



Narratio aliena

Stephan Conermann, Jim Rheingans (Eds.)

Narrative Pattern and Genre in
Hagiographic Life Writing:
Comparative Perspectives from
Asia to Europe

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Introduction

Narrative patterns and genre in hagiographic life writing: an introduction

by

Stephan Conermann & Jim Rheingans

Influenced by the study of Christian medieval saints, researchers have labelled texts that narrate the life of a saint “hagiography”; and we assume that these texts generally form a narrative text type in which certain elements of the life of a saint are included. As a matter of course, the term “hagiography” has thus been used frequently for pre-modern texts also in the wider field of Oriental and Asian studies and such works have been employed as sources for historical research or studies of literary corpora. However, we are still in need of a closer text-based definition of the term, not to mention a confirmation of its use on the basis of examining a wider range of texts across cultures. Furthermore, the thorough analysis with the various methodological devices offered by narratology is only in its beginnings. This volume aims to be a step on the way to examining hagiography and its use as a cross-cultural category. The focus is on uncovering narrative patterns and genre across texts and cultures; this entails a characterisation of functions of hagiographies and highlighting how certain functions are realised through narrative strategies. The eleven contributors come from various disciplines and study hagiographies (or life writing) from Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and Judaism. The basis for this book was a conference at the University of Hamburg, organised by the editors and hosted by the University of Hamburg, Center for Buddhist Studies and the University of Bonn, Center for Transcultural Narratology. This introduction will outline the concept of the hagiography as a narrative genre and briefly present the individual papers. An outlook at the end of this volume will further summarise the outcome of this examination and develop a scheme of a transcultural analysis for hagiographies, along with discussing possible avenues for future research.

Some Remarks on Hagiography and Culture

As Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning have pointed out, narratives are omnipresent in that they “are at work in ordering experiences, negotiating collective values, constructing versions of the past, generating knowledge and stabilising identities.”¹ Narrative texts – such as hagiographies – are invariably an expression of cultural self-perception and self-thematisation. If one defines culture according to Nünning/Sommer (2004) (based on Posner 1991) as the correlation of material, social and mental phenomena within a particular society, the analysis of themes and literary forms that mark a specific genre or period may shed some light on the mental disposition of the respective society. To explore this mental dimension by means of literary criticism hence attempts to reconstruct the overall system of values, norms, world views and collective visions shaped by culture and expressed (manifested) in a condensed form e.g. in narrative texts.² In the context of such an exploration, the key questions would include: How can such a text be defined in relation to the discourses and the knowledge of a society? How do texts of a specific medium or genre reflect the socio-cultural knowledge of its time, and which purpose did they serve in society?

In this view, hagiographies are a succinct expression of culture that allows for observing societies and drawing conclusions about specific mentalities.³ The study of literary modes through transcultural narratology thus provides insight into the mental processes of appropriating and constructing reality. We, however, agree with Erll/Roggendorf (2002) that hagiographies do not mimic social reality with respect to the literary production of narrative texts nor with regard to cultural perception (how culture was perceived);⁴ a direct cause-and-effect relationship cannot be assumed. Hagiographies rather articulate individual and collective empirical realities and reconstruct these by way of example and significantly affect the symbolic world of meaning in a society. In this way hagiographies largely capture elements originating from the imagination, experience and knowledge of a society – although these elements of the cultural archive are taken from its initial context and are thereby fundamentally altered during the process of narrative presentation. A rather hybrid genre like hagiographies would do well to be researched by means of

¹ Neumann/Nünning 2011: 8.

² Cf. Nünning 2000.

³ See Chatman 1990 as well as Baßler 1995 and 2005.

⁴ In this context one should mention Ernst 2000 and Erll/Roggendorf 2002.

comparative studies and analysed with regard to the historical function of its specific genre memory and critique. Having said that, analysing non-occidental⁵ hagiographies with regard to their narrative patterns and textual genres as well as their capability of creating meaning seems to be a worthwhile undertaking. Hagiographies have two facets: (a) they represent a part of the material culture in which thought patterns, imagination and the construction of reality condense. We can thus draw inferences about the knowledge systems from the texts. (b) Hagiographies also generate specific literary “ways of world making” (Goodman 1978) and participate actively in the processes of the social formation of meanings. The consideration of narrative modes of representation in relation to the historical context can thus provide access to well-founded hypotheses about the function of hagiographies. On a superordinate level a possible reconstruction of historical genealogies and typologies of hagiographies is at stake. In this volume, we would like to start from the basic level up, i.e. reflect about genre and textual type, the function of hagiographies and how they are manifest in narrative and self-reflective strategies.

