

Preface

The volume at hand brings together the papers of the International Symposium “Hindu and Buddhist Initiations in India and Nepal” held at Heidelberg in May 2008. Sponsored by the *German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG)* and by the symposia program of the University of Heidelberg, this event was organized under the aegis of the Collaborative Research Centre (Sonderforschungsbereich) on *Ritual Dynamics*. Its purpose was to discuss changes in and interrelationships among different initiation rituals in South Asia and their relation to other kinds of rituals. Apart from papers delivered at the meeting, we present additional related contributions by Gérard Colas, Kathleen Gögge and Todd Lewis.

Initiation rituals have attracted enormous academic attention ever since Joseph-François Lafitau (1724) first applied the term initiation to individual or collective entry into a new phase of life or into group membership (Streck 2000: 111).¹ On the whole, two explanatory models have dominated debate. Michael Houseman and Carlo Severi observe that “initiation rites are almost invariably analyzed, either explicitly or implicitly, in terms of Van Gennep’s (1909) classic three-part progression: separation, liminality, aggregation” (1998: 278). Outside as well as inside academic circles, Van Gennep’s structural model of *rites de passage* has often been combined with Eliade’s idea of initiation as *regressum ad uterum* and spiritual rebirth (Grimes 2000: 100–7). But both components of this dominant explanation have been subject to criticism. What Pierre Bourdieu misses in Van Gennep’s merely descriptive conception of the rites of passage and its more systematic refinement by Victor Turner (1969) is any notion of the “social function and the social significance of the boundaries or limits which the ritual allows one to pass over or transgress in a lawful way” (1991: 117). For Bourdieu, who prefers to speak of “rites of consecration, or rites of legitimization, or, quite simply, *rites of institution*—giving this word the active sense it has, for example, in expressions like ‘*institution d’un héritier*’ (‘appointing an heir’)” (*ibid.*)—the essential effect is not the passage, but the separation of those who have undergone the ritual (i.e. the persons initiated), not from those who have not yet undergone it, but from those who are not eligible to undergo it.² The social significance of initiation rituals and their role in constructing identity is addressed in several contributions to this volume. Yet such trans-

1 For a survey of the approaches taken by Schurtz, Webster, Van Gennep, Kristensen, Eliade, Thurnwald, Van der Leeuw, Heiler, Goldammer, Van Baaren, Stanner, Turner, Young and La Fontaine, see Snoek 1987. For the more recent approaches of Bloch and Whitehouse, see Gellner in this volume.

2 Bourdieu (1991: 119) calls these rites acts of “social magic” which manage to produce discontinuity where once there was continuity (cp. Wulf & Zirfas 2004: 27–8).

formation by means of ritual is an important but only one aspect of the dynamics of initiations.

When it comes to elucidating other aspects of change, metacultural and transhistorical models of interpretation are of little use. It has been remarked that the pervasiveness of the rites of passage structure undermines its analytical usefulness,³ and furthermore, that the focus on one structural, symbolical or functional feature blurs the complexity ritual events often display.⁴ Changes in details cannot be comprehended by recourse to invariable structures. Mono-causal explanations ignore the possibility of a changing interrelationship among form, function and meaning. If, as in this volume, the notion of dynamics is not restricted to the transformation of persons by rituals but also includes the transformation of rituals by persons, it is useful to base analysis—in accordance with the general agenda set out for the Ethno-Indology Series (see Michaels 2005)—on a study of ritual details in their historical and cultural context.

Treating a given ritual in historical perspective—tracing, in other words, the transformations which have occurred to the ritual in its passage through time—almost necessarily includes an examination of its relationship to other rituals of the same tradition. But interrelations exist not only between rituals within a single tradition. As argued above, rituals of initiation—or more general rituals of institution—allow a person to cross socially constructed borders. Several examples in this volume demonstrate that ritual procedures themselves can overstep borders they themselves are involved in establishing. Whole rituals, or certain elements of them, may ignore social, ethnic and religious boundaries. Some of the elements transferred reappear in different types of rituals. On the one hand, initiations, like other rituals, usually embody the general standards of their given tradition. On the other hand, specific elements of initiations can be found in rituals that are usually not regarded as initiations. While most of the papers in this volume treat initiatory rituals for human agents, some papers show how elements of such rituals are adapted to the installation of non-human objects of worship. Ritual transfer involves, in these and other cases, such readjustments to the new context as the modification of procedures or the reassignment of meanings. Further aspects of the dynamics of ritual addressed by the authors include the relation of script (ritual handbooks) to performance or various forces of change (e.g. the economics of ritual, gender-related variations, modernization and democratization).

