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:

1.2. The Negotiation of Interpretation: Dialogs and Cognition (W3)
Texts: two consultations of astrologers.
Comparative reading:

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:

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:
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.

3.2. Mantras and remedies (W7)
Text: extracts from a XIXth century treatise on medicines and mantras, the Mahāsāram.
Comparative reading:
- Tarabout, Gilles, 2008, Tantrics without Tantras: Tales and Images of Magic in South India (draft paper).

3.3. Power and asceticism (W8)
Text: extract from a local myth about the god Cāttan
Comparative reading:

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:
4.2. Making truths (W10)
Text: Consultation of a temple medium.
Comparative reading:

4.3. Questioning categories (W11)
Text: Consultation of a ‘tantrik’ medium.
Comparative reading:

Conclusion and Comparative Openings
(W12)

Reading: