



## Dealing with Misfortune in Contemporary India

RLST 578a / ANTH 530 (Fall 2008)

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Religious traditions of Hinduism are crucially concerned with the question of misfortune, seen as a form of powerlessness, and have developed distinct but related ritual ways for ensuring protection and relief, and in some cases quasi- “divine powers” as well. *Tantras*, for instance, constitute a vast body of textual traditions and diverse practices, in which advanced initiates are said to develop extraordinary and protective powers, as well as a capacity to liberate them from successive rebirths. Tantric texts also describe numerous amulets, mantras and medicines that aim at fighting illness and misfortune. Divine possession, similarly, enables a person temporarily to become an incarnation of a deity, with the knowledge and power for curing illnesses and for exorcising victims of spirit possession. Sorcery is practised by initiates, often identified with tantric practitioners, who are said to be able to control malevolent ghosts and deities, and thus can be hired for protection or attack. The course will document and analyze these interrelated traditions and the constant circulation of ideas, images and practices between them. It will address the question of how people understand events happening in their lives, and how they decide about the proper course to follow, following various models of ritual action that are open for choice.

Each seminar will include the study of a text from a primary source (in translation), the viewing of related audiovisual material, and a discussion making use of comparative readings. All the required texts will be provided on the ‘classesv2’ website.

The course requirement is a weekly short paper and a final paper of 20 pages.

# Readings

## Introduction

(W1)

### Chapter 1: Astrology, divination

#### 1.1. *Causality* (W2)

Texts: - extract from a XVIIth century treatise on astrology, the *Praśnamārga* (“The Path of Questions”);

- text of an interaction recorded during a ‘drawing stone’ divination.

Comparative reading:

- Nuckolls, Charles W., 1992, Divergent Ontologies of Suffering in South Asia, *Ethnology*, 31 (1): 57-74.

- Scott, David, 1991, The Cultural Poetics of Eyesight in Sri Lanka : Composure, Vulnerability, and the Sinhala Concept of Distiya, *Dialectical Anthropology*, 16: 85-102.

- Sharma, Ursula, 1973, Theodicy and the Doctrine of Karma, *Man*, n.s., 8 (3): 347-364.

#### 1.2. *The Negotiation of Interpretation: Dialogs and Cognition* (W3)

Texts: two consultations of astrologers.

Comparative reading:

- Tarabout, Gilles, 2007, Authoritative Statements in Kerala Temple Astrology, *RiSS*, 2: 85-120.

- Wilce, James M., 2001, Divining *Troubles*, or *Divining Troubles?* Emergent and Conflictual Dimensions of Bangladeshi Divination, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 74 (4): 190-200.

- Zeitlyn, David, 1990, Professor Garfinkel Visits the Soothsayers: Ethnomethodology and Mambila Divination, *Man*, n.s., 25 (4): 654-666.

### Chapter 2: Brahmanical rituals

#### 2.1. *Ritual models* (W4)

Text: extract of a written report of an astrological consultation for a temple, with ritual prescriptions.

Comparative reading:

- Berti, Daniela, 2008 [2001], Acts, Words, and Fights: Ritual Plurality and Modalities of Action in the Indian Himalayas (English transl. of French original, Paris, *Annales de la Fondation Fyssen*)

- McCreery, John L., 1979, Potential and Effective Meaning in Therapeutic Ritual, *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, 3: 53-72.

- Staal, Frits, 1979, The Meaninglessness of Ritual, *Numen*, 26 (1): 2-22.

#### 2.2. *The construction of meaning and efficacy* (W5)

Text: extracts of a manual used during a ‘vedic’ *mahāmṛtyunjay yāg*, “the great fire offering to the Vanquisher of death [god Śiva]”)

Comparative reading:

- Schieffelin, Edward L., 1998, Problematizing Performance, in Felicia Hughes-Freeland, ed., *Ritual, Performance, Media*, London, Routledge: 194-207.

- Severi, Carlo, 1993, Talking About Souls: the Pragmatic Construction of Meaning in Cuna Ritual Language, in P. Boyer, ed., *Cognitive Aspects of Religious Symbolism*, CUP: 165-181.

- Wheelock, Wade T., 1989, The Mantra in Vedic and Tantric Ritual, in Harvey P. Alper, *Understanding Mantras*, SUNY Press: 96-122.

### Chapter 3: Sorcery

#### 3.1. *The pragmatics of occult fighting* (W6)

Text: transcript of a sorcerer's consultation.