Analysing Hagiography as a Transcultural Category and Narrative Text

What then are narratives, what is narratology, and what is a hagiography? There are manifold definitions of narrative and narrativity: when talking about “narrative texts” we follow Weber (1998). According to the basic notion of narrative, a narrative text is: (1.) A serial communication of temporarily specific states of facts, (2.) always about something that is not actual, (3.) has two points of reference – the narrator and his/her world and those that are narrated about, (4.) is addressed, (5.) is “expounded reporting” (“entfaltendes Erzählen”), (6.) does usually not only consist of narrating (core elements of a narrative are narrative-recounted discourse and optionally direct and indirect speech; side elements are further discourse about the narrated topics or because of the narrated topics as well as discourse about discourse and the discursive situation). We also agree with Weber in that these criteria apply to any narrative in any literature.⁶ In addition to the definition by

⁵ With the term “non occidental” we do not wish to categorically exclude a certain group of texts – with this term we only wish to emphasise that our texts do not fit the “occidental” canon of texts, which have usually been employed in narratology.

⁶ See Weber 1998: 8, 10.

Weber, narration and narrative text refers to a sequence of signs (a “text”), which represents a succession of events (a “story”). Narratology is thus the theory of narrative.⁷ It has developed its elaborate set of tools on the basis of analysing literary fiction, but due to the selective nature of any narrative it has been expanded to any narrative, among others biographies.⁸ The theory of narrative and the systematically developed parameters for the analysis of narratives conjoin in one “science of story telling”. Well beyond literary studies, narratology can be applied wherever communication and cultural manifestation take place in the form of stories. Thus narratives can be defined as anthropologically predetermined, culturally developed and diversified basic patterns to generate orientation and meaning in the world. At a first glance, the abovementioned criteria for narrativity may indeed apply to what we intuitively consider a hagiography – and narrativity can also be found in various definitions of hagiographic texts. Although it is primarily an aim of this book to elaborate on these definitions in the following papers and in the outlook, let us begin with a working-definition of hagiography. Kleine, who has examined what we would call non-occidental texts, distinguishes:

- i. Content: a written account of the life and works of a saint.
- ii. Aim (primary): the religious edification and the propagation of the cult of the saint.
- iii. Form: descriptive narrative text with a chronological-successive plot.⁹

During a recent course on Buddhist hagiographies, one of the editors – together with the students – examined some Buddhist hagiographies from India, China, Korea, and Tibet and expanded the definition to include Buddhist life writing:

- i. Content: person of religious achievements portrayed after Buddhist ideals in the respective cultural context.
- ii. Aim: legitimation of (the unbroken) transmission and religious edification.
- iii. Form: a narrative-descriptive text with a maturing plot and predetermined successional motives that the tradition regards as being factual.

⁷ Useful introductions are Bal 1997, Nünning 2002, Nünning/Nünning 2002, Kindt/Müller 2003, Fludernik 2006, Schönert 2006 and Martinez/Scheffel 2007.

⁸ Klein 2009.

⁹ Kleine 2010: 13.

Obviously, the texts we find in the various literatures are diverse, and whether and how all of us consider hagiography to be narratives is left for the papers here and future research to determine. Be it as it may, while in the modern textual traditions a sharp distinction between autobiographies, biographies and hagiographies is predominant, this divide is increasingly put to question in postmodernism. The epistemological challenge hagiographies present became even more pronounced through the poststructuralist and postmodern critique of language, selfhood and historical narratives. No matter whether a hagiography is composed by the protagonist, a ghost-writer, chronicler, a man of letters, saint, scholar or journalist, it always consists of a person's life put into words – thus one also speaks of “life writing” (and we have decided to use “hagiographic life writing” in the title to this book).¹⁰ More recent approaches in memory research¹¹ have questioned even the authenticity of one's own hagiography as the one closest to the subject and most intrinsic (as was still to be found in the phenomenological tradition based on Dilthey 1883). Even one's own story, construed through the act of memory, is told through the medium of language and is therefore limited by it. Recollections in the sense of a coherent (and meaningful) narrative correspond to the trade of a biographer, historian or hagiographer. The difference between them is only gradual in nature, i.e. depends solely on the degree of referentiality the text establishes to reality rather than on the proximity to the intrinsic. Inherent in our texts are the interpretations of those pieces of information and knowledge that were available to the respective ‘editor’ during his or her time. The abovementioned referentiality brings us to a further distinction that is worth considering for hagiographies: Gérard Genette (1990) has distinguished between factual and fictional narratives.¹² It remains to be examined in this volume to which extent hagiographies can be considered factual texts: By their claim to reality and “referentiality”, factual narratives depict an event that the reader basically is supposed to assume is true. On the other hand, the unlimited representation of internal processes as often seen in hagiographies is considered a signpost of fictionality (we may further find out that the divide of fact and fiction itself may be fairly relative culturally).¹³ Although factual texts do not relate to fictional characters, objects and events, they may – and this is crucial – be literary and hence possess their own poeticity. They

