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Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Sonderforschungsbereich 619

Heidelberg Ritualdynamik

Speaker: Prof. Dr. Axel Michaels

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Heidelberg, 21 January 2008

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

(Heidelberg, 29 September to 2 October 2008)

Religious studies paves the way: Collaborative Research Centre 619 highlights the fascinating relationship between ritual studies and ritual dynamics and breaks new ground in the research.

That rituals clearly undergo change and are able even to adapt to the new possibilities in the age of globalisation, has been eloquently shown since 2002 by the findings from the interdisciplinary Collaborative Research Centre 619 "Dynamics of Ritual" (SFB 619) at the University of Heidelberg. SFB 619 Spokesman Axel Michaels, Professor of Modern Indology and Managing Director of the Excellence Cluster "Asia and Europe", who previously was Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Bern and Vice President of the Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Religionswissenschaft, has played a major part in ensuring that Religious Studies pave the way in ritual research.

First of all the SFB 619 scrutinised the Internet as a source for religious studies. Equally germane to Internet-based ritual research are electronic publications of traditional ritual texts - together with instructions for their correct implementation - and newly invented rituals which in part can only be performed online. In many cases the Internet has had a decisive influence on the change and development of existing religious structures and on the genesis of new ones. For its international conference "Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual" from 29 September to 2 October 2008, SFB 619 has invited experts from around the globe to Heidelberg, where they will discuss their current research findings on an interdisciplinary platform and present them to outside world.

The SFB 619 is the largest research centre worldwide dedicated solely to the subject of rituals and their dynamics. 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 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.

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Around 250 experts will present the results of their research at the conference and put them up for discussion, including such famous names in the field of ritual studies as Ronald Grimes (Ontario/Nijmegen), Bruce Kapferer (Bergen), Alexis Sanderson (Oxford), Frits Staal (Berkeley), and James Laidlaw (Cambridge). The interdisciplinary teamwork will first be focused on twenty-one panels, lasting in some cases several days. Not only will the latest research approaches be presented, such as “ritual economics”, “ritual design” and “scientific rituals”, and new topic areas discussed, such as intercultural ritual transfer, “ritual agency”, and the connection between rituals and the new media. These will be augmented by the latest innovations in religious studies.

Thus the panel “Ritual Design”, chaired by Gregor Ahn (Heidelberg), Professor of Comparative Religion and Project Manager for SFB 619, will focus on the forms of ritual dynamism that have manifested in a wide range of religious and cultural contexts on the Internet. Ritual design is the key term here, which allows us to describe a great variety of patchwork processes that not only have a bearing on traditional rituals, but also lead to the creation of new rituals. Working in the wide field between modification and innovation, so-called “ritual designers” consciously create widely disseminated rituals, such as for weddings or funerals, by piecing together old, often handed-down elements or new building blocks that often have been borrowed from quite different cultural contexts. This has led to a regular ritual market in the West, which is blossoming not only as an economic factor. The transfer of rituals into virtual life worlds, as in Internet platforms such as “Second Life”, demonstrates the immense importance that is attached to ritual design in our current daily culture. But not all changes in ritual traditions are the outcome of ritual design. Often they are brought about by small lapses of attention by priests, ritual specialists and ritual performers. Looking at a variety of case studies, this panel will investigate where ritual design begins and how it differs from the perfectly normal changes that occur in ritual practice.

The use of the new media has in many respects become an increasing focus of interest for interdisciplinary ritual research. And not only have these media made their triumphal entry into research practice, their increasing accessibility worldwide has meant that they are also transforming ritual practices. The panel “Ritual and Media” chaired by Christiane Brosius (Heidelberg), anthropologist and Assistant Professor at the Institut für Ethnologie Südasien, will discuss the effect the new media are having on ritual practice and its dynamics. The changes in the media landscape have meant that rituals are gaining more public exposure than was ever anticipated in the ritual’s original context. Thanks to the “electronic turn”, even rituals from sacred contexts, such as pilgrimages or religious worship, can now be featured on Internet pages for consumption. Protagonists of this field already work with the latest media technology, creating new forms of identification, reaching out to new audiences, and opening new channels for knowledge transfer.

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It is precisely the sacrosanct, which abides in certain spaces or objects and is manifested by formalised performative sequences of action, that is the subject of the panel chaired by Nils Holger Petersen (Copenhagen) - Professor of Ecclesiastical History at the Theological Faculty and head of the "Centre for the Study of the Cultural Heritage of Medieval Rituals" at the Danish National Research Foundation. Entitled "Ritualised Space and Objects of Sacrosanctity", the panel will focus on all aspects of sacrosanctity – irrespective of whether with regard to traditional religious figures, buildings or objects, or to historical edifices and museums, or to the idea of the inviolability of the human body. We are all familiar with rituals of initiation and for consecrating parishes, buildings, and sites or objects of worship. As ritualised physical structures, these kinds of sacrosanct objects stand out and, especially in the Western historical tradition, they are inscribed with hierarchies. Of interest here are sacred sites whose positions in the hierarchy and in the sacred echelons are determined by mythic occurrences and religious recollection, and sacrosanct bodies that assume form through various kinds of ordination or initiation, as well as sacrosanct buildings, sites and objects. They assume a position both materially and spiritually in their respective societies. The notion of sacrosanctity can also be extended beyond superhuman or religious realms to include ideas of natural, artistic, symbolic or memorial values – and thus to include the human body, nature, art, historical monuments, or places of remembrance, even when the forms in which sacrosanctity manifests itself and the significance of the ritualised actions involved strongly differ.

New for many of the participating disciplines 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. The daily breaks and evening activities will serve as informal platforms for discussions. In order to underscore the social relevance of ritual research, 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 who are interested can find the relevant information at www.rituals-2008.com and sign up for the conference newsletter.

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