

Winfried Köppelle

English translation by Klaus Ammann from (Koeppelle Winfried, 20130418), Heidelberger Habilitationshumbug, Laborjournal 4, 14-17, 18. 4. 2013

See also a related piece of the same author: (Koeppelle Winfried, 20121015)

(The article appeared p. 14-17; in the current 'Laborjournal' 4/2013,
Start Photo: Heidelberg marketing)

Heidelberg post-doctoral humbug

A former member of the University Hospital Heidelberg was never hired as a professor. Also she has plagiarized in her post-doctoral habilitation work. Nevertheless, the lady appears for years as "Heidelberg University Professor" with habilitation in the international media and on conferences.

(see also the UPDATE below: a press release from April 18, 2013 of the University of Heidelberg as a reaction to the article and previous interventions from last year)

The Indian critic of genetic engineering Dr. Suman Sahai is a well-known conversationalist. Dr. Sahai, who lived in the 1980s for a while in Germany, meets regularly with members of Parliament and appears frequently in TV panel discussions. Dr. Sahai has good contacts with the Advisory Board of the President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso. With her agricultural lobby organization '[Gene Campaign](#)' Sahai effectively influences Indian legislation and research policy since many years.

The eloquent activist also influences successfully the opinions of German TV viewers. Dr. Sahai appears in great style in a traditional Indian sari, and presents herself as an authority for plant

breeding and genetic engineering. She plays successfully the role of a dedicated fighter for the rights of the poor, who would like to make small farmers in India independent of the international seed corporations.

The good (Sahai) in the eternal battle against the evil (Monsanto and co.) - as a Professor she is omnipresent in the media.

In October 2010, Sahai appeared in the TV documentation "[SWR1 Leute](#)" and as a studio guest in "[Planet Wissen](#)"; in February 2011 in the international program of the "Deutsche Welle". And she rarely misses to point to her high scientific reputation of an Indian researcher, having acquired habilitation and professorship at the German elite University of Heidelberg:

"Dr. Suman Sahai is habilitated human geneticist from the University of Heidelberg. In 2002 she was honored with one of the highest awards in international agricultural research, the Borlaug Prize"

And:

"Suman Sahai teaches worldwide in universities, including Heidelberg."

Also industry is seeking contacts with Dr. Sahai. By end of 2009 Dr. Sahai was invited as an academic world authority for a Panel discussion "Green genetic engineering and world hunger" by the pasta manufacturer Klaus Freidler ([ALB-gold](#)) from Southern Germany:

"How are poverty and hunger related to agricultural genetic engineering?" (...) ALB-gold CEO Klaus Freidler invited Professor Dr. Suman Sahai, human geneticist at the University of Heidelberg, and Dr. Rudolf Buntzel, both internationally well-known experts, for a panel debate under the leadership of moderator Manfred Ladwig, an experienced journalist and globalization expert of the SWR ([Südwestdeutscher Rundfunk](#)), providing interesting insights into the global relationships."



However, the story of the "Heidelberg Professor of human genetics" Dr. Suman Sahai turns out to be a bubble - the story about the habilitation of this "renowned expert" is a fake.

An anonymous email...

The initial trigger for this article was pushed by the end of September 2012, as a story reached the editors of the 'Labor-Journal' as an anonymous email under the subject line "Scientific Misconduct":

"The chapter 'Glutamate in the brain of mammals' in the habilitation by Suman Sahai is a word for Word plagiarism from (Fonnum, F, 1984)".

Fonnum, F. (1984), GLUTAMATE - A NEUROTRANSMITTER IN MAMMALIAN BRAIN *Journal of Neurochemistry*, 42, 1, pp. 1-11, <Go to ISI>://WOS:A1984RV24100001 AND <http://www.ask-force.org/web/Peer-Review/Fonnum-Glutamate-Neurotransmitter-1984.pdf>

Professor Bartram, the Director of the Institute for Human Genetics at the Medical Faculty of the Heidelberg University (where Dr. Sahai's habilitation paper was released in 1987), was informed approximately seven months ago, he has however opted not to act. Dr. Sahai presents herself as "Professor at the University of Heidelberg" in India and published writings on ethics in scientific research. (...)“, even recently again under

Oops - Suman Sahai, the honorable fighter for the rights of poor farmers, is to be an impostor, and actively covers up her scientific misconduct the University of Heidelberg? Bad accusations coming from the unknown email writers, rising questions on accuracy -

... is usually to enjoy with caution

Anonymous allegations should basically be treated with highest caution. Often confused minds are hiding behind apparent fraud cases needing whistleblowers, and lukewarm flatulence is the result instead of real fraud revelation. But initial suspicion should nevertheless be followed up and addressed. And gee, the following facts in the present case were confirmed within a few minutes for further scrutiny:

