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New Directions in Mantra Studies: Exploring the Emergence of Mantra Repetition[1]

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Abstract

Many theories understand repetitiveness to be inherent in the concept of mantra itself. Despite its popularity and its significance for South Asian—and, indeed, global—religious history, mantra repetition has been insufficiently defined as an object of research. The peculiarities of the repetitiveness of mantra repetition are hardly ever reflected upon in academic literature. Furthermore, it has been assumed that mantra repetition is a timeless and even universal practice. Consequently, mantra repetition has eluded adequate scholarly analysis: Significant terminological particularities in primary sources have been overlooked and the possibility of historical developments has not been considered. In this article, I survey the current state of research relevant for the study of the emergence of mantra repetition—in particular, the practice of continuously reciting one and the same short formula—from its post-Vedic origins up to the middle of the first millennium CE. I also formulate research questions and hypotheses to guide future studies on the subject.

1. Introduction

The term "mantra" typically designates a short formula that is composed in Sanskrit and is considered to have a special power or efficacy.[1] Mantras are often repeatedly recited as part of a devotional, meditative,[2] or ritualistic practice (Wilke/Moebus 2011: 170). Indeed, they are repeated so often that many understand repetitiveness to be inherent in the concept of mantra itself. Robert A. Yelle, for instance, has stated that "[t]he most obvious fact about mantras is that they are repeated many, even countless times. This fact has been incorporated into the meaning

1 Defining the concept "mantra" is notoriously difficult and there are good arguments against understanding mantras as an ontologically distinct, historically stable category *vis-à-vis* categories such as spells or prayers; cf. Haas 2025. For the heuristic purpose of this article, which focuses on pre-modern South Asia, mantra is defined here as a comparatively short text or formula that consists of words (or sounds) originating in or associated with an Indo-Aryan language (Vedic, Sanskrit, Pāli, etc.) and is ascribed a power that goes beyond that of ordinary speech.

2 For heuristic purposes, meditation is defined here as a self-directed and rule-guided physical, verbal, or mental practice that leads to a change in one's own state of mind; in other words, a psychotropic activity. Usually (but not necessarily) meditation practices also have a higher goal (such as self-knowledge, realization of fundamental truths, connection with the divine, etc.).

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of the word mantra, along with its translations 'spell,' 'chant,' and 'incantation.'"[3] Since its introduction into the English language, the word "mantra" has come to refer to any "constantly or monotonously repeated phrase or sentence; a characteristic formula or refrain; a byword, slogan, or catchphrase"[4]—sometimes carrying a pejorative overtone. All of these meanings could only establish themselves because the principle of mantra repetition (henceforth: MR)—that is, the idea that the repetition, verbal or other, of mantras is especially efficacious and powerful—has become well known across the globe.

As numerous examples show, the principle of MR has diverse multimodal and multiform realizations, with chanting aloud being only one of them (albeit a particularly vivid and catchy one). According to a conceptualization that is widespread in Sanskrit-based traditions, MR can be performed in three modes: mentally, in a low voice, and aloud (*mānasa*, *upāṃśu*, *vācika*)—with the *mānasa* or inaudible mode being considered the most effective one (Padoux 2011: 4). For some time now, MR has also been adapted to the online and digital world, as for example, apps being used to keep track of repetitions or to record one's own recitation in order to replay it as often as desired, or collective chanting rituals being posted on Facebook.[5] MR also takes various forms, some even non-vocal: Mantras can be iterated by means of writing them repeatedly, or simply by running a string of "prayer beads" (*akṣamālā* or simply *mālā*) through one's fingers without actually uttering the mantras. The rotations of the Tibetan "prayer wheels" (*chos-'khor*) function according to a similar principle.

Continuous MR can be a psychotropic activity.[6] Due to its stress-reducing properties, quiet or silent MR is today advertised as an intervention to improve mental health (Lynch et al. 2018; Álvarez-Pérez et al. 2022), with the religious or doctrinal aspects of mantras often fading into the background altogether. When it is combined with melody and rhythm, MR assumes the form of chanting. In recent years, the scholarly interest in this form of singing or melodic speaking has increased (Simpson/Perry/Forde 2021: 2). Chanting has the potential to increase well-being, attention, and altruism; it can also induce altered states of consciousness (Perry/Polito/Thompson 2021). Inasmuch as it fosters social connection, chanting can also play an important role in building and maintaining group identity. Musical vocalizations of mantras enjoy great

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[3] Yelle 2003: 9–10. In this article, square brackets are used to mark explanatory additions to or modifications of quotations and translations; if they are part of original quotations, this is indicated.

[4] See art. "mantra" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2000). The Vedic/Sanskrit term *mántra* has variants and translations in many languages, e.g., Tamil *mantiram*, English "mantra" (historically also "muntru" and "mantram"), Tibetan *sngags*, Chinese **真言** *zhēn yán*, etc. There has been no systematic study of what exactly these terms have encompassed (and what not) in various cultures and traditions in different historical periods, or how they have related to similar terms (*vidyā*, *dhāraṇī*, *maṅgala*, etc.).

[5] As, for example, in the case of the chanting of the mantra of the Blue Medicine Buddha at the Thai Buddhist temple Wat Songdhammakalyani, currently being investigated by Katherine Scahill (Haas 2022: 4–5).

