The enactment of all ceremonial (or theatrical) performances is inherently risky [since] the ritual performances are necessarily subject to the variable competencies of the major performers, the competing agendas and ongoing evaluations of all the participants, as well as unforeseen contingency and blind luck”, says Schieffelin (1996: 80). The existence of ‘competing agendas’ or intentions of the participants implies that within the tradition(s) explicit critique and accusing others that they have made mistakes is the rule rather than the exception. While the scholar has to be very careful regarding the vocabulary he uses when it comes to deviations, those contributions to this volume dealing with conflicting assessments of rituals within certain traditions show that there is little hesitation in accusing other members of the same tradition of ‘getting it wrong.’ Diverse assessments of ritual events can exist side by side: varying perspectives result in diverse evaluations of what counts as ‘mistake’ or as successful performance. In this section competing perspectives within certain ritual traditions or social settings are unfolded. In many cases, these rituals are not a means to conflict resolution but are objects of conflicts themselves. The contributions to this section clearly show that these conflicts refer to the realm external to the ritual: not only the ritual process, but also the authority and authenticity of the ritual experts, internal hierarchies of the participants (or of the groups which are represented by them) as well as relations beyond the ritual frame are evaluated, negotiated and reorganized. Ritual mistake and failure in this sense therefore originate inside as well as outside the ritual.

Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin in her contribution “Rivalling Rituals, Challenged Identities: Accusations of Ritual Mistakes as an Expression of Power Struggles in Bali (Indonesia)” exemplifies in one case study that critique may even be integrated into performances, and at the same time can influence action outside the ritual setting. The Intaran’s deities manifest themselves in humans during the performances. These superhuman agents have the right to point out mistakes and to ask for their correction—which also implies the competence and power to continuously modify the ‘script’ of the temple festival, to induce change
or to insist on conservatism. Since these local deities are ‘lower’ deities (as opposed to the ‘higher’ deities of the immigrants), their voicing of ritual mistakes represents a ‘ritual of rebellion’ which, however, does not only keep alive the recollection of the local deities as powerful leading figures, but also has a lasting practical impact on the social structures beyond the ritual context. In another case study Hauser-Schäublin discusses questions of ritual mistakes by drawing on one example from pre-colonial Bali. The village community consisted in the 17th century of autochthon villagers and a group of immigrants who were, in everyday life, bound together through economic and political ties. However, during temple festivals the cultural gap between these two groups became manifest in that each of them claimed that the animals appropriate for ritual sacrifice were those they had been using before. Here the mutual accusations mirror competitive power struggles within the village community (immigrants/locals). “The evaluation of mistakes and the mutual accusation of committing mistakes is the result of cross-references. Mistakes […] were not the result of the wrong application of generally approved rules but stemmed from applying one’s own rules to rituals of the others”, Hauser-Schäublin concludes (p. 261). The allegation of ‘getting it wrong’ can serve to emphasise identity for all who are involved in the process: defining what others do ‘wrong’ implies the affirmation of one’s own ‘correct’ values and norms. Challenging the validity of a ritual also touches upon the crucial issue of individual or group identity. “One’s own ritual rules, seen as the exclusively correct way to perform rituals, are at the core of a group’s identity construction” (Hauser-Schäublin, p. 263).

Similarly the constant struggle over ‘ritual shares’ between two Viṣṇuite groups in Ute Hüsken’s case study (“Contested Ritual Property. Conflicts over Correct Ritual Procedures in a South Indian Viṣṇu Temple”) points to a ritual’s importance for identity formation. Moreover, in the context of ‘ritual mistakes’ Hüsken raises questions regarding the ‘ownership’ of rituals and of the right to perform them. She refers to Simon Harrison (1992) who characterises rituals as ‘luxury goods’ which are ‘owned’ and function to signify social, especially political, relationships. The right to perform certain rituals is owned by both individuals and groups, and as soon as ownership is challenged by one party, this feature of ‘ritual shares’ (the privilege to participate in one way or another in certain rituals) becomes evident. In that case certain ritual action is conceived of as a ‘mistake’ or even as an voluntary infringement of established norms from certain perspectives. Although