

## Reviews

*The Ambivalence of Denial: Danger and Appeal of Rituals*. Edited by UTE HÜSKEN and UDO SIMON. Wiesbaden: HARRASSOWITZ VERLAG, 2016. Pp. 315. €38.

“Humans always seem to need ritual, but they also always seem to reject ritual” (p. 7). So begins this stimulating volume on the topic of “denial” in ritual theory and practice. Introducing the ten essays that make up the core of the book, editors Ute Hüsken and Udo Simon make a convincing case that denial—broadly construed as all sorts of critique and contestation, from within and without a given tradition—is a fundamental dynamic of ritual which should be more actively engaged in ritual studies. Notably, the denials analyzed here are not wholesale attacks on ritual as an institution, but rather on elements of ritual (animal sacrifice, for instance), practitioners of ritual (women priests), or discrete observances (the prophet Muḥammad’s birthday) that have become flashpoints for critics and defenders alike. Hüsken and Simon insist on the inherent “ambivalence of denial” in the ritual sphere: “Denial is both a way of saying ‘yes’ to some and of saying ‘no’ to others” (p. 8). In this way, the editors argue, the ambivalence of denial is a generative dialectic at the heart of all ritual traditions, “a constant movement from exclusion to inclusion, from closure to opening, and then back again” (p. 8). Even when presented as negative criticism, such denials affirm the integrity of the ritual enterprise and shape the identities of groups that take part. The ambivalent nature of denial is therefore a crucial factor in the modernization of ritual, insofar as it makes room for innovation and change under the guise of shoring up tradition.

Several chapters in this volume grapple with the ways that denial of ritual—often taking the form of challenges to Brahmanical orthopraxy—has shaped Hinduism in India over the centuries. Ambivalence is a central dynamic in this context: even as critics contest Brahmins’ hegemony over ritual matters, they appropriate Brahmanical authority and worldview. And the ambivalence is mutual: time and again Brahmin elites react partly by vilifying their opponents and partly by accommodating their critiques. In “The Cremation Ground and the Denial of Ritual: The Case of Aghorīs and Their Forerunner,” Christof Zotter traces a genealogy of ritual transgression among Aghorī ascetics from the earliest known examples up through the present day. The pattern that emerges exemplifies the ambivalence of denial: Aghorī ascetics gain power by transgressing norms, while their antinomian behavior in turn is “domesticated” and made more palatable to Brahmanical Hinduism (p. 59). For Zotter, the early modern religious leader Bābā Kīnārām embodies this duality: his hagiographies present him as a fierce critic of ritual but also enshrine him as a saint patronized by respectable householders. Jumping ahead to the present day, Hüsken’s contribution, “Hindu Priestesses in Pune: Shifting Denial of Ritual Agency,” analyzes the recent trend of Brahmin women entering the male-dominated priesthood in Maharashtra. This change precipitates a “chain of denial” (p. 9): ritual patrons who approve of priestesses cite the laziness and greed of male priests, while those who disapprove criticize the abilities and qualifications of the new female officiants; Brahmin priestesses, in turn, affirm their newfound authority by denying ritual competence to non-Brahmin aspirants, regardless of gender. In Hüsken’s analysis these dynamics attest to the ambivalent ways that denial of ritual agency continually shifts its boundaries.

The fraught issue of animal sacrifice (*bali*) is fertile territory for the examination of similar themes. In another chapter on Indian traditions, “Anxiety and Innovation: On Denial of Sacrifice in Vedic Ritual,” Cezary Galewicz uses philology and ethnography to explore the long and contested history of immolation in Vedic traditions. By connecting the ancient myth of Śunaḥśepa, who successfully avoids becoming the human victim of a sacrifice, to the modern controversy among Nambudiri Brahmins in Kerala, who accommodated public pressures by substituting a vegetal, rice-paste victim for the goat victims they had used for centuries, Galewicz shows that in spite of the conservative reputation of Vedic sacrifice, innovation has been a constant hallmark. Moving into other corners of the Indian subcontinent, Lokesh Ohri in “Rights versus Rites: *Bali* and Ritual Reform in the Himalayas” recounts

how criticism of the long-running practice of goat sacrifice among Mahasu worshippers in the Himalayas leads to an all-out negotiation of identity involving ritualists, animal rights activists, politicians, and even—through a divine oracle—the voice of the god himself. The resulting compromise, which allows *bali* to be carried out only on a limited basis, reaffirms the volume’s central thesis that denial of ritual is always ambivalent. Jürgen Schaflechner’s “Denial and Repetition: Towards a Solidification of Tradition” draws our attention to Pakistan, where a ban on blood sacrifices for the Hindu goddess Hinglaj Mātā at a shrine in Baluchistan has become a source of disagreement. On the one hand, some Hindu elites use the ban as a means to broadcast nonviolence as a marker of “Hinduness” (p. 162), especially as distinguished from Muslim practices of blood sacrifice; on the other hand, local Pakistani Hindu communities such as the Devipujaks insist that *bali* is central to their religious identities and fight to preserve it. Schaflechner draws on sociological theory to show how the denial of animal sacrifice, even as it remains unresolved, serves as a potent symbol for all sides—“nothing less than a fundamental question of identity” (p. 162).

Through this sustained examination of denial and the productive tensions it engenders, *The Ambivalence of Denial* makes a substantial contribution to ritual studies; moreover, the volume should be of interest to scholars of religious studies, anthropology, and philology who focus on ritual traditions in the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia, which are the regions covered in the book’s chapters. With its strong theoretical framing and insistence on ritual as “a universal mode of human action” (p. 7), the overall aim of the volume might have been better served by a more global selection—case studies from Europe, Africa, and the Americas are conspicuously absent here. Nevertheless, within this restricted purview, the topics, materials, methods, and time periods are quite diverse: we find everything from burial practices in texts and material culture in classical China, to coronation rites in modern-day Nepalese media and politics, to the history and reception of self-flagellation in Iran. Taken together, the various chapters make up a fascinating patchwork and, notwithstanding some differences in style and presentation, they all adhere to a rigorous scholarly standard. One unevenness should be noted, however: the editors’ explicit engagement with ritual theory is not evident in most chapters, which instead emphasize close readings, ethnographic observation, and granular analysis. In this regard, Ian Reader’s conclusion (“Afterword: On Denials, Inclusions, Exclusions and Ambivalence”) is welcome for the way it circles back and situates individual chapters within a broader theoretical terrain.

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*The Paippalādasamhitā of the Atharvaveda: Kāṇḍas 6 and 7. A New Edition with Translation and Commentary.* By ARLO GRIFFITHS. Groningen Oriental Studies, vol. 22. Groningen: EGBERT FORSTEN, 2009. Pp. lxxxvi + 540.

This extraordinary volume is a critical edition, translation, and extensive philological and exegetical commentary on kāṇḍas 6 and 7 of the Paippalādasamhitā. The kāṇḍas of this section of the Paippalādasamhitā (which I will follow Griffiths in abbreviating “PS”) are defined by the numbers of verses that are the norms for the hymns contained within them. Kāṇḍa 6 has a norm of nine verses per hymn; kāṇḍa 7 a norm of ten verses. However, as is the case in other such Atharvavedic kāṇḍas, these two contain many exceptions to these norms. In kāṇḍa 6, for example, the hymns that do not adhere to the norm outnumber those that do, and in all but one of these the hymns are longer than the norm. Griffiths occasionally considers why a hymn exceeds the norm, but this is not an issue to which he devotes particular attention—probably wisely, since it is often not possible to determine which verses might have been added or whether a hymn exceeding the norm might have been secondarily inserted in a kāṇḍa. Since the contents of these two kāṇḍas are more or less formally defined, their hymns are thematically varied. As we would expect, most accompanied rites for health, prosperity, protection against opposing or evil forces of various kinds, and other family and individual concerns. There are a few