"Mantras: Sound, Materiality, and the Body": A Comprehensive Workshop Report

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Introduction

The hybrid workshop "Mantras: Sound, Materiality, and the Body" was held on May 12–14, 2022 at the University of Vienna (Austria)'s Department of South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies (ISTB), as well as online via Zoom. In terms of organizational assistance and funding it was also supported by two other institutions, namely: the Asia Research Institute (ARI) at the National University of Singapore (Singapore), and the Center for Contemporary South Asia (CCSA) at Brown University (USA). There were five main organizers: Borayin Larios (ISTB), Finnian M.M. Gerety (CCSA), Carola E. Lorea (ARI), Gudrun Bühnemann (Department of Asian Languages and Cultures, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA), and Dominik A. Haas (Institute for the Cultural and Intellectual History of Asia, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Austria; as well as the ISTB, University of Vienna, Austria).

The three-day workshop brought together a diverse range of scholars from over thirty academic institutions. Its aim was to further the growth of Mantra Studies as a field by fostering synergy among scholars working on mantra utilizing different materials, approaches, and frameworks. In order to create a trusting and fertile setting for the discussion of new research projects and approaches (many of which were or still are under development), it was held *in camera*. Furthermore, the contributions to be discussed were shared between the participants in advance. This approach proved to be particularly useful in terms of fulfilling the workshop's objective.

Written by someone who was involved as an organizer, a presenter, as well as a chairperson, this report is intended to make the contents and results of the workshop accessible to the wider public by summarizing the individual contributions and

addressing avenues for future research on mantras. The purpose of this report, however, is not limited to providing a snapshot of the workshop (the programme, including the abstracts, being freely available online), but to serve as a tool for inspiring, developing, and situating new research approaches in Mantra Studies. To this end, I present the individual contributions in an order that reflects thematic overlaps and methodological intersections that became apparent during the workshop.

The nature of this report allows me to thank the participants here in the main text (and not peripherally in a footnote) for their stimulating and inspiring contributions and presentations, astute remarks and reflections, and especially for their help in writing and formulating this document. I also thank the other organizers for our productive collaboration and the three institutions involved for making the workshop possible. Last but not least, I thank Georgi Krustev for reading the English manuscript and suggesting various corrections.

Mantras as multimodal media: sound, materiality, and space

Mantras are not only strings of words and sentences that can be understood as texts, but they also have sonic, material, and visual aspects that play an important role in their application. As multimodal media, they carry meaning not only through their linguistic content, which is, in practice, often secondary to their form – muttered or depicted. Rather, physical contact with them through hearing their sound or through the material medium on which they are written is, in many cases, considered sufficient (or even primary) for them to become effective. The location and environment where this contact occurs are also significant for many mantra practices. This multimodal aspect of mantras was addressed in a variety of contributions.

Keith Edward Cantú[2] discussed the use of mantras in the works and teachings of Sabhapati Swami (c. 1828–1923/4) – a religious teacher who was mainly active in South India. In his Tamil (and Maṇipravālam) works, Sabhapati Swami provides guidance for folk festivals and rituals that also involve the recitation of Sanskrit mantras. These are not only explained in the Tamil language, but also connected to music, which made them accessible to a wider public. An interesting aspect of Sabhapati's teachings is that the use of mantras also includes meditation on their sounds, which highlights not only the importance of the language content of mantras, but of their very "substance" – in this case, sound.

Jan E.M. Houben[3] addressed a long-debated issue in Mantra Studies, namely the question of whether mantras have meaning or not. The notion that the Vedic mantras are authorless (and hence possibly even meaningless) is frequently presented as the

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[2] Jagiellonian University (Krakow, Poland); "To Summon or to Surrender: A Development of Mantric Arts among Tamil Swamigals" (Panel 3).
[3] École Pratique des Hautes Études, Sciences historiques et philologiques – Paris Sciences et Lettres (France); "Meaningful Vedic Mantras and their Transformations" (Panel 8).

typical Indian position. As the examples of the Vaiśeṣikas, Naiyāyikas, and Aitihāsikas show, however, this notion has not been shared by all South Asian traditions. That the Vedic mantras are meaningful was also the explicit position of Skandasvāmin, who, in the introduction to his commentary on the Ṛgveda, distinguished five categories of meaningful Vedic mantras. Only in the fifth category, meant for purposes such as *japa*, is the linguistic meaning of the mantra external to its immediate ritual use. It is this category that seems to implicitly accept something like the "sound value" of mantras – something which, together with *chandas* or the meter of each Vedic verse, is neglected in the rest of his commentary.

Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko[4] explored how mantras and their soteriological efficacy are understood by contemporary Vajrayāna Buddhists from Mongolia and Australia. Mantras are believed to work primarily through sonic and material agency, for example, by being recited or written on prayer flags that transfer their blessings to the wind. The capacity to produce salvific sound is exclusive to humans, who are thus categorically different from animals. The inability of animals to express themselves verbally is seen as a negative aspect of their state of existence, which according to Buddhist theory is the result of negative karma accrued in past lives. However, animals can also benefit from *hearing* mantras and prayers – a consequence of the circumstance that the semantic content of mantras and prayers is generally considered secondary (if understood at all).

Kathrin Holz's[5] paper dealt with Buddhist *rakṣā* mantras, i.e. "protective" or "apotropaic" formulae from primarily South and Central Asia. Since around the 2nd century CE, these *rakṣā* mantras were preserved and put to use by means of being written down in manuscripts made of various materials, either as parts of longer *rakṣā* texts or in isolation. An interesting observation is that the name of the persons to be protected (above all, travellers or merchants) was sometimes not specified (instead, a space was left blank where the name could be entered) or modified later. The formulae on such manuscripts were not only meant to be recited – rather, they were to be worn as amulets, or deposited in *stūpa*s. Continuities with the Vedic tradition (amulets are also known from the Atharvaveda) are possible.

Richard David Williams's[6] contribution was concerned with ritual handbooks in Hindi that were produced from the 19th century onwards. Panah Ali's Indrajāl (published 1876), for instance, is a practical, "do-it-yourself" handbook that is intended for a popular readership, and offers a range of magic means to achieve common, worldly goals (such as enchanting a woman). The procedures it describes are deeply influenced by Islamicate literature and culture, even though the Sanskrit mantras involved are directed at Hindu deities. What is most striking is that the oral-aural

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[4] University of Copenhagen (Denmark); "Human Exceptionalism and the Sound of Awakening: Countercurrents in Buddhist Soteriology" (Panel 6).
[5] Université de Lausanne (Switzerland); "On the Application of Buddhist Apotropaic Mantras" (Panel 1).
[6] SOAS University of London (UK); "Practical Magic: Accessible Mantras and Hindi Handbooks, c.1870-1930" (Panel 7).

aspect of mantras is mostly ignored: mantras become effective through their written and material form (e.g. as talismans), and not by being recited or heard.

Rae Dachille[7] built upon her already published work on a ca. 10th–11th century manuscript from Dunhuang (IOL Tib J 576), in which a plethora of transliterated and translated mantras is found. In particular, it contains multiple allographic variations of the mantra *oṃ*. These variations may have facilitated the orientation of the scribe as well as the reader, and they thus fulfilled a similar function as spaces in modern printed texts. With her presentation and especially the discussion that followed, Dachille brought the visual and material worlds of the manuscript to life and challenged traditional ways of classifying "text"" and "image" among the materials from the Dunhuang library cave. The presentation made an important contribution concerning the material and visual aspect of mantras and illuminated connections between scribal and ritual practice.

Nike-Ann Schröder[8] presented her research and movie project on Pema Wangchuk, a Tibetan yogi and refugee living in Ladakh, and his practice of inscribing the "Maṇi-Mantra" or *oṃ maṇi-padme hūṃ* into stones and rocks. She began by introducing the concept of "lived space," which is determined by three factors: (1) specific practices and performances, (2) the cultural/religious framework, and (3) the individual contribution of the practitioner. She then discussed three such lived spaces: (a) Pema Wangchuk's own human-size inscriptions of the mantra, (b) his relationship to and interpretation of a giant inscription at a cremation ground, and (c) the production of Maṇi stones for Tibetans who self-immolated in protest against Chinese rule. Schröder's work shows that ethnographic and biographic approaches are vital to understanding individual mantra practices, and further raises the complex question of the agency of the mantras themselves and their individual, religious, political, and social dimensions.

Katherine Scahill[9] offered a glimpse into her ongoing ethnographic research on a community of nuns at a Theravada Buddhist temple in Thailand, the Wat Songdhammakalyani. At this temple, the worship of the blue Medicine Buddha plays an important role. During the height of the Covid-19 surge in 2021, the practice of meditating and chanting the mantra of the Buddha together was translated into an online setting: each week, a photograph of the statue of the Buddha and the text of the mantra were posted on Facebook, and the followers responded with virtual versions of real-life reactions (e.g. bowing or prostrating Avatars). This development highlights

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[7] University of Arizona (USA); "The Density of Mantra: Navigating Text, Image, and Embodiment in the Dunhuang Library Cave" (Panel 11). The paper she proposed for discussion is published: "Inscribing the Corpus: Scribal and Ritual Practice in the Material Culture of Dunhuang." *Numen* 67 (2020): 113–137, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685276-12341570.

