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Introduction to the Special Issue 'Religion, Ritual, and Ritualistic Objects'

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If an object-centered volume on religious ritual is anything, it is a collection of contributions on material culture as a manifestation of structured symbolic practices (Fleming and Mann 2014; Grimes 2011; Keane 2008; Morgan 2008). Such practices are assumed to be endowed with signification and to be based on an interrelated set of ideas. Rituals may be taken to exist because they perform the function of establishing a common mood and thus assert social solidarity, but a ritual has a particular style, is part of a cultural and symbolic order. Its material dimensions, particularly its objects, may provide us with keys to meaning-making.

According to Hodder (1987, p. 1) the meaning in objects is threefold: (1) objects have use value through their effect on the world (a functionalist, materialistic, or utilitarian perspective); (2) objects have structural or coded meanings, which they communicate (their symbolic meaning); (3) objects are meaningful through their past associations (their historical meaning). Studying objects as transporters of meaning, as well as people's responses to such objects, especially in ritual contexts, thus becomes a study not merely of culture-specific materiality (or: materialization, when the processual character is emphasized) but also of the multiple interpretations that occur when people and objects move from one context to another.

We are fortunate that all authors in this Special Issue show a sensitive awareness of contexts and people's responses to objects, and do not limit themselves to iconography, style, or symbolism. Nor do they fall victim to 'the danger of a single story' (as the novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls it in her TED-talk, (Adichie 2009)). The single story, according to Adichie, 'creates stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete' (quoted in (Buggeln and Franco 2018, p. xii)). Instead, all contributors present multiple perspectives and suspicion of single (or reductive) narratives, and thus allow their objects to come to life before the reader's eye, and shimmer.

This is not a collection of articles about rituals, but about the power of ritual objects. Some of those objects are found in museums; others are used within religious contexts and in daily life. Grimes: 'Ritual stuff is sometimes treasured and iconic, but sometimes it is not.' (Grimes 2011, p. 77) Cow dung is an example of the latter. In India it may be merely dirt; it may be scattered as fertilizer in the fields; mixed with straw and dried in the sun cow-patties may be used as fuel in simple ovens and furnaces; it may be the semi-fluid 'paint' with which the walls and floors of traditional rooms (temples and kitchens) were (and sometimes still are) ritually purified; and it may be the stuff from which divine figures are fashioned, as related by Catrien Notermans in her article on women's Govardhan festivities in rural Rajasthan.

1. Context

Things, objects, materiality: when they become saturated with religious meanings ((Morgan 2011, p. 140): 'a thing is an object waiting to happen') they appear to possess more power than people would reasonably allocate to them. What all contributions in this object-centered thematic issue share is the importance of **context**. The cow dung, mentioned above, in its normal appearance all over the world

is 'nothing but shit', literally so. The object's existence, function, and potency depend on the context. A heap of cow dung on an Indian street may be smartly sidestepped by an urban lady passing by. She carefully hitches the borders of her silk sari for a minute. But what is dirt to the lady on her way to office may be precious to the urban scavenger. It can be collected, dried, and sold to the factory where it is made into granules of organic fertilizer used in gardens. In Notermans' article it is all this, and more. In her portrayal of cow dung's cognitive and relational specificity, she draws attention to rural women's intimate relation to cows and their dung in various contexts. Is it the multiple-day feast of Divali, not merely the single ritual, which makes cow dung stand out as the substance of fertility? Is it the specific context in which cow dung is not merely dirt—indeed, in the festive ritual situation it becomes the material from which divine figures are crafted and about which local stories are being told and re-told—or does its significance exist independent of the ritual and narrative context? Notermans shows that for the women the cognitive and imaginative relation may be heightened by the ritual context, yet the basis is found in their daily lives and ecologies.

One of the qualities ascribed to ritual (Bell 1992, 1997) is that rituals are an intensified form of participation and communication. If we take 'communication' here to have both social (for example, disciplinary, expressive) purposes and self-referring properties—women intensifying their pre-existing everyday relationships to both cows and their produce—we could state that the rural women around Udaipur have a matter-of-fact relationship to cow dung that becomes more dense when expressed through ritual, creativity, narrativity, symbolism, and a common mood (cf. Collins 2004). Cow dung, to them, is precious in a multi-purpose way. That the festive figurines made of cow dung are destroyed on the spot, then sun-dried, and at the right time carried out to the fields as fertilizer points at a lifeworld in which context is merely a matter of application, of use and deployment. Context does matter but in this case study it is transitional rather than sharply oppositional. That such precarious ecology—in terms of both lifeworlds and livelihoods—is under threat, such as by housing projects, fertilizer factories, and intergenerational change, is, literally, merely a footnote.

2. Form

Does **form** matter? The role that the shape or aesthetics may play in ritual efficacy is best illustrated and critically discussed through Walter van Beek's article on Dogon dance masks. Both in the production of the masks and the staging of the masked dance there are identities, there is personhood, there is agency, but there is also imitation, role-play, a masquerade. Dance is 'matter in motion' (as van Beek's title aptly states): 'Masks are matter in motion and symbols in context.' It appears that in this case study we need to consider both context and form, both objects and movements and places. The masks are to honor the dead and provide them with a means to become ancestors. Death itself is a major transition, marked by funerary rituals, but the major transition ritual—that of ritually transferring them, post-death, to the realm of ancestors—is essential. There is a reason why the dead are often referred to as 'the departed': they are somewhere else, not with us anyway, but they are still unsettled and for their own good and that of society they need to be firmly established 'elsewhere', as ancestors. Warning for over-interpretation of masks, van Beek rejects stereotypical significations attributed by outsiders, by whom masks are thought to represent ancestors, deities, spirits, or, in a different register: objects of art. The Dogon masks, van Beek cautions, are the entire apparition: costume, headpiece, and paraphernalia. They are a class of beings in their own right, and they come from outside the village. They are a presence rather than a representation: wild animals, sometimes humans. Their dances often mimic the particular animal the apparition refers to, but the apparition is the mask, not the person behind it. At the same time, masks show trends and fashions. At some recent point in time, the author notes, masks tended to become de-liminized, once some dancers started to write their own name on the headpieces, along with the year. In this process of masks becoming personal billboards, the ritual objects had crossed over into the 'real' world, of writing lessons in school, and of the international calendar.

One of the notions that is challenged in this article is the materiality of the masks, their 'objectness' (cf. Morgan 2011). In this particular case, the headpiece (commonly referred to as a mask when placed in an ethnological museum) may be an object, but it is not a ritual object at all. The ritual entity, in the staged context of the dance, consists of the material object(s) plus the costumed dancer. This implies that it is the combination of person, object, and act that is the real ritual agent, the ritual entity that moves and acts.

When we compare these insights about Dogon masked dances and masquerades to Andrea Nicklisch's processions and displays of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ecclesiastical silverworks in the southern Andes, we truly cross over to another dimension of objectness and materiality. Although in van Beek's case we do find some intrusions of modernity—the European anthropologist, his camera, not to forget the billboard culture of individual names written on headpieces—in Nicklisch's study it is not the historical Spanish intrusion that determines the approach but the subsequent trans-cultural and inter-cultural processes. The silver objects are framed, by the author, as objects in their own rights, on their own non-verbal levels. This implies that the objects and images are studied from the perspective of the beholders. The degree to which, in the eyes of indigenous believers, the objects displayed before them may be interpreted as expressing continuity or discontinuity of indigenous or Catholic beliefs and iconographic vocabularies, is determined by the various angles. Nicklisch pays special attention to the angle that encompasses both belief systems, in the sense of a mutually transferred meaning. The objects are integrated into ritual acts in the context of church services and processions, yet in the ongoing cross-cultural and trans-cultural encounters there may be multiple readings of such images, objects, and rituals. The author uses the idea of 'contact zones' (Pratt 1991, p. 34), particularly cultural contact zones, as a sensitizing concept for indicating a (directly physical, spatial but also mental, intellectual) zone where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other.

A street shrine, framed in massive silverwork, hosts an image of the Virgin of Guadeloupe. Especially her cloak is covered with countless devotional gifts: precious stones, pearls, medals, coins and watches. It is this image of the Virgin—porcelain skin and sky-blue cloak—that is carried around in an annual procession. Pre-Hispanic worldviews and narratives shine through as mixed with Christian and possibly even pre-Christian European worldviews and narratives especially in the form of winged anthropomorphic beings. Much of this is made of local silver, or faced with silver, such as the tabernacle, candle banks, and altar. The author briefly discusses indigenous parallels, such as in the two silver plaquettes supposedly depicting Adam and Eve, as revealing a transfer of meaning. In the author's view, the indigenous system has instrumentalized a dominant system (Hispanic Christianity) as a vehicle and canvas for its own worldviews. By exploring processes as trans-cultural and cross-cultural transfer, she weighs related concepts such as cultural adaptation, acculturation, de-culturation, neo-culturation and trans-culturation. Is it possible, she wonders, to understand pictorial representations, in a colonial contact zone, directly, or at least beyond binary oppositions and exclusivities?

3. Figuration, Iconicity, Aniconicity

In Nicklisch's focus on historic objects made of silver, we may already have posed questions about **figuration, iconicity, and aniconicity** even when they were not accentuated or made explicit. Such questions were left out of both van Beek's and Nicklisch's presentation, but should be addressed here as a third connecting topic. The act of 'representation' may need to be distinguished from the notion of 'presence' (as van Beek did), but in most of the contributions there is no such distinction. Deborah de Koning, in her article on two annual rituals in Colombo, Sri Lanka, distinguishes two sides in the discourse and emerging cult around the god-king-hero-healer Ravana: the martial and the benevolent. She locates and temporizes these two main sides of his contemporary 'appearance' in two rituals: the ritual setting of a public street procession, and the low-key, low-profile rituals appealing to him as a healer, within the relative 'inner circle' of a Buddhist temple compound. Although the figure of Ravana

has long been familiar throughout Asia through the Hindu epic *Ramayana* (and more popularly through plays and performances, and particularly televization), there is a recent upsurge of his popularity in Sri Lanka. Although the process of 'Ravanization' is still too young, too new, and too fluid for her to determine its reach and impact, the author acknowledges the multidirectionality and processual nature of Ravana's cult by consistently speaking of 'ritualization' (cf. Bell 1988, 1997; Grimes 1982, 2011) instead of rituals. Zooming in on two major ways in which Ravana is portrayed—his martial side and his benevolent side—she grapples with the inconsistency of binary categorizations. Yet, instead of the stereotypically monstrous, we find a warrior-king whose 'attributes' are presented in a spectacular display, ranging from a parade of 'jeweled' elephants to drum dances and *angampora* martial arts. Most stunning and disconcerting in its eeriness is the life-like statue of King Ravana himself as the center of the elephant procession. That Ravana is thus being hailed as a god-king refers back to (Sri) Lanka as the location of the epic war between Rama and Ravana. This direct (and highly imaginative) association between Lanka and Ravana—as Lanka's famous king in epic times—has gained new currency in today's nationalist sentiments.

The other, explicitly benevolent, side may be more puzzling to some: how could the same exalted figure, whose role combines the various personalities of royal adversary-warrior-epic king-founder of the nation be simultaneously a sage, a healer, a benefactor, a deity even, to those who participate in a ritual of participation, by imbibing his bathwater as medicine? Whereas the figure of the 'just ruler' may be a logical composition, the composite configurations we find in Ravana as a healer may need more crystallization before anything definite can be said about this aspect. Possibly, it is easier for us to understand a king's sword as symbolizing both his martial prowess and his role of dispensing or guarding justice. The warrior-king may have been previously demonized by his adversaries, but that this same god-king is now dispensing medicine and carrying the lotus as one of his emblems may be better understood and aligned with his martial side when seen in the perspective of a South Asian king's role in times of war as contrasted with his role in times of peace. There might be a fascinating sequence to this publication when the author would undertake an exploration of possible parallels with the *bodhisattva* figure; after all, these healing rituals take place within the precincts of a Buddhist temple.

From sword and scripture or lotus as attributes of a god-king, symbolizing his layered power, we move on to the symbol of the lotus in a completely different time and setting: ancient Egypt, the Levant and Mesopotamia, in an article by Andrew McDonald. Lotuses are widely dispersed—all they need is a little water, mud, and the sun's warmth—and so is the lotus motif. The lotus may have grown within everyone's reach in a wide area—from the Nilotic and other ancient river civilizations, such as those of the Euphrates and Tigris to contemporary ponds, marshes, and mud-holes throughout South and Southeast Asia. But the history of arts and artifacts is such that what has survived the rampages of time is often connected with royal dynasties, court deities, and priestly rituals. McDonald, in his study of Egyptian lotus symbolism, does not lose sight of the aquatic, biological, and botanical realities, but in studying surviving artifacts he is necessarily limited to the symbolism of 'high culture'. The lotus motifs he presents in his article are highly stylized, exquisite to look at, especially considering that some or most of the depictions must have been colored (blue and variations of yellow). Most of the floral and vegetative illustrations he uses are static images now kept in museums, but he also provides textual details and photographed botanic specificities to make his points: the time-tested role of water lilies in (royal or priestly) libation ceremonies. Such ceremonies are portrayed on the walls of tombs, on papyri, royal thrones, coffins, drinking cups, and vases. In ritualistic contexts on both sides of the Red Sea, a rite of passage involved a person's metaphorical transformation into a lotus flower, both in a ruler's inauguration and in his funerary rites. It should not surprise us that, in a circular worldview, a short-lived aquatic flower was so closely connected to the solar disc and the arc of the sky; by richly illustrating his article with well-chosen images the author discloses the associative logic of this floral symbolism.