[6] The term "psychotropic" (literally "mind-turning") is widely associated with substances that affect mental states. Here I tap into its use regarding activities that do not involve consumption of substances, but still have a significant impact on the state of mind.

popularity today, and their recordings (widely available on YouTube, Spotify, and other platforms) also make it possible to "tap into their power" in a more passive mode.

Despite its popularity and its significance for South Asian—and, indeed, global—religious history, MR has been insufficiently defined as an object of research. The ramifications of the repetitiveness of MR are hardly ever reflected upon in academic literature. Nor is the possibility of historically or geographically determined cultural developments and differences taken into consideration. While MR is often considered a "typically Eastern" or "Asian" form of religiosity, at the same time, one also encounters the notion that MR is a cross-cultural, timeless, and even universal human practice. Thus, MR has been characterized as "an ancient practice found in nearly all spiritual traditions" (Bormann et al. 2006: 219) and as "a ubiquitous technique that has been practiced throughout human history." (Berkovich-Ohana et al. 2015: 13) According to Doug Oman (2024: 2), "[t]he repetition of a single short word, phrase, or prayer—commonly in Western traditions called a holy name or prayer word, or in Eastern traditions called a mantra, mantram, or sometimes a 'siddha nāma, a proven or established Name' (Tulpule 1991: 76)—has been used for centuries in every major religious tradition." Frits Staal (1989) even hypothesized that in terms of evolutionary history, the uttering of "mantra-like" sounds is an archaic activity that precedes language and, as such, may be related to bird songs. He also hypothesized that the repetitiveness in certain speech disorders and the babbling of babies "are reminiscent of earlier stages of evolution" (Staal 1989: 273)—an evolutionary and reductionist approach that has turned out to be too simplistic (Thompson 1995).

In my view, explaining MR practices as mere actualizations of an archetypical and inborn religious proclivity or ability is insufficient. There is no denying that vocal and verbal repetition is a recurrent element in a whole range of human cultural expressions, be it musical refrains, the chanting of political slogans, or the recitation of prayers and other religious texts. Yet, the concept of mantra originated in a specific historical region of the globe —ancient South Asia. The potency ascribed to the sounds of Sanskrit, the meaning and significance attached to individual mantras, and the association of mantras with repetitiveness are arguably the results of specific historical, culture-specific processes. The ideas and beliefs associated with MR also influenced—and continue to influence—how practitioners think and feel about their practices. However, such cultural and religious specificities are often underestimated, especially in psychological experiments: either they play no significant role in the study design, or the effectiveness of MR is a priori attributed to the power of mantras or the "sacred language" of Sanskrit.

In historical and philological disciplines, on the other hand, there is a tendency to regard all types of (mantra) recitation simply as manifestations of one and the same activity. This overlooks the fact that the prerequisites for different types of recitation can be fundamentally different—as can the possible effects. For example, it takes years of study to be able to recite an entire collection of Vedic hymns—whereas a single mantra, which is intended for continuous repetition, can be learned in a very short time. Furthermore, there is a significant difference between the occasional multiple recitation of a mantra in a ritual context (three repetitions are particularly common) and

long, continuous recitation. Anyone who repeats the same formula over a longer period of time will realize that continuous repetition creates a very different feeling than, for example, reciting a longer text (for example, it may require special mental effort to recall a longer text).

The aims of the present article are to survey the current state of research relevant for the study of the early history of MR and to formulate research questions and hypotheses to guide future studies on the subject, especially—but not exclusively—philological studies. Preliminary research suggests that MR emerged in the final centuries of the first millennium BCE. In the course of the first millennium CE, MR practices became increasingly more systematized and elaborate—a process that seems to have reached a plateau with the emergence of complex Tantric systems in the 5th CE (the Mantramārga). In pre-medieval primary sources, MR is often mentioned briefly and in passing. Accordingly, in the secondary literature dealing with these sources, MR is usually treated only marginally—and even more often, simply ignored. For these reasons, relevant observations and insights are widely scattered and difficult to find. The present article is intended as a first contribution to the project of reconstructing the largely unknown history of MR.[7]

2. Backgrounds, roots, and precursors

The most important term associated with (vocal) MR is the Sanskrit noun *japa* (derived from the verb *jap*). Both Sanskritists and modern practitioners in and outside South Asia generally understand *japa* as a kind of repetitive mantra recitation. In the words of Tantra scholar André Padoux (2011: 24–25), "*Japa* […] is never an isolated utterance. It is the repeated utterance of a formula which is, to quote the Sanskrit expression, repeated 'again and again' (*bhūyo bhūyaḥ*), even sometimes […] an enormous number of times." Due to the association of *jap*(*a*) with repetition, the study of the early, pre-medieval history of MR has been mostly confounded with the study of this word and the practice supposedly associated with it.

The assumption that *japa* has *always* been a technical term denoting a specific practice goes back at least to Louis Renou (1954). In his entry on *japa* in the *Vocabulaire du rituel Védique*, Renou translates *japa* as "prière murmurée," but also states that, in its technical sense, it designates the recitation of the mantra *bhūr-bhuvaḥ-svar-o3ṃ*. However, the passages he cites provide little basis for such a definition.[8] The idea of a well-defined Vedic *japa* was nevertheless repeated in a number of publications over the following fifty years.[9]

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[7] I have presented preliminary research findings in the form of unpublished conference papers: "The Origins of Mantra Repetition in Yoga: A Hypothesis" at the conference *Yoga darśana, yoga sādhana: methods, migrations, mediations* (Kraków 2022); "Mantra and Muttering in the Mahābhārata: Re-evaluating the Evidence of the Jāpakopākhyāna (MBh XII 189-193)" at the *Tenth Dubrovnik Conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas* (Dubrovnik 2023); "There Was No Repetitive Recitation of Mantras in Vedic Ritual" at the *Eighth International Vedic Workshop* (Paris 2023). While my own research has focused on Vedic and Brahminical Sanskrit texts, the research program outlined in this article is broader in scope and will hopefully be relevant and helpful to scholars with other specializations as well.

