

*Work to be undertaken with 3 month Fellowship at Max Weber Kolleg - March-end of May 2018*

This proposal for a three month fellowship with the Max Weber Kolleg for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies at the University of Erfurt builds on a longer standing set of collaborations with Professors Martin Fuchs and Jörg Rüpke, as well as other members of the college. These include an earlier Fellowship at the Kolleg in 201, followed by an invitation from Prof. Rüpke to give a keynote plenary address for the 2015 XXI World Congress of the International Association for History of Religions, *Dynamics of Religions: Past and Present*, held in Erfurt. The address was subsequently published at the end of 2016 as a chapter entitled 'Gaining Access to the Radically Unfamiliar: Religion in Modern Times' and appeared in *Dynamics of Religion*, edited by Professor Rüpke and published by De Gruyter Press. In 2018 I will be working on two projects, both of which make contributions to the work that has been done by the research group 'Religious Individualization in Historical Perspective' undertaken at the Max Weber Kolleg.

**Project 1: Review Essay on Existential Anthropology**

I have been commissioned to write a review essay for the Political and Legal Anthropology Review of several books on existential anthropology by Albert Piette, along with Sartre's *What is Subjectivity?* I have been asked to consider the use or otherwise of existentialism and phenomenology for anthropology. The review will build on my long standing attempts to highlight the use of the phenomenological traditions in anthropological work, drawing particularly on the traditions specifically associated with Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. The argument has been elaborated most recently in my co-edited volume (with Dr. Houston), *Phenomenology in Anthropology: A sense of perspective*. (Indiana Press 2015), which contains a selection of anthropologists who were either already using phenomenology in their work or were asked to consider its applicability. My own ethnographic use as well as philosophical exploration of phenomenology in my book *Fertile Disorder: Spirit Possession and its provocation of the modern* (Hawaii Press, 2013) has been extremely well received in reviews from a diverse range of fields of enquiry such as anthropology, feminist philosophy, south Asian studies, anthropology of science and medicine (these can be provided on request).

Central to the review essay is a theme which makes a direct methodological and philosophical contribution to the project on individualisation. To what extent are the social sciences able to provide an understanding both of the social nature of our human existence and the irreducible individuality of each one of our lives and experiences? What militates against such a synthesis is the brief that social science charted for itself in making a break with the dominance of individualism both as ideology and methodology. This is particularly explicit in the French traditions of social science

(Durkheim, Dumont, Mauss). Returning to the phenomenological framework at this juncture is instructive for it provides a philosophical framework that shares this charter, while remaining alive to existential orientations to death, to illness, to pain and injury, all of which are irreducibly individual. It will be the task of the review to develop further this line of argument and method which I first assayed in *Fertile Disorder* in terms of trying to show how the social is always inflected in and through individual existential dilemmas, in this case of women in rural Tamil Nadu.

**Project 2: New book: *Ornamentation as love: The aesthetics of “Sringar” in the Indian performing arts and the production of the sacred.***

I will be starting a new book during my fellowship period, which will develop the theme of what is core to the Indian performing arts, both in aesthetic theory in Sanskrit and Tamil textual traditions, but even more importantly for the purposes of this book, in the practice of music, dance and performance. It will take into account not only the experience of performers and ‘rasikas’, those who savour the taste and ‘flavour’ of the arts, but also try to show that core elements of this aesthetic pervades practices in everyday life. The book follows some of the strategies I developed in my last book, seeking to reverse the usual procedures of the social sciences. Instead of providing a social and/or historical account of practices that do not fit easily into a rational explanatory model, I seek to produce a phenomenology of such practices, which includes not only direct experience but also the background of taken-for-granted practices and histories that feed into that experience. Such a phenomenological account, if rich enough, is capable of entering into a conversation with questions raised not only by social science, history and psychology, but also political questions that are urgent and of the moment. Thus by the end of the book, the purpose is to allow some of the core experiences of Indian aesthetics in music, dance and poetics to address the calcification of religious boundaries and accompanying violence that characterises India and other parts of the world.

For the same reasons, the book engages with modern transformations of Indian performance traditions, not in order to produce a history of modernisation, but to show what those modern projects reveal about the core elements of Indian aesthetics. In a sense the reform projects work as phenomenological ‘limit case’ scenarios: what is it that stands revealed as the fundamental element supporting a project, when it is no longer operative or when an attempt is made to remove it? The classic instance of this in the work of Merleau-Ponty where our own bodies emerge as the ultimate instance of a support both indispensable and invisible for the most part. Taken-for-granted as long as all is well with it, the body stands revealed by illness and injury as fundamental to our entire existence.

