Special Collaborative Research Programme ”Dynamics of Ritual: Socio-cultural Processes in a Historical and Cultural Comparative Perspective“

In May 2002, the German Research Council (DFG) approved a special inter-disciplinary and collaborative research project (Sonderforschungsbereich 619) to be conducted at the University of Heidelberg. The project, which is scheduled for the duration of 12 years, consists of 15 disciplines mostly related to the field of cultural studies, which are collaborating on a total of 16 sub-projects. An initial endowment of 3.5 million Euros for the first three years has created over 20 academic posts for upcoming scholars.

Axel Michaels, Head of the Department of Classical Indology at the SAI, was elected speaker of the research project.

The members of the research group have so far concentrated on hitherto unresolved questions regarding the dynamics of rituals: How do they emerge and how do they disappear? How and why do rituals change their form? The approach to these questions is performed on an inter-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary platform and focuses on changes in rituals and their structures and functions.

Of the 16 sub-projects, four are located at the SAI and conducted by the heads and research fellows of the Departments of Classical Indology, Modern Indology, and Anthropology. In the following a brief description will be given of these individual sub-projects.

1. Life-cycle Rituals in Nepal

Department of Classical Indology (Axel Michaels, Niels Gutschow, Alexander von Rospatt and Nutandhar Sharma)

This sub-project is aimed at studying life-cycle rites (samskāra) in Nepal with reference to the changeability of rituals, their adaptation to new contexts, and their nature as processes, i.e. their internal and external dynamics. Taking as a starting point V. Turner’s thesis that religion reveals itself above all in what it does, rituals will be treated as ”religion in action“; this will be taken into account methodologically by combining the study of the normative texts of the high tradition (script) with field research on the actual ritual practices (performance). The rites de passage, which are often regarded as paradigmatic rituals, have been chosen because they are fundamental to the self-concept of the people and their integration into social structures (caste system, locality). Moreover, they are especially well suited to the study of the relation between normativity and ritual practice. Changes in society often have a direct affect on these parts of ritual life. The dynamic relationships between lifestage rituals and modernity have scarcely been researched in the societies of South Asia.

In order to give the most complete picture of the ritualization of the individual’s journey through life and the processes of adaptation in life-cycle rites, it is important to record the entire range of transition rituals, including those that are gender-specific. This range embraces rituals found a) in both local texts and those of the high tradition, b) in Hindu, Buddhist popular religious contexts, c) in their locality, i.e. above all in the milieus belonging to various castes and ethnic groups. This will allow the materiality and symbolism of the lifecycle rituals of a particular region to be recorded on a larger scale and analysed in the light of ritual transfer performed in other religions. A period of ten to twelve years has been set in order to cope with the breadth of this task, and also to allow less common rituals to be observed, such as the second and third age group rituals among the Newars.

During the first phase of research (2002-2005), three main topics will be examined: the rituals of ageing, dying and ancestor worship. The second phase will look at the period prior to birth (including prenatal rituals) up to adolescent initiation. The third phase will be devoted to the rituals of puberty and matrimony. A fourth phase is aimed at rounding off the picture by looking at person-related rituals, which do not relate strictly to lifecycles (illness, examinations, Tantric initiation [diksha] etc.).

Given the current state of research, it is no exaggeration to say that rituals of old age and death have scarcely been researched in Nepal.

2. Initiation, Priestly Ordination, Temple Festivals - Ritual Traditions in the South Indian Temple City of Kancipuram

Department of Classical Indology (Srilata Müller, Monika Boehm-Tettelbach and Ute Hüskens)

The city of Kancipuram is an ancient religious centre in south India that in the third century B.C. was already playing an important role in the region’s political and cultural history, and achieved immense importance as the capital of the Pallava Dynasty. From the 7th century onwards, the city developed into a place of religious pluralism and drew scholars, ritual experts, ascetics, gurus and monks of various faiths: Buddhists, Jains, Vaishnavas and Shaivas, among others, were brought together at a single location. Today the ritual topography of the city is very largely determined by Vishnuism, Shivaism and Shaktism (the cult of the goddess).