[8] Āpastamba-Śrautasūtra XIV 15.4 (see Caland 1924); Āśvalāyana-Śrautasūtra I 1.20 and 2.3 (see Mylius 1994).

[9] Padoux (1987: 118), quoting Renou's entry on *japa*, writes: "Le terme est d'un usage ancien, la récitation elle-même, à but religieux, de textes du Veda étant sans doute plus ancienne encore. Le mot *japa* se

In his 1963 article on the Jāpakopākhyāna, a heterogeneous text that is contained in the twelfth book of the Mahābhārata (XII 189–93), V. M. Bedekar wrote the following (1963: 72):

> It appears that the idea and the technique of *Japa* properly belong, as the *M*[*ahā*]*b*[*hārata*] chapters testify, to the ancient orthodox Vedic tradition in which sacrifice and sacrificial rites played the most prominent part. […] There are found references in the Brāhmaṇas to *Japa* connected with the sacrificial ritual. The mantras, besides being chanted during the ritual, were also inaudibly recited to add to the mystic potency of the ritual. *Japa*, thus, appears to belong to the Vedic sacrificial tradition which required the silent recitation of a Vedic mantra in a secrificial [sic!] ritual.

However, the passages cited by him do not give any details about a practice referred to by the noun *japa*.[10]

John Brockington, too, has published an article on the Jāpakopākhyāna (2012). He primarily views the development of *japa* as having moved from "the murmuring of Vedic *mantras* as an accompaniment to sacrificial rituals" to "the meditative repetition of a divine name in *bhakti* traditions" (Brockington 2012: 75), especially in the Pāñcarātra tradition. He speculates that the Jāpakopākhyāna constitutes one of potentially several links between them, in that it belongs to a "transition phase consisting of a pre-*bhakti*-type worship of Brahmā" (2012: 85). However, there is no indication of a connection between *japa* and theistic worship of Brahmā: Brockington (2012: 83) states that "Brahmā" (in the masculine form) is mentioned frequently in the text, but in the list of references to "Brahmā" given in the footnote supporting this statement (n. 18), he also includes passages that refer to the neuter noun *brahman*. Moreover, Brockington himself concurs with the "assessment that the evidence for Brahmā as a *bhakti* deity is rather weak" and concedes that *japa* is "not especially directed towards Brahmā" (2012: 85).

As far as I can see, there are no other sources to support Brockington's theistic hypothesis—in his defense, it must be said that he himself does not claim that it is anything other than speculation (2012: 84). But the problem goes a little deeper than that: both Bedekar and Brockington implicitly assume the existence of a practice that was well enough defined that it makes sense to

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rencontre dè les Śrautasūtra et les Grḥyasūtra pour désigner une prière murmurée ou, 'plus techniquement, la récitation des mots *bhur, bhuvaḥ, svar, 03m* [sic!].' C'est alors la récitation murmurée de stances ou de formules par les officiants ou le *yajamāna* à certains moments du culte védique." Padoux 2011: 25: "The term *japa* is ancient. One finds it in the *Śrautasūtra* and *Gṛhyasūtra* [sic!] where it refers to a muttered prayer or, in a more technical sense, to the recitation of the *vyāḥṛtis bhur* [sic!] *bhuvaḥ svar oṃ*. In that case *japa* is the muttered recitation of stanzas or ritual formulas by the officiating priests or by the *yajamāna* at specific moments of the Vedic cult." Referring to Renou via Padoux, David Carpenter (2003: 31) states that "[i]n the Kalpasūtras, according to Renou, *japa* appears as a technical term for the recitation of *Oṃ* and the *vyāḥṛtis*. The term is clearly used this way in the Dharma Sūtras and Śāstras, and this of course brings it into close association with the *svādhyāya*, which always begins in this way, as do the morning and evening devotions (*saṃdhyā*) which were the daily duty of every Brahmin."

[10] Aitareya-Brāhmaṇa II 38, VI 14 (see Keith 1920); Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa I 5.1.26, 7.4.20–21 (see Eggeling 1882/1864).

speak of its *transformation*, rather than of its *emergence*.[11] The work of other scholars has not progressed much beyond this assumption (Padoux 1987: 118; Padoux 2011: 25; Carpenter 2003: 31; Goodall/Isaacson 2016: 57–58). Dominic Goodall and Harunaga Isaacson (2016: 57), for example, state that *japa* "is a seemingly ubiquitous phenomenon, the origins of which can probably not be pinned down with any precision."

Although it is certainly true that precision in this respect is unattainable, preliminary research suggests that the supposition that repetitive *japa* was prefigured in the ancient Vedic religion is highly problematic. In fact, in pre-medieval South Asian literature, there is no indication that *jap* necessarily involves repetition. The word is also used for texts that are recited only once, and sometimes in non-ritual contexts. Moreover, in pre-classical texts, the basic meaning of the verbal root *jap* seems to be simply (probably onomatopoetic) "to mutter" ("murmeln, flüstern" Werba 1997: 347) or rather "to recite quietly." The fact that the noun *japa* occurs extremely rarely in Vedic literature suggests that it was not (yet) established as the designation of a ritual activity in its own right. This means that what we are dealing with was not a simple transition or shift from a "Vedic *japa*" to a "*bhakti japa*," that is, the devotional repetition of the name of a deity.

As a matter of fact, the widespread assumption that MR has *always* been an important component of South Asian religiosity is difficult to substantiate. In Śrauta ritual, the oldest form of Vedic ritual known to us in detail, MR was not established either as a common practice or as a principle. Mantras were generally supposed to be recited once; exceptions to this rule are rare. Only in the Sāmavedic chants—the musical part of the rituals—is repetition ubiquitous. Sāmavedic chants generally consist of textual material from the Ṛgveda that has been modified in various ways, for example by inserting so-called *stobha*s—non-lexical syllables or syllable sequences such as *ho vā ho vā*—or by repeating (*abhyāsa*) components. The resulting lyrics are set to melodies and are often repeated according to certain patterns (Howard 1977: 20–23; Kane 1941: 1182–1183).

A special case is the so-called *aniruktagāyatrasāman*, a particular Sāmavedic melody, in which the entire text is replaced by non-lexical syllables. This substitution results in a highly repetitive chant that, as Finnian M. M. Gerety (2021) has argued, prefigures later yogic forms of meditation focused on the syllable *om*. In the Upaniṣads, meditation on *om* is presented as a means to achieve liberation and immortality (Gerety 2021: 225–233). However, the extent to which this meditation involves continuous *repetition* of the syllable is unclear—the sources are surprisingly unspecific in this respect. It is also an open question of how recitation (which is close to speaking) and chanting (which is closer to singing) relate to each other and to what extent the universal phenomenon of repetition in music (Margulis 2014) had an influence on the development of early forms of mantra yoga involving *om*—and of MR in general. The late Sāmavidhāna-Brāhmaṇa (Konow 1893), for instance, describes many ritual practices involving the repetitive singing of

[11] Concerning the emergence, formation, and transformation of ritual practices, reference must be made here to the numerous publications that resulted from the *Sonderforschungsbereich* (SFB) 619 "Ritualdynamik" at the University of Heidelberg; see, for instance, Brosius et al. 2013.

mantras and hymns. As this Brāhmaṇa is clearly post-Vedic, the practices it mentions are most likely based on—and are not the precursors of—repetitive recitation practices as we know them from Dharma and Gṛhya literature. Nevertheless, one could hypothesize that Sāmavedic practices are particularly repetitive because they are (at least in part) also musical.

A practice that most likely played an important role in the emergence of MR is *svādhyāya*, which is often translated as "private study" or "self-study." *Svādhyāya* is the practice of "going over" (*adhyāya*), that is, reciting a previously memorized text "on one's own" and "for oneself" (*sva*); in practice, it is not always done privately and alone, but also in small groups. Its primary purpose is not so much to study the content of a text intellectually—even though this can be a part of it—but a means to keep its words and sentences in one's memory. *Svādhyāya* is done above all by repeating memorized sequences of mantras (Larios 2017: 115–116). Because it fulfils a crucial function in the transmission of Vedic texts, it has been ascribed a religious value from late Vedic times onwards. As the *brahmayajña*, the "act of worship of the Vedic formulations/mantras," it is one of the five "great acts of worship" (*mahāyajña*s) to be performed daily by a householder following the Vedic Brahminical tradition (Lubin 2018: 185–186). *Svādhyāya* has received much more study than "classical *japa*" or MR (Malamoud 1977; Carpenter 1992: 65–67; Carpenter 2003: 29–34; Killingley 2014; Sundareswaran 2019).

3. The emergence of mantra repetition

As Carpenter (2003: 31–32) has observed, in Brahminical Dharma literature a tendency developed to perform *svādhyāya*—as well as repetitive *japa*—with only a reduced number of mantras. These include above all the so-called *pāvana*s or *pavitra*s ("purifiers"): the syllable *om*, the Vyāhṛtis, the Gāyatrī-Mantra, and several other hymns and verses taken primarily from the Ṛgveda.[12] The (repetitive) recitation of these texts was early on combined with breath-control (*prāṇāyāma*). Probably among the first to be made the object of such repetitive recitation were the syllable *om* and the Gāyatrī-Mantra; in recent years some scholarly attention has been given to their development and history (Gerety 2015, 2016, 2021; Haas 2023ab; Brereton 2022; Kajihara 2019). In contrast**,** little research has been done on the other purificatory mantras. It is still unclear why they were considered particularly suitable for purification and (possibly repetitive) *japa*, and what the former has to do with the latter.

Since the literary culture of ancient South Asia was largely based on orality, preserving texts other than the Vedic ones also required regular recitation. The Pātañjala-Yogaśāstra (c. 4th century CE), for example, counts *svādhyāya* among the practices of a yogi (Carpenter 2003: 29–34), defining it as the "recitation of the treatises on liberation" (*mokṣaśāstrāṇām adhyayanam*, commentary on *sūtra* II 32). Interestingly, this text also defines (continuous and repetitive?) *japa* of the syllable *om* and the "purifiers" as forms of *svādhyāya*. This raises the question of whether repetitive *japa* is primarily rooted in the above-mentioned Vedic-Upaniṣadic meditation practices involving *om*

[12] Gautama-Dharmasūtra IXX 11–12, XXVI 10; Baudhāyana-Dharmasūtra II 7.2, III 10.10, IV 2.7–9, 6.1–4; Vasiṣṭha-Dharmasūtra XXII 8–9, XXV 3–4, XXVIII 10–15 (see Olivelle 2000).

