

## „Hindu and Buddhist Initiation in India and Nepal“

Heidelberg, 28<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> May, 2008

### Some introductory remarks

As mentioned in the invitation letter the conference is part of the work of the Collaborative Research Centre “Dynamics of Ritual” (SFB 619), an interdisciplinary research project studying dynamic changes of rituals. Two of the more than twenty subprojects of the Centre are working directly on different forms of initiation rituals in South Asia: subproject A2 “Life-cycle Rituals in Nepal” and subproject A3 “Ritual Tradition in the South Indian Temple City of Kanchipuram”. The conference aims at exchanging the research findings of these projects with experts of related fields of study. This exposé is to provide a short introduction into the main questions of the conference.

The lectures of the conference will deal with different kinds of initiation in India and Nepal, e.g. initiation as investiture with a sacred thread or with a loincloth, initiation in a special kind of temple service or in different Buddhist communities. Taking this variety of initiation rituals in South Asia into consideration, one has to ask what is common and what is different. This problem of standard and variation can be seen on several levels while comparing Hindu and Buddhist initiation, brahmanic and non-brahmanic rituals, or present and past rituals. Such methodological queries are pertinent even if only a single type or element of ritual is analysed in its historical development or in its actual performances.

Related to this problem of comparison are questions regarding the classification of rituals. The title of the conference uses the term *initiation*. However, what are the criteria to classify certain rituals as “initiation rituals”? Other classifications could be applied too. The *vratibandha*, for instance, has been classified – according to its function – as consecration, educational or puberty ritual. Which taxonomical criteria are useful for which analytical purposes? How we can distinguish between different forms of initiation, e.g. *vratibandha* and *dīkṣā*? In this context we also may touch gender related questions: Is the Nepalese *ihi* ritual, the marriage of girls to the Bel fruit, an initiation for girls?

Looking at similarities of such rituals in different social (high vs. low caste), ethnic (Newar vs. Parbatiyā) or religious (Hindu vs. Buddhist) contexts, the notion of ritual transfer becomes apparent. Here again different levels can be distinguished: ritual transfer beyond borders such as Hindu/Buddhist or brahmanic/non-brahmanic (e.g. the cutting of the hair in the Hindu *cūḍākarāṇa* and the Newar Buddhist *bare*

*chuyegu*), and within one ritual culture (e.g. the *homa* as part of many *saṃskāras* and other rituals of the Parbatīyā and Buddhist Newars).

If we ask why and how these modifications (e.g. the final cutting of the hair tuft in the *bare chuyegu* or the insertion of the *vedāhutis* in the *homa* of the *vedārambha* and the *samāvartana saṃskāra*) are done, we come close to general questions of ritual studies: How are rituals composed? Is there a kind of “ritual grammar”? What are the basic or core elements of a certain ritual?

Ritual is acting. However, the widespread use of mantras in South Asia provides an example for acting by words and leads to the question: What is the importance of mantras for the “grammar” of ritual? Mantras appear in different forms of text (e.g. *veda*, ritual handbooks, notebooks of priests). Replacements by other spellings and variations of one and the same mantra in different scripts are no rare cases. The application in the actual performance of a ritual may differ, too. Keeping in mind the emic belief, that a mantra draws its power from a divine origin, we may ask: How do changes of mantra affect the efficacy (and agency) of the ritual? Does a wrongly spelled mantra cause a ritual failure?

Another topic that could be raised during the conference is the problem of agency in initiation rituals. Since the initiates are often very young, they are sometimes only marginally involved. The agency is completely with the priests and other ritual specialists or with the parents. This problem is, of course, related to the question of majority.

Similarly, one has to consider the different sources of information on rituals. A key issue will certainly be how ritual handbooks are related to the practice of rituals. But it also has to be asked what kind of ritual knowledge is and is not transmitted by such manuals.

Finally, there is the discussion about the economy of rituals and the question: is ritual economy? To give you an example: In Kathmandu Valley the tendency to do initiations in a group ritual is observable among Newar and Parbatīyā. Like marriage, initiation is traditionally a very expensive ritual. Group rituals are one way to save time and financial resources. What other relations do exist between ritual economy and change of ritual?

These are some of the topics which conference members might address. We are looking to instructive papers and productive discussions.

Heidelberg, 21<sup>st</sup> of May, 2007

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