

# Introduction

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“Ritual” and “innovation” are generally taken to signify two mutually exclusive domains. In both common parlance and academic writing, ritual implies the unchanging and the ahistorical; innovation, the anticipation of a future and the promise of change. Rituals are typically understood as symbolic performances whose very power lies in their antiquity, while innovations are undertaken when the stagnation of the past becomes evident. Their adjectival forms conjure similar images: “ritualistic” suggests mindlessly or stubbornly repetitive and meaningless acts, whereas “innovative” announces something new, exciting, or creative. The perception, however, that there must be something oxymoronic about the phrase “ritual innovation” can only be based on an understanding of ritual as an inherently conservative social, political, or religious force. However widespread, this sensibility about ritual overlooks its malleability and the role it often plays as an agent in engineering social change or allowing those engaged in ritual activity to come to terms with changes they may be facing.

While most of the chapters in this volume focus on the contemporary religious context in South Asia and in the South Asian diaspora, many examples from religious traditions across the globe could be introduced to demonstrate the central place innovation has had and continues to have in the life of ritual. The Protestant reformulation of the Christian Eucharist as a remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice rather than its literal reenactment took place at the birth of modern science and as a prelude to the Enlightenment; Mahayana Buddhism invented a whole pantheon of supernatural figures

and rites to propitiate and entreat them in defiance of the more austere Theravada traditions that developed following the death of the Buddha; and Sufi Islam promoted the veneration of its departed saints in spite of early Islam's insistence on radical monotheism. These cases help illustrate two important insights about deliberate inventions or self-conscious changes to rituals: on the one hand, ritual innovation has played an important role in the history of the world's major traditions, but on the other hand, the rhetoric of religious specialists and thinkers often attempts to establish the legitimacy of new ritual forms by portraying these innovations as more genuine reflections of the tradition's original insights or teachings than those they are replacing. That is to say, successful ritual innovation must strike a balance between submission to the authority of received practice and the promotion of obvious alterations to those practices. How is this balance achieved? Under what circumstances does innovation meet with acceptance, and when is it challenged? What ends are successfully pursued via such means? What roles do class, caste, and gender play?

### Early Insights into Ritual Change

The earliest theorists of religion represented ritual change in ways that have indelibly shaped the field ever since. The first person to receive an appointment in anthropology at Oxford was E. B. Tylor, whose most enduring contribution has been a particular means of understanding both how rituals change and how they remain the same. Like many of the Victorian age, Tylor viewed the history of religions through the lens of evolutionary development, seeing in change evidence of either advancement towards rational forms of belief and practice or degeneration from a golden era. His predecessor F. Max Müller and his student J. G. Frazer exhibited similar tendencies, but Tylor is particularly relevant to the question of ritual innovation because of the urgent commitment to understanding religious change his work conveyed. For Tylor, attacking outmoded religious forms that had persisted into the present was something of a personal quest. "The science of culture is essentially a reformer's science," he wrote, whose end was "to expose the remains of crude old culture which have passed into harmful superstition, and to mark these out for destruction" (1889 2: 452–53). Tylor identified those superstitious vestiges as "survivals." Operating with an optimistic sense of continuous progress towards a culture of reason, he less theorized change than demonstrated its pervasiveness to discover what had failed to evolve.

While evolutionary perspectives had the advantage of understanding ritual diachronically, their methods were largely speculative, and the data they supplied in evidence of their theories was highly selective. More important for our purposes, they too often failed to note the correlation of social status with ritual form or authority. To the degree that evolutionists such as Tylor sympathized with the elites of the ancient cultures they studied, they overlooked the contributions that the study of the rituals of nonliterate practitioners could make to an understanding of culture. For functionalists who emerged in reaction to evolutionary perspectives, such as Bronislaw Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, cultural systems were highly integrated and largely static. Functionalism moved deliberately away from the study of sweeping change to examine how cultures promoted stability and continuity through, among other institutions and practices, religion and ritual. Functionalists understood well the imbrications of ritual with social order and hierarchy, but they failed to account for history.