(Gerety 2021), or whether the emergence of the practice of repeating a single, short mantra as a substitute for reciting more extensive texts was part of a more general development.

Meditation practices involving mantras play an important role not only in the Pātañjala-Yogaśāstra, but also in the Pāśupata tradition, dating probably from around the 2nd century CE. Both types of mantra meditation are treated in detail in an article written by Gerhard Oberhammer (1989). After first discussing the relationship between mantra the *om* and God with reference to Pātañjala-Yogaśāstra I 27 (Oberhammer 1998: 204–205), he turns to a passage from the c. 9th-century Ratnaṭīkā (IX 27 – XX 12; Oberhammer 1998: 206–210). In this text, a lower and a higher form of mantra meditation are distinguished, differing "in the degree of immediacy and in the intensity of the experience of union with Maheśvara that they facilitate" (Oberhammer 1998: 207). The lower type of meditation, whose purpose is purification, is done with two Brahma-Mantras (Bisschop 2018): the Bahurūpī Ṛc or Aghora-Mantra and the Raudrī Gāyatrī or Tatpuruṣa-Mantra. Oberhammer discusses the content of these two mantras as well as their theological interpretation (1998: 210–213). He then turns to the higher form of mantra meditation (*dhāraṇā*; 213–216), which involves the syllable *om*. He discusses the nature of this practice (Oberhammer 1998: 214), the meaning of *om* (1998: 215), which is a "specific linguistic representation of god" (a *guṇadharma*; 1998: 216), and "the philosophical question of the function of th[is] mantra" (1998: 218). Practical issues concerning the mantra practice of the Pāśupatas and its repetitive aspect are hardly addressed by Oberhammer; however, relevant observations on this subject have recently been made in Hans Bakker's translation of the first chapter of Kauṇḍinya's Pañcārthabhāṣya (Bakker 2023: 19, n. 60).

4. Mantra repetition in early Tantric traditions

In early Tantric texts (c. 5th century CE), we regularly encounter vocal MR as a well-established ritual tool. Padoux's study of the use of mantras in medieval Hindu Tantric traditions (2011: 24–53) provides an extensive overview of "classical Tantric *japa*" focused on what he identifies as the most important types of application, features, and concepts concerning *japa*/MR (see also the entry "*japa*" in Brunner/Oberhammer/Padoux 2000). His overview is kaleidoscopic rather than systematic; it presents various forms and modes of recitation unsystematically and side-by-side, even including cases where *japa* is limited "to very few utterances, or to one utterance only: the case is frequent" (Padoux 2011: 32). Moreover, Padoux avoids discussing philological or historic details and leans heavily toward generalizing statements. A systematic overview of MR in (early) Tantric traditions that situates it within the broader history of South Asian religions is thus still lacking.

In general, Tantra research focuses on individual texts, with cases of MR being considered or commented upon in passing. There are few studies specifically devoted to particular cases, uses, or aspects of Tantric MR. One example is Marion Rastelli's (2000) study of the daily religious practice of practitioners in the Pāñcarātra tradition, in which MR plays a crucial role: The 9th-century Jayākhya-Saṃhitā provides numerous details about timed mantra observances

whose ultimate goal is to attain *bhukti* and *mukti*, enjoyment and liberation (Rastelli 2000: 340–346). The total number of repetitions in each case depends on the mantra; the lower limit being 100,000 in total. The practitioner (specifically: a *sādhaka*) is supposed to devote about six hours per day to MR.[13] Recitation is also connected to or combined with other activities and practices, such as visualization (Rastelli 2000: 346–349), writing and the creation of amulets and diagrams (*yantra*s), the imposition of the mantra(s) (*nyāsa*), the offering of oblations (2000: 349–352), walking (2000: 321), and breathing or breath-control (2000: 333). The practitioner not only has to identify mentally with the mantra (2000: 322, 330–331), but also to assimilate his outer appearance to the visual form of the mantra (2000: 329–331). What is particularly interesting is that the text also describes the experiences the practitioner makes during his practice (Rastelli 2000: 336–338) and what happens after he has gained mastery of the mantra (*mantrasiddhi*; 2000: 335–336).[14]

Goodall (2020) deals with the semantic history of terms such as *puraścaraṇa*, *pūrvasevā*, *pūrvasevana*, *puraścaryā*, and *vidyāvrata*, which refer to a preparatory ritual or practice whose purpose is to gain mastery over a certain mantra by means of repetition. He notes that the term *vidyāvrata*, or "mantra observance" or "observance [that qualifies one] for [using] spells"[15] was preceded by the Brahminical term *vidyāvratasnāta* (Lubin 2011: 27). However, the semantic development of this or related terms, such as *vedavidyāvrata*, *vidyāvedavrata*, or *vedavidyā*, has not yet been fully unraveled.[16] Moreover, the timed MR practices referred to by these terms probably had pre-Tantric, Atimārgic/Pāśupata precursors.

