Conference report

**Mediality of Rituals**
**Representation – Performance – Transformation**

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A cooperation between the
International Graduate School *Resonant Self-World Relations in Ancient and Modern Socio-Religious Practices*
Max-Weber-Kolleg, University of Erfurt, and University of Graz
International research Group on *Media and Religion*, University of Munich

Rituals shape the relationship between individuals, groups and the world in a variety of constellations that are negotiated in diverse fashions, according to cultural, social and historical contexts. By shaping the tension between the self and the world, ritual practices provide orientation. From everyday routines to specific occasions in the course of a year, from individual habits to significant biographical steps, or from the intimate sphere to state acts, rituals permeate the social fabric on many levels and in various ways. Rituals are forms of communication in which visions of the self and the world are negotiated. On the one side, ritual communication arises from the interaction of a broad range of media with the human body. Consequently, media and material arrangements shape the time and the place where ritual communication takes place. On the other side, rituals are expanded, reproduced, and reenacted in the public sphere by media that, again, vary depending on the socio-historical context.
The conference held in Munich deepened the complex interrelation between media and rituals in papers focused on cases studies from diverse cultures and times privileging the dialogue between the participants, articulated in responses to the presentations, in exchanges within small groups, and in plenary sessions. The overall question of the conference has been structured according to an approach to ritual that focusses on communication processes and considering practices of representation, the performative dimension of ritual and their adaption and transformations.

*Representation*
The first session considered representation strategies of rituals in a triangulation of material things, the human body, and mental imaginations interacting in the communication process. Anna-Katharina Rieger introduced the concept of representation in her keynote *Repetitive and extraordinary representations of deities. Image-objects and texts in sanctuaries of Roman times and their role in rituals*. The meaning-making processes generated in and through rituals were explored in three further case studies: *Of Yoga instructions and sleep protocols. Ritualistic practices of wholesomeness in health advice literature of the late GDR* by Lukas Bartl; *On Learning the traditional: The transmission of Tibetan Buddhist art in Nepal and France* by Dolores Bertschinger and *A Agon for the emperor's favour. The role of monumental media enhancing the imperial cult and «sacred crown games»* by Lukas Jung. The responses by Verena Eberhardt and Heinrich Hofer introduced common lines to be discussed in smaller groups:

- The role of symbols in media representations making the inaccessible accessible in every-day life.
- The entanglement between the variety of discussed media and their specific relationship to time-space-constellations in the various cultural settings. Is ritual a transitory detachment from a space-time constellation?
- The tension between representation within the rituals and the role of mediatisation and commodification of ritual performances in shaping the urban environment the ritual is embedded in.
- The negotiation of power relationships within rituals and their link to the media at the core of rituals and the role of shaping and re-shaping rituals in order to stabilise power relationships.

*Performance*

Jörg Rüpke addressed the performative dimension of rituals with the introductory keynote *Performance and resonance. Looking into historical ritual actors.* Emma de Koning's *Supernatural puppet theatre? Kissonerga-Mosphilia Unit 1015 and the representation of ritual on Chalcolithic Cyprus,* Charles White's *Laptop orchestra as a ritual practice in post-digital music education* and Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati's *The* National Covid Memorial *in London as a funerary practice* highlighted diverse aspects of ritual performance with case studies from diverse time and places involving a variety of media. In their responses, Vincenzo Cerulli and Paul Klausing emphasized the following questions:

> Ritual performance mould relationships that are distinct from everyday experience and yet it always mirrors or refers to a specific social context.
> Ritual performance breaks every-day routines, it opens up a disrupting time in which past, present, and future are fused in an enactment of "being in time".
> Ritual is an epistemic moment in which contingency is framed by means of performance.

*Transformation*

The transformative dimensions of rituals have been presented first in the form of a joint keynote by Natalie Fritz, Marie-Therese Mäder and Paola von Wyss-Giacosa entitled *Seizing the incomprehensible. Transformative rituals and technologies in ethnographic films.* Specific facets of ritual transformations were highlighted in the papers *"Time for a black metal ritual": Transforming religious symbols* by Anna-Katharina Höpflinger, *From Percy Jackson to KAOS. Ancient rituals in contemporary popular narratives* by Katharina Waldner and *The mediality of inscribed monuments; enhancing ritual performances through text and image* by Marios Kamenou and Wolfgang Spickermann. In their responses, James William Santos and Baldassare Scolari focused on

> The tension between transforming rituals and maintaining their efficacy.
> The limits of rituals when they are alienated, deconstructed or criticised and the role of the failure of rituals.

According to the exploratory character of the conference, the participant had been asked to include in their reflections the provisional findings of their ongoing work. Therefore, a various range of questions, perspectives, and ideas were elaborated on during the conference. The exchange offered an occasion to discuss a broad range of questions that may inspire further research or give new input to the ongoing doctoral and post-doc research projects. In a tentative recapitulation, these overall topics may be highlighted:

*a) Defining a ritual*

A general, substantial definition of ritual is neither self-evident nor always useful. Like other concepts in the study of religions and cultures, "ritual" is as a multilayered concept which mirrors its travel through time and societal spheres as well as academic disciplines. Choosing a substantial, very specific definition, which could allow outlining "ritual" in a precise way, may exclude the possibility of diachronic and synchronic comparison. On the other side, a broad definition of the concept may seem too general and miss the scope of differentiating ritual from other cultural processes. Could approaches to ritual as "verdichtetes Ereignis", or as "intensified cultural experience" be elaborated on to build a common ground for comparison?

Alternatively, resisting a substantial definition, ritual could be conceptually described as a specific way of looking to performances in a given context. This second strategy focuses on performances that are highlighted in an emic perspective as being particularly meaningful and distinguished from other forms of performances. This approach emphasises the self-reflexive dimension of rituals and the references to ritual knowledge within the ritual itself. Since it offered a variegated sample of "rituals" which challenged simple assumptions about comparison and generalization, the interdisciplinary trait of the conference encompassing case studies from antiquity to the present society proved very inspiring on the theoretical and hermeneutical level.

*b) The role of media technology*

The comparison over various times and cultures in the conference papers stimulated a debate also on the role of the very diverse media technologies interacting with ritual practices. Media technologies shape rituals on different levels: on the one hand, they play a crucial role with the ritual performance and, on the other, they refer to rituals beyond the time and space in which the ritual is performed. Media technologies are linked to commodification of rituals in the wider societal context. Mediatization processes are not specific of the contemporary world. Rituals as communication processes can cross the boundaries between times and places by means of materialization of media. Furthermore, media mediate the (scholarly) reconstruction of rituals.

*c) The role of materiality*

Material things play a specific role in the ritual performances and in scholarly reconstruction of rituals. Objects are often inscribed in everyday life. They may be at the core of a ritual or refer to a ritual in everyday life. Furthermore, they materialise the memory of past, transformed, or alienated rituals. Things bridge the time of the ritual with every-day life; they are shifted from places where every-day life fold to ritual places and the other way round. Following the path of object through space and time allows grasping the complexity of rituals, giving insights into the tension between ritual as performance taking place in a particular place at a particular time and the wider references to rituals within the wider societal context.

*d) The role of the body*

Discussing such a wide selection of case studies focusing on cultural and religious practices from all over the world draws attention to the paramount role of the body in performing and receiving rituals. Overall, the human body seems to be at the core of the ritual, defining ritual performances and their reception. Corporeality characterizes resonance experiences within ritual practices opening up the analysis of rituals to complex relationship between the self and the world. However, such an anthropologic approach to ritual is not meant to be an exclusive, rather a possible focus on rituals.

Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati