

## KHK WORKING PAPER SERIES

# IX. TRADITION

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**Our Goal for ERiC** is to create a comprehensive, easy-to-use online companion to **Eurasian Religions in Contact** that informs readers about occasions, themes, modes, conditions and consequences of contacts between religious groups and the way religious thought and practice developed in and through such contact phenomena, eventually creating both the larger and smaller religious traditions of today and the religious field as a social entity distinct from other fields such as politics, economics and art. The companion will be comprised of **case studies** with each case study focusing on a particular geographical region, a particular moment in or period of time and a particular constellation of two or more religions encountering each other. Each case study will extrapolate the occasions as well as the historical and social contexts of such encounters and, most importantly, shed light on the issues, notions, themes and practices addressed in the particular contact situation.

In each case study, authors will present their material in light of a specific theoretical concept or approach. We particularly encourage authors to consider engaging their material with theoretical concepts and approaches **developed at the KHK Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe over the past years**. This includes specific understandings of the role of concepts such as "purity", "secret", "tradition", "gender", "media", "the senses", "the immanence/transcendence-distinction" and "dynamics/stability". The **KHK Working Paper Series** informs readers about some major aspects within the KHK's thinking about these concepts. We are looking forward to your contributions to this ongoing conversation!

For a working definition of "tradition" for comparative purposes, the KHK has come to consider the following criteria:

- I. The most obvious and primary criterion is **the temporal dimension**. Tradition can be understood as a mode of religious conviction and religious practice which produces and reproduces a continuity between past and present (and, prospectively, also between the future present and the past future). The timeframes traditions are dealing with and also the very starting point of a tradition can be either relevant or irrelevant for its performance (*illo tempore*). Traditions tend to keep the length of their existence indeterminate and they also tend to obscure (but at the same time to glorify) their own foundation. They predicate a starting point, where often there is none. Religious traditions, therefore, are constitutively dependent on myths. Religious traditions are not structured with their own evanescence in mind; at least they are not performed with the awareness of their own preliminaryity (from an outside perspective, of course, traditions do come and go). The act of calling a given conviction or practice a tradition is typically either a plea for the preservation of that

tradition (something “is” a tradition”) or a reaction to such pleas (something is “only” a tradition).

2. **The spatial dimension:** The act of passing something on and that which is being passed on (the “traditum”) must be made present and concrete in religious practice. Tradition is a “spatial [...] process of handing over imaginative material drawing on collective wisdom or noninstitutionalized ‘lore,’ typically enacted creatively and strategically in face-to-face interactions within localized or small groups” (Bronner 2011: 41). The practices of religious traditions are spatially bound, and at the same time religious traditions determine or produce physical and semantic spaces. The temporal-spatial confinement of religious traditions makes them sensitive (but only partially resistant) in reference to dislocations, de-contextualisations and globalisation. Spatial confinement, it should be said, is not limited to physical territory, but may also include imaginary and virtual spaces.
3. **The performative dimension:** In addition to the spatial dimension, religious traditions gain their authority and their status as self-evident by way of performing said tradition: “Performative utterances are self-referential and constitutive in so far as they bring forth the social reality they are referring to” (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 24). Performance creates the oscillating unity between differences (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 24), thus in the case of tradition, performance creates unity between past and present, absence and presence, subject (“tradent”) and object (“traditum”). Quite often, the performance of a religious tradition will have the form of a ritual, with performance and ritual reinforcing each other: “The form of a ritual is parentally determined by tradition” (Berne 1964: 36). At the same time, the performance of tradition is based on ritual execution.
4. **The social dimension:** A religious tradition is not founded in *statu nascendi*, but constituted in its impact. Religious traditions cannot be deliberately introduced, rather they are necessarily a part of a succession, a chain as it were, with the adherents to the tradition adding new links to the chain in a process of sending and receiving. It may be that something is done with the intention to establish a tradition, but the success of this endeavour only proves itself in the succession of tradition as a special form of gift exchange (Engler 2005).
5. **The semantic dimension:** Present and future practices of a religious tradition are legitimized by way of a recourse to the past. Nothing is inherently precious, and there is no need ‘per se’ to preserve anything. Thus, the reason why a tradition is

preserved is precisely because it is a tradition, i.e. because it already has been preserved and has been considered worthy of preservation in the past (a self-fulfilling mechanism of sorts). Hence, by calling something a tradition, that which is being preserved (the traditum) gains a special dignity. The traditum is socially constructed, but is regarded as given and is being externalized as indisputable. Traditions can, thus, obscure any controversies, they solve the fundamental contradiction of having to justify that which cannot be justified. They perform the validity of something, and through this, they dispense from the need for justification.

6. **The media dimension** is closely connected to the spatial dimension, as the media of religious traditions make visible and tangible that which is usually invisible and non-tangible: the reference of religion. In general, it can be said: “Media transcend space and time” (Winkler 2004:9). For the media of tradition, in particular, it should be added that media provide the means for time and space to be experienced in a special way. What is more, traditions can be dislocated, but to have an effect, they can be located with the aid of media. If anything, they can be “transplanted”, “shared” or they can “migrate” (e.g. in exile or diaspora contexts). The materiality of media of tradition provides for the spatial presence of traditions.
7. **The self-referential dimension** of tradition transcends all other dimensions, which is due to the mode of preservation in which tradition functions. Acceptance of a religious tradition beyond its recursive performance cannot be achieved through mutual consent or agreement. On the contrary, a religious tradition can only be valid in and of itself. Only from an external perspective, i.e. the perspective of the Social Sciences and Humanities (as well as in those instances, when different traditions encounter each other), each tradition is revealed as socially constructed and therefore as contingent. Within a working tradition, however, this contingency is covered up.

As an ideal type (as understood by Max Weber), a religious tradition can be defined as those religious convictions and practices which gain legitimacy from

- (1) producing and reproducing a continuity between past and present, and, prospectively, also between the future present and the past future
- (2) allowing concrete experiences through an attachment to social space
- (3) constant repetition (most often through rituals)

- (4) producing a sense of belonging through inter-generational sending and receiving
- (5) externalizing that which is being handed down as self-evident
- (6) making use of media which convey non-representable religious transcendence into tangible immanence
- (7) reproducing and developing self-referentially and gaining authority through performance alone.

### References:

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Engler, Steven (2005): „Afterward: Tradition’s Legacy“, in: Steven Engler, Gregory P. Grieve (Hrsg.), *Historicizing ‘Tradition’ in the Study of Religion*. Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 357–378.

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