Already by 1959, in his oft-reprinted essay, "Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example," Clifford Geertz was complaining that the dominant functionalist theorization of ritual had proven itself unable to make sense of social and religious change. Its emphasis, he noted, "on systems in balance, on social homeostasis, and on timeless structural pictures, leads to a bias in favor of 'well-integrated' societies in a stable equilibrium" but gives us no purchase on how or why rituals change or on the "disruptive, disintegrative, and psychologically disturbing aspects" of ritual (143). His analysis of a Javanese boy's funeral in a community going through the early phases of transition from rural life to urban social structures demonstrated that a new set of methods for studying ritual would be necessary in an era when political and rationalized forms of religion were displacing traditional forms throughout the formerly colonized world. The identity politics that would soon establish such labels as "Hindu" and "Muslim" as the markers of exclusivist communities, electoral rivals, and bounded social groups was quickly coalescing as one of the most potent religious transformations in modern South Asian history. In an environment of such rapid and decisive change, and specifically in a Muslim funerary specialist's refusal to assist at the death of a ten-year-old Hindu boy, Geertz recognized that manipulation of religious and ritual symbols was common in several different contemporary social contexts and could, therefore, just as easily contribute to the disintegration as the integration of social systems. Equally important, however, was his exposure of just how inadequate the dominant understanding of ritual as a conservative or backward-looking force was.

## Ritual Innovation: An Oxymoron?

Despite Geertz's insight, much of the twentieth century treated ritual as a static phenomenon and focused on uncovering its hidden logic and meaning. But the 1990s saw the emergence of a few key works that viewed ritual as a fluid and malleable phenomenon, subject to both natural evolution in the context of social change and manipulation by religious institutions or their adherents. Much of the energy generated in the field of ritual studies at the time grew out of Catherine Bell's ground breaking *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. While her analysis of changing ritual in that work was more implicit than explicit, it paved the way for a wholesale reevaluation of the role ritual plays in society and the methods used to study it in two ways. This reassessment was made possible because, first, Bell conducted a "house-cleaning" (1992: 7) in which she examined the history of the term and the theorization of ritual in order to understand how we had reached the state of the field at the time. Second, she proposed a shift from seeing ritual as a paradigmatic act to viewing "ritualization" as a way of acting strategically. This move would allow a closer scrutiny of the previously underappreciated role of ritual actors and their intentions and of the "conscious or unconscious deployment of ritual as a type of social strategy" (89). The field then turned its attention from social practice that could be captured by nouns to those that were best described by verbs.

The examination of ritual as strategic practice opened new avenues for analyzing religious change, and in her later work Bell offered some insights into the implications of studying ritualization. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* much more directly discussed ways in which rituals are transformed, with Bell observing that "ritual can change when shifting social circumstances induce transmutations, when ritual is intentionally created or repurposed, or when ritual adopts new forms of expression or media" (1997: 212). This work recognized that many different motivations and catalysts might be responsible for changing ceremonial forms, as when she maintained that "ritual change may come from the top down or move from the margins of a community inward; it may arise spontaneously from within a community or it may be engineered by ritual specialists" (223). Bell concerned herself with how "the meaning of a fixed ritual changes for participants as the social and historical conditions for those rituals evolve" (223), but also with the invention of ritual. Her analysis of these dynamics fell short of interrogating the social, political, or material conditions that trigger transformations in what, after all, are performances and acts that derive their legitimation from their connection to tradition.

Our volume speaks to an emerging understanding of the mechanisms, means, and strategies that analysis of change and development in ritual practices makes visible. A much more vigorous scrutiny of the fractures in ritual forms that reveal the stresses that historical change and social conflict can put them under and the junctures where they depart from accepted formulations has been underway for more than a decade. Recent interest in the malleable nature of ritual is also evident in the literature that aims to understand how ritual specialists and religious communities respond when ritual fails to achieve its objectives. A substantial portion of the studies pursuing new methods has come out of Europe.

*Ritual Matters: Dynamic Dimensions in Practice* (Brosius and Hüsken 2010) is among the latest works to analyze the fluid character of ritual. Its authors focus on factors that promote stability or change in ritual performances. Compiled in response to the challenges inherent in the quest to analyze ritual as “cultural dynamic flow, despite its specific characteristics like formality, standardization and repetition” (1), its case studies range across many continents and religious traditions to examine the transfer of ritual elements from one context to another, the psychological aspects of ritual change, and the new media that now often provide novel ritual opportunities and structures. Whereas the essays in *Ritual Matters* examine the factors that accompany or encourage ritual change (or promote stability in times of change), we are much more interested in the deliberate and self-conscious alterations to ritual performance, context, or intention.

