa corpus, prescribes the gift of lands to priests, thus following an established Vaikhānasa point of view in this respect. When describing the act of donation, however, it states that the act should be engraved on copper-plate and should mention that the god is the recipient of the donation, which can also, as a second option, be made to the priest. Interestingly enough, this text conforms to a socially conventional way of recording donations of land to the god even though the intended recipient was in fact the priest. It appears that the Vaikhānasa text is aware of two levels of understanding of the land gift, one its own and the other pertaining to its epigraphic presentation. It apparently illustrates the gap between the vision usually projected by the texts which were composed by and for the priests and the epigraphic interpretation which probably reflects the common ideology of the society. The *Prakīrṇādhikaraṇa* pragmatically integrates both points of view in its prescriptions.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the question of how to make sense out of rites should be preceded by another: “in temple worship what is and is not a rite?”. We then tried to see under which conditions the modern researcher could make sense of the temple rites handbooks. In this connection, the article contrasted the work of the ethnologist with that of a philologist studying ritual texts as well as the advantages and limitations of field observations for understanding ancient ritual texts. I also underlined the limitations of the philological approach and the difficulties in establishing a critical edition of a ritual text. Then the question: “how does the ancient documentation make sense of rites?” was discussed. Finally, I briefly mentioned how epigraphy can provide us with concrete examples of ritual contexts and force us to become aware of the gap between the ritual prescriptions as found in the handbooks and their application in times past.

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