[8] Humboldt Universität Berlin (Germany); "Inscribing Maṇi Mantras in Exile: Lived Spaces" (Panel 6).

[9] University of Pennsylvania (USA); "Facebook in the Time of Covid-19: Virtual Mantras and the Affordances and Challenges of Commercial Social Media" (Panel 10).

the need for studying mantras as multimodal and multisensory media, and raises the question of their status and efficacy in and between "real" and "digital" environments.

Embodiment and agency

Since at least the first millennium CE, the idea that mantras themselves can be considered agents in themselves has been spreading across traditions and religions. These processes continue today, with divinity and personhood being attributed to them, with them being worshipped in the form of ritual media (manuscripts, books, etc.) that contain them, and with mantras even being embodied in anthropomorphic depictions and sculptures. Three contributions dealt with this topic specifically.

The paper presented by **Vaishnavi Patil**[10] was dedicated to a specific form of the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara, namely the Six-Syllable (*ṣaḍakṣarin*) Avalokiteśvara. This form is a manifestation of the famous mantra *oṃ maṇi-padme hūṃ*, first mentioned in the Kāraṇḍavyūha-Sūtra. Looking at the sculptures of the *bodhisattva* from the (north-)east of South Asia that were made between the 10th and 12th centuries, Patil observed that these were often influenced by the iconography specified in the Sūtra. This suggests that the worship of these sculptures was understood both as a worship of the *bodhisattva* and of his mantra. The relationship between them can possibly be explained by understanding the sculpture as a "container" and the mantra as its "content."

Alexander James O'Neill's[11] paper was concerned with the attribution of agency to various ritual media, such as mantras, *vidyā*s, *sūtra*s, manuscripts, and books, in contemporary Newar Buddhism. Two types of agency are involved: (1) the agency of the sonic medium (e.g. of a mantra that is to be recited); and (2) ritual agency that is attributed to a material object believed to contain a divine presence and authorizes it for use in certain ritual contexts. Agency can be established by means of paratextual features and circumstances which may be scriptural (e.g. an injunction to worship the text within the text itself), physical (e.g. a sculpture of a personified text, such as the Six-Syllable Avalokiteśvara), or spatial (e.g. the placement of a text at a holy site). O'Neill suggested that the perceived agency in these cases is ontologically indistinguishable from that of humans.

Dominik A. Haas's[12] contribution, too, was concerned with the attribution of agency to texts, specifically with the widespread phenomenon of the deification of mantras. After offering theoretical reflections on processes such as personification and deification, he presented results from the second part of his doctoral dissertation, which traces the history of what he believes to be the earliest mantra to be

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[10] Harvard University (USA); "Manifestation of a Mantra: *'Oṃ Maṇipadme Hūṃ'* and Ṣaḍākṣarī Avalokiteśvara in Buddhist Art" (Panel 11).

[11] SOAS University of London (UK); "Sonic Agency in Newar Buddhist Doctrine and Ritual" (Panel 11).

[12] Austrian Academy of Sciences and ISTB; "Mantra Deities or Deified Mantras?" (Panel 1).

worshipped as a deity: the so-called Gāyatrī(-Mantra) or Sāvitrī (Ṛgveda 3.62.10). The deification of this mantra involved its identification with an existing goddess, which provided the mantra with agency and an anthropomorphic form. The question arises of whether the deification of mantras in later, Tantric traditions was primarily driven by their identification with deities or by the direct attribution of agency and personhood to the mantra in question.

Mantras in modern South Asia

Several contributions were concerned with mantras in modern South Asian traditions. Three aspects emerged as recurring: (1) the role mantras play in forming and demarcating social and religious identity in modern South Asian traditions and contexts; (2) the relationship and dynamics between classical Sanskrit mantras and vernacular and/or folk mantras (such as "magic" formulae, charms, spells, etc. in languages other than Vedic/Sanskrit); and (3) the question of how mantras that do not come from an authoritative human or scriptural source can nevertheless be considered effective.