The project is focussed on rituals (initiations rituals, rituals of ordination, temple festivals) in three of the main temples founded between the 8th and 10th centuries: the Tantric-Shakti temple of the goddess Kamakshi, the Tantric-Shaivite Ekambareshvara Temple, and the Varadaraja-Temple of the Vaishnavite Pancaratra. These internal assignments stand in relation to transformations in the Tantric temple rituals brought about by the pan-Indian Smarta ritual tradition developed from Vedic ritualism and regional factors.

The working plan foresees three phases in the investigation:

1. Finding out how the orientation of the respective ritual traditions in the prescriptive texts has affected current ritual practice. The performative components in the temple liturgies are to be analysed in the contextual framework of initiation rituals (diksha) and rituals of ordination (abhisheka), and coupled with the question of the authorisation and agency of
the ritual specialists, a question that also relates to the acquisition and exercise of ritual competency and the incorporation of a religiously-determined temple identity.

2. The comparison (also historical) between the three ritual traditions is to be done on the structural, institutional and cultural levels, all the empirical material thus gathered analysed and collated in order to recognise the cultural and institutional prerequisites for transformation in the ritual practices of the temples.

3. The interactions between the three ritual traditions and their religious specialists will be studied, along with the constitution of the sacral topography of the temple city created by the ritual journeys (yatra) of the gods within the civic arena, as well as the fashioning of the territorial sphere of influence of each of the main gods concerned.

On the basis of field research and textual studies the attempt is being made to give a complete picture of the historical, institutional and cultural factors in the interaction between the ritual traditions within the south Indian urban region.

3. Agency and Territorial Rituals in India

Department of Anthropology (William Sax, Michael Nijhawan and Christiane Brosius)

Despite the centrality of agency to current social theory, ritual theorists have rarely addressed it explicitly. Moreover, they often assume that rituals are invented, performed, and altered by particular persons, and that ritual agency is primarily individual. However, numerous ethnographical accounts of rituals make it clear that ritual agents are often collective, and that ritual agency is usually distributed among multiple actors and institutions. In this project, we aim to develop ideas of ritual agency by exploring notions of collective or complex ritual agency, along with non-human (i.e. divine) ritual agency.

Territorial rituals like processions, pilgrimages, temple constructions, and like are ideal for exploring and developing these ideas, because the links between territorially-defined agent (village, tribe, kingdom, nation, etc.) and ritual action can be clearly specified and analyzed. Moreover, territorial rituals are sensitive to external social and political forces (i.e. changes in political borders), so that their dynamics are barometers of socio-political change, as well as catalysts of it.

During the first three years, the project will concern itself with the documentation and analysis of three discrete complexes of territorial ritual. William Sax will study divine and royal processions, circumambulations, and ritualized invasions within and among a set of tiny divine kingdoms in the Central Himalayas, with particular attention to changes in their meaning and function as a result of modernization and globalization. Michael Nijhawan will investigate the significance of territorial rituals associated with Sufi and Sikh shrines in Punjab and Europe, and Christiane Brosius will conduct research on the use of ritual processions by Hindu nationalists in India.

4. Court Ritual in the Jaipur State (18th Century to 1949)

Department of Modern Indology (Monika Boehm-Tettelbach and Jörg Gengnagel)

The Divine King Pabasi Mahesa in his palanquin - Photo: William S. Sax

The project focuses on the court ritual of the Jaipur state in the period between ca. 1720 and the merger of the Jaipur State with the Republic of India. Its main emphasis lies on the function of the ritual and the factors of its change. The point of departure is the assumption that the court ritual - understood to comprise both court ceremonies and religious ceremonies - provides for the central structure of the system of power. It legitimizes kingship and elicits the subjects’ loyalty. It is also assumed that social and historical change entails enhanced change of rituals. This is why the focus will lie on the earlier part of the 18th century and the latter part of the 19th century as two periods of marked change.

In order to achieve the objectives of the project we will examine the court protocol of Jaipur, kept in the Rajasthan State Archives. Moreover we will seek access to documents of the Archives of the erstwhile Maharaja of Jaipur, notably paintings visually representing ritual and public processions. Also of great importance is the study of not only ritual texts prescribing religious ritual but discussions with ritual specialists that are still attached to the royal family and the Jaipur court.

For further information please contact the homepage of the research programme (→ 1), the Executive Manager Dr. Brigitte Merz, Tel: 54 88 47 (→ 2) or the Speaker of the project Prof. Axel Michaels (→ 3).

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