The papers of the volume

In South Asian languages there is no single term for what we call initiation rituals. Broadly speaking, two sets of rituals are relevant to a discussion of initiations in Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Firstly, life-cycle rituals (*samskāras*) are observed in many social groups, and are compulsory depending on gender or age. Secondly, there are ini-

3 See Houseman & Severi 1998: 170–1 (with further references).

4 See Gladigow 2004: 57; Grimes 2000: 105–7.

tiations, more optional in character, that allow admittance to a certain religious group or practice; these are usually called *dīksā* or *abhiṣeka*. The contributors to this volume treat examples of both kinds of rituals in various Hindu and Buddhist settings. The papers could have been arranged in various ways—for example, according to the religion or region being dealt with. The nature of the material presented or the methodology applied to it could have been still other criteria, again resulting in a rather mechanical grouping into sections. But since our interest lies in the intersections between the different initiatory rituals and between the different ways the contributors approach them, we opted for the following arrangement.

The volume begins with the papers by Christof Zotter and Anne Keßler-Persaud, each of which deals with the Brahmanical life-cyclic initiation (*upanayana*) and such modifications of models of this ritual as can be found in the pan-Indian textual tradition. Both articles present cases in which the *upanayana* is performed together with other life-cycle rituals, and both focus on modifications of the ritual procedure from an historical perspective. Each stresses the fact that the processes of construction, adaptation and change within such rituals are rule-bound. Christof Zotter examines the post-Vedic development of the *upanayana* in one Vedic tradition predominant in Nepal. He demonstrates how the modern-day practice of performing *vratabandha*—that is, a cluster of four *samskāras* from the “making of the tuft of hair” (*cūḍākarana*) up to the “return (after Vedic study)” (*saṁāvartana*)—is reflected in the recent textual tradition. From a comparison of prescriptive texts of different historical periods he deduces some general principles at work in the evolution of this initiation ritual, such as the successive accumulation of ritual elements or the transfer and adaptation of ritual standards used as a construction kit for the *samskāras*. By means of these rules, the creation of the *vedārambha samskāra*, the ritualized beginning of the Vedic study, which nowadays forms part of the *vratabandha*, can be comprehended as well. Whereas among the Bāhun and Chetri of Kathmandu Valley the *upanayana* is, as described by Zotter, the centre of a complex event, Anne Keßler-Persaud shows that among the Gaddi Brahmins in the Kangra Valley the *upanayana* is attached to the nuptial ceremonies, the *vedārambha* being skipped and the *saṁāvartana* being performed in a condensed form. While the combination of *upanayana* and marriage is a relatively recent economization of the ritual life-cycle, Keßler-Persaud argues that a close connection between *saṁāvartana* and marriage is attested already in some of the *Grhyasūtras*. According to these texts, either *saṁāvartana* and marriage are performed in direct succession (with some overlap), which makes the former a prelude to the latter, or the interval between the two is bridged by repeating certain elements of the *saṁāvartana*—such as a bath, dressing and the reception with *argha*—again at the beginning of a wedding. In both cases, she concludes, from a compositional point of view there is no gap between *saṁāvartana* and marriage.

While the first two papers analyze complete rituals that undergo a rearrangement of their elements, the third contribution focuses on modifications to the details of a single element in different contexts. Bringing together substantial references to the salving of the eyes (*āñjana*) in different initiations (*dīksā* for the Soma sacrifice, *saṁāvartana*)

and other rituals, Shingo Einoo describes how this element is embedded in the procedures, how the eye salve is applied and which mantras are used. Based on his findings, Einoo points out the different effects achieved by this act. Depending on the setting, it can be observed that such ointment has a general protective or curative function, or else that it is employed to achieve specific results.