Kush Depala[13] discussed the rewriting of mantras in the Swaminarayan tradition, which was founded in Gujarat at the beginning of the 19th century. The central mantra of the tradition was *svāminārāyaṇ*, which also became the name of the tradition itself, of its founder (Sahajānand Svāmī), as well as of his followers. The identity-forming function of mantras in the tradition also became apparent in 2018, when one of its sub-sects, the so-called "BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha," made the initiation mantra for renunciants a regular mantra for householders – a change that can be understood as part of what can only be described as a rebranding process. Other mantras too were transformed or replaced at some point, always with great awareness of the meaning of their constituent parts. Depala's field work shows how the modification and replacement of mantras can contribute to the emergence of a theological consensus and the strengthening of a sense of identity among their users.

Drawing on field work she did in the 2010s, **Daniela Bevilacqua**[14] focused on the multifarious uses of mantras by Hindu ascetics belonging to various traditions, namely the Rāmānandī *tyāgī*s, Daśnāmī *nāgā*s, and Nāth yogis. In these traditions, the categorization of mantras as either Tantric or Vedic hardly matters as different mantras are used in the daily routine of ascetics to sanctify and purify their bodies and actions, as well as being utilized in their personal *sādhanā*s. The repetition of a mantra or the name of deity (*nām jap*) is particularly prominent, and due to its duration and intensity can also be interpreted as a form of austerity (*tapasyā*). Bevilacqua also

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[13] Heidelberg University (Germany); "Saying, Self, *Sampradāya*: The Introduction of Three New Mantras in the Swaminarayan Tradition" (Panel 1).

[14] SOAS University of London (UK); "Living with Mantras: The Use of Mantras among Contemporary Hindu Ascetics" (Panel 6).

highlighted the social function of mantras: ascetics may use or teach mantras in order to help laypeople achieve worldly goals or to attract devotees with the help of impressive supernatural powers that are supposedly the result of such mantra practice.

Hemant P. Rajopadhye[15] presented his research on the heterogeneous Datta tradition (which, since it is still in the process of standardization, could be called a "*saṃpradāya* in the making"). The hagiography of two of its founding figures, the Guru-Caritra (composed around ca. 1550 CE), is conspicuously characterized as *mantrātmaka* ("having the nature of mantra"), which is probably a consequence of the incorporation of Vedic/Brahminical chapters into the text. The majority of sub-sects nowadays do not engage with the Sanskritic mantra tradition, but instead use *bhajan*s or vernacular mantras. At the same time, we observe that nowadays mantra initiation is being introduced into the tradition, which can be interpreted as part of a Sanskritization process.

Mani Rao[16] summarized the results of the fieldwork she conducted in Andhra-Telangana in 2012–14 (including the presentation of video footage). The interlocutors from the three communities she engaged with described various experiences they had had with mantras. These experiences were embedded in a variety of tension fields: sound vs. silence, vision vs. imagination, objectivity vs. subjectivity, scepticism vs. belief, and outside vs. inside. Vedic and Tantric mantras were hardly distinguished. The authoritative sources of the mantras that were used were always experienced gurus, and not scriptures.

Joel Bordeaux[17] offered an analysis of vernacular mantras in contemporary, down-market, Bengali booklets. The purpose of these booklets is to provide a means of achieving practical, quotidian goals for a target audience that does not have the opportunity or desire to engage with more classical and prestigious mantra traditions. Being composed in basic (or even ungrammatical) Sanskrit, Hindi, or Bengali, the mantras in the booklets do not seem to be treated as belonging to different categories based on their language (moreover, they are always presented in Bengali script, regardless of the language used). Raising the important question of the difference between mantras and charms, Bordeaux suggested that more folkloristic and comparative approaches might be better suited for the study of vernacular "mantras" than those anchored in classical, Sanskritic frames of reference.

Vernacular mantras – or rather, "folk mantras" – were also the subject of **Adrián Muñoz**'s[18] contribution, which was concerned with booklets that abound in teachings of the Nāth yogi tradition. He argued that these booklets are best not understood as

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[15] University of Mumbai and Ahmedabad University (India); "With or Without Mantra: Mantra, Power and Sectarian Affiliations in Datta Sampradāya" (Panel 9).

[16] Independent scholar (India/USA); "Mantra, Deity and Visionary Experience: Fieldwork in Andhra-Telangana" (Panel 10).

[17] Leiden University (Netherlands); "Coming to Terms with Folk Mantras" (Panel 2).

[18] El Colegio de México (Mexico); "Nāth Mantras in Popular Print Culture" (Panel 3).

belonging to a vernacularized form of Sanskrit/classical Tantra, but rather as expressions of contemporary "folk" (in this case: "Nāth") Tantra. Although allusions to mantras are recurrent in Nāth hagiographies, where yogis use them as means for achieving a variety of supernatural goals, modern Nāth initiates are eager to dissociate themselves from lower, "non-philosophical" forms of Tantra.

Katrin Stamm's[19] paper was concerned with the famous Hare-Kṛṣṇa-Mantra, which in the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition is also known as the Mahāmantra or "Great Mantra." She argued that insofar as this mantra is believed to have the power to fulfil all desires, one of its most important characteristics is multifunctionality. Because it is the only mantra that can bring about *premabhakti*, however, it is also unique. After providing a summary of the theological teachings in Rādhā-Govinda Nāṭh's commentary (1948) on a passage from Caitanya Mahāprabhu's hagiography (the Caitanya-Caritāmṛta), Stamm concluded with her own reflections on possible misuses of the mantra.

Mantras and multiformity: export, appropriation, and adaptation

Although potent formulae as such are certainly not peculiar to South Asia, this region has probably been the most prolific in terms of the production and export of such formulae. When mantras are taken to other parts of the world, however, their form, content, purpose, doctrinal context, and method of application rarely remain entirely the same. Throughout history, complex processes of appropriation and adaptation to new contexts can be observed. Four contributions addressed such processes and their results, focusing on historical Southeast and East Asia on the one hand and on modern North America (and Europe) on the other.

Andrea Acri[20] presented a first schematic survey of the use of mantras in Southeast Asia (in particular, Java and Bali), where Śaiva and Buddhist traditions have been present since at least the 7th century CE. The survey addressed the subject of mantras in seven domains: (1) internalized yoga, (2) ritual, (3) techniques for yogic dying, (4) devotional contexts, (5) magic, (6) healing, and (7) modern Javanese Islam. While being imports from South Asia, Acri argued that mantras should not be understood as mere "cultural transplants." Rather, the local agents who adopted them were also actively involved in their adaptation and further development. As an example of a text concerned with mantras, Acri presented the Bhuvanakośa ("The Storehouse of Worlds"), a heterogeneous text that, while stemming from the earlier South Asian

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[19] International Center, Europa-Universität Flensburg (Germany); "Why is the Mahamantra called the Great (Maha) Mantra? A Theological Discussion Based on Radha Govinda Natha's Commentary on Caitanya-Caritamritam III.20.8" (Panel 7).

[20] École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE), PSL University & École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) (France); "Mantras in the Religious and Ritual Traditions of Java and Bali (with special attention to the Mantra-System of the Sanskrit-Old Javanese Śaiva Text Bhuvanakośa)" (Panel 5).

Śaiva Saiddhāntika tradition, was probably adapted or even partially composed in a Javano-Balinese milieu.

The subject of Southeast Asian agency was also addressed by **Julia Byl**.[21] Critically engaging with previous scholarship, she discussed three mantra-related "devices" found in the literature of the Batak, an ethnic group in Sumatra: (1) a diagram called *bindu matogu*, which has roots in South Asian designs; (2) amulets on which an Islamic formula (*bismillah…*) is combined with a Hindu-Buddhist one invoking the syllable *omm*; and (3) various diagrams that involve Islamic elements, such as the name of King Solomon/Sulaiman, or the four *lā*s of the Shahada. Byl argued that the lack of doctrinal context facilitated the syncretism that is so characteristic of Southeast Asian mantra/*yantra* traditions.

Georgi Krastev's[22] paper dealt with the importation of Sanskrit mantras into Japan, including via Chinese Buddhist texts – an interesting process in which we observe a strong contrast between the striving for the preservation of the fixed form of mantras and a striking tolerance toward their multiformity. For the reproduction of the pronunciation of the mantras in these texts (as they sounded to the Japanese, *nota bene*) in the 8th–9th century CE, a more phonetic script (the Katakana syllabary) was introduced. However, logographic Han characters, in which one character often represents various words in Japanese, on the one hand, and many such characters can share the same pronunciation, on the other, also continued to be used along with the Siddham script. As a result, the way mantras are written and pronounced was, and continues to be, influenced by an entire range of highly idiosyncratic linguistic circumstances. To illustrate this, Krastev presented a number of examples from a 17th century Japanese commentary (the Shittan Mata Taibun; 悉曇摩多體文) on a 9th century Chinese Siddham manual (Xītánzì-jì; 悉曇字記), whereby the very title of this text exhibits a mixture of the transliteration, transcription, and translation of essentially Sanskrit terms.