Comparative reading:

- Berti, Daniela, 2008, Ritual Bricolages: Texts, Drawings and Tantric Practitioners in North India, draft paper.
- Maskarinec, Gregory, 1995, Flatter, Promise, Threaten, Kill: A Discursive Analysis of Shamnic Mantar, in Tae-Gon Kim & Mihaly Hoppal, eds., *Shamanism in Performing Arts*, Budapest, Akademiai Kiado:
- Nabokov, Isabelle, 2000, Deadly Power: A Funeral to Counter-Sorcery in South India, *American Ethnologist*, 27 (1): 147-168.

#### 3.2. *Mantras and remedies* (W7)

Text: extracts from a XIXth century treatise on medicines and mantras, the *Mahāsāram*.

Comparative reading:

- Padoux, André, 1998, Concerning Tantric Traditions, in Gerhard Oberhammer, ed., *Studies in Hinduism II: Miscellanea to the Phenomenon of Tantras*, Vienna, Der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften: 9-20.
- Tarabout, Gilles, 2008, Tantrics without Tantras: Tales and Images of Magic in South India (draft paper).
- Zysk, Kenneth G., 1989, *Mantra in Āyurveda: A Study of the Use of Magico-Religious Speech in Ancient Indian Medicine*, in Harvey P. Alper, ed., *Understanding Mantras*, SUNY Press: 123-143.

#### 3.3. *Power and asceticism* (W8)

Text: extract from a local myth about the god Cāttan

Comparative reading:

- Van der Veer, Peter, 1989, The Power of Detachment: Disciplines of Body and Mind in the Ramanandi Order, *American Ethnologist*, 16 (3): 458-470..
- Freeman, John R., 1998, Formalised Possession Among the Tantrics and Teyyams of Malabar, *South Asia Research*, 18 (1): 73-98.
- Tarabout, Gilles, 2000, «Passions» in the Discourses on Witchcraft in Kerala, *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 28: 651-664.

### Chapter 4: Possession

#### 4.1. *Narratives of affliction and the question of "experience"* (W9)

Text: A selection of patients' narratives from Dr. Jagathambika's PhD.

Comparative reading:

- Claus, Peter J., 1979, Spirit Possession and Spirit Mediumship from the Perspective of Tulu Oral Traditions, *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, 3: 29-52.
- Hamayon, Roberte, 1995, Are «Trance», «Ecstasy» and Similar Concepts Appropriate in the Study of Shamanism?, in Tae-Gon Kim & Mihaly Hoppal, eds., *Shamanism in Performing Arts*, Budapest, Akademiai Kiado: 17-34.
- Korom, Frank J., 2000, Close Encounters of the Numinous Kind: Personal Experience Narratives and Memorates in Goalpara, West Bengal, *South Asia Research*, 20 (1): 19-45.

#### 4.2. *Making truths* (W10)

Text: Consultation of a temple medium.

Comparative reading:

- Berti, Daniela, 2007 [2001], The *Bhūt*'s lie : The Case of Nirmala, transl. of Chapter 8 of *La Parole des Dieux*, Paris, CNRS ed: 21p.
- De Certeau, Michel, 1988 [1975], Language Altered: the Sorcerer's Speech, in *The Writing of History*, Columbia U. Press.
- Schömbucher, Elisabeth, 1994, The Consequences of Not Keeping a Promise: Possession Mediumship Among a South Indian Fishing Caste, *Cahiers de Littérature Orale*, 35: 41-63.

#### 4.3. *Questioning categories* (W11)

Text: Consultation of a 'tantrik' medium.

Comparative reading:

- Gold, Ann Grodzins, 1988, Spirit Possession Perceived and Performed in Rural Rajasthan, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 22 (1): 35-63.
- Jacob-Pandian, E.T., 1975, Nadu Veetu Rituals and Family Shamanism in Tamil Society: A Cult Institution of Hinduism, *Man in India*, 55 (1): 67-77.

### **Conclusion and Comparative Openings**

(W12)

Reading:

- Csordas, Thomas J., 1987, Genre, Motive, and Metaphor: Conditions for Creativity in Ritual Language, *Cultural Anthropology*, 2 (4): 445-469.
- Hacking, Ian, 1995, Introduction & Chap. 18 'False Consciousness' in *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*, Princeton University Press.
- Sperber, Dan, 1985 [1982], Apparently Irrational Beliefs, in *On Anthropological Knowledge*, CUP: 35-63.