

Brian K. Pennington and Amy L. Allocco, eds., *Ritual Innovation: Strategic Interventions in South Asian Religion*

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Ritual Innovation is an edited volume that brings together fourteen articles on several aspects related to the changing dynamics of South Asian rituals. They are grouped into four thematic parts. Four of the five contributions in the first part (“Ritual Innovation and Political Power”) focus on the Himalayas. Using “still unpublished manuscripts” and ritual handbooks, Nawaraj Chaugalain discusses the innovations in the royal consecration ritual (*rājyābhīṣeka*) during the Shaha period of Nepal. He argues that the foci of three different coronations have distinct Tantric, Shaiva, and Vaishnava innovations. Unfortunately, the reader is not given details of the manuscripts, such as the location, date, or number of folios. Anne T. Mocko focuses on the replacing of the Nepalese king by a president in a central part of the important Rato Matsyendranath festival; that is, the public display of a symbolic shirt (*bhoṭo*). Her contribution draws on Chapter 4 of her excellent 2016 monograph. Michael C. Baltutis discusses the innovations in a *longue durée* of the ancient South Asian Indra festival that has survived only in Nepal. His analysis is based on Sanskrit sources as well as on field observations of the Nepali *Indrajātrā*. Luke Whitmore elaborates on the question of how the increased influx of pilgrims changed the ritual practices at the Sri Kedarnath *dhām* through improved transport facilities. In his fascinating contribution, Reid B. Locklin discusses how Shankara in his *Upadaśasāhasrī* reintroduces Vedic ritual in Advaita Vedanta philosophy.

The second part contains three contributions on “Ritual and the Economies of Caste and Class.” On the basis of the Gr̥hyasūtras, Matthew R. Sayers describes the transition from solemn ancestral rites to domestic feeding of the dead. Especially interesting are “significant developments” in these rituals: the introduction of meat offerings, the elimination of the Vedic priests, and the introduction of a Brahmin who stands for the deceased persons in death and ancestor rituals. Amy Allocco describes the new Brahmanical “flower-shower festival” introduced in 2005 at the non-Brahmin Muṭṭakkanniyamman temple in Chennai in order to attract new groups of devotees. Shital Sharma focuses on the ritual economy of devotional practices of upper-class Pusthimargi Vaishnava women in Gujarat.

Brian K. Pennington deals with the “Innovating Ritual Power in a Pilgrimage Economy,” focusing on the life story of a woman healer, in which he argues that the position of this female Hindu healer was shaped by dramatic changes of the infrastructure in Garhwal. In the second chapter of the third part (“Ritual and the Negotiation of Gender”), M. Whitney Kelting describes the recent participation of unmarried Jain women in the *upadhān* fast in Pune, during which they become Jain mendicants for forty-five days. She discusses how this participation could be seen as leverage in their marriage arrangements in order to open up an option for renunciation in case they are dissatisfied with the marriage arrangements made by their parents. Liz Wilson explores aspects of masculinity in a remarkably popular pilgrimage event in southern Kerala, the largely male pilgrimage to Ayyapan’s mountain temple. She argues that despite the exclusion of women, the Ayyapan movement “includes mythic figurations of the feminine, but does so on male terms” (208).

The fourth part (“Ritual Innovation in Contemporary Transnational Contexts”) predominantly includes case studies of the Hindu diaspora. It opens with Charles S. Preston’s analysis of the performance show called *The Universal Truth: An Interpretation of Vedas through a Repertoire of Indian Dance* by Roopa Iyer, that toured throughout the USA and Europe in 2007. The author discusses to what extent this show should, or should not, be regarded as a ritual and rather rejects this idea on the grounds of arguments derived from performance theory. Based on interviews with thirty-two Hindu women in Ottawa and Toronto, Janet Gunn discusses ritual innovations in household *pūjās* and connected beliefs in ritual efficacy and meaning. Finally, Sudarshan Durayappah and Corinne G. Dempsey describe and analyze the adaptation of traditional Tamil rituals in “nonnormative lifestyles,” such as a Hindu-Muslim gay wedding or a wedding for a polyamorous collective.

The volume offers a broad spectrum of interesting and inspiring case studies that generally include new and, in this sense, innovative material. They are well edited, but an abstract or summary of the chapters would have been useful. Naturally, the theoretically most challenging question (not raised by all contributors) concerns the problem of “ritual innovation,” which is, after all, the title of the book. Asking whether “ritual innovation” should be regarded as an oxymoron, the editors, in their Introduction, discuss a number of previous publications from E.B. Tylor to Catherine Bell, as well as the publications of the Heidelberg school of ritual studies in which innovation in rituals has played a major role. To be true, much ink has been spilled on this general topic of ritual studies, even if the term “innovation” has been rather less frequently used for the many forms of ritual changes, transformations, and transfers than other terms such as agency, change, dynamics, creativity, variability, invention, etc.

The perhaps even more challenging question is whether “South Asia provides a *particularly* fertile environment for ritual innovation” (10, emphasis added) or not. Ritual innovation is a valuable contribution to this query and serves as a starting point for the subsequent question pertaining to why “ritual innovation in South Asia has not been theorized directly” (10). In my understanding, such a theory of South Asian ritual must also regard indigenous ritual theories, such as the Pūrvamīmāṃsā school or the ritual grammar theory in the queries of Frits Staal. It must include a deep analysis of the vast traditional ritual literature like the Dharmasāstras and Gṛhyasūtras. It seems that these kinds of Brahminical influences and dominance are still at work when rituals in South Asia are changed, invented, or transferred from one religious strand to another. If this holds true—and the contributions to *Ritual Innovation* seem to support it—the combining force would lie in certain formal structures and ritual elements that can be used for innovations and yet remain what they have always been. From this point of view, “ritual innovation” is indeed an oxymoron.

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