Attesting formal interrelations—for example, by pointing out shared elements—is but one way to relate initiations to other rituals. Still other bonds, of a conditional nature, can be observed. The life-cycle initiation is a precondition for marriage and for different forms of *dīksā* as well, and it itself requires rituals to be performed in advance. The series of rituals conducted in early childhood, which gradually remove birth-related pollution and prepare an individual for initiation, are the topic of Kathleen Gögge's paper. She presents the results of fieldwork in the Kathmandu Valley and of having analyzed modern Nepalese handbooks. The textual tradition provides normative models for these childhood rituals. Still, as many examples described by Gögge reveal, to a considerable extant the actual responsibility for carrying out the rites lies not with priests who consult manuals but with women (the midwife, the eldest woman of the clan or the mother), who draw their knowledge from oral traditions. Apart from the influence of modern living conditions, the dependence of the ritual procedure on orally transmitted customs of caste, family and locality accounts for the great variance in the performance. Yet despite all variance, the unity of the ritual culture within one ethnic group is discernible.

One of Gögge's sample groups are the Newars, speakers of a Tibeto-Burman language who live in Nepal. In the following section of the volume, contributions deal with facets of different initiation rituals within this specific ethnic context. Taking the boys' initiation *mekhalābandhana* ("binding of the girdle") as an example, Axel Michaels examines the language of a personal handbook used by a Newar priest. He demonstrates that the hybrid character of the idiom in which these *aide-mémoires* are written reflects the hybrid character of the ritual. Michaels urges that this material not be measured in terms of grammatical correctness or against the Great Tradition, but rather be appreciated as an expression of a culture in its own right. Adoption of linguistic and ritual elements from the pan-Indian textual tradition enriches Newar ritual culture. But what on the surface may look like Sanskrit and pan-Indian ritual is, underneath, Newar.

One ritual unique to Newar culture is *ihi*, the marriage of a girl to a *bel* fruit. Based on his observations in the city of Bhaktapur, Niels Gutschow argues that *ihi* is first and foremost an initiation, parallel to the one for boys. It both makes a girl a full member of her clan, which she will leave at the time of her marriage to a human spouse, and imposes ritual duties, such as the worship of the ancestors and the lineage deity. Moreover, the female initiand is introduced to the larger urban realm through visits to the houses of relatives. Gutschow sees these formal visits as part of a process which started with earlier childhood rituals.

The *ihi* is also dealt with in the next three papers, there in the context of the Newar Buddhist community. Together with the contribution on initiation in tantric Buddhism, these articles show how Hindu initiation rituals are variously transferred to or abandon-

ed by Buddhist traditions, and in the former case Buddhicized by inflection of forms or infusion with new meanings. Changes which have affected Newar Buddhist initiations over the last few decades are the subject tackled by David N. Gellner, who styles such changes as reformists' attempts to distinguish Buddhist rituals from their Hindu counterparts, and yet maintain Newar identity. Gellner demonstrates how Newar ritualists have responded to initiations offered by the Theravāda movement as more economical or more rational alternatives. In the case of the boys' initiation, competition has led to opening up the temporary ordination (*bare chuyegu*), formerly restricted to high-caste Buddhists, to all Newars independently of any traditional affiliation their families may have with a particular monastery. Initiations for girls have changed much more drastically. The customary confinement ritual related to the onset of menstruation (*bārhā tayegu*) has been discontinued and superseded by a temporary ordination (*rikhini pabbajjā*) imported from Burma. In contrast, the performance of *ihi* has generally been maintained by Newar Buddhists. Both faithfulness to traditional forms and modern adaptations of initiation rituals, Gellner concludes, must be seen primarily as expressions of identity.