¹⁰ For “Life Writing”, see Jolly 2001 and Eakin 2004.

¹¹ Cf. Erll 2005a and b, Erll/Gymnich/Nünning 2003 and Erll/Nünning 2004.

¹² For an elaborate discussion of factual and fictional narratives, see Fludernik 2001.

¹³ See Neumann/Nünning 2011: 24.

may be understood as narrative models of reality, as linguistically acquired, constructive blueprints of understanding. On the one hand, reality proves to be too little for literary processing: interpretative connections and the creation of coherence smoothes the deficiency of the actual. On the other hand, reality also turns out to be too much: to describe the totality of even a single moment is impossible. Hence there is the need to choose so that, given the principle of selection, a confusing and meaningless entropy can be conveyed into a sensible whole. We can then examine precisely those choices in order to identify and describe an inventory of narrative strategies and techniques in hagiographies.¹⁴ In order to avoid an overly theoretic discussion, we consider it most important to start out with the examination of concrete instances of non-occidental pre-modern texts, and are therefore very pleased with the papers contained in this volume.

About this Book

The individual studies of hagiographies are subsumed under the varied religions that are usually also connected to a certain geographical location: Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism. Although another categorisation would be equally applicable, the category of religious culture seemed to be the most accessible for the interested reader.

As the term “hagiography” was first coined for the study of Christian saints’ lives, the first part is about Christianity: In *Christian Hagiography and Narratology*, Peter GEMEINHARD demonstrates the outcome of applying narratological methods to Christian hagiographical texts, focusing on late Antique hagiographies such as *The Life of Anthony* and *The Life of St. Elizabeth*. After pointing out the many ways a saint can be venerated apart from hagiographies (such as liturgical texts and wall paintings, some of which can potentially be analysed with narratology) he suggests employing the notion of “hagiographical discourse” (instead of “genre”) in order to consider the (partly non-narrative) literary, social and especially religious contexts. Using the structuralist mod-

¹⁴ Klein (2009: 204) points out that with narratological analysis of biographies, “... wird also ausschließlich die Funktionalisierung der Motive im Kontext der Erzählung rekonstruiert. Gegenstand der Analyse ist allein die narrative Vertextung des Lebens und nicht etwa das Leben selbst – man erfährt also nichts darüber, inwieweit einer bestimmten Handlung tatsächliche Bedeutung im Leben des Biographierten zukommt, sondern nur, on der Biograph sie ihr zuschreibt.”

Authors

Stephan CONERMANN was born 1964 in Kiel/Germany. Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Bonn/Germany since 2003, he has served as Vice Dean of Research and International Relations of the Faculty of Humanities at Bonn University (2008–2010), and Speaker of the Bonn Asia Center (since 2008), the Bonn Center for Transcultural Narratology (BZTN, since 2009), and the Bonn International Graduate School of Oriental and Asian Studies (BIGS-OAS, since 2010). He studied Ancient, Early Modern, Modern and Asian History, as well as Slavic and Oriental Philology, at the University of Kiel, and took multiple language courses and study visits in Beirut/Lebanon, Damascus/Syria, Moscow/Russia, and Poznan/Poland. He did his doctoral studies at the Department of Oriental Studies at Kiel University from 1992 till 1996, and was afterwards a Research Assistant and Assistant Professor until 2003.

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Ġahāngīr und seine Darstellung in Maġālis-i Ġahāngīrī (ca. 1608–11) von ‘Abd al-Sattār b. Qāsīm Lāhōrī”, funded by the DFG.