Neil Dalal[23] discussed the "mantra theologies" encountered in modern so-called "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) communities, using the case of the Gāyatrī-Mantra as a prime example. Many SBNRs adopt a New Age universalism that denies the possibility of cultural ownership and allows for the appropriation of cultural artifacts (such as Hindu mantras) without regard for the original or traditional contexts, practices, and rules (which are often dismissed as "dogmatic"). In the very popular rendition of the Gāyatrī-Mantra by the singer Deva Premal, for example, the traditional pronunciation of the mantra is ignored. Moreover, Premal believes that the mantra does not belong to the category of normal language, but has an independent,

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[21] University of Alberta (Canada); "Power before Knowledge: Sonic Religious Exchange in Island Southeast Asia" (Panel 5).
[22] ISTB; "On the Curious Life of Sanskrit in Japan: The Case of a 17th Century Japanese *Siddhaṃ* Manual" (Panel 5).
[23] University of Alberta (Canada); "SBNR Mantra Theologies: Vibrations and Universalism in the Case of Gāyatrī" (Panel 10).

energy-based existence as sound vibration (a belief shared by many other SBNRs). Such views may tacitly imply that South Asian traditions are less authentic – a dynamic that Dalal linked to an orientalist, exclusivist, neo-colonialist ideology and spirituality.

Mantras and texts

Given the wealth of textual sources from both pre-modern and contemporary South Asia, it is not surprising that a number of contributors approached the subject of mantras by looking at one or more specific texts (in most cases Vedic and Sanskrit). This approach inevitably raises the question of what role the texts played for the mantras they contain. In several cases we observe a certain tension between theory and practice. While some texts show a high concern for the form and/or meaning of mantras, others only refer to them by name. Furthermore, highly intriguing dynamics can be observed between the "affiliation" of a text (Vedic, Tantric, Purāṇic, Āyurvedic), that of the mantras in it, and that of its users: for example, Tantric mantras may appear in Āyurvedic texts that are used by practitioners initiated in the Vedic tradition, and Vedic as well as Tantric mantras may appear side-by-side in Purāṇic texts.

Following up on a seminal study by Kenneth G. Zysk,[24] **Vitus Angermeier**[25] presented his preliminary work towards an up-to-date overview of mantras in classical Āyurveda as codified in Sanskrit texts from the first millennium CE. One of his new insights is that mantras were above all prescribed for the treatment of conditions that are caused by external, supernatural agents ("evil spirits"), rather than by an internal derangement of morbific factors (*doṣa*s). Among these conditions are certain sub-types of insanity (*unmāda*), epilepsy (*apasmāra*), and fever (*jvara*). The mantras mentioned in the texts can be divided into various categories: Vedic, post- or pseudo-Vedic, medical, and Tantric (Vedic mantras are only referred to by means of their initial words, while others are quoted in full).

Patricia Sauthoff[26] addressed the topic of mantras in Rasaśāstra, or "South Asian alchemy." The use of mantras in this discipline (e.g. in the form of repetitive *japa*) can be tied to certain Tantric traditions. Sauthoff observed that while not much is known about alchemists, it is clear they have been initiated into the use and also have knowledge of mantras. In fact, the procedures in the alchemical texts regularly involve the recitation of mantras (which are rarely encoded in these texts, unlike in Tantric

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[24] Kenneth G. Zysk, "Mantra in Ayurveda: A Study of the Use of Magico-Religious Speech in Ancient Indian Medicine." In: Harvey P. Alper (ed.), *Understanding Mantras.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989, pp. 123–143.
[25] University of Vienna (Austria); "Medication or Magic? Mantras in Early Ayurveda" (Panel 2).
[26] University of Alberta (Canada); "The Alchemical Mantra" (Panel 2).

works). In the production of mercurial medicines, for instance, they were considered key to the purification of this otherwise toxic substance.

In her paper, **Joanna Jurewicz**[27] dealt with the semantics of the Vedic word *brahman*, which is not only used to refer to "the Absolute," but also designates pieces from the Vedic canon (i.e. mantras). Focusing on a number of Vedic texts, she argued, utilizing the framework of Cognitive Linguistics and Conceptual Metaphor Theory, that the abstract meaning of this word is based on its literal meanings: "growth," "expansion," or "swelling." Her main hypothesis was that *brahman* expressed the "support" that can be felt in the lower body as a result of diaphragmatic breathing that is needed for the long recitation of Vedic mantras.

Shilpa Sumant and **Madhavi Godbole**[28] presented their work on the so-called Rāmarahasya-Upaniṣad, a Sanskrit text composed in the mediaeval period. This heterogeneous text contains several mantras dedicated to the heroic god Rāma. Among the most popular among these mantras (which vary in length) are the monosyllabic *rāṁ* and the six-syllable mantra *rāṁ rāmāya namaḥ*. Each mantra is also provided with a *dhyāna* verse, that is, a verse that describes how one should visualize Rāma while reciting the mantra. The text also contains prescriptions for the drawing of *yantra*s. However, the presenters remarked that the practice of worshipping Rāma with the mantras and *yantra*s taught by the text was discontinued after the mediaeval period.

