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# Homo Ritualis: Hindu Ritual and its Significance for Ritual Theory, written by Axel Michaels

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## 1

Hindu ritual is at the centre of this rich and all-encompassing study of ritual based on over three decades of research and fieldwork. Axel Michaels' research embraces a multitude of disciplinary approaches to ritual theory, beginning with the ethno-indological approach (introduced on pages 24–31) and concluding with computational linguistics (319–24). His ethno-indological approach is a fine demonstration of combining fieldwork with philology and an analysis of ritual manuals in contemporary usage, such as the twentieth-century *Samkalparatnāvalī*, alongside ancient ritual texts such as the approximately third-century *Mīmāṃsāsūtra* of Jaimini. This diachronic overview enables Michaels to examine persistent structures of ritual traditions while accounting for variations and modalities over time and space, and even across religious boundaries. Michaels knows the field; he describes it meticulously, going back and forth between his own observations of rituals *in situ* and those of scholars of religion, be they indologists, philologists, anthropologists, or sociologists. His thick description of Newari life-cycle rituals is grounded in a close reading of Hindu ritual handbooks, constantly drawing upon the insights and contributions of a wide range of scholars, including Victor Turner, Stanley Tambiah, Roland Grimes, Frits Staal, Max Weber, Marcel Mauss, and Thomas E. Lawson and Robert N. McCauley—to name a few. This represents the breadth of disciplinary approaches typical of Michaels' in-depth engagement with ritual theory. *Homo Ritualis* is thus an impressive inventory of approaches to ritual studies beyond the specific Newari Hindu ritual that the author is particularly concerned with. Besides his reliance on this impressive array of approaches to ritual studies, Michaels' own approach exemplifies a refreshing combination of anthropological fieldwork with an in-depth textual study of an often-neglected material, namely ritual handbooks (*paddhati*) currently in use by Hindu priests in Nepal (and even in the US).

## 2

The book opens with an introduction arguing for the potentially significant contribution of Hindu ritual theories and practices to the general field of ritual studies. The introduction explains the rationale for paraphrasing the famous coinage by Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, as *Homo Ritualis* (5–6), and proceeds to survey theoretical approaches to the study of ritual in India and beyond (10–4, 19–27). Michaels dedicates a section to the term ritual, exploring the manifold and more nuanced Indic equivalents (6–10), and another section to problematizing

the orientalist critique and post-colonial challenges posed against the outsider—often an elitist outsider—perspective on Hindu rituals (14–9). The last part of the introduction presents Michaels’ conceptual framework for the organization of the book in sections according to his structural analysis of Hindu rituals as constituted of framing, formality, and modality (parts I, II, and III), followed by transformation and confirmation, which are represented in the fourth section (31–40).

### 3

This introduction is an excellent survey of the field of ritual studies and it nicely presents the reader with Michaels’ work of three decades on Hindu rites of passage in Nepal. Nevertheless, it falls short of accounting for the eclectic character of the book, which is first and foremost a publication of Michaels’ collected papers (xii–xiii). While the separate chapters as well as sections of the introduction contain convincing, solid arguments regarding ritual theory, the book as a whole lacks a strong, single argument or, alternatively, a coherent line of argumentation beyond the significance of Hindu ritual to ritual theory, captured by the title and recaptured in the summary of the book (311–8). Every so often, the reader encounters a section that seems to be loosely patched, like the one dealing with ritual and angst (285–92), with a concluding paragraph (entitled “Coda”) on the silverfish, the purpose of which remains unclear to me. It might have been better to represent the book right at the outset as collected papers, rather than somewhat disappointing the unsuspecting reader looking for a holistic, coherent whole. This is unfortunate as the book, despite its baffling structural organization, does contain valuable insights and observations.

### 4

The first section, “Framing” (43–70) lays out an impressive, thick description of ritual markers, focusing on the *samkalpa*, or the commitment to take up ritual actions as well as ritual greetings and gifts; both markers are used for demarcating ritual actions from mundane activities. The second part, titled “Formality,” collates three broader issues in the study of rituals. The first deals with rules and structures, or what Michaels calls “the grammar of rituals” (73–117). It discusses the linguistic approach, so to speak, to ritual theory, exemplified first and foremost by the Indologist Frits Staal. The second broad issue under the formality category deals with formal agencies, ritual administration, ritual repetitions and formulas, as well as dynamic variations and change, and even comic aspects in response to ritual rigidity (118–145). This section, titled “Ritual Agency,” brings to the fore Michaels’ skilful mastery of the ethno-indological approach combining observations from the field, rigorous philological analysis, and a comparative vision across the field of ritual studies and beyond Indology and anthropology alike. The third issue in the discussion of formality in rituals addresses playful, dramatic, and emotional elements that, while constituting repetitive, formal constituents, also introduce variation and facilitate dynamic innovation.