Alongside the social conditions for dynamism or stasis and the consequences of failure, the means and strategies of innovation make up a third rubric for appreciating ritual’s changeable nature. This volume is not concerned with how the meaning of ritual might shift as the social conditions of its performance evolve over time, which is widely observable and an aspect of how anthropology has understood ritual. Its focus, rather, is on deliberate changes to ritual structure or performance that have discernible or attested ends in mind. Referring to these interventions in ritual as “innovation” implies that our authors see these changes as part of ritual’s inherently creative potential and its adaptability to new contexts and circumstances. These essays do not analyze the exploitation of that capacity as devious or cynical but propose that innovation is simply one set of options that ritual always presents to participants and performers, and appreciating this fact allows us to observe the many ways in which ritual can serve the objectives of specific interested parties. Ritual innovation can legitimate, express, or contest class and social status (for example, in the chapters written by Sharma, Allocco, Whitmore, Preston, Gunn), invest new forms of political

or religious authority with legitimacy (Chaulagain, Mocko, Baltutis, Sayers), or authenticate nontraditional modes of religious selfhood (Pennington, Kelting, Durayappah and Dempsey).

Examining ritual change under the rubric of innovation allows us to investigate the role of intentionality in the construction and performance of ritual in a manner not always foregrounded in some recent theorizing of ritual. Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Pruett, and Bennett Simon, for example, in *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (2008), contrast ritual with what they call “sincere” modes of social action. Whereas ritual creates a subjunctive, “as if” sphere of action in which formalized gestures construct a realm of idealized intersubjectivity in contrast to the fractured reality of everyday experience, sincere modes of social interaction are rationalized and marked by a correspondence between the internal mental processes of an individual and the outward actions they produce. In their analysis, ritual lies outside the realm of intentional, goal-oriented behavior, leaving little room for consideration of invention and innovation in ritual processes. We, on the other hand, maintain that an approach to the dynamics of ritual that underscores ritual’s otherness to reflective or strategic behavior not only potentially mystifies ritual but also dehistoricizes it by overlooking its performance and manipulation by actual human agents.

Linda Penkower and Tracy Pintchman’s *Hindu Ritual at the Margins: Innovations, Transformations, Reconsiderations* (2014) shifts the focus to Hindu forms of ritual that are “marginal” insofar as they are located beyond the places where the Western scholarly community has typically looked for them. This edited volume first highlights “transformations” (considering issues of identity and agency at the intersection of ritual and change within India), then shifts to “innovations” (reflecting on rituals that are geographically marginal, i.e., outside of India in the Hindu diaspora), and finally moves to “reconsiderations” (examining ritual in and from marginalized perspectives in textual traditions and in places where ritual appears to be absent). The goal of the collection is to understand how ritual actors shape and reshape ritual activity and conceptions, adapting them to specific contexts as well as adapting shared understandings of ritual in relation to these contexts. Together, the chapters examine how Hindus have—individually and collectively—“come to understand or utilize the dynamic processes through which Hindu ritual is shaped, challenged, and redefined” (3).

Another very important collection of essays on ritual theory, *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, edited by Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek, and Michael Stausberg (2008), is similarly noteworthy for the rela-

tive absence of a searching analysis of invention or innovation. There are virtually no mentions of these concepts in the index, and when we look to individual essays, we see a great number of distinct statements on ritual theory that range somewhere between ignoring and outright dismissing the significance of the social and historical contexts that give rise to ritual change. Bruce Kapferer, to take one example, offers an analysis of ritual as a process of creating and engaging with what he, following Deleuze, identifies as “virtuality.” His approach, which he acknowledges cannot account for all rituals, proposes that “much ritual can be understood primarily as a dynamic with no necessary immediate relation to external realities” (2008: 671). For Kapferer, ritual is a grammar in and of itself, largely self-referential, and a technology for halting and intervening in the flux of human reality more than a strategy for representing either internal mental states or extant or idealized social structures; “not a modeling of reality so much as a framework for direct engagement with particular aspects of it” (676). His is essentially an authorless ritual, one that emerges from nowhere and offers itself to the actors as an already given and fully formed means for influencing reality. Kapferer dismisses analyses that reflect on the political or social context of ritual as potentially irrelevant or even “radically misleading” (681). The Sinhalese Buddhist Suniyama ritual he presents as paradigmatic of his model he directly argues is “distinctly out of historical time” (681).