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Jim RHEINGANS has studied Tibetology (as a major), along with Classical Indology and Ethnology, and received his Magister Artium 2004 in Tibetan Studies at Hamburg University. Jim completed his doctorate on “The Eighth Karmapa’s Life and his Interpretation of the Great Seal” (UWE Bristol, funded by Bath Spa University) in 2008. After a year of postdoctoral research at Hamburg, he was a post-doctorate for teaching and research in Tibetan Studies at the University of Bonn. Since 2011 he has worked for his DFG-project on the origin and transmission of a Tibetan textual corpus at Hamburg University. Among his research interests are Tibetan literary genres, history, and Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. Recent publications include “Narratives of Reincarnation” (in *Lives Lived* ed. L. Covill, U. Rösler and S. Shaw, Wisdom: 2010) and “Communicating the Innate” (IABU: 2012).

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Peter SCHWIEGER is Professor of Tibetan Studies at Bonn University in Germany. His publications cover the literature of the Tibetan Nyingma School, Tibetan diplomatics, Ladakhi and East Tibetan history, Tibetan oral literature, and the grammar of Tibetan language. Currently he does research on the political and social history of Tibetan societies.

Marta SERNESI received her academic training in Tibetan and Buddhist Studies in Italy and France, and since 2009 is a research associate at LMU Munich. Her work focuses on Tibetan and Himalayan religion, history, and literature. Her main fields of interest include tantric lineages and practices, historical and biographical writing, the history of the book in Tibet, and the reception of Buddhism in the West. She has worked in particular on the religious history and the textual production of the bKa’ brgyud pas, and is currently carrying out the project “History and Xylography in South-Western Tibet” sponsored by the German Research Council.

Susanne TALABARDON, born in Berlin (East Germany), studied Protestant theology at Humboldt-University/ Berlin. She received her PhD. (Theology/Old Testament) in 1996, with a doctoral dissertation entitled ‘Moshe as a Prophet: History and Development of an Idea from Bible to the Midrash ha-Gadol’. She completed her Habilitation in Religious Studies and Jewish Studies in 2002, with a study on Eastern European Jewish hagiography. From 1997 to 2008 she was a Lecturer at Potsdam University, teaching the history of Jewish and Christian religion(s). Since then she has served as Professor of Jewish Studies at the Otto-Friedrich-University in Bamberg. Her main research interests include the history of East European Hasidism (especially the modern era), comparative hagiography (namely Jewish and Christian), comparative exegesis, and Jewish exegesis and hermeneutics.

Leyla TELLI completed her Masters degree in Celtic Studies at Bonn University, where her minor fields were Islamic Studies and English Literature. Her Masters thesis was a comparative analysis of the various vitae of St Brigit. In this work, she compared these texts to the main literary and stylistic features of continental vitae of the early Middle Ages, suggesting ways in which they adhered to or differed from the ideals of contemporary Christian texts.

Narrative Pattern and Genre in Hagiographic Life Writing: Comparative Perspectives from Asia to Europe examines so far mostly unstudied ‘non-occidental’ pre-modern hagiographic texts across disciplines with both philological and narratological approaches. Texts that recount the life of a saint have been labelled ‘hagiography’ and such works have been employed as sources for historical or literary research. However, a text-based definition of the term, not to mention a confirmation of its use on the basis of wider examinations across cultures is still wanting. Furthermore, the analysis with the methodological devices offered by narratology is only in its beginnings. This volume aims to be a step on this way: eleven contributors examine texts from Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and Judaism in the respective source languages. Works studied include the Christian hagiography of Anthony or St. Brigit of Ireland, narrative texts about Tibetan Buddhist masters such as Milarepa or the Eighth Karmapa-hierarch, Sino-Tibetan Communist ‘hagiographies’, Persian Sufi monographs, Turco-Persian hagiographies and Hasidic legends. A comprehensive introduction outlines hagiographic life writing; an outlook develops some definitions and suggests a scheme of analysis for future research.

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Jim Rheingans has studied Tibetology (as a major), along with Classical Indology and Ethnology, and received his Magister Artium 2004 in Tibetan Studies at Hamburg University. Jim completed his doctorate on “The Eighth Karmapa’s Life and his Interpretation of the Great Seal” in 2008. After a year of postdoctoral research at Hamburg, he was a post-doctorate for teaching and research in Tibetan Studies at the University of Bonn. Since 2011 he has worked for his DFG-project on the origin and transmission of a Tibetan textual corpus at Hamburg University. Among his research interests are Tibetan literary genres, history, and Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. Recent publications include “Narratives of Reincarnation” (in *Lives Lived* ed. L. Covill, U. Rösler and S. Shaw, Wisdom: 2010) and “Communicating the Innate” (IABU: 2012).

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