Lotus symbolism, in McDonalds' presentation, is rich and layered. One of the keys to this symbolism is the plant's three-day life span, and the fact that new shoots arise before a flower stalk

has finished the three days of anthesis. These three phases—as a bud, a half-open lotus with delicately unfolding petals, and a fully opened lotus looking like an aureole, indeed the solar disc—may seem extremely transient to some. Yet the lotus became a symbol of immortality, combining obvious fertility motifs, cycles of return, conceptions of immortality and aspirations to join the gods in the afterlife. In initiation rituals, 'lotus nectar' may even have been imbibed for its psychoactive effects. In the course of time (from 2500 BCE onwards) and through cultural diffusion as well as geographic expansion (Ancient Egypt, the Fertile Crescent, Levantine centers, Greece and onwards), distant human populations came to share these iconographic, mythic, and ritualistic conventions. Moreover, lotus symbolism began to collate crucial elements with sacred tree symbolism, and the occasional transition of the herbaceous plant into a sacral (lotiform) world-tree motif includes ancient winged entities, serpents, and solar orbs we may see referred to even today, such as in forms of both western and eastern esotericism. But on this point McDonald wisely restrains himself, and merely mentions a minor work by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1935).

Vegetative symbolism may use life-like floral and plant imagery, and in that sense its art may be called figurative, but plant symbolism can become so dense and stylized that the resulting compositions draw the beholder into complicated allegorical significances, especially in the ritualistic use of immortalizing plants. Can ancient Egyptian tableaus on coffins and tombs still be called iconic in the conventional sense of that term? When floral motifs become so stylized and juxtaposed with so many intricate motifs referring to eternal life, can we still speak of iconicity? Moreover, all persons and all vegetation portrayed there have been dead for millennia; how could we possibly link all that dead matter to biological and botanical reality? There seems to be an enormous gulf between the tombs of ancient Egyptian pharaohs and the next topic, pictures taken of children taking part in funerary rites for a dead parent in a contemporary Dutch family, but in fact there isn't. Laurie Faro introduces us to ritual-like mnemonic and coping practices of children in whose memories their dead father lives on, among other reminiscences, through a series of intentionally and purposely taken photographs. A striking detail of Faro's report is that the mother of the children, who, naturally, having lost her husband, herself is full of grief, carefully plans and initiates the entire event with the children's perspective foremost in her mind. While orchestrating the entire set of mourning activities, she is lucidly aware that she should create memories, good memories, for the children. In terms of academic studies on dying, death, and disposal, she is a prime example of the 'continuing bonds' and 'symbolic immortality' paradigms.

Today, post-mortem photography is rare. In this particular case, the children's mother decided not to have the deceased photographed, or at least not to have any photographs of him while lying in his coffin, to be included in the 'visual essay'. Photos of the dead, be they taken long before they actually died or on their death-bed, may function as tangible links between past and present (Zerubavel 2003), but most people choose to remember a lighter moment, the beloved person at his or her best. When the coffin had been positioned in one of the rooms in the family's home, they had surrounded it with flowers—indeed, in a way resembling the ancient Egyptians with their lotuses—as well as with some earlier pictures of the deceased among his family while still alive. Faro's article makes mention of some other objects, indicated as 'transitional objects', put into the coffin by the children, objects that the children considered to 'represent' or 'characterize' him. Although Faro does not discuss the 'absence-presence' predicament of death rites explicitly, there are clues in her article. For instance, the six-year-old boy imagines his father to now live on a little cloud (in the original Dutch it almost sounds as: on a cotton-ball fluff), and as on the way to a new life. Unexpectedly, bridging millennia, this is not unlike the imagery and promises of ancient Egyptian death rites.

Figuration, iconicity, and aniconicity are much more explicitly thematized in Albertina Nugteren's article on a Hindu god's footprint believed to have been left on a natural rock in Gaya, India. After a general introduction into the social facts of human feet and footwear in India, Nugteren zooms in on divine feet. The idea that the divine (deities, prophets, messengers, the numinously sacred in general) may leave footprints is widespread in the world, and India is particularly blessed by such

visible-tangible 'traces'. Or should we say that human imagination proves to be so fertile that it finds traces of divine presence in both expected and unexpected places, and does not shy from exploiting such sites? Places of pilgrimage have often grown around such a gravitational point (Eck 2012), and so is the case in Gaya. A search for origins—what came first? How and with what object or story or event did this ritual center start?—is bound to lead contemporary scholars to frustration. Nugteren extricates various myths and local variations of such myths, but acknowledges that they may well be later—ex post facto—justifications, rationalizations, and embellishments. What remains is the object as such: a more or less clearly outlined imprint of a footstep (toes, and a hollow impression where both the ball and the heel of a foot may have slightly dented the surface) on a piece of natural rock.

