CHAPTER ONE

THE COSMIC VORTEX AND DON HANDELMAN’S
ANTHROPOLOGICAL VISION: A PERSONAL VIEW

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The three essays presented here are fine examples of a method and a craft of anthropological analysis combined with a conceptual/theoretical vision that is ultimately comparative in its sweep. The idea of craft instead of method communicates for me Don Handelman’s distinctive style. Like a master craftsman, Handelman works with his materials. He follows their grain, enters within their spirit, establishing a unity with them and giving expression to their particular dynamic. Handelman combines a highly intuitive feeling and sensitivity for the ethnographic materials that he works with, with a thoroughgoing concern to rigorously establish the analytical and objective force of his arguments and discoveries. He continually opens to new vistas of possibility extending well-beyond conventional or established understandings.

Handelman has maintained a deep fascination with religious, ritual and symbolic materials from the Indian sub-continent for over thirty years.1 His interest, I think, was sparked during a short trip he made to Sri Lanka in 1979 when he visited the major shrine to Kataragama/Murugan in the island’s South Eastern Province, followed up during the same trip with a study of the Vel festival for Murugan in the island’s capital of Colombo. This interest was to blossom during a long period of intellectual and field collaboration with David Shulman which resulted in two major co-authored books, God Inside Out (1997) and Śiva in the Forest of Pines (2004). These two volumes are an exploration into the poetics of central mythological events in Sanskrit, Telugu and literature. Although highly

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1 One should not overlook the longer-term interest that Handelman has shown in ritual practice from very early in his career (see Handelman 1967, 1983). This has also been closely connected to his interest in what has been described as processes of “ritualization,” which bear a relation to Handelman’s (2004) major interest in “bureaucratic logic” and were developed to the greatest extent in his study of nationalism. Handelman (e.g. 1981, 1996, 2001) has also taken a keen interest in the dynamics of humour and play; these are crucial to his understanding of ritual and, of course, to the kind of analysis that he pursues in these essays.
significant for the understanding of ritual practice—I think path-breaking in their philosophical insight and noteworthy in their phenomenological closeness to the spirit of the works with which they engage—they are not as thoroughly grounded in practice, which is the great distinction of the essays in this volume. Here there is a marriage between the great philosophical themes of Hindu mythopoeisis and rite and the ground of their practice.

My discussion begins with a short consideration of certain aspects of the intellectual background to these essays, which demonstrate a holism appropriate to the mythological and ritual materials with which Handelman deals. They also manifest the development of a distinctive analytical approach in anthropology. A thesis I present is that Handelman’s analytical course was virtually bound for India from the word go. That he would become fascinated with Hindu cosmology and practice was immanent in the orientation he initiated in his investigation into ethnographic materials at considerable cultural distance from that of the sub-continent. The essays here express the flowering and the potential of his thought.

_A Passage to India_

Handelman’s journey to India and his fascination with ritual and its cosmological unfolding might be said to begin early in his career with his (Handelman 1967) encounter with the Washoe shaman, Henry Rupert. Indeed, Handelman’s analysis of the Hindu materials resonates with shamanic cosmic process—the Moebius-like course into the universe of the self, its in-curving and out-curving along the multi-dimensional planes of existence, the realms of merging and shifting appearances, the emergence of the self from out of itself, and so on. The shamanic universe is a living, pulsating, embodied cosmos, and this is the hallmark of Handelman’s deeply humanist perspective as it has developed. If, as I hazard, Handelman’s anthropological perspective begins with the Washoe shaman, it reaches its apotheosis in and through the Hindu mytho-cosmic and ritual materials presented here. It is highly appropriate that the initial essay in this collection should concern Śiva/Murugan, the shaman archetype and generative embodiment of the living cosmos.

Almost shaman-like, Handelman’s career describes a pathway through the cosmological imaginings of anthropology and the social sciences generally concerning the matter of human being. Coming to India towards the end of his shamanic journey Handelman emerges with a novel mode of anthropological understanding. To put it another way, Indian