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Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Sonderforschungsbereich 619

Heidelberg Ritualdynamik

Speaker: Prof. Dr. Axel Michaels

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Heidelberg, 7 February 2008

International Conference: "Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual"

(Heidelberg, 29 September to 2 October 2008)

Putting Anthropological Theories and Methods to the Test: Collaborative Research Centre 619 highlights the fascinating relationship between ritual studies and ritual dynamics and presents ground-breaking research.

The Collaborative Research Centre 619 "Ritual Dynamics" (SFB 619) at Heidelberg University is holding an international conference on "Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual" from 29 September till 2 October 2008. Experts from around the world have been invited to Heidelberg to discuss their current findings and present them to a wider audience. With this conference, SFB 619 also aims to expand and consolidate its interdisciplinary approach. And this will be a chance to put anthropological theories of ritual and research methods to the test. That rituals, contrary to the long-held belief, can change and even adapt to the possibilities and demands of the global era has been clearly demonstrated by the findings of SFB 619 since it was founded in 2002.

SFB 619 is the largest research centre worldwide dedicated solely to the subject of rituals, how they change, and their dynamics. The centre performs pure research with the aim of developing theories with cross-cultural validity, and presenting explanatory models for the socio-cultural significance of ritual action, as for instance in the legitimisation of power or creation of identity, in crisis therapy, or the maintenance of order. At present, nineteen projects are being conducted by over 90 researchers from the fields of Anthropology of South Asia, Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern History, Assyriology, Classical and Modern Indology, Comparative Religion, Egyptology, the History of East Asian Art, the History of South Asia, Islamic Studies, Medical Psychology, Musicology, and Theology. The interdisciplinary teamwork will be focused on twenty-one panels, lasting in some cases several days. Over 250 experts will present the results of their research at the conference and put them up for discussion, including such famous names in anthropology and ritual studies as Professors Ronald Grimes (Nijmegen/Ontario), Eric Venbrux (Nijmegen), Bruce Kapferer (Bergen), Alexis Sanderson und Harvey Whitehouse (Oxford), and James Laidlaw (Cambridge).

The spokesman of SFB 619, Axel Michaels, has great expectations about the forthcoming event. Michaels, who is also Professor of Classical Indology at the South Asia Institute at the University of Heidelberg, will chair the panel "Grammar and Morphology of Ritual" which focuses on the preliminary considerations for a universal

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“grammar of ritual“ that also allows for non-verbal elements of communication. Every culture and society has its rituals – even when individual members of the respective groups may not practice any rituals, or are unaware of doing so. If ritual studies ever wishes to become a science of its own, based on more than phenomenological similarities and associations, it is time that the formal and functional rules of rituals are laid down in such a way that they can be viewed as a kind of universal grammar of rituals. With this, Michaels will be presenting a series of opening thoughts on a possible science of ritual and drawing on recent research to plumb a challenging theoretical issue in anthropology.

In the panel “Reflexivity and Discourse on Ritual“ chaired by Dr. Udo Simon, Islam scholar and SFB 619 collaborator, rituals themselves will be viewed as discursive formations that provide dynamic resources for the social, cultural and religious negotiations of identity within a society. The term reflexivity refers here quite generally to the interpretative self-reference that takes place in a ritual, which places the actors in relationship to the ritual action. Increasing contact between different cultures often leads to a need for self-affirmation and justification within the ritual community itself, which are also answers to outside demands. At the same time, criticism and discussions concerning rituals are embedded in discourses that have a broader scope. If one looks at these discourses in the light of a globalised world, and especially the way ritual experts and participants themselves reflect on ritual knowledge, it seems questionable to make a sharp distinction between inner and outer perspectives on rituals. The interplay between the two calls for special attention.

For interdisciplinary research into rituals, particularly in fieldwork, the use of the new media has become increasingly important on numerous fronts. But the new media have not only become an established part of research: their increasing accessibility worldwide is changing ritual practice. The panel “Ritual and Media“ chaired by Christiane Brosius, anthropologist and Assistant Professor at the Department of Anthropology at the South Asia Institute, sets out to discuss the effect the “electronic turn“ has had on ritual practice and its dynamics. The new media landscape has meant that rituals experience greater publicity than was originally foreseen. Now even rituals embedded in sacred contexts – such as pilgrimages or acts of worship – can appear on websites and be consumed. The protagonists in these milieus this work with the latest media technologies, creating new audiences, identities and ways of knowing.

Over and beyond basic methodological and theoretical issues, two panels will highlight new approaches in ritual research: the panel “Ritual Economics“ chaired by Dr. Thomas Widlok, lecturer at the Department of Anthropology at the University of Durham, and the panel “Ritual Design“ chaired by Gregor Ahn, Professor Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Heidelberg and project director for the SFB 619. Comple-

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mentary to this is the panel “Scientific Rituals” chaired by Professor William Sax, head of the Department of Anthropology at the South Asia Institute and project director for SFB 619. Central here will be the relationships and interactions between science, ritual and ritualisation, and the question as to which rituals and processes of ritualisation can be found in laboratories, operating theatres and classrooms, not to forget the question of their relationship to normatively viewed “science”. In addition, new topics such as intercultural ritual transfer und “ritual agency” will be discussed at the conference. New to many of the disciplines involved will be the insight that quite familiar procedures or actions, or even performative artworks can be viewed as rituals. Important new impulses will be sought here from those who straddle the sciences and ritual practice.

In order to underscore the social relevance of ritual research and heed its educational remit from the university, SFB 619 also wishes to communicate the topics of its research over and beyond the academic framework, particularly through its accompanying programme.

The official period for registration begins on 15 February 2008. All those interested can find the relevant information at www.rituals-2008.com and sign up for the conference newsletter.

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