By contrast the historicity of ritual and its origins in human authorship are fundamental to the analysis of ritual the essays of this volume conduct. A complete portrait of the work and dynamics of ritual, we maintain, must take full account of the ways in which ritual may be manipulated with specific personal, social, or political ends in mind. Sometimes innovation may be undertaken deliberately, self-consciously, and transparently. In other cases, it may be muted, disguised, or obscured. Whatever the character of the innovation, ritual as a tool for advancing particular interests is well attested in the chapters included here, in both ancient and contemporary times. While it is true that rituals derive much of their authority from their association with tradition and must at least appear to adhere to certain prescriptions, they are also routinely the subjects of intentional, conscious, and even public invention or alteration. In fact, one of the most powerful and effective methods of ritual innovation is to rationalize it as an original, truer, or more ancient form of the ritual being altered.

As Ursula Rao points out, because one is “simultaneously the author and not the author of a ritual act,” one possesses a degree of freedom to perform the act, within certain limits, according to one’s own designs (2008: 157). The exact degree of the latitude to innovate or to make an

innovation stick once it has been performed or prescribed will vary based on the social location of the actor/author and the level of cultural tolerance for manipulating prescribed actions. Rao continues, “[P]articipants carefully judge any ritual performance in keeping with an imaginary construct of tradition. This does not mean that all innovations are rejected, but only that new elements have to pass the scrutiny of those who have the ability to pronounce whether they are an adequate addition to or even an improvement upon ‘the tradition’” (157). In turn, the social status of the innovator may be advanced by his or her success in promoting an alternative performance: “[W]hereas participants are not allowed to act independently of an imaginary tradition, those who are able to vary or reinterpret the rules become powerful agents” (158). Ritual is, therefore, an important ground for the negotiation of power and status.

Following William S. Sax, however, we would distinguish agency from action and efficacy. Agency, “the ability to transform the world” (2008: 474), is rarely, in the realm of ritual, the property of individual ritual actors. Ritual agency is distributed along networks, as it is, for example, in the legal system: a judge’s ability to ritually render one a criminal by delivering a verdict is the product of a complex agency that depends on diffuse social constructs and institutions. The concepts of ritual action and ritual actors, however, imply “conscious, embodied and intentional beings” (477); “efficacy” refers to their relative success or failure in bringing their intentions to fruition.

Sax’s careful parsing of the forces that produce ritual and its effects allows us to make the distinction between two kinds of ritual instrumentality. Ritual can be considered an instrumental means to an end when it achieves its desired outcome on the basis of ritual actions themselves (whether this can be empirically demonstrated or whether it occurs only in the imaginations of those who believe in the power of the ritual). Such instrumentality is close to what Sax calls “efficacy.” But ritual also serves as a means to an end when it achieves a desired outcome on the basis of an intervention by a collective or individual actor in the shape of the ritual itself. The outcome may be a change in the actor’s status, altered social relations, or wider acceptance of a new understanding of the ritual. In these cases, we are looking at the strategic exploitation of the social capital of ritual to bring about certain social or political ends: a wresting of power, the assertion of hierarchy, the enfranchisement of a marginalized group, and so forth. That is to say, ritual achieves certain outcomes not only by virtue of the power that is internal to ritual practice but also by virtue of its ability as a social instrument to solidify, augment, or create social capital.



## Innovation, South Asian Style

Ritual, therefore, is inescapably and unmistakably political. It authorizes social relations of many sorts and intercedes in power relations at potentially all levels, visibly and invisibly. Its effects include those that are knowable and discernible in advance and those that are unanticipated and unimagined. This volume includes case studies that examine ritual as a means both to stake claim to certain kinds of authority and to signify the relationships of social groups to one another. Success in gaining acceptance of ritual innovations can enhance the authority of individuals or groups. Similarly, trends in ritual innovation that are adopted within particular social classes or communities can function as demands for recognition or acceptance. The authors of these chapters examine self-consciously innovative ritual among religions of South Asia, a cultural region in which ritual innovation has long served to launch or legitimate new religious movements. Today rapid social and economic change have contributed to an environment in which new ritual forms rapidly appear and evolve. In addition, the expanding presence of South Asian cultures on virtually every continent has created settings that invite ritual experimentation.

