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RELIGIONSGESCHICHTE



Conference

Mediality of Rituals Representation – Performance – Transformation

Munich, 24–26 February 2025

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 (LMU)

Rituals shape relationships between individuals, groups, and the world in various ways that are negotiated according to cultural, social and historical contexts. By shaping the tension between the self and the world, ritual practices provide orientation. Rituals permeate the social fabric on many levels and in various ways, from everyday routines to specific occasions throughout the year, from individual habits to significant biographical steps, or from the intimate sphere to state acts. Rituals are forms of communication in which visions of the self and the world are negotiated. Ritual communication arises from the interaction between a variety of media and the human body. Consequently, media and material arrangements shape the time and the place of ritual communication. Conversely, rituals are expanded, reproduced, and re-enacted in the public sphere by media that, again, vary depending on the socio-historical context.

The conference explored the complex relationship between media and rituals. Papers focused on case studies from various cultures and time periods, encouraging the dialogue between the participants through responses to the presentations, small group discussions and plenary sessions. The conference was structured around the question of how rituals focus on communication processes, considering practices of representation and the performative dimension of rituals as well as their adaption and transformation.

In line with the exploratory character of the conference, participants were asked to incorporate the preliminary findings of their ongoing projects into their reflections. Therefore, a variety of questions, perspectives, and ideas were elaborated on. The exchange provided an opportunity to discuss a broad range of topics that could inspire further research or contribute to the ongoing doctoral and postdoctoral research projects of the participants. In a tentative recapitulation, the following topics can be identified:

A general 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 that reflects its evolution over time, across societal spheres and academic disciplines. Adopting a substantial, very specific definition of “ritual” could allow it to be outlined precisely, but would exclude the possibility of diachronic and synchronic comparison. Conversely, a broad definition of the concept may seem too general and fail to differentiate ritual from other cultural processes. Could approaches to ritual as “intensified cultural experience” be developed to build a common ground for comparison?

As an alternative to providing a substantial definition, ritual could be conceptually described as a specific way of viewing performances in a given context. This second strategy focuses on performances that are considered as being particularly

meaningful and distinguished from other forms of performance from an emic perspective. This approach emphasises the self-reflexive dimension of rituals and the references to ritual knowledge within rituals themselves. The interdisciplinary nature of the conference, which encompassed case studies from antiquity to the present day proved very inspiring on the theoretical and hermeneutical level, as it offered a variegated sample of "rituals" which challenged simple assumptions about comparison and generalization.

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

Material objects play a specific role in ritual performances and in scholarly reconstructions of rituals. Objects are often embedded in everyday life. They may form the core of a ritual or serve as a reference to a ritual in everyday life. Furthermore, they embody the memory of past, transformed or alienated rituals. Things bridge the time of the ritual with everyday life; they are shifted from everyday places to ritual places and vice versa. Tracking the path of objects through space and time provides insight into the complexity of rituals and the tension between rituals as performances taking place in specific places and times and the references to rituals within a wider societal context.

A discussion of such a wide range of case studies focusing on cultural and religious practices from around the world highlights the paramount role of the body in performing and perceiving rituals. Overall, the human body seems essential to the ritual, defining ritual performances and their reception. Corporeality characterizes resonance experiences within ritual practices opening up the analysis of rituals to the complex relationship between the self and the world. However, this anthropological approach to ritual is not intended to be an exclusive, but rather to provide an alternative perspective on rituals.

We would like to thank the IBZ Munich for hosting the conference in its beautiful, peaceful surroundings!

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