In the case of Indian aesthetics, I will take attempts by reformers to get rid of what they come to perceive by the late nineteenth century as 'excesses' they find in music and dance performance, as a limit case capable of revealing what it is that gives performance its affective life for audiences and performers. Core elements survived, in part because reformers themselves understood their task not as one of replacing the traditional arts with western music, but of purifying them of excesses that had become accretions, a view that was in keeping with colonial discourses of a decadence that had overcome the vitality of Indian civilisation, requiring intervention and governance by superior authorities. Yet, as I seek to show, that which was sought to be removed and that which endured, turn out to fundamentally share the same wellspring of aesthetic orientations found in the subcontinent.

The first chapter of the book examines the modernising projects of Rukmini Arundale in her institution known as Kalakshetra in Chennai which played a key role in the entry of upper caste women into the public sphere of the arts, both as performers and as intellectuals. Most publications on Rukmini Devi have concentrated principally on her work in the establishment of Bharata Natya as a dance form worthy of modern India. By contrast, I seek to show that the aesthetic she sought to replace was in fact so pervasive that she was driven by the logic of her own project to extend her efforts well beyond the performing arts and into other areas of daily practice. Her reforms extended, for instance, to the aesthetics of the design of handloom saris, to the decoration of interiors of homes as well as to the everyday dress and comportment worthy of the modern woman who could thus emerge from the home and take her place in the public world. Equipped with an embodied set of skills, she could carry in herself a unique synthesis of the traditional and the modern that would confound colonial evaluations of gender subordination, and so enable India to take its confident place in the world. Female artists were among India's key emissaries on foreign concert tours during the period immediately after independence that has come to be termed the "Nehruvian" period.

The second chapter deals with the debates and dissatisfactions that characterised the intellectuals involved in the establishment of new national arts institutions in New Delhi in this Nehruvian period. A repeated refrain on the part of these intellectuals is the complaint regarding the gulf between aesthetic theory and the practice. In effect, this was a complaint levelled against arts practitioners, who were drawn from traditional classes of musicians and dancers, where the arts were nurtured within professional castes, such as the women and men of the Isai Vellala communities of the Tamil south, and the Muslim lineages who nurtured Hindustani music in the north. Intellectuals making the criticisms and building the new institutions were, by contrast, largely upper caste Hindu men. The scholarship of the last twenty years has made headway in bringing out some of these class power dimensions of reform. The two chapters will therefore concentrate on developing further the

implications of this social history. What were the implications of this sociological gulf in terms of taste and how has it shaped the tendency towards 'intellectualism', or the bias towards making theory the arbiter of practice?

The period of the fellowship will be spent in writing as much as possible of the first chapter and working across the first two chapters. The plan for the book is follow these initial chapters with a couple of chapters that set out what can be revealed through the projects of reform about the core aesthetic principle of 'sringar'. Sringar is often rendered too narrowly in terms of the Sanskrit theory of aesthetics known as *rasa* theory, as the art of revealing the essence of eroticism. Such a narrower interpretation of the term would have us focus exclusively on reform as the attempt to curb and constrain the explicit representation of sexuality in dance performance. While this is not wrong in itself, the fact that sringar is also a term for ornamentation carries us much further in terms of understanding why the quest to eradicate vulgar accretions took reform into so many more areas of life itself and why, ultimately, the reforms remained highly unstable. As the historian Bhakle remarks in her book *Two Men and Music*, (2005), unlike countries such as Japan, Korea and China where western classical music set down deep roots, in India, 'chords did not replace *tans*...symphonies did not replace *ragas*...melodic compositions did not succumb to the so-called superiority of contrapuntal harmony (Bhakle 2005:14). Equally strikingly, she points out that this indifference to western colonial forms in music through the 19<sup>th</sup> century affords a clear contrast with its adoption in other spheres such as law, education, medicine and literature. Yet once we admit ragas, tans, and intricate melodic structures as form of continuity, we have already admitted the very principle of sringar as ornamentation that also generated what reformers found excessive. As I will seek to show, sringar as ornamentation is the hidden principle that underlies a pervasive set of orientations that may be said to define an entire habitus in the region itself. Ornamentation, and the performativity associated with it, connects many kinds of practice in India – from bodily ornamentation in decoration of skin and jewellery, to the profusion of images in religious architecture, the ornamentation of the images themselves, ornamentation of musical notes and dance and theatrical interpretations of given texts. Such practices share an orientation that connects a wide range of ontologically distinct domains. If narratives and musical ragas may be ornamented in performance mode, so too can tools of trade, forms of transport, domesticated animals, houses and thresholds. In all cases, ornamentation is a form of bringing the presence of the object into sensory focus. Presence and affect are in turn, intimately connected. The affect I speak of may be an explicit and heightened one, but it may also fit into the more subtle concept of mood which I have explored in several papers, as something which underlies that which is explicit. A mood such as well-being, which underlies many practices of sringar, may become explicit only when missing. As a child, my grandmother would tell me to go back and

