RITUAL POLITY AND ECONOMY: THE TRANSACTIONAL NETWORK OF AN IMPERIAL TEMPLE IN MEDIEVAL SOUTH INDIA*

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I. The Ritual Polity

The paradigm of the ‘‘ritual polity’’ suggests that cultural meaning may explain the formation of the early state, the legitimation of its authority, and the spatial configurations of its political units. Several formulations of the ritual polity indicate that administration and control over territory were not the bases of early political structures in South and Southeast Asia. Instead, kings at a central core who manifested the qualities of a universal overlord linked together ‘‘galactic politics,’’ constellations of small political and economic units'). The position of the kings devolved from the operation of cosmic forces or from the will of the gods, who supported royal protectors of righteousness (dharma) in the material world. In these ‘‘theatre states,’’ rulers at the center went through a daily and annual round of sacrifices and military campaigns that displayed their support of religious institutions and their power to suppress the forces of chaos that threatened a righteous order"). Early Buddhist formul-

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tions of the ritual polity described the king as the “turner of the wheel of dharma” (cakravartin), while later deistic systems, especially in Southeast Asia, developed the idea of the “god-king” (devaraja). Incorporation within large political units involved a gradation from administrative and fiscal control near the center to an increasingly ritual and theatrical allegiance at the geographic peripheries.

This paper builds on the idea of the ritual polity to show that a pattern of ritual integration is a key to empirical study of political and economic development. The logic of the argument is as follows: Rulers in the ritual polity had to maintain institutions and participate in events that continually renewed their legitimacy as the upholders of cosmic order. Legitimating activities could be episodic, such as military campaigns or meetings of the court, but the most important forms of legitimation were the long-term support of religious institutions such as temples or monasteries—concrete manifestations of the protection of dharma. Let us assume that the organization of ritual integration was rational, that is, the scale or style of participation of different actors in the system manifested the importance ascribed to individuals, families or places within the political order. The varying degrees of participation in a ritual state system could thus indicate variations in the political and economic importance of the participants. If this assumption is correct, then we may recreate a picture of political economy by discovering patterns of ritual behavior at the