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Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Sonderforschungsbereich 619

Heidelberg Ritualdynamik

Speaker: Prof. Dr. Axel Michaels

Media information: page 1 (of 3)

Heidelberg, 22 January 2008

International Conference: “Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual”

(Heidelberg, 29 September to 2 October 2008)

Asia as Key Regional Focus: Collaborative Research Centre 619 highlights the fascinating relationship between ritual studies and ritual dynamics and breaks new ground in the research.

The Collaborative Research Centre 619 “Dynamics of Ritual” (SFB 619) at Heidelberg University is holding an international conference “Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual” from 29 September till 2 October 2008 to discuss their current findings and present them to a wider audience. With this conference, SFB 619 aims to expand and consolidate its interdisciplinary approach. Around 250 experts from around the world will present the results of their research at the conference and put them up for discussion. Asia specialists such as Johannes Bronkhorst (Lausanne), Jan Heesterman (Leiden), Hermann Kulke (Kiel) and Frederick M. Smith (Iowa), together with renowned specialists from the world of ritual research, such as Professors Ronald Grimes (Nijmegen/Ontario), Bruce Kapferer (Bergen), Frits Staal (Berkeley), Alexis Sanderson (Oxford) and James Laidlaw (Cambridge), have agreed to participate in the conference.

That rituals can and indeed do undergo change, and adapt to the opportunities offered in the age of globalisation, has been substantiated by the findings from SFB 619 since 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. Since autumn 2007, SFB 619 also constitutes a major cornerstone of the humanities cluster “Asia and Europe”, which has just been founded as part of the Excellence Initiative in Germany. Managing director is Axel Michaels, Professor of Classical Indology at the South Asia Institute, the University of Heidelberg, who is also spokesman of SFB 619.

Thus alongside agendas that will help create theories with interdisciplinary trajectories, Asia will act as a key regional focus for the conference. The range here will cover for instance Hindu monarchies in southern India

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Media information: page 2 (of 3)

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from the early Middle Ages to the Colonial era, or China and Japan from the past to the present day. The interdisciplinary teamwork will be focused on twenty-one panels, lasting in some cases several days.

In the panel “Debating Ritual in China”, the Daoism expert Gil Raz (Dartmouth) will take select textual sources to reveal indigenous ritual theories that appear in a variety of contexts, without necessarily being recognised as such by the modern reader. Theoretical statements on rituals may appear covertly in, for instance, narrative or poetic forms. They may be found just as equally in polemical discourses as in exegetical passage on the numerous ritual handbooks produced by the many religious traditions that developed in China. This has meant that many of the indigenous ritual theories are not recognised as such and are overlooked by scholars of rituals. Using carefully selected case studies - from early Chinese to contemporary practices – the panellists will investigate interpretative and theoretical models, both implicit and explicit, that underlie the broad diversity of ritual schemes in the Daoist tradition. The aim is also to show that ritual authors and practitioners were not only keenly aware of the different ritual systems, but carried on a constant debate with rival ritual schemes. It is precisely by understanding these debates and their underlying assumptions and implications that indigenous Chinese theories of ritual may be discerned.

The panel “Ritual Practices in Japan” will examine the culture-specific dynamics entailed in the performance of religious practices in Japan, with particular focus on liturgies related to or derived from esoteric (or Tantric) Buddhism. To this end, Dr. Katja Triplett (Marburg) and Dr. Lucia Dolce (London) will subject a variety of sources to an interdisciplinary analysis, using textual analysis, Iconography, Anthropology and Ethnomusicology, so as to arrive at a coherent hypothesis as to why and how certain rituals have changed. It will be assumed here that the meaning of a ritual is redefined with each performance, in the light of the participants, the geographical or historical circumstances in which it is performed, and most recently the involvement of mass media. Research into Japanese ritual practices suggests that rituals once introduced from China have altered with time, being reinterpreted and further developed in accordance with “unorthodox” lines in Japan. These variations in turn were, and still are, employed as legitimising strategies for the group that performs or sponsors the ritual, thus to become key factors in understanding the power relations created during the ritual.

Prof. Hermann Kulke (Kiel), expert on the history of India and South Asia, and author of such standard works as *Hinduism Reconsidered* (with G. Sontheimer, 1989), *The State in India 1000-1700*, and *A History of India* (with D. Rothermund, 4th ed.2004), will chair the panel “State and Ritual in India”. This panel will examine the political importance of grand royal rituals, such as the Vedic Rajasuya or Mahanavami. There can be no doubt that these rituals are an important aspect of the Hindu kingdom. However, ever since C. Geertz introduced the

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Media information: page 3 (of 3)

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notion of the “Theatre State” in Bali, and B. Stein drew her somewhat strict distinction between “ritual sovereignty” and “actual political control” as a basic feature of the early medieval south Indian state, the political meaning and function of these rituals has become contested. The panel wishes to explore the political significance of various aspects of these rituals, looking at them within the broader context of an intended “ritual policy” as an essential means of political integration and control. The topics to be explored by the panel cover the period from early mediaeval to colonial India, and focus on Rajasthan, Orissa and south India.

Over and beyond these topics relating to the regional focus, the conference will also present the latest approaches in researching rituals, such as “ritual economics”, “ritual design”, and “scientific rituals”, and discuss new topic areas, such as intercultural ritual transfer, “ritual agency”, and the connection between rituals and the new media. 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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