In the temple's everyday reality, however, devotees are not particularly interested in the form. Instead, they cover the basin almost continuously with gifts of flower petals, sacred leaves, oil, clarified butter, and other ritual-sacrificial substances. Ritual gifts, naturally, are part of an exchange, and many prayers and wishes are said aloud or muttered inaudibly. Key to the ritual behavior in front of this divine footprint is a lively engagement with the god Vishnu's absence-presence: He was here, once, in primordial time, and subsequently left his footprint on a rock. Priests and devotees are now continuously filling the hollows his foot is supposed to have left on the stone. The dichotomies absence-presence and emptiness-fullness are thus ritually bridged, transcended, and transformed. From a more distanced and etic perspective, the cult around the footprint poses a question about the figurative nature of such a natural footprint: can we speak of an icon and thus of iconicity, or does such a 'natural manifestation of the divine' in the form of a trace of his presence, an imprint of his foot, belong to that other category, the aniconic (Gaifman 2017)? It cannot be called a relic, as this is not a foot, merely the alleged imprint of a foot; yet for the faithful it appears to be all at the same time, without the finer distinctions between concavities and convexities, or between presence and absence. What matters, really, is the god's grace, and the cultural heritage of narratives that ascertain that he once moved around in this world, and that his feet touched this spot. He may no longer be seen in his full form, but this is the place where one comes closest to his visible and tangible presence.

4. The Ritual Setting

As a fourth focal point, we trace the importance of **the ritual setting**. In an object-centered issue like this, some authors pay more attention to the ritual setting than others. With the jointly written contribution by Xiaohe Ma and Chuan Wang, we enter the domain of ritual manuals. Indeed, in some cultural situations rituals have to be performed 'by the book' and are highly stylized events. In ritual theories, especially those referring to events requiring adherence to time-tested traditional rules, stylization (or its concomitants, formalism, traditionalism, invariance and rule-governance) may be considered one of the crucial aspects of ritual performance (Bell 1992, 1997). Ritual manuals may have been newly constructed yet given the sheen of a long pedigree, but they also may have grown through long practice. Texts may become ritualized just as rituals may become textualized (Bell 1988). Such manuals may have been written down by one authoritative person, but in other cases an anonymous author may have merely compiled what had long been practiced and had been transmitted orally until the moment of compilation. Formalization may both produce and maintain tradition, and its efficacy may be partly due to the fact that a formalized ritual becomes a form of power and control. Another dimension of constructed tradition is that it may delineate group identity. This latter aspect becomes especially pungent in the case of Chinese Manichaeism, which in later Chinese history was often considered a potentially troublesome sect. One of its strategies was a continuous assimilation of Buddhist and Taoist terminology; it survived, in its later forms, as Religion of Light. The possession of a written collection of manuals for congregational worship may well have been a factor in both its precarious delineation and its vitality.

Although most religious scholars may be aware of Manichaeism (also spelled Manicheism) as a Gnostic movement that once stretched from the Atlantic to the Chinese Sea but has long been completely extinct, it may come as a pleasant surprise to hear that recent finds indicate that some

material traces testify to its long survival in Buddhist or Taoist 'disguise' even today. This highly contested topic, however, is not what the two authors are concerned with; rather, they attempt to understand a collection of ritual manuals from Chinese Manichaeism in the perspective of a pictorial tradition in the form of a painting, and vice versa. The upper part of this painting, known as 'Diagram of the Universe', is generally said to portray 'Mani, the Buddha of Light'. It portrays Mani, the founder of Manichaeism who lived in the third century, as a Buddha. Not only was Manichaeism deeply sinicized on its entry in China, adapting to the Chinese cultural context, its basic tenets included a claim to universality, as the completion and fulfillment of all preceding religions. That its founder Mani was portrayed as a Buddha is not exceptional at all, considering both Manichaeism's claim to universality and its uneasy status as a sect. Ma and Wang, however, were puzzled about the lower part of the painting. In this article, they try to 'read' this lower part (of a half-devotional, half-didactic painting dated late 14th/early 15th century) by using the ritual manuals (of which the oldest parts may go back to the 9th to 11th century, but as a compilation may more or less be dated about the same period as the painting) as a clue or chiffre. Using the method of juxtaposition, by combining a written collection of rituals as a key to the lower half of a painted scroll, they hope to come to a deeper understanding of both objects.

Mahayana Buddhism in China had developed an extensive congregational cult, consisting of ritual activities such as worship (invocation of Buddhas, *bodhisattvas*, and even sacred scriptures), confession, and repentance, and chanting by the priests as well as the audience. For various reasons, Manichaean sects were, on and off, considered as potentially troublesome minorities, and this may partly explain why Manichaeism began to be practiced under 'the cloak of Buddhism', as Ma and Wang call it. The ritual compilation *Mani Buddha of Light* shows many parallel elements with Mahayana Buddhism, but the 'great ones' being invoked in rituals are the five Manichaean prophets (Nārāyaṇa, Zoroaster, Buddha Sakyamuni (the historical Buddha), Buddha Jesus and Buddha Mani). When the elaborate *Diagram of the Universe* is deployed as a kind of illustration of the rituals, or conversely but simultaneously, when the ritual manual is deployed as an illustration of the cosmology displayed in the scroll painting, an extremely rich and intricate image of Chinese Manichaeism emerges. Terms such as 'realm of Light', 'new paradise' and 'new Light world' not only indicate the salvationist and soteriological character of Chinese Manichaeism, but also present a fascinating parade of beings (humans, divine beings, monsters, animals) populating the various realms (or rings of existence) surrounding—indeed—mythical Mount Meru at the center of the cosmos.