- *Dr. Sahai has indeed habilitated in late 1986 in Heidelberg.*
- *A certain Frode Fonnum 1984 actually published the cited article in the Journal of Neurochemistry .*
- *The Director of the Heidelberg Genetics is indeed Prof. Claus Bartram .*

In order to verify the anonymous suspicion of plagiarism, you have to compare the habilitation thesis of Sahai with the paper by Prof. Fonnum. The *Journal of neurochemistry* article is freely available (Fonnum, F, 1984); but Dr. Suman Sahai's habilitation paper search proved initially to be problematic: Because no digital version of the work in the 1980s was available, it took several weeks to obtain a copy of Dr. Sahai's work for checking purposes for the Editors of the 'Labor Journal'. But then, it was obvious that because something is rotten. It still can be found as citation on the internet: (Sahai Suman, 1986), but is not available at Amazon, but can be ordered from the University of Heidelberg.

Successful Habilitation at the Institute for human genetics

Dr. Suman Sahai's habilitation work of 456 pages was produced and submitted in the 1980s at the Heidelberg Institute of Anthropology and Human genetics, lead at that time by Prof. Friedrich Vogel, a human geneticist. In November 1986, Sahai filed their script with the title „Elucidation of the Role of Neurotransmitter Glutamate in Normal and Abnormal Mental Function“ (Sahai Suman, 1986).

A contemporary witness, who also worked in the 1980s in the Heidelberg Human Genetics remembers Dr. Suman Sahai as a "poor scholar"; but this being only his personal opinion you need

not necessarily share. At this time, the rumor was also circulated that Dr. Sahai stems from an Indian family that previously held their own private army. The self-confidence of the lady was in any case "exceptionally strong", and when she negligently contaminated the laboratory, Dr. Sahai was expecting "that this mess should be cared for by her colleagues".

The former director of the institute Prof. Friedrich Vogel however was clearly sympathetic towards his energetic habilitation candidate. Prof. Vogel was obviously and clearly anxious to foster her habilitation. He himself can no longer be interrogated on the case; he died in 2006 at the age of 82.

According to a handwritten note on the cover page Dr. Sahai habilitated successfully with their work on June 3, 1987. She was awarded her teaching certificate (*venia legendi*) according to the same note on February 2, 1988.

Recycling the work of a colleague

Habilitation rewards are most probably unjustified due to important plagiarism:

Dr. Suman Sahai should have already been denied the request for the habilitation. In her habilitation text she has plagiarized, and that not too scarcely.

In the habilitation rules of the medical faculty of the University of Heidelberg under § 6 (habilitation exam) (4) 7 you can read:

"Wenn sich der Habilitand bzw. die Habilitandin einer Täuschung schuldig gemacht hat, insbesondere, wenn gegen die Grundsätze zur Sicherung guter wissenschaftlicher Praxis der Universität Heidelberg verstoßen wurde."

"Admission to the habilitation is to deny when the habilitation candidate is guilty of a deception, especially when violation of the principles for safeguarding good scientific practice of the University of Heidelberg is involved."

And furthermore in §6, (1) 14:

„Versicherung darüber, dass die Habilitationsschrift von dem Bewerber / der Bewerberin selbstständig und ohne andere als die darin angegebenen Hilfsmittel angefertigt worden ist.“

„Reassurance, that the habilitation thesis has been worked out by the candidate on his own behalf and without other means than the ones indicated in the original text.“

More details under (University-Heidelberg-Habilitation, 20060922).

At least a full chapter by Dr. Sahai habilitation work is copied nearly word by word, as claimed by the anonymous whistleblower: Sahai has fully plagiarized the two years before (1984) published paper of the Norwegian brain researcher Frode Fonnum (Fonnum, F, 1984). The 12 pages text from 1984 of the summary article "glutamate: a neurotransmitter in mammalian brain" can be found in largely the same texting on pages 54 to 70 in the habilitation thesis of Dr. Sahai. The similarities are striking – although Dr. Sahai has omitted a phrase or half of it here and there, rarely she added one of her own sentences or even paragraphs. However, the two texts are largely identical. Needless to say that Dr. Sahai has not stated that the chapter is a text written largely by somebody else.

What is the opinion of the plagiarized original author?

Frode Fonnum, born in 1937, is a toxicologist and Professor emeritus since the end of 2012 at the University of Oslo. [Prof. Fonnum](#) was the former Director at the [Forsvarets Forskningsinstitut \(FFI\)](#) near Oslo, a research facility of the Norwegian Ministry of defense. In his research he was known as a neurotransmitter expert, one of the leading scholars worldwide in this field, with 275 peer-reviewed publications, confirmed in MEDLINE.