Shaman Hatley[29] presented his research on a curious chart whose purpose is to encode mantras, the *nārāc(y)aprastāra* or "Arrow Chart." This chart is found in one of the earliest surviving non-Saiddhāntika Śaiva Tantric texts, the *Brahmayāmala* (composed in the 7th to 8th centuries CE). It arranges the syllables of Sanskrit in an idiosyncratic order in a grid of five by ten squares. Syllables are encoded either through references to their position relative to other syllables in the grid or by means of code-words (these are based on their graphic form or on semantic associations). The Arrow Chart illustrates the importance of writing for Tantric mantras, but also raises the question of how this aspect might relate to the literacy of its users.

Mery Cecconi's[30] paper dealt with the development of a text called *padamālā vidyā*, the "Word-Garland Spell," which is first found in the 9th century Devī-Purāṇa. Cecconi hypothesized that this complex *vidyā* (the "female version" of a mantra) and the cult of the goddess Cāmuṇḍā that it reflects have Tantric origins. The *vidyā* can be understood as a "bridge" between the domains of the (Tantric) initiates and the more

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[27] University of Warsaw (Poland); "Growing of Sound in the Body: The Experiential Meaning of Brahman" (Panel 8).

[28] Both Deccan College Post-graduate and Research Institute (India); "Mystical Mantras of Rāma: An Overview of Rāmarahasya Upaniṣad" (Panel 8).

[29] University of Massachusetts (USA); "Decoding the Arrow Chart (*nārācaprastāra*): Mantra, Secrecy, and Writing in Early Tantric Śaivism" (Panel 7).

[30] University of Leiden, (The Netherlands); "The Padamālā Vidyā: Puranic Adaptations of a Tantric Mantra" (Panel 7).

"civic" non-initiated. In the Agni-purāṇa and Garuḍa-purāṇa (both 11th century CE), the *padamālā vidyā* was appropriated by the martial class, adapted, and associated with the warrior goddess Durgā.

The research object of **Christèle Barois**'s[31] paper is a pre-eleventh-century Purāṇic text from the South of continental South Asia, the Vāyavīya-Saṃhitā. Chapter 2.12 of this text is dedicated to the *pañcākṣara* or "five-syllable (mantra)": *namaḥ śivāya*, "homage to Śiva." After summarizing the contents of the chapter (according to which the mantra has, among many other things, even a female anthropomorphic form), Barois showed that it draws from the Śivadharmottara (an early Śaiva Purāṇic source), has textual parallels with the Liṅga-Purāṇa, and is important enough to be cited in texts such as Hemādri's Caturvargacintāmaṇi, Nīlakaṇṭha's Kriyāsāra, and Appaya Dīkṣita's Śivārcanācandrikā. Barois stressed that the text distinguishes between the *pañcākṣara*, which is suitable for all, and the *ṣaḍakṣara* (*oṃ namaḥ śivāya*) which is restricted to the Vedic and Śaiva tradition. She put forward that the intertextual network formed by chapter 2.12 of the Vāyavīya-Saṃhitā, its sources, and testimonia constitute a heuristic corpus for the study of the *pañcākṣara* in a historical perspective.

Lubomír Ondračka[32] provided a first survey of mantras in Nātha literature written in Middle Bengali between the 16th and 19th centuries, focusing on the Gorakṣabijaẏa, the Gopīcandrer Gān (the longest version of the story of Gopīcandra), the Hāṛamālā, and the Anādyacaritra (or Anādi-Purāṇa). Mantras are unexpectedly rare in these texts. Among the most prominent are the syllables *huṃ* and *oṃ*. A number of other mantras are referred to by means of a (usually nondescript) name, but are not specified (e.g. a *mahāmantra*, a *gurumantra*, etc.). The repertoire of mantras is thus very limited.

Liwen Liu[33] dealt with a purification ritual that is part of an animal sacrifice prescribed by the Śrī-Śrī-Kāli-Pūjā-Paddhati, a contemporary ritual manual in Bengali. The mantras used in this purification ritual are drawn from various traditions: mantras that are taken from a Vedic archetype are rearranged, Purāṇic deities are invoked both for the consecration of the limbs of the sacrificial animal and as its purifiers, its killing is legitimized by a Vedic statement, and its deification is brought about by means of a Tantric adaptation of the Gāyatrī-Mantra. Liu observed that the contextual meaning of mantras plays an important role in these processes of transference and modification.