5. Buddhism and Jinism

In the two most prominent non-Vedic religions originating in ancient South Asia, Buddhism and Jinism, short potent formulas similar to Vedic mantras only found currency during the first half of the first millennium CE (Skilling 1992; Gough 2021: 21–41). Systematized, elaborate MR practices were only introduced into these religions from the middle of the first millennium, when Tantric forms and modes spread across the religious landscape of South Asia. However, pre-medieval Buddhism was not at all bereft of devotional and meditative practices involving the recitation of fixed texts.[17] The Pāli canon contains a range of *paritta*s ("protections") or protective texts that

[13] Rastelli (2000: 332) calculates that the minimum duration of an MR observance would be about 23 days; longer forms of the practice may take several months or even years.

[14] Comparable information is found in the Kulārṇava-Tantra studied by Gudrun Bühnemann (1991: 302): "The perfection of the mantra (mantrasiddhi) is indicated by signs like unusual calmness and contentment of the mind, absence of anger and greed, the conquest of sleep and hunger, hearing of unusual sounds, like the sound of drums or music and the seeing of Gandharvas."

[15] Goodall 2020: 66; square brackets original.

[16] Goodall 2020: 69, n. 67; Acri 2021: 385. In particular, it is unknown when and where the word *vidyā* acquired the meaning "mantra"; Haas 2023b: 73, n. 286, 192–193.

[17] The practice of "Commemorating the Buddha" (*buddhānusmṛti*/*buddhānussati*), for example, involves the recitation of a formula listing the ten epithets of the Buddha (Harrison 1992). In the first half of the first millennium, this practice was further elaborated and expanded to include visualizations and the use of

are to be recited by monks to fight calamities and promote welfare (Shulman 2019; Deegalle 2022). The secondary literature known to me does not indicate that these texts were recited repetitively, but since the primary texts have never been analyzed in this respect, the last word has not yet been spoken. Today, repetitive recitation of *paritta*s is not uncommon,[18] and it is easy to imagine that their first users, too, recited them continuously on some occasions (e.g., to calm themselves in dangerous situations), if not systematically. A more concrete case of repetitive recitation is described in Buddhaghosa's Visuddhimagga (5th century CE): while contemplating certain visual objects (*kasiṇa*s), certain phrases should be repeated to aid focus (Crosby 2014: 150–152). Targeted research might reveal even more such pre-Tantric forms of MR.

There is some evidence that repetitive recitation already played a role in pre- (or non-)Tantric Jinism. The *kāyotsarga* ("Abandonment of the Body"), a central Jain practice that is performed several times a day in a mendicant's life, includes the recitation of the "Eulogy of the Twenty-four Tīrthaṅkaras" (*caturviṃśatistava* or *logassa*; Pragya 2017: 57–64). This practice is first mentioned in the Āvaśyaka-Sūtra. According to the earliest commentary on this text, the Āvaśyaka-Niryukti, the Eulogy is to be recited repetitively by counting breaths, with the number of repetitions (between four and forty) depending on the occasion. The Āvaśyaka-Niryukti was probably composed between the first and the 5th century CE (Pragya 2017: 53; Gough 2015: 62–63). If this is correct, MR may have been a central component of Jinism from a comparatively early date. What is certain is that MR was practiced by Jains by the middle of the first millennium at the latest: the Aṅgavidyā or Aṅgavijjā, a Śvetāmbara text that may have been composed in the 4th century CE, describes a divination ritual that involves 800 repetitions of a formula including the Pañcanamaskāra-Mantra, the most important Jain mantra (Gough 2021: 29–30).

6. Counting aids and numbers

An important element in the development MR is the emergence and (possible) cross-cultural spread of *akṣamālā*s (literally "strand of fruit kernels") or simply *mālā*s,[19] whose production and use are discussed in detail in various sources (Padoux 2011: 80–88). It has been speculated that *mālā*s also inspired other similar counting aids, such as the Islamic *misbaḥa*, which is used for the repetitive prayer called *tasbīḥ* (Venzlaff 1985; Melchert 2020: 98–106) or the Christian rosary or prayer ropes (κομποσκοίνι, чётки, etc.).[20] According to Willibald Kirfel (1949), *mālā*s emerged in

(external) images. Are there parallels in this development with the Jain practice of *kāyotsarga* (see next paragraph), which incorporated repetitive recitation during this period?

[18] Continuous *paritta* recitations may last up to seven days—a practice that was evidently already known to the medieval commentators (De Silva 1981: 17–18, 31, 45). Long *paritta* recitations inevitably involve repetition (if not MR in the strict sense).

[19] Other terms used are *akṣamālikā*, *akṣasūtra*, *rudrākṣamālā*, *carcakamālā*, *japamālā*, *rudrākṣavalaya*, *rudrākṣa*, *gaṇettiyā*, and *kancaṇiyā* (Leumann 1893).

[20] Relatedly, several scholars have hypothesized that Hesychasm, an Eastern Christian tradition involving the repetition of the Jesus Prayer, was influenced by yogic practices, possibly through Sufism (Ivánka 1952; Baier 1998: 32–35; Nacsinák 2010). However, the principle of repetition of prayers or mantras is simpler and more ancient than classical Hesychasm. The Christian practice of continuous prayer dates back to at least the 4th

a Śaiva milieu and date back to the first centuries CE. While the possibly earliest mention of a *misbaḥa* dates to around the 8th century CE, the origins of the rosary in Europe probably lie in the 11th or 12th century CE. On the basis of these observations, Kirfel concludes that the rosary was probably inspired by the *misbaḥa*, which in turn was inspired by South Asian *mālā*s. However, an initial cursory review suggests that many of the South Asian sources he used were composed comparatively late, namely in the Middle Ages. His theory that the various forms of "rosaries" have South Asian roots (Bernardi et al. 2001: 1448–1449) must therefore be reviewed—and possibly revised—on the basis of up-to-date chronological findings. The complex history of the rosary and similar counting aids has yet to be written.