Prof. Fonnum was informed by the 'Laborjournal' about the activities of Dr. Sahai, but she was completely unknown to him, and also he was not aware of her plagiarism, which he confirmed in an email to the reporter of the 'Laborjournal'.

Whether Dr. Sahai has plagiarized other parts of his work, was not tested by 'Laborjournal', but this is anyway irrelevant. It is in any case clear that the habilitation and granting of the *venia legendi* of Dr. Sahai is based on scientific fraud and there is no doubt that the Heidelberg authorities will have to revoke the awards, after becoming aware of plagiarism. The habilitation rule (University-Heidelberg-Habilitation, 20060922) paragraph 15 the following statement under points (3) 1 reads:

„(3) Die Lehrbefugnis kann widerrufen werden, 1. wenn sie durch Täuschung oder andere unzulässige Mittel erworben wurde“

"(3) The teaching certificate may be revoked, 1. if it has been acquired by deception or other illegal means."

Mind you: Here the faculty's current habilitation rules are cited, it is not the version valid at the time of the actual habilitation of Dr. Sahai. Maybe plagiarism was permitted in 1986 at the Ruprecht-Karl's University??

Prof. Fonnum in addition confirmed that neither the University of Heidelberg nor anyone else have informed him about the plagiarism affair so far.

The Dean is doing: Nothing

At least the Dean of the medical faculty of Heidelberg, the pediatrician [Prof. Claus Bartram](#), should know about the plagiarism of Dr. Sahai for at least one year, (unfortunately, Bartram does not respond to emails for weeks and resisted any attempt of clarifying contacts). So what has the faculty, what has the Dean undertaken so far in the plagiarism scandal?

Absolutely nothing - to fear the worst

Although our whistleblower himself has informed the Dean Prof. Bartram in February 2012 on a personal basis on the matter, nothing has been undertaken so far. This statement can unfortunately not be verified due to clear reluctance of cooperation: the University is trying since weeks to impede inquiry efforts for this article – response on specific questions to the press office of the university hospital were answered incompletely or not at all. However, a most interesting email was leaked to the editors of the 'Laborjournal': The [German Research Foundation](#) (DFG) had knowledge of the case of Dr. Sahai being a suspect of plagiarism no later than August 6, 2012 and pledged to start an investigation. Half a year later, on January 15, 2013, the DFG then told the anonymous whistleblower in an email:

"Concerning your allegations of scientific misconduct, the University of Heidelberg already has taken measures."

Really? So far, no known measures have been taken - neither an official announcement about the plagiarism case, nor anything else. The original manuscript of the habilitation thesis as a loan from the University Library of Heidelberg does not carry a warning stamp "plagiarism" or a similar note. The main victim, Prof. Frode Fonnum was not even informed about the theft of ideas.

It seems that the "measures" taken so far by the University was to throw sticks between the legs of the curious press representatives and to airbrush the case out of existence.

Now you could say of course: so what? The incidence is more than 25 years old!

May be, but at least Prof. Fonnum could see his rights differently. There is no statutory period of limitation foreseen in Germany for the removal of PhDs so far – as well as for Habilitations.

Law professor Gerhard Dannemann made it clear in a statement related to the Schavan Affair that those "who plagiarized must expect that scientific misconduct is even posthumously revealed and documented and can face legal consequences for lifetime." (Loewer Wolfgang & Dannemann Gerhard, 20120707)

Mrs. Professor or Mrs. Impostor?

But what is fact about the alleged professorship of Dr. Sahai? The spokesperson of the University Hospital only stated that Dr. Sahai was "since some years no longer able to meet her teaching obligations in Heidelberg" and has therefore revoked her teaching authority. No further information would be granted due to "reasons of confidentiality".

A longtime member of the Institute of Human Genetics however, who wants to remain anonymous, assured that Dr. Sahai has left at the latest in 1989 Heidelberg; she then returned to India and started her anti-genetic engineering activities there, see her campaign [website](#). In addition, "she has never been a professor at the Heidelberg University Hospital – Dr. Sahai has never taught. It is hogwash that she ever (and still now) described herself as a Professor of the University of Heidelberg!" (Sahai Suman, 201008).

We hold: Dr. Sahai has plagiarized and has never been a Professor at the University of Heidelberg, but appears as such in the media. In her [Curriculum Vitae](#) [permanent link on ASK-FORCE download 25. August 2013] comprising 28 pages, [downloaded from the [internet in February 2013](#) as softlink on 25. August 2013] she mentions without hesitation her "Professorship with Habilitation in Genetics from the University of Heidelberg, Germany".

Is the reputation ruined once ...

