

Ad. E. Jensen Gedächtnisvorlesungen 2017

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On the pursuit of wealth and happiness: Some lessons from Central India

Every year at rice harvest time on the Bastar plateau of central India some householders will host a performance of the Lachmi Jagar epic. Female priestesses, called curumais, sing a 30,000 line oral epic about Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth and good fortune. The epic, which takes two weeks to sing, is ritually enacted over this period. Like all stories about Lakshmi, the aim of the ritual is to persuade the goddess to dwell in one's house so that she may bring wealth and happiness and drive out Alakshmi, the goddess of misfortune, who brings poverty and misery to those households riven by discord and vice. What distinguishes this variant of Lakshmi worship from others in India is that it reflects not only the egalitarian values of the indigenous people of the area but also the values of women whose poetic imagination has been shaped by their domestic labour as wives and mothers and their long hours working in fields weeding rice. Rice is here personified as the goddess Lakshmi.

Based on some fifteen field trips to Bastar over the years 1982 to 2016, these lectures will situate the economic theology of this unique oral tradition in its broader comparative and historical context. Why has this ritual become more popular in recent years as Modi's neoliberal revolution radically transforms the local polity and economy of a region well-known for its Maoist insurgents? Could it be that this rice-centric, female-centric, egalitarian conception of wealth and happiness – one that values female progeny, good health and sufficient food over other forms of material wealth – has something to tell us about the human condition in today's globalized world? I will attempt to answer these questions by means of a series of lectures that examines the culturally specific values of an economic, familial and religious kind that inform conceptions of wealth and happiness in different cultures. The gurumais of Bastar elaborate their values by means of an elaborate allegory. This tale is about the imagined kinship relations between personified material objects of everyday significance such as the lotus, the rice plant, the mango tree, the elephant, daughters and money. The values epitomized by these six objects will define the themes of my six lectures as I ruminate on the general significance of this hitherto unreported female epic tradition of a sacred poetry.