That ritual practice is vital to the building, defining and maintaining of Buddhist identity is also held by Todd Lewis. He challenges the widespread notion of a "Protestant" Buddhism, in which rituals appear to be superfluous and on the verge of being abandoned, by pointing out the fact that Newar Buddhist rituals occasion movement toward enlightenment as well as earthly benefits, and are furthermore a means of acculturating the young. The Newar Buddhists' *samskāras* are characterized by the author as a continuous chain of initiations preparing a candidate for further initiations (*nikhan* and *dekhā*) which are optional and explicit religious. For the Urāy, a grouping of Buddhist merchant castes in Kathmandu, the performance of these life-cycle rituals serves the purpose of sustaining their social bonds with the Nepalese Hindu rulers, protecting their wealth and marking their high-caste status. The *samskāras* themselves appear to be transpositions of corresponding Brahmanical ones; that is, these latter are invested with Buddhist meanings. With reference to the twelfth-century *Kriyāsamgrahapāñjikā*, the author suggests that the life-cycle rituals for Newar Buddhist householders were not directly taken over from the Hindus but rather were adapted from consecrations of images.

This last point is substantiated in Alexander von Rospatt's paper. In the *Kriyāsamgrahapāñjikā*, the consecration of images is a composite ritual including an installation proper (*pratiṣṭhā*), life-cycle rituals and a series of tantric initiations (*abhiṣeka*). Von Rospatt's focus lies on the ten *samskāras* (collectively called *daśakriyā*), which are equated in the text with steps of the consecration process. Drawing on parallels in other texts and on actually observed practice, he investigates their development within the Newar Buddhist tradition. Rather than searching for an "original" ritual from which later practice deviates, he takes the variance observable in different localities as being of interest in its own right. Treating some features of the procedure more closely, he points out local variations which themselves have become standard. His investigation of the marriage rite for exemplification purposes is especially fit to attest that the link

between the life-cycle rituals for humans and their employment in image consecrations is not a one-way process of adapting the former to the latter but rather a complex relationship of mutual influences. Whereas the use of *samskāras* in image consecration may be an adaptation of Hindu practice unique to the Nepalese Buddhist tradition, the application of *abhiṣekas* to images is a well-attested feature in the broader Buddhist literature.

The historical development of the higher Buddhist tantric consecrations (*abhiṣeka*) for humans, which serve as empowerments to tantric practice, is treated by Harunaga Isaacson. The common method followed by the authors of the texts Isaacson investigates is to take earlier sets of *abhiṣekas* and relegate them to a lower level, while adding new and still higher empowerments. One such newcomer is the so-called “Fourth” consecration (*caturthābhiṣeka*), on which Isaacson focuses more closely. He traces the debate surrounding, and indeed the very notion of, this *abhiṣeka* back to a cryptic line in the *Guhyasamājatantra*, which he considers unlikely to have originally been intended in that passage. The diverging interpretations by scholars of different tantric schools of what the “Fourth” empowerment might entail show how an initiation ritual taken over from Śaiva traditions was creatively reassigned Buddhist functions and how the necessity of a ritual sexual in character was justified in terms of Buddhist soteriology. Remarkably, most of the authors treated managed to accommodate the further empowerment on the interpretative level without changing the actual ritual practice.

What is known about the Buddhist current Isaacson focuses on holds good for tantric traditions in general. There, initiation is a multilevelled process by which a practitioner gradually advances in his ritual practice. In the cases of sectarian Hindu traditions dealt with in Jörg Gengnagel’s and Ute Hüskens’ papers, for example, there are a series of mutually non-exclusive initiations, called *dīkṣā* or *abhiṣeka*. Moreover, in the Śaiva Siddhānta tradition there is a ritual that annuls any previous adherence to other traditions. This “removal of sectarian marks” (*lingoddhāra*) is discussed by Gengnagel in relation to the initiatory system of the Śaiva Siddhāntins, and also within the general debate over conversion to Hindu traditions. He sees conversions as being characterized by a fixed determination and an accentuation of difference, hinting at rivalry between religious communities. At the end, he raises the question to what extant historical cases of kings who renounced the religious affiliation of their forefathers and took initiation into another tradition presuppose rituals of conversion.

