

# How Purity Is Made

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## Preface

The inspiration for the present volume developed out of interdisciplinary discussions within the Collaborative Research Centre “Ritual Dynamics” at Heidelberg University, investigating the changes and dynamics of rituals. In the framework of this centre, rituals are studied in diachronic and crosscultural perspectives by more than 20 sub-projects combining historical disciplines with those of the social sciences. Questions asked in these projects range from the implications of historical events on the effect of ritual changes to the function of rituals in allocating status. Among the topics are also the legitimizing or repressive functions of rituals, the use of rituals in negotiating social roles within the ritual community and society as a whole; and finally the structure and morphology of rites, for example, their differentiation and their increasing or decreasing complexity, as well as the relationship of script and performance, norm and practice. With a focus on the invention and re-invention of rituals, as well as the variance or invariance of ritual behaviour in cultural transfer, the strong cross-linking of projects on Asian and European cultures in this research centre enables the intercultural comparison of a wide spectrum of ritual activity.

Inspired by this research environment, a conference in February 2008 approached the idea of purification and purity rituals from a cross-cultural, interdisciplinary perspective and invited participants from various disciplines, including Assyriology, Egyptology, Indology, East Asian Art History, Japanology, and Islamic Studies, as well as Medieval History and Social Studies. Most of the papers presented at the conference are included in this volume. The discussion following this conference with colleagues from different fields within and outside the collaborative research centre resulted in the inclusion of several additional papers in this volume, which add greatly to the assessment of classical approaches in this field.

In this volume, purity and ritual are discussed in the light of five dimensions: action or techniques of purity, of concepts of purity, their visual and verbal representations, the experiences or emotions connected with these concepts and the daily routine or internalization of them. The book as a whole aims at contributing to the question of how the fields sketched here come to be related to one another in the social context.

In what ways, for example, do techniques of purity vary according to the notions of impurity as a concrete, material accretion or as a moral stain? With regard to the concepts of purity, it must be asked what patterns of meaning are constructed, and how central the notion of purity in peoples’ beliefs should be seen, how unforeseen cases compel a new interpretation or reflection. Categori-

cal criteria of purity are accompanied by feelings and emotions that are of great importance for guiding interactions in and between social structures. What underlying experiences nourish the lived dimension of purity? Asceticism, fasting, as well as the confession of transgressions promise feelings of release. What descriptions of experiential dimensions do we know from the past, and how can this be grasped today? Of special interest is the question of how the idea of purity is publicly staged, what figures and symbolic forms the collective representations of purity are tied to, and how normative and emotive aspects are portrayed to the world by using a variety of media such as images, sound, light, odors, etc. Purity metaphors and rhetoric are in common usage still in individual and public discourse. By looking at the internalization of selective mechanisms, such as avoidance tendencies, food choices, taste preferences, as well as bodily perceptions, daily routines of purity are shaped, even entire ways of life might be ritualized.

The articles collected in this volume deal with matters from basic grooming behaviour and the psychological effects of cleansing, to sophisticated purity regulations with a legal status. Cases discussed range geographically from the Far East to the United States, and chronologically from the early advanced civilizations to the present time.

We owe a debt of thanks to many, but in particular to Lucia Banholzer for her help in organizing the conference, to Abir Al-Laham and especially Daniela Esser for editing this volume and compiling the index, Douglas Fear for his profound language editing, Susanne Enderwitz and Lothar Ledderose for their support, and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) for funding this publication.

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