Whereas the Manichaean pantheon and paradises of Light are overwhelming in their luminosity, there is a world of Darkness there as well. Manichaean views and practices in general may be known to most scholars of religion mainly through the works of anti-Manichaean polemicists, where Manichaeism tends to be presented as an arch-heresy. In a great leap through time and geography we now find ourselves, with Frank Bosman's article on the *Creed of Assassins* in the digital world of online games and encounter another cosmic dualism, another paradise, and another esoteric worldview: the battle for the Apples of Eden, between Templars and Assassins. Although the historical realities of these two name-giving associations do not entirely translate to the online identities, the names give a quasi-historic, quasi-mythic character to the game. The overall setting is the ongoing battle between two rival factions: the Assassin Brotherhood (modeled on the historical Nizar Isma'illis known from the Third Crusade) and the Templar Order (inspired by the historical order of the Knights Templar who had started as protectors of pilgrims in occupied Jerusalem). They compete over the possession of mythical artifacts, the Apples of Eden: power objects par excellence.

That the universal binaries—life and death; belonging and exclusion; state control and individual emancipation—are marked by in-game rituals may be expected. Initiation, the purpose of which is to accompany, produce, and announce a vital change of position, in this case of initiation into a fraternity, is usually classified as a rite of passage. The ritual of assassination—the victims belong to the competing faction—may be likewise characterized as a rite of passage: violence, human sacrifice, death. Political assassination is thus elevated and ritualized as one group's rite of belonging and

identity for the good of the world ('We work in the dark, to serve the light. We are Assassins'). In the perspective of current extremisms, human sacrifice, in this series of games, is highly problematic, and Bosman admits that it may become palatable and justifiable only when ritualized, and when nothing less than World Order is at stake. Although 'it is merely a game', this latter aspect confronts us with another side of ritual and ritualistic objects. The ritual activity of sacrifice—from the perspectives of victims and perpetrators alike—has been studied by many academic disciplines, and the rich density of its meanings continues to invite theoretical reflections. The translation of online and in-game violence back into today's daily life-world, and vice versa, poses compelling questions about ritual refraction (Houseman 2011).

Violence, committed wittingly or unwittingly, is one of the subtopics in the co-authored article on stories told in the Alor-Pantar archipelago, Southeast Indonesia, by Francesco Cacciafoco and Francesco Cavallaro. The violence committed in various versions of the founding myth they study may be considered a sacrifice, it may be considered communion through food, but in its bare bones the story is about an innocent child. This child had lost its way and happened to trespass, i.e., it unintentionally passed into the supernatural world where some of the deities used to rest and meet with the Abui people. The child was taken hostage, dismembered, cooked, and served as food. Those who had been invited to the gruesome feast from the outside world only later discovered that the food that had been offered to them on a table was actually the dismembered body and head of the missing child. On request, the horrified dinner guests from the village were allowed to take the child's head with them.

The main story's composite configurations reflect a ritual setting in more ways than one. First, there is the ritual-like act of storytelling itself. Storytelling is not just a pastime, it is a ritual recreation of primeval times, and only the 'owner' of a story knows the story in its entirety. Gaps and inconsistencies should not be seen as flaws or errors; rather, they are the prerogative of the 'owner' of the story who leaves out certain parts or consciously makes leaps and bounds through the story. The rightful 'owner' of the story may even act as a trickster and put his audience on the wrong foot, intentionally, playing with his audience's misplaced rationality. Second, there is the ritual meal. The horrific dinner referred to above may reflect times when the Abui people were still cannibalistic head-hunters, and the head trophies—the skulls of people killed in war—were often placed and kept on altars in sacred places and fed with cooked rice. Remember that the child's head was ceremonially placed at the central table—as if on an altar—amidst the other cooked human meat! The altars with ritual stones surviving today may be directly linked with this past. Third, when contexts change or stories get juxtaposed with other narratives, or the same legend is being retold with shifting interpretations and shifting loyalties, the ritual-like activity of storytelling becomes a 'discourse': interlocking story motifs testify to intercultural contact, such as with the Portuguese and Dutch colonizers from the sixteenth century onwards. The authors not only relate an alternative (still unpublished) version of the same myth, they also attempt to make sense of the changing positions of the main deities, Lamoling and Latahala, in the light of Christian missiology and fragments of Platonic thinking and classical theology. Naturally, this results in clashes and paradoxes (cf. Ingold 2003). But by indicating the stratified character of the myth in its variations, the authors attempt a 'stratigraphy'. One of the outcomes is that one god, who used to be a companion of the people, eats with them, dances with them, and shares their everyday life events, begins to be gradually portrayed as demonic, constantly changing in form, unreliable—the epitome of the charms of animism (cf. Sprenger 2015) and the dangers of polytheism—whereas the other god is gradually elevated to a monotheistic rank where he is considered 'the only and true god'.