### 5

The third section of the book is titled “Modality” (173–264), and it is this section that provides the most maturely developed analytical tools representing Michaels’ work. This section is divided into chapters in accordance with Michaels’ distinction between *individualitas*, *societas*, and *religio* (38–9) addressing the classification and analysis of various types of rituals. This threefold distinction constitutes one of the more solid and comprehensive arguments of the book, enabling a sensibly organised discussion of life-cycle

rituals corresponding to *individualitas* (179–210), collective and public rituals, such as festivals, corresponding to *societas* (211–27), and the transcendental aspects of rituals corresponding to *religio* (228–64). Compared with the “Formality” section, somewhat conflating unrelated notions of form and formation, the “Modality” section is much more succinct and coherent. The fourth section, titled “Meaning,” provides a useful overview of scholarly approaches to ritual studies that were treated sporadically in the previous chapters, namely cultural studies, cognitive science, and Pūrvamīmāṃsā. Especially valuable is the chapter on the Pūrvamīmāṃsā theory of ritual efficacy (292–310), as it brings the reader back to the main issue at hand, namely, the significance of Hindu ritual to ritual theory. For those unacquainted with the *śāstra*, or scientific textual traditions of classical India, this section will most probably be highly significant. It seems to me that no other religious tradition developed such an elaborate reflection on ritual outside of and much earlier than modern academia. As Michaels rightly notes in his introduction, the indigenous theories of ritual and performance did not receive the attention they deserve in the field of ritual studies (19).

## [6](#)

My own interest in the book was focused, apparently overly so, on Michaels’ work on the “grammar of rituals” (74–117), which first attracted my attention in his paper published in 2010, “The Grammar of Rituals” (in Axel Michaels and Anand Mishra (eds), *Grammars and Morphologies of Ritual Practices in Asia*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 7–28). This is probably the reason for my sense of disappointment, which other readers might not share; the book is indeed an important contribution to ritual theory and to typologies of Hindu rituals, past and present. However, Michaels’ perspective on the linguistic approach to ritual—be it morphology, syntax, or pragmatics—seems to steer away from linguistic analysis. Michaels surveys various attempts to provide a structural-linguistic analysis of ritual, while oscillating between his call for taking the grammar of rituals in a non-metaphorical sense (79) and, on the other hand, proclaiming that the linguistic aspects of the analysis of ritual grammar, such as morphology and syntax, are merely metaphors, soon to reach their limits (91). To me, it seems like a premature conclusion considering the lack of serious engagement with theoretical linguistics of any kind (and the field is broad and well-developed enough to resort to at least some theories and approaches to language). Apart from references to John L. Austin and John R. Searle for discussing the communicative aspects of rituals (78), the section on the grammar (and occasionally “grammar”) of rituals concludes with a call for more typologies of rituals to compile sets of ritual rules, quoting a general statement by Wittgenstein (whom I would not consider a linguist) on the rules constituting language (94). What the structural rules of rituals would look like remains indecisive throughout the book, despite the impressive lists that the book provides (e.g. 85, 95–7, 102–4, 137) with the chapters on framing (41–72), probably getting the closest to identifying a syntactic structure. However, an important progression toward linguistic analysis can be seen in the computational linguistic experiment by Michaels with Niels Reiter, Annette Frank, Oliver Hellwig, and Anand Mishra, feeding ritual “events” and “agents” as data for computer analysis and aiming at facilitating qualitative semantic and structural analyses of ritual (319–24). Unfortunately, this promising vein of inquiry merely remains a potential for future analysis; this section is relegated, so to speak, to the Appendix, with no bearing on what might be considered a preliminary, linguistic analysis of ritual structures.

## [7](#)

That said, the book is immensely useful for anyone wishing to become acquainted with the field of ritual studies. Readers interested in various aspects of rituals and ritual theory are sure to find ample room for addressing their concerns in this book, which embraces diverse topics beyond the structural and analytical issues that I have referred to above based on my own, perhaps somewhat narrow, research concerns. Such diverse issues surrounding rituals and discussed in this book even include a section on cyber ritual (258–60) and sections that may be found useful by religious studies scholars such as the one on the dramatic and playful aspects of rituals (146–158). I am convinced that students as well as researchers will find the book extremely useful in research on various aspects of religion and culture in general and South Asian religions in particular.

Axel Michaels (2016). *Homo Ritualis: Hindu Ritual and its Significance for Ritual Theory*. Oxford University Press.