(Kroll Werner, 1945): „Ist der Ruf erst ruiniert, lebt es sich ganz ungeniert“. Should this fraud not be a serious warning sign for the oldest German University? After all, everybody relates to the Ruprecht-Karl University, created in 1386, a clearly honourable conduct as a research institution "of international standing". As one of only eleven German elite universities you can read on the [website](#): "Numerous great minds have learned, taught and conducted research at Heidelberg University. The oldest German university has thus played an important part in shaping science and society since its founding in 1386."

In the face of such high standards, it must hurt enormously its reputation if such an impostor is related to the good name of this academic institution.

Rubbish! The reputation of a Faculty of Medicine as the one in Heidelberg is already ruined seriously: It recently accepted a thesis, where discussion and conclusion was plagiarized to 99.9% from the habilitation paper of the supervisor, and their hypothesis and results were copied to 80% from the thesis of other PhD students ...

... you can live free and easy.

(Kroll Werner, 1945). Because you can easily tolerate a fake professor in his own ranks and who has never been one at all. For the reputation of the faculty it is always better to have a false, but well known professor instead of a bunch of real faculty, known by nobody and certainly not frequenting TV shows or invited to a noodle maker event promoting GMO free food.

And what about the thing with the phenomenal price?

Thus the habilitation case of Sahai is considered closed. Still, the case of the "Borlaug Award" deserves an addendum. Remember, wherever the fake Professor Sahai occurs, there is mention of a highly prestigious international award, won it in 2002.

Well, most probably the year of the award is 2004, not 2002, our "Professor" actually received a "[Borlaug award](#)". But also the story of the allegedly renowned prize is fishy. The [Borlaug award](#) it by no means "one of the highest awards of international agricultural research". In truth, this award is at best a regionally significant decoration; a recognition plaque, awarded by an Indian fertilizer company and 500,000 rupees (current equivalent: 7000 Euros) as well as a pretty gold medal is endowed.

Really - another award would be by far more prestigious: with a quarter of a million dollars in prize money it is called the "[World Food Prize](#)", launched by the American Nobel Peace Prize laureate Norman Borlaug – a price Dr. Sahai has never received - only the similar-sounding little brother.

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(The article appeared S. 14-17; in the current laboratory journal 4/2013, Start Photo: Heidelberg marketing) (Koeppelle Winfried, 20130418)

UPDATE : The response of the University of Heidelberg

Shortly after the article was published in the 'Laborjournal', the University of Heidelberg came up with a [Press release](#) on the matter:

Opinion of the medical faculty of the University of Heidelberg

14.04.2013

"The medical faculty of the University of Heidelberg has dealt with the anonymous allegations against the former employee of Dr. Suman Sahai and in coordination with the University decided to draw the following consequences.

Dr. Sahai served in the 1980s at the Institute of genetics of the University of Heidelberg and succeeded to habilitate. Dr. Sahai has never held a professorship at the University of Heidelberg at any time.

In November 2011 University and medical school have been confronted with the anonymous accusation, that Dr. Sahai has plagiarised in her habilitation thesis from other scientific publications.

The University and the Faculty of medicine disapprove the practice of such serious accusations to be made anonymously.

The habilitation committee of the Faculty of medicine has nevertheless reviewed the facts of the case and came to the conclusion that the habilitation text adopted from the scientific publication of another author. On January 9, 2012, the habilitation committee noted in his session that the introduction of the post-doctoral text is largely identical to a 1984 published work of overview of another author without having marked this text as quotation. Dr. Sahai, who lives in India, has also no longer met their teaching obligations as a habilitated person.

As a consequence Dr. Sahai was asked in writing on January 26, 2012 to return their teaching certificate (venia legendi) and thus the title "Associate Professor" in view of the serious shortcomings of their thesis and the missed teaching obligations.

On June 1, 2012 Dr. Sahai agreed in an email to waive the venia legendi.

Dr. Sahai was and is not entitled to call herself a Professor the University of Heidelberg. It is unclear whether Ms. Sahai may be a professor at another University. Continuation of carrying the official title of a Professor at the University of Heidelberg will have legal consequences and prosecuted."

The Article has been published online in the "Laborjournal" on April 14, 2013

Last changes: 18.04.2013 (Koepfelle Winfried, 20130418)

[**More journal publications** of Dr. Suman Sahai: (Sahai, S & Gupta, PD, 1979, Sahai, S, 1997a, Sahai, S, 1997b, Sahai, S, 1997c, Sahai, S, 1999, Sahai, S, 2003a, Sahai, S, 2003b, Sahai, S & Rahman, S, 2003, Sahai, S, 2004a, Sahai, S, 2004b), evidently all opinion pieces without original data, translator].

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