It is fascinating to notice how the authors, with their sociolinguistic backgrounds, are increasingly drawn into the narrative by their attempt to analyze and understand place names. One of the methods for tracing 'mythscapes' is the exploration of local landscapes in terms of place names: their semantic properties may define and delimit landscape categories, just as their features (plants, crops, but also vernacular names of typical landmarks in the topography) are situated by narration. Toponyms may testify to the traditional use of a place and may shed light on landscape as a religious category.

A toponym, explained either in a scholarly way or through local folk etymology, may also be a key to the ritual position of a particular location. Main places in this respect are Lamoling Beaka and Karilik, both 'gates' and 'portals' to the world of supernatural entities. Myths, like rituals, can be analyzed as 'situated practices' (Overing 2004, p. 71). Myth actually shapes the world and its landscapes. In a way, this represents the fourth aspect of the ritual setting in this article: they used to be indigenous cult places, now abandoned, but still honored as the sacred sites where the events reported in their founding myth had once taken place.

5. Conclusions

In a fascinatingly diverse way, people come to embody 'their' culture, a complex set of ideas, values, and practices. Whether they are religiously inclined or not, at cross-national, trans-national and inter-national levels, they are inescapably part of a world in which there may be religious dimensions to collective aspirations, such as for peace and justice, but also to tensions, violence, and conflicts. History shows that faith traditions may splinter into small groups. They may also merge, fuse, mix, co-exist, incorporate, compete, transcend, or fade away. In such processes, ritual calendars mark significant past events. What exactly is historic past, and what is mythic past, may easily get blurred, but particular moments, sites, and objects take on a particular importance in the group's hierarchy of time and place. Although all sacred occasions and sites are centers, some are believed to bring believers closer to the divine than others (Hassner 2009, pp. 29–30). The same may be true of sacred objects: 'ownership' of sacred objects has often given rise to violent conflicts. The individual rewards attributed to visiting such a site or possessing such an object vary from situation to situation, from culture to culture, and from religion to religion.

Instead of highlighting conflicts over such objects, in the sense of military, theological, political, or touristic clashes, the objects presented in this volume illumine subtler processes. Most of them are presented as modes of experiencing divinity, as making divinity (or the divinity of royal rule) sense-able. By studying them in their ritual setting, 'loops' are made between collective cultural practices and individual sensing (Howes and Classen 2014). An object may shine in all its exuberant materiality; it may come to life only through the ritual setting and its performative aspects; or it may exist merely for a moment, and then be intentionally eaten or otherwise destroyed. The use of religious objects involves not only the collective and individual's experience but also all those people who are involved in their production, ritualization, and maintenance. This broader context illustrates how religious acts and actors co-define material objects to suit changing times and audiences.

This brings us to the end of this introduction. In the final pages of this thematic issue of the journal *Religions*, on 'Religion, Ritual and Ritualistic Objects', the biodata of all authors are briefly introduced as well.

For me, acting as convener and academic editor, it has been a pleasure to work with them.

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- van Beek, Walter E. A. 2018. Matter in Motion: A Dogon *Kanaga Mask*. *Religions* 9: 264.
- Bosman, Frank G. 2018. Resquiescat in Pace. Initiation and Assassination Rituals in the Assassins's Creed Game Series. *Religions* 9: 167.
- Cacciafoca, Francesco Perono, and Francesco Cavallero. 2018. Lamòling Bèaka: Immanence, Rituals, and Sacred Objects in an Unwritten Legend in Alor. *Religions* 9: 211.
- Faro, Laurie M. C. 2018. When Children Participate in the Death Ritual of a Parent: Funerary Photographs as Mnemonic Objects. *Religions* 9: 215.
- de Koning, Deborah. 2018. The Ritualizing of the Martial and Benevolent Side of Ravana in the Annual Rituals at the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya in Pannipitiya, Sri Lanka. *Religions* 9: 250.
- Ma, Xiaohe, and Chuan Wang. 2018. On the Xiapu Ritual Manual *Mani the Buddha of Light*. *Religions* 9: 212.