Pre-medieval texts provide little or no information on how repetitions were counted, even though high numbers of repetitions (up to 8,000) are already mentioned in comparatively early sources (Haas 2023b: 165). Studies of contemporary traditions suggest that the phalanxes of the hand or blades of grass or other objects may have been used for this purpose (Larios 2017: 114–115; Padoux 2011: 33; Bühnemann 1991: 302). In any case, the number of repetitions is an important aspect of performing MR, which is why special attention should be paid to the cultural and religious significance attached to certain numbers in ancient South Asia (Srinivasan 1997: 162–175). Especially the number 108 is often associated with MR, and there have been various attempts at explaining its significance (Scheftelowitz 1931; Lienhard 2007: 161–163; Srinivasan 1997: 74; McEvilley 2002: 77). Such explanations are often based on numerological inferences or outright speculation.[21] Still lacking is a chronological examination that takes tradition- and text-specific contexts and developments into account.

7. Questions and hypotheses

This article aimed to demonstrate that the relationship between mantras and repetitiveness has been insufficiently studied. MR—in particular, the practice of continuously reciting one and the same short formula—has not been recognized as an aspect of South Asian religiosity worthy of attention. It has been assumed that MR is universal and timeless. Consequently, MR has eluded adequate scholarly analysis: Significant terminological particularities in primary sources have been overlooked (frequently, in translations and paraphrases the words "repeat" and "recite" are even used interchangeably) and the possibility of historical developments has not been considered. When and where mantras were associated with repetitiveness, how the MR principle and its diverse forms and modes emerged, how MR might relate to other repetitive activities (such as music or repetitive offerings into a fire), and which specific ritual, spiritual, and psychotropic effects it was (and is) supposed to bring about is still largely unstudied.

century; MR practices are probably a few centuries older. Since the emergence and development of the latter is de facto unexplored, the question of possible influences must be posed anew.

[21] This is not to say that number symbolism should be rejected as meaningless when interpreting the number of repetitions (or the beads on a string; Bühnemann 1991: 302). However, it is imperative that such interpretations are based on the primary literature or the tradition being studied, and not merely the imagination of the observer.

To improve our understanding of MR practices, it is necessary to approach the subject with an increased awareness of possible forms and modes of mantra recitation and the significance of its repetitiveness. First, when analyzing a particular MR practice or a description thereof, it must be taken into account how those engaging with or in it generally understand the religious or ritual role and function of recitation (of mantras, as well as other types of texts) and how they conceptualize mantras as well as their function and efficacy. Once this background is established, the specifics of the practice in question can be examined. In doing so, a number of questions should be kept in mind. Why is it necessary to recite a mantra more than once in any particular case? Does the repetition of a mantra fulfill a certain religious or ritual goal that is unattainable by other means? Is it intended to bring about a change in the state of mind, or is it expected to lead to the development of certain mental or spiritual qualities (such as inner calm or the ability to concentrate)?[22]

Technical details are important. Is recitation continuous? Is it performed with the use of the voice, and if so, with the singing voice or the speaking voice? How does inaudible or mental recitation differ from normal recitation? How often is a mantra to be repeated? Is a special significance attached to this number? Is a counting aid (such as a *mālā*) being used? In many cases, the duration of MR is determined with reference to a certain ritual act or time or left to the preference or discretion of the reciter. If repetitions are not counted, what determines how long recitation should be continued? Such basic questions should always be taken into account when studying MR practices, be it from a historical, anthropological, or psychological perspective—even if one should not expect to be able to answer all of them completely.

Historical texts pose particular challenges in this respect. While one might expect that pre-modern South Asian sources have much to say on all kinds of MR,[23] in fact, only very few deal extensively and explicitly with specifics and technical details—MR has always been practiced rather than reflected upon. For this reason, philological acumen is essential. The possibility of semantic developments must always be considered: The meaning and connotations of a word such as *japa* may be different in texts that are linguistically removed from each other in time, space, and/or culture or tradition. If an innovative form or mode of MR is mentioned in a text for the first time, this is usually not marked (e.g., by the use of a new designation). More often than

[22] Sørensen (2020: 80) argues that normal, functional actions are defined by causal structures and specific goals, whereas in the case of ritual actions, it is the correct performance alone that determines whether they are considered successful or not. This raises the question as to what extent psychotropic MR practices should be analyzed as ritual acts.

[23] As mentioned, there is no indication that repetitive recitation of mantras was a component of Vedic ritual as practiced in the Vedic period. The foremost sources for studying the early history of MR are post-Vedic texts concerned with rituals and ritualized (or "religious") behaviors: Gṛhyasūtras (c. 400 BCE–400 CE), Gṛhyapariśiṣṭas and similar texts (c. 400 CE–1000 CE), Dharmasūtras (c. 300 BCE–100 CE), Dharmaśāstras and Smṛtis (200 CE–800 CE), Atimārga and Aṣṭāṅgayoga texts (c. 200 CE onward) as well as (early) Tantric (Mantramārga) texts (c. 500 CE onward). However, fictional literature, such as the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa, must not be ignored, for fictitious practices (of which there is no dearth in the Sanskrit Epics) mentioned in them may reflect actual religious realities.

not, practices are introduced or modified silently, and innovations can only be identified by comparing precursors or similar practices mentioned in earlier texts. Sometimes one has to read a text several times or with fresh eyes in order to recognize what form or mode of mantra practice an author may have had in mind. Fortunately, there is reason to hope that careful analyses will enable the reconstruction of the history of MR in reasonable detail.