S. A. S. Sarma[34] presented his work on ritual manuals from contemporary Kerala. These manuals, which are composed in Malayalam and are called "Caṭaṅṅus," are used

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[31] Institut d'études avancées de Nantes (France); "Forms and Practices of the *Pañcākṣara* in Purāṇic Literature" (Panel 9).

[32] Charles University (Czech Republic); "Mantras in Middle Bengali Nātha Literature" (Panel 3).
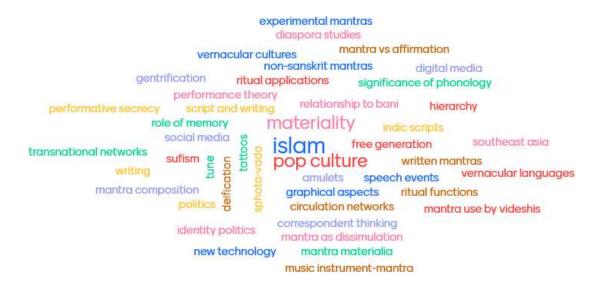
[33] University of Toronto (Canada); "Accretion, Efficacy and Authority: Mantras in the Balidāna in the Śrīśrīkālīpūjāpaddhati" (Panel 10).

[34] École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), Pondicherry (India); "Usage of Mantras in the Malayalam Manuals on Domestic rituals (*Gṛhya*) or *Caṭaṅṅu* Manuals" (Panel 9).

by Namputiri Brahmins for the performance of Śrauta and Gṛhya rituals. While the rituals tend to be in accordance with the Gṛhyasūtras, there are also differences, notably in the case of mantras. In contrast to the Gṛhyasūtras, the Caṭaṅṅu manuals generally quote the mantras to be recited in full – the form in which they are given, however, sometimes differs from that found in Vedic texts. Sarma's work underscores the importance of philological groundwork – not only on Vedic/Sanskrit, but also on vernacular texts – for Mantra Studies.

Roundtable

The roundtable discussion was initiated by an anonymous Mentimeter survey (www.mentimeter.com). The participants were asked to provide input on what they think are understudied themes or areas in the field of Mantra Studies. The result is displayed in the following word cloud:[35]

This interactive "exercise" was followed by contributions by the organizers – Lorea, Larios, Bühnemann, Gerety, and myself – who briefly presented their own work and research agendas with regard to Mantra Studies. Lorea and Larios both emphasized the importance of ethnographic approaches and of the inclusion of contemporary, non-Sanskritic/vernacular mantra traditions. Bühnemann and Gerety highlighted the study of the scriptural and, respectively, sonic and medial aspects of mantras. I myself briefly problematized the use of the concept or word "mantra," which segued into a very lively discussion among the participants about the definition and possible categorization of our research subject. In this discussion (which was extended despite

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[35] I thank Mentimeter for permission to use this graphic.

the late hour), many of the issues presented above were revisited. A definitive conclusion was not reached – a result that, in view of a workshop whose purpose was to generate impulses for new avenues of research, can only be regarded as highly auspicious.

Timetable

May 12, 2022

09:00 – 09:15   Welcome & Introductory Remarks

09:15 – 10:30   Panel 1: Haas, Holz, Depala (chair: Bühnemann)

11:00 – 12:30   Panel 2: Angermeier, Sauthoff, Bordeaux (chair: Larios)

14:00 – 15:30   Panel 3: Muñoz, Ondračka, Cantú (chair: Gerety)

16:00 – 17:30   Panel 4: Roundtable

May 13, 2022

09:00 – 10:30   Panel 5: Krastev, Byl, Acri (chair: Bühnemann)

11:00 – 12:30   Panel 6: Schröder, Bevilacqua, Abrahms-Kavunenko (chair: Lorea)

14:00 – 15:30   Panel 7 (virtual): Stamm, Cecconi, Williams, Hatley
                (chair: Bühnemann)

May 14, 2022

09:00 – 10:30   Panel 8 (virtual): Houben, Sumant and Godbole, Jurewicz (chair: Haas)

11:00 – 12:30   Panel 9 (virtual): Rajopadhye, Sarma, Barois (chair: Larios)

14:00 – 15:30   Panel 10 (virtual): Scahill, Dalal, Rao, Liu (chair: Lorea)

16:00 – 17:30   Panel 11 (virtual): Patil, O'Neill, Dachille (chair: Gerety)

17:30 – 17:45   Concluding Remarks