ornament myself if I appeared without kohl in my eyes, a kumkum on my forehead and bangles on my wrists – she would say people would think I was ill or not cared for. The performativity of ornamentation and the performativity of the body are in this instance intrinsically linked by an expansive notion of making-presence that stretches well beyond bodily boundaries, and out into the surrounding world of spectators and interactions. Some of these expansive effects have been addressed in a literature on ‘auspiciousness’ in South Asia – *mankalam* in Tamil (*mangalya* in Skt.). Ornamentation also utilises the possibilities afforded by repetition – the profusion of images, of phrases sung or uttered, of rhythmic syllables and footwork are also forms of repetition. There is a conscious utilisation at work here of some of the more abstract arguments that have been made in post-structuralist philosophy regarding repetition as being quite distinct from sameness – there is always a swerve, a difference, which is also a temporal deferral which audiences of the arts may experience both as expansion but also as an affect of yearning and longing. And, as in my grandmother’s comment about ornamentation being a demonstration of care and concern for that which is being adorned, the one who performs ornamentation performatively elaborates the affect of love for that object. In what is a remarkably continuous and old tradition in South Asian sculpture and painting, even self-adornment is not understood as solipsistic but rather as a performative force, making it a vehicle not only for erotic love, but of well-being in others who see the adorned body.

The final chapters use this richness of *Sringar* to show its wider capacity to address concerns outside its terrain. How does such a rich and pervasive aesthetics help us to conceive of fresh responses to the calcification of boundaries between religions as well as internal hardening of identity? There is room for a conversation here precisely because traditions of aesthetics in India are not identical with religion. Even though invocations of the divine form a kind of framing device for performances of all kinds, there is a rich vocabulary both in treatises and in pedagogy on how to achieve specifically aesthetic effects for audiences. Yet the very process of bringing to presence through *sringar* is itself generative of a sense of transcendence, of going beyond the mundane, which generates in those engaged in regular practice (repetition again), a sense of the sacred that nevertheless be distinguished from religion per se. If long standing traditions of heterodox religion in South Asia, such as *Bhakti* and *Sufi* currents, have strongly availed themselves of music and performance, it is not because musical traditions are intrinsically religious but because the experience of the sacred and of love that are already implicit in the ornamental practices has made them eminently fitted to the propagation of religious traditions that make love their primary motif. It is this which also accounts for the fundamental unity of performance habitus that underlies the performance of Hindu *Bhakti* and *Sufi* traditions. Even in today’s polarised climate of religious distinctions, performers move effortlessly between the two. These themes are explored in the final chapters, using as materials both the popular

culture of music in cinema as well as the concert traditions. Of particular interest here are responses to fundamentalism which employ these performance traditions and offer possibilities that are quite distinct from the responses shaped by Enlightenment rationalism, secularism or liberalism.

The Max Weber project of individualisation has involved itself centrally in the debate over whether individualisation can be said to be a feature exclusive to modernity, and more recently, the ways in which subjectivity can be explored under the rubric of 'dividual' versions of the self. I have argued in several publications that the anthropology of the dividual and the partible personhood of non-western cultures has proceeded at the cost of ignoring traditions of western philosophy that have also provided alternative accounts of subjectivity that are not that of a unified or self-sustaining individual, not to mention traditions of feminist argument that have long shown the impossibility for women to integrate the typical patterns of their own experience in such a vision of the individual. Integrating such contributions to the anthropological project has been central to my work, and in this book I propose to show how *sringar* can take examinations of dividuality as well as post-structuralist arguments in new directions. A sustained argument advanced on language in the hermeneutic traditions represented by Paul Ricoeur as well as Derrida, attempts to deconstruct the idea of the 'literal' by showing that metaphor is no mere ornament placed on literal language, but rather is fundamental to language. The Indian traditions of aesthetic practice makes it clear that the ornament itself is not something external placed on the 'literal' body. Rather, it is intrinsic to the expansive movement of the body, to its arc of intentionality as it moves into the world as a force.