In order to interpret this history, it is essential to address the underlying causes of emergence and popularity of MR, as well as the factors that led to its diversification. As for its emergence and spread, I hypothesize that two factors were especially important: First, MR is very simple. Learning and repeating a short formula is easy. While MR practices can be quite elaborate (e.g., when they are combined with breathing techniques or the visualization of a deity), many of them do not require extensive training or preparation. The simplicity of MR made it accessible to people who may not have had the time or capability to engage in more complex religious activities.[24] Second, MR has distinct psychotropic qualities, such as increasing attention and focus as well as reducing anxiety, stress, and anger. It may even induce altered states of consciousness (today, MR is even advertised with these qualities). Practitioners in pre-modern South Asia must have experienced these psychotropic effects too. In a culture where meditation practices were firmly established and valued as a salvific activity, MR must have been a welcome addition.

While the simplicity and psychotropicity of MR must have contributed greatly to its "appeal" and were probably important for its emergence and spread (and likely still are), these two factors cannot explain all of its diverse realizations. MR practices are not always easy—in the sense of effortless—and their ultimate goal is often not just to temporarily induce a desirable state of mind. Many of the mantra observances (*vidyāvrata*s) mentioned above are very time- and energy-consuming, and they are expected to bring about more lasting achievements, such as the attainment of a special power (e.g., control over a deity) or a permanent change in an individual's nature (e.g., spiritual awakening). This raises various questions. In what ways do such observances differ from other mantra practices in terms of efficacy? How do authors (and practitioners) explain how they work? How do they affect the practitioner's life?[25]

Other MR practices do not only differ in length and intensity, but also in form, such as writing the same word again and again or turning a "prayer wheel." Historically, such practices only came into being after the "Urform" of MR, repetitive quiet recitation, had already firmly established itself as a religious practice. It is likely that this original form inspired the idea that the repetitive activation of certain formulas is especially efficacious, and that efforts were then made to apply

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[24] In Haas 2023b: 163, I show how in some cases the study of Vedic texts was reduced to the memorization of the Gāyatrī-Mantra, which for many must have been the only Vedic mantra they ever formally learned. Similarly, MR may have served the same ritual function as the recitation of longer texts.

[25] From a neurological point of view, the question arises if MR has the power to permanently transform a person's (mental or even physical) constitution. Hartzell and colleagues have shown that remarkable differences exist in the organization and morphology of the brains of experts trained in the memorization and recitation of Vedic texts (Hartzell et al. 2015)—a finding that has been called the "mantra effect" and has attracted some attention from the public—but whether simple MR has similar effects is unclear.

this principle in other ways. The obvious question is: Why? What motivated the introduction of non-oral forms and adaptations of MR? How do they differ from oral forms? Can they substitute for oral MR?

"Prayer beads" and similar counting aids used to keep track of repetition often have an important secondary function: They may serve as an external religious sign that identifies those who are carrying them as members of a particular religion or denomination, or as distinctly religious or pious. In fact, both the use of *mālā*s and the audible recitation of mantras are performative acts. For this reason, attention must be paid to the situations in which individuals are supposed (or reported) to engage in them (e.g., meditating alone in an isolated place or in public while performing other tasks). Is the noticeable (although not necessarily loud and clear) repetitive recitation of a formula intended to make a certain impression on others? Is the display of a counting aid meant to signal devotion or religious identity?[26]

The phenomenon of mantras has only recently begun to again receive the scholarly attention it deserves.[27] Research on the emergence and diversification of MR—arguably the most prominent way of using mantras—will be essential to improve our understanding of this phenomenon. It will fill a critical gap not only in our knowledge of South Asian religious history, but also in our understanding of contemporary forms and modes of MR practices.[28] At present, the MR practices that have been cultivated by Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and adherents of other Asian religions for centuries (or even millennia) cannot be put into historical perspective. The same applies to forms of MR practiced by people who consider themselves "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR), among them numerous New Age esoterics and practitioners of modern yoga. Studying the emergence of MR will make it possible to categorize such practices historically and culturally. Moreover, it will help researchers from various disciplines—such as psychology, musicology, cognitive science, and neurology—to better factor in the manifold aspects and facets of their research subject in their analyses. This will make the results of their analyses more robust and comparable, which in turn will also benefit the study of MR from humanities perspectives.

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[26] When used, the counting aid is often hidden in a pouch (*gomukha*/*gomukhī*, literally "cow's mouth") or in the folds of clothing (Bühnemann 1991: 302), which may make the procedure even more recognizable. It is not known when these pouches came into use.

[27] Reference must be made here to a six-year project funded by a Synergy Grant from the European Research Council (ERC), which has been running in Vienna, Tübingen, and Oxford since September 2024. This project is entitled MANTRAMS (Mantras in Religion, Media, and Society in Global Southern Asia) and will examine mantras from a wide variety of perspectives.

[28] Such as the Transcendental Meditation (TM) technique (Williamson 2010: 87–89, 100–103) or the repetition of the Gāyatrī by members of the *All World Gayatri Pariwar* (AWGP; Heifetz 2021).

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