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# The Sacrificial Scene: Remarks on the Rivalry between Myth and Ritual in Vedic India

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The biographies of Benjamin Franklin tell us that from an early age this man, who would become one of the founders of the United States, was blessed with remarkable common sense. He was a most pious child, but he found the long prayers that began and ended each meal to be very tedious. One day, when a huge barrel of salted provisions for the winter was being prepared in front of him, he said to his father: "It seems to me that if you said your prayer right now once and for all over this whole barrel that it would save a great deal of time" (Clark 1983, 13).

What is interesting about this anecdote is that, in it, the ritual is immediately placed in relation to time. Moreover, we could not more clearly show a refusal to understand what the ritual expects from us. When we take what the ritual demands seriously, we immediately see that it is not a question of making the time allocated to the ritual but a fragment of time in general. It is not a question of gaining or losing time, but of constructing time itself by means of ritual. What young Franklin also refused to understand is that the prayers which accompany the meal are destined to transform, to sanctify, if you will, not a given mass of food, but the very act of eating.

For my part, I will take the position opposite to Franklin and, using examples drawn from ancient India, I will present a defence and illustration of ritual. I will attempt to project a light on these examples, and defend the idea that it makes sense, and is perhaps fruitful, to study the way in which a given culture, in this case the culture of ancient India,<sup>1</sup> glorifies but also analyzes its ritual tradition. I insist, then, on the importance of ritual, that it is necessary for the historian, the anthropologist, the philosopher, and, I believe, the psychoanalyst to be conscious not only of the multiform reality of ritual but also, and above all, of the thought, speculation, and intellectual construction which is supported by ritual.

Of course, I am not presenting myself as a partisan of ritual as such. I am, in fact, most suspicious of those who wish to combat disenchantment with the world through some kind of deliberate ritualization administered for therapeutic ends. If, as anyone, I may be charmed by the beauty of a ceremony (by the way, there will be room to investigate the significance of this expression which returns so frequently to the pen of anthropologists: "a sumptuous ritual," "a magnificent ritual") and if I am ready to let myself be overcome by the emotion which seems sometimes—although certainly not always—to reside within the individuals and groups which take part in this ceremony, I also endeavour not to forget that the ritual is routine and repetitive and that it may be a prison for the mind. Still, I affirm once again, it is important to know that, in Vedic India at least, the ritual, seen clearly and defined as a system of obligations and constraints, gave way to an intense work not only of exegesis and interpretation, but also of abstraction and theorization. To expand on the formula with which Robert Higgins recently and amusingly summarized the position of Claude Lévi-Strauss in relation to ritual—"let's stop gesturing, let's classify"—I would say that the watch-word in ancient India could be: "let's classify our gestures; let's see how they are interconnected with one another; let's see what characterizes them as rituals." If the ritual is a prison, the Indian spirit knew how to explore it marvellously and to profit from this research in order to put in place the intellectual instruments—the ideas, the means of questioning—which soon found themselves applied to other fields, notably

that of language. The sciences of ritual and grammar, within Brāhmaṇic India, walk in the same step, forging common terminologies and concepts which reinforce one another (cf. Renou 1941-42, 105-68).

How does one say “ritual” in Sanskrit? Using two series of terms: one signifies “act,” and the other signifies “rule.” Combining these two kinds of designations, we see a definition take shape: the ritual is always an act which must be executed because it is stipulated by a rule. This definition says nothing about the nature of the ritual act, and nothing of its end. This must be clarified: the rule which dictates the ritual act is contained in the text of the Veda.<sup>2</sup> In turn, all stipulations, that is to say all expressions which may be reduced to an injunction,<sup>3</sup> which consist of an injunctive sentence in the Vedic text, stipulate a ritual.<sup>4</sup> I must immediately add that this definition is valid for those rites called solemn rites, as opposed to domestic rites. Domestic rites are also taught using injunctions, but not all of these injunctions are contained within the Vedic texts:<sup>5</sup> many of these pertain to later and more varied texts which draw, it is true, their authority (*pramāṇa*) from the Veda and are not considered as valid except in as much as they are not in contradiction to the Veda.

What then is the Veda?<sup>6</sup> For the external historian, it is a group of ancient Sanskrit texts whose composition spans from the fifteenth to the fifth centuries before the common era. Within these texts we distinguish two principal layers which also correspond to two different genres: the first is a vast group of poems, hymns, songs of praise, and prayers; the second is made of later treatises, in prose, which expound the doctrine of sacrifice.<sup>7</sup> To these two fundamental groups may be added liturgical manuals which re-group and present in a logical or practical order all the instructions concerning the effective execution of rituals, notably the sacrifice.<sup>8</sup> For Indian followers of the Vedic religion, the Veda is furthermore the receptacle of truth; it is a text true in its entirety whose authority is to be neither discussed nor justified. It is generally held among the most orthodox followers of the Veda (and it can be deduced from passages of the Veda itself) that the Veda is *apauruṣeya*; it is uncreated, without origin or author.<sup>9</sup> However, it is also true that the Veda revealed itself to the gods and

to men, in fragments such that these partial unveilings could not be organized in a chronological process. It is the sum total of all these revelations which form the text of the *Veda*, the *śruti*, such as we know it and which is a closed corpus. Those men who first had the “vision” of this or that portion or of this or that version of the Vedic text are considered as inspired seers and may, by a kind of linguistic convenience, pass for the human authors, but more exactly as the human carriers, of this immortal voice.<sup>10</sup> Faith, in Vedic India, is not belief in the gods; it is certainty that the *Veda* is true (cf. Malamoud 1987a, 225–36).