- McDonald, J. Andrew. 2018. Influences of Egyptian Lotus Symbolism and Ritualistic Practices on Sacral Tree Worship in the Fertile Crescent from 1500 BCE to 200 CE. *Religions* 9: 256.
- Nicklisch, Andrea. 2018. Continuity and Discontinuity in 17th- and 18th-Century Ecclesiastical Silverworks from the Southern Andes. *Religions* 9: 262.
- Notermans, Catrien. 2019. Prayers of Cowdung: Women Sculpturing Fertile Environments in Rural Rajasthan (India). *Religions* 10: 71.
- Nugteren, Albertina. 2018. Bare feet and Sacred Ground: "Viṣṇu Was Here". *Religions* 9: 224.

7. List of Contributing Authors

Walter **van Beek** is professor em. in the Anthropology of Religion at Tilburg University, and senior researcher at the African Studies Center, Leiden University, both in The Netherlands. As a cultural anthropologist he has a long field experience among the Dogon of Mali and the Kapsiki/Higi of Cameroon and Nigeria. He has published extensively on indigenous religious aspects of both groups, such as in 2017, *Rites et religions dans le Bassin du Lac Tchad*, edited with Emilie Guitard (Karthala/ASCL); in 2016, *The Transmission of Kapsiki-Higi Folktales over Two Generations: Tales that Come, Tales that Go* (Palgrave-MacMillan); and in 2015, *The Forge and the Funeral. The Smith in Kapsiki/Higi Culture* (Michigan State University Press). At present he is engaged in a project of cultural heritage preservation in Mali, and a wide-ranging study of African masking rituals.

Frank **Bosman** is a senior researcher at Tilburg Cobbenhagen Center, Tilburg University, The Netherlands. He has published extensively on religion and popular culture, with a special focus on religion and video games. He plays a noticable role in the public discussions in The Netherlands on religion and society through multiple on- and offline media outlets. Game-related publications are: in 2018, Death Narratives: A Typology of Narratological Embeddings of Player's Death in Digital Games, *Gamenvironments* 9: 12–52; in 2017, The incarnated gamer. The theophoric quality of games, gaming, and gamers. In *Boundaries of the self and reality online. Implications of digitally constructed realities.* Edited by Jayne Gackenbach and Johnathan Brown (Londen: Elsevier, pp. 187–204), and soon to be published, his book *Gaming and the divine. A new systematic theology of video games* (London: Routledge).

Francesco **Cacciafoco** has a PhD (2011) in Historical Linguistics from the University of Pisa, Italy. He is a linguist and philologist with a focus on etymology and toponymy. He also works on anthropological linguistics and cultural anthropology applied to the documentation of undocumented and/or endangered languages and to the reconstruction of indigenous myths and legends. He joined Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore, in 2013 where he is currently a lecturer in linguistics. Some of his selected publications are: in 2017, together with Francesco Cavallaro, The Legend of Lamòling: Unwritten Memories and Diachronic Toponymy through the Lens of an Abui Myth. *Lingua: An International Review of General Linguistics* 193: 51–61; and with the same co-author and František Kratochvíl, in 2015: Diachronic Toponomastics and Language Reconstruction in South-East Asia According to an Experimental Convergent Methodology: Abui as a Case-Study. *Review of Historical Geography and Toponomastics* 10: 29–47.

Francesco **Cavallaro** Francesco Cavallaro is an Associate Professor in Linguistics and Multilingual Studies and the Head of the Centre for Modern Languages, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His research interests are in sociolinguistics and the social aspects of bilingualism, especially of minority groups in multilingual contexts. His main research focus is the survival of minority languages and the factors that influence both language maintenance and shift. He has published on language maintenance and shift, the demographics of the Italian community in Australia, language attitudes in Singapore and on minority groups in South East Asia. In addition to the articles mentioned above, in co-authorship with Francesco Cacciafoco, he is the author of the book, published in 2010, *Transgenerational language shift: From Sicilian and Italian to Australian English* (La Trobe University, Melbourne).

Laurie **Faro** has been educated in the field of law and culture studies. Already as a young attorney she developed a strong interest in empowering the victim in the legal process. This focus

remained when she switched to scientific research in the field of health law, care and patients' rights. In 1990 she completed a PhD project on this subject, and in 2015 a second PhD on the experiences of people burdened with traumatic experiences in the past and the impact of their ritual commemoration practices. At present she is involved in the research project 'Children handling death: reality versus popular culture.' Related publications are, in 2015, *Postponed monuments in the Netherlands: Manifestation, context, and meaning* (PhD thesis Tilburg University); and in 2014, 'The Digital Monument to the Jewish Community in The Netherlands: A meaningful, ritual place for commemoration'. *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia* 20: 1–20.

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