As highlighted by several contributions, initiations betoken frontiers, be they penetrable or impenetrable ones. They may mark the admittance to a religious tradition, the rejection of another or the empowerment to a certain religious practice. Moreover, they may entitle a person to ritually act on the behalf of others. In her paper on a South Indian Vaiṣṇava tradition, Ute Hüskens elaborates on the composite nature of eligibility (*adhikāra*) to act as temple priest. According to the authoritative *Pādmasaṃhitā*, initiation (*dīkṣā*) into the Pāñcarātra tradition is open to all, whereas the quality of eligibility (*adhikāra*) acquired through this ritual depends on caste and gender. Only male Brahmins who have undergone *samskāras* beforehand are entitled to perform rituals for others. In practice, the necessary series of initiations is not the only precondition for

serving in a temple. Particularly restricted is admittance to the priesthood in the major Vaiṣṇava temples, where certain Brahmin families hold hereditary priestly monopolies and every priest needs a written appointment letter from the temple administration. This traditional system came into question in recent public debates on ritual competence, in which the focus shifted from eligibility to the actual ability to carry out rituals. Complaints about the low performance standards of priests led the Tamil Nadu government to open up the temple priests' profession to all communities and to establish educational institutions to train future priests. But, as Hüskens argues, such education, which mainly inculcates knowledge of the authoritative scriptures, cannot make up for the traditional way in which priests' sons accustom themselves to the routine of a temple from childhood onwards. Therefore, formal education or legislative measures do not represent a real challenge to the hereditary priesthood.

The interplay of ritual and non-ritual (social or historical) factors is also one of Gérard Colas's interests. He points out the fact that conflicts between different groups of specialists involved in ritual (e.g. craftsmen vs. Brahmin priests) find expression in differing versions of ritual procedure described in handbooks. Although it does not deal with any initiation, we thought it might be fruitful to include Colas's paper on the installation of images (*pratisthā*). On the macroscopic level, one may argue that there is a clear classificatory distinction between rituals performed for human initiands and rituals for installing images of deities.⁵ But on a micro level, focusing on details of the procedure, there seem to be several interrelationships between the two types of ritual. For example, initiatory rituals and *pratisthā* have been adapted to one another. As in the text sample of the *mekhalābandhana* treated by Michaels, a *pratisthā* can be performed for a boy to be initiated. From von Rospatt and Colas we learn that *abhishekas* or *samskāras* are employed as consecration rites for images in all major South Asian religious traditions. Therefore we suggest expanding the term "rituals of institution" to cover not only rituals for human beings but also the installation of images (*pratisthā*). In his treatment of such installations, Colas's major concern is to elucidate the historical dynamics that play into them. He shows that the models of *pratisthā* were subject to constant remodelling. Apart from presenting evidence for both one-way and two-way exchange between Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions, he convincingly demonstrates that features often perceived as being central to *pratisthā* rituals, such as the opening of the eyes or the infusion of power into the image, do not represent the essential core of the ritual but can rather be better treated as instances of ritual and hermeneutical accretion.

Whereas Gérard Colas analyzes how models of *pratisthās* were reconfigured over time, Astrid Zotter shows how elements of *upanayana* and *pratisthā* are combined in the composition of one specific ritual. She has edited a Nepalese handbook on the Brahmanical initiation of the *asvattha* tree (*Aśvatthopanayanavidhi*) which has parallels in some of the North Indian ritual compendia (*nibandha*). From her analysis of the elements and the liturgy of the *asvatthopanayana*, she infers that the two rituals are not re-

5 For recent studies on consecration rituals in South Asia, see the volume *From Material to Deity* edited by Shingo Einoo and Jun Takashima (2005).

lated hierarchically; rather, some components of the *pratiṣṭhā* and *upanayana* are interwoven. Moreover, the ritual includes, as a third strand, elements specific to the *aśvattha* tree. Such amalgamation offers scope for different interpretations. Zotter sees the conceptual link between installation and initiation in their both marking ritual beginnings, that is, establishing someone or something in the ritual sphere. The *aśvattha-upanayana* thus presents a case in which we cannot decide whether it is an initiation or an installation, but if modifications are made to the above concept it can be labelled a “ritual of institution.”

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