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Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Sonderforschungsbereich 619

Heidelberg Ritualdynamik

Speaker: Prof. Dr. Axel Michaels

Media information: page 1 (of 3)

Heidelberg, 11 February 2008

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

(Heidelberg, 29 September to 2 October 2008)

Theories of Cognition and Experience in Ritual Research: Collaborative Research Centre 619 highlights the fascinating relationship between ritual studies and ritual dynamics and treads new ground with its 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 convey them to a wider audience. With this conference, SFB 619 also aims to expand and consolidate its interdisciplinary approach. 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 developing 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. Currently, 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 short papers with their research findings for others to discuss, including such famous ritual researchers as Professors Ronald Grimes (Nijmegen/Ontario), Eric Venbrux (Nijmegen), Bruce Kapferer (Bergen), James Laidlaw (Cambridge), Alexis Sanderson and Harvey Whitehouse (Oxford).

Anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse has based his cognitive approach on the distinction between imagistic and doctrinal forms of religiosity, which he has derived from the interaction between specific features of rituals and the various forms of human memory. Recent cognitive theories of ritual such as this, which offer universalist models and explanations, will be examined in a relativistic light by chairman Prof. Ulrich Berner, Professor

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Media information: page 2 (of 3)

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of Religious Studies at the University of Bayreuth, in the panel “Rituals, Language, and Cognition”. The last two decades have seen an increasing number of cognitive theories being advanced to explain religion on the basis of Cognitive Psychology and Neuropsychology. Common to them all is a more or less explicit reference to Neo-Darwinist theories of evolution. These “explanatory models of religion”, which make strong claims to being scientific, have even proposed links between rituals and the cognitive structure of the human mind. McCauley and Lawson, for instance, have come up with a theory of “ritual form” aimed at outlining the cognitive architecture of *Homo religiosus*. Boyer and Liénard, on the other hand, focus on the crucial role played by an evolved ‘Hazard Precaution System’ in their attempt to explain ritualised behaviour in general, as well as typical patterns in the cultural design of collective rituals. Historical and empirical case studies will be examined in order to determine the analytical strength of these hypotheses. Special reference will be made throughout to the dynamics of rituals, their role in processes of social change and the way they connect up with power relations. Of particular interest will be the question of the cognitive significance of language, a factor often neglected in cognitive theories of rituals, but which might significantly modify the current models.

The music therapist Dr. Henrik Jungaberle and psychologist Jan Weinhold, both collaborators on SFB 619, together with Geoffrey Samuel, Professor of Anthropology and Religious Studies at Cardiff University, will chair the panel “The Varieties of Ritual Experience”. They aim to cast light on ritual and experience from a multi-disciplinary perspective. While ritual research to date has chiefly been interested in analysing scripts and performances, a shift in focus to changes in the experiential dimensions of rituals among the actors and participants may well provide insights into changes in the social and structural dynamics of a ritual. Will it prove feasible to draw up a typology of ritual experience based on the connections between specific ritual scenarios and techniques, and the resulting experiential states of the participants?

The experiential dimension is also crucial to many ritual (re)inventions that take place in post-modern societies. What do these inventions allow for, what do they exclude? Which traditional and which new forms of technology and behaviour are used to alter states of consciousness/experience by means of rituals? Experience is an extremely complex phenomenon, and no single theory or method can give a comprehensive account to cover all of its breadth. Only by enlisting a variety of methods can one gain a better basis for investigating all of these various experiential dimensions. Also interesting in this context will doubtless be David Thurfjell’s contribution “Ritual, emotion and the navigation of the self” in the “Open Panel”, which the SFB 619 has set up to cope with the overwhelming diversity of topics.

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Media information: page 3 (of 3)

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Above and beyond fundamental methodological and theoretical issues, the conference will also serve as a platform to present new approaches in the research, such as ritual economics, ritual design, and scientific rituals, as well as new topics areas such as intercultural ritual transfer, ritual agency, and the link between ritual and the new media. An air of great anticipation surrounds the project to be unveiled by Axel Michaels, spokesman of SFB 619 and Professor of Classical Indology at the South Asia Institute in Heidelberg. In the panel "Grammar and Morphology of Ritual" he will give his preliminary thoughts on a universal "grammar of rituals" that also takes into account the non-verbal aspects of communication. 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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