In the study of South Asian traditions, the idea that mainstream, popular, or elite ritual is a platform for innovation has long been in play. Confronted by the existential risks inherent in older Indo-European sacrifice, Aryan ritualists repressed its mortal effects by doing away with animal sacrifice and subjected its elements to formulaic repetition, thereby generating the complex of Vedic sacrifice (Heesterman 1993); Rammo-han Roy devised modes of Hindu worship that he believed reflected an authentic and non-idolatrous Vedic devotion as a plank of his colonial-era religious reform movement (Hatcher 2008: 23–26); in the mid-nineteenth century, priests battling the effects of British taxation and regulation of pilgrimage on their revenue recast a local bathing festival along the model of an ancient myth, and the Kumbh Mela, the largest religious gathering on the planet today, was born (Maclean 2008: 83–109); the widespread availability of cheap “god posters” in the twentieth century inspired a “democratic devotionalism” encompassing a whole set of new but very widespread orthoprax *pūjās* (Smith 1995); Hindu priests now direct nightly worship of sacred rivers like the Yamuna in North India to cultivate environmental consciousness on the part of devotees (Haberman 2006: 173–75); and funerary specialists debate the merits of returning to long-neglected scriptural guidelines versus pursuing popular innovations

that arise from the desires of the bereaved (Parry 1994: 193–94). We could go on.

The point, however, is surely clear enough: while it features in the analysis of a very large number of studies, ritual innovation in South Asia has not been theorized directly, nor has it been given sustained attention as a pervasive mechanism by which this religiously diverse region has negotiated such frequently attested realities as interreligious encounter, shifting royal and political power, the rise and fall of various classes, unequal gender relationships, new technologies, and life in the diaspora. It may well be, moreover, that South Asia provides a particularly fertile environment for ritual innovation. The presence of a diverse array of religious communities as well as their interaction with and influence over one another, the absence of any centralized structure or single sacred text in Hinduism, waves of conquest throughout history, and South Asia's tremendous regional diversity have been long-standing social realities that have contributed to the constant production of new religious ideas and practices. Add to these several more recent factors—the explosion of India's economy and the rise of the middle class, the widespread migration out of South Asia and the formation of many South Asian diasporas, and the dissemination of first print and then electronic technologies and media—and you have a setting rich in possibilities for the production of original and revisionist forms of ritual. This volume brings together chapters that treat various aspects, contemporary and historic, of ritual innovation as a reflection of these dynamic South Asian realities.

### The Organization of This Volume

The present collection is divided into four sections. Part 1, “Ritual Innovation and Political Power,” foregrounds the ways that ritual serves as a site for the construction, exercise, and transformation of power relations across South Asian religious contexts. Nawaraj Chaulagain's essay focuses on specific adaptations to the *rājyābhīṣeka* ritual to install the Nepalese king that are presented in three Sanskrit coronation texts and analyzes the effects of these innovations for the shifting dynamics of Nepalese royal ceremony and religious culture. Anne T. Mocko's chapter also discusses rituals related to Nepal's monarchy, concentrating on how King Gyānendra's relinquishment of his fundamental role in the Bhoṭo Jātrā ceremony in 2007 effectively contributed to an unmaking of the monarchy by reconfiguring royal authority into alternate forms of political authority and relocating the center of politics and political ceremony from the king to the prime minister. Our

third chapter extends this focus on the political dimensions of royal ritual in Nepal: Michael C. Baltutis concentrates on four iterations of the Indra festival—three drawn from Sanskrit sources and one a contemporary urban performance—to reveal both the innovations embedded within them and the ways in which these public displays prefigure or announce related religious innovations. With Luke Whitmore’s chapter we move to the North Indian Himalayas, where changes to a distinctive ritual practice performed at the shrine to Shiva at Kedarnath appear to signal broader shifts, both in perceptions about the nature of Shiva’s presence and about the complex character of this powerful pilgrimage site as a “place.” Reid B. Locklin’s chapter employs theoretical frameworks offered by Pierre Bourdieu, Talal Asad, and Bell to reexamine the eighth-century Advaita Vedāntin Ādi Śaṅkarācārya’s arguments against Vedic ritual as a strategy of ritualization. Drawing on a cluster of examples of ritualized practice from Śaṅkara’s *Upadeśasāhasrī*, Locklin argues that rather than constituting a thorough rejection of ritual as such, Advaita instead revises and relocates Vedic ritual activity in new, dialogic forms of embodied practice.

