



## Always an Argument

### Persuasive Tools in the Death Rituals of the Jēnu Kurumba

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**Abstract.** – This article analyses the rhetoric of death rituals among the Jēnu Kurumba, a tribal community in South India. It is argued that rituals that are predominantly organised as discursive interaction can be seen as contexts of argumentation and controversy. Rhetoric, then, is not so much understood as monologic manipulation nor as mere adornment of speech or a poetical elaboration of a text but as an alternating process of negotiation. Arguing for a Sophistic concept of rhetoric, the article outlines some of the principal persuasive procedures employed, namely narratives, social memories, and emotions. [South India, Nilgiris, Jēnu Kurumba, ritual, rhetoric, language, culture and performance]

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## Introduction

The question how ritual works is one of the central, long-standing, and controversial topics in anthropology. Moreover, recent contributions<sup>1</sup> testify that the dynamics of ritual is still of vital relevance for the discipline. Despite serious differences as to what it is and how it works, it is undisputed that in ritual two modes of transformation are employed. Thus, specifically symbolic-interpretative anthropologists have shown in great detail, how participants in the "ritual process" (Turner 1969) use symbolic modes of behaviour. In

other rituals, however, language plays a significant or even a primary role. Accordingly, speech acts and "performative utterances" (Finnegan 1969; Ray 1973) are well identified as a crucial linguistic instrument of many a ritual. In addition, we have considerable knowledge of the poetics of ritual speech, in particular of how speakers linguistically construct and renew normative orientations and cultural "concepts unexpressed in daily life" (Laderman 1996: 125).

In contrast, only occasional attention has been paid to procedures of rhetoric so far. Though many ethnographic accounts attest to the substantial role verbal persuasion plays in ritual, empirical research is rather scarce. This is the more surprising as of all disciplines it is the science of rhetoric that is explicitly dedicated to examine, how words and speech are used to influence and transform social relationships as well as the perceptions of audiences or interlocutors. Accordingly there is much unclarity as to how exactly persuasive discourse is employed in the service of ritual transformation and renewal.

The present essay explores the transformative functions of rhetoric in ritual. It suggests to locate rhetoric not so much in the poetic elaboration of monologic speech but rather in the course of communicative interaction. In particular I argue that rituals which are primarily based on verbal exchange are best conceived of as contexts of

<sup>1</sup> Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994; Bell 1992; Houseman and Severi 1998.