Part 2, “Ritual and the Economies of Caste and Class,” includes a chapter written by Matthew R. Sayers that traces specific innovations in the offerings and specialists attendant in two distinct types of ancestor worship recorded in the Gṛhyasūtras and analyzes a shift in the status of the ceremonies themselves. Amy L. Allocco’s chapter analyzes the brahminical *pūccorital vilā* (flower-shower festival) that was inaugurated at the popular non-Brahmin Muṅṭakakkaṇṇiyammaṅ Hindu goddess temple in Chennai, Tamil Nadu in 2005, paying special attention to the ways that this new ritual—imported to appeal to an upwardly mobile class of devotees and to generate funds for a special temple campaign—was deliberately located vis-à-vis an established and locally meaningful, non-Brahmin ritual vernacular. Allocco is interested in how this innovative ceremony brought two typically distinct ritual idioms into a complex conversation mediated by the culture of aspiration and conspicuous devotionism that increasingly defines contemporary Chennai. Similar themes are also present in Shital Sharma’s chapter, which identifies the contemporary devotional practices of upper-class Pushtimargi Vaishnava women in Gujarat as constitutive of a certain kind of “ritual economy,” in which social and cultural capital is produced and displayed to establish and maintain family class status.

Part 3, “Ritual and the Negotiation of Gender,” opens with Brian K. Pennington’s chapter, which draws on ethnographic research conducted in the North Indian Himalayas to analyze how a female Hindu healer leverages her move to an urban context to develop a thriving ritual practice that explicitly

employs a rural ritual idiom to establish the conditions for her economic independence. M. Whitney Kelting's chapter follows, and with it our focus shifts temporarily from Hindu to Jain religious traditions. Her discussion of unmarried women's participation in contemporary performances of the Updhān Fast, which amounts to practicing a kind of temporary nunhood, exposes how younger penitents refashion the rites to achieve such personal and worldly outcomes as advantageous marriage arrangements and how the public ceremonies have emerged as sites for adopting strategic piety and displaying marriageability. Liz Wilson's contribution examines innovations in the production of masculine identities and the possibilities for a brotherhood that cut across other markers of difference in Kerala's enormously popular Śabarimāla pilgrimage. Importantly, Wilson interrogates the mythological, liturgical, and social figurations of the feminine that are operative in this ritual context in tandem with the mechanisms for masculine identity formation and ecumenical bonding in the contemporary Ayyappaṇ movement, thus offering a nuanced portrait of the catalysts for and the effects of this changing tradition.

The three chapters that comprise Part 4, "Ritual Innovation in Contemporary Transnational Contexts," consider ritual innovation in North American Hinduisms. Charles S. Preston's contribution takes a performance of Roopa Iyer's "The Universal Truth: An Interpretation of Vedas through a Repertoire of Indian Dances" at the Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago to explore and complicate the relationships between "ritual" and "innovation." While Preston highlights the innovative juxtaposition of a genre of texts that are posited as uniquely authoritative with an art form that carries significant cultural capital, he also points out ways that the dance performance's deritualization of the Vedas parallels the modern history of Indian dance. Drawing on ethnographic research at temples and in domestic settings and interviews with thirty-seven Hindu women in Ottawa and Toronto, Janet Gunn's chapter offers an analysis of the dialectic between ritual innovation and perceived efficacy of household worship. Gunn is particularly interested in the everyday religious lives of women, particularly in the *pūjās* they conduct in their household shrines and the ways they reveal the creativity and elasticity through which culture is produced, transformed, and enacted. In the final chapter of the volume, Sudharshan Durayappah and Corinne G. Dempsey analyze three innovative South Indian rituals that were enacted in Toronto to validate and consecrate alternative lifestyles: a gay wedding between a Hindu man and a Muslim man, a marriage to join a polyamorous collective of eight lovers, and a coming-of-age ceremony performed for a gay man by his gay male friends. The authors emphasize that the ritual prac-

tices themselves in each case delineate levels of adherence to tradition and the potential for liberation present in these decidedly nontraditional rites. They note that while these highly personalized ceremonies pose challenges to traditional gender roles and expectations, they also represent cultural continuity, much as ritual itself suggests constancy and consistency even as it is transformative and produces transformations.

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