This then is the status of the *Veda*, but we must more closely examine the structure of this composite whole. We are urged to do so by the emergence, in India, of a philosophic school which has a most beautiful name: *Mīmāṃsā*, that is to say, “the desire or will to think.”<sup>11</sup> Supporters of this school (*Pūrva Mīmāṃsā*) distinguish two kinds of discourse in the *Veda*: (1) injunctive sentences, *vidhi*, those which contain stipulations which, because we are speaking of the *Veda*, are ritual instructions; (2) all the rest (*vidhiśeṣa*). This second part is quantitatively much more important and is itself diverse, but it is of inferior status. It is made of sentences which, no matter what their content, are arranged around verbs in the indicative and thus are descriptions and narratives. In this immense “rest” are thus all kinds of affirmations (and negations) concerning the world and notably the gods.

It is the analysis of these injunctive sentences, of the *vidhi*, which lead the philosophers of the “will to think” to engage themselves in this investigation of the structure of the ritual act to which I have already alluded. One must first ask oneself: what is an injunction; how is an injunctive sentence constructed; what is the linguistic power, the *bhāvanā*, that one must suppose in these words, these morphemes, such that he who hears them feels held to obey?<sup>12</sup> Then one asks oneself: of what is made, and how can one understand the object of the injunction, that is, the ritual, inasmuch as it is that which must be executed?<sup>13</sup> Thus the philosophers of the “will to think” were lead to ask questions as elementary and fundamental as these: What is an act? What distinguishes a ritual act from other kinds of acts and what

are the agents which characterise a ritual act?<sup>14</sup> What specific relationship is there in the ritual between the cause and the effect, between the immediate consequence and differed consequence?<sup>15</sup> The rituals are more or less complex. Of what consists the unity and the continuity of a ritual sequence? How can one conceive the relationships between the parts, between the whole and the parts? (Cf. Renou 1954, s.v. *anga*). What remains of an initial element when we move on to the next? What is it to begin? What symmetry, or rather it seems to me, what dissymmetry is there between the act of beginning a ritual and the act of ending it? The rites are diverse and yield a kind of typology. How can one establish the relationship between the type and the instance, between the basic form and the variations? (Cf. Renou 1954, s.v.v. *prakṛti* and *pradhāna*). A ritual may be autonomous or figure as an element included in another rite, and this relationship may itself be reversible. How can one think of this reversibility of the principle and the secondary, which may be necessary or optional? Certain rites—not all—are repeated, that is to say, they must be executed periodically, at more or less frequent intervals. On the other hand, within the same ritual, there may be stipulated repetitions. However, the ritual treatises teach that there are some variations which must be introduced in the execution of certain rites in order to prevent pure and simple repetition of the same element. How can one distinguish between bad repetition, which is redundancy, and thus a form of excess, and good repetition, which reinforces or confirms that which has already taken place?<sup>16</sup> Symmetrically, how can one distinguish, in one sequence of acts, but also within one material structure, between the gap which is only a flaw, and even a symptom of the abyss, and the fertile void (*ūna*) which appears as an incentive for the act of filling it? All these questions, and one could lengthen the list, which are so many ways of speaking about the relationship between the same and the other, of continuous and discontinuous, are faced very concretely, and are tackled within the Vedic treatises as questions which develop the doctrine of sacrifice and which also deal with sacrificial practice. However, it must be understood that these questions take a systematic and ab-

stract turn only in the elaboration of this philosophic school, the “will to think.”

One will remark in the enumeration, or rather in the sample which I have just sketched, that what is in question is the structure of the ritual act and the way that it functions; what is left aside is the aim of the ritual, its symbolism, and the psychological motifs which move humans to obey the injunctions and to execute the rites. This remark applies to the *Mīmāṃsā*, but not at all for the *Veda* itself. The Vedic text is, in fact, inexhaustible on the reasons why one celebrates the rituals and on the kinds of bliss which one may, and even ought to, desire to obtain when one engages oneself in the execution of the rites. Schematically, these motifs may be divided into two groups. (1) One executes the rituals in order to commemorate, confirm, re-enact, symbolically re-do, that which the gods have done. One re-creates the world; one re-activates the forces which assure world order; one re-plays the battle, always re-beginning, of the gods against the demons; or rather one repairs, indefinitely, this or that imperfection, this or that calamity, that some rash act of the gods brought about. (2) One conducts the rites in order to obtain prosperity and happiness in this world, and, above all, a place in the heavens after death. These two kinds of motifs are combined in the general and ambiguous formula: the sacrificer must effect through his own efforts a “constructed world,” *lokam kṛtam*, an expression which one may in fact, gloss in two ways: through the ritual one must make the world, that is to say, repeat or confirm the cosmology; also, through the ritual, one must make himself a world, that is to say, earn himself a space in heaven where he may act freely (cf. Malamoud 1989, 303–25). What we call mythology and theology belong to the raisons d’être of the ritual, to the motivations and symbolism which one assigns to it.

Now the philosophers of the “will to think,” who nevertheless profess the most scrupulous orthodoxy, and for whom the essential dogma is that the *Veda* is true in its entirety, arrange all this mythological and theological discourse, all that is said about the gods and the world in the *Veda*, in the great carry-all that is the “rest” in relationship to the essential, that is, in relation to the group of ritual

stipulations. This “left-over” bears a name: *arthavāda*, literally “discourse on meaning.” I would translate it as “directed discourse.” They explain that this part of the Veda is not of the same nature, does not carry the same value or the same dignity, as the injunctions. The myths, but also the hymns which celebrate the grandeur and the power of the gods, and the comments regarding the blessings of various sorts which result from the celebration of the rituals, are, they say, embellishments, ways to make the stipulations agreeable or to “glorify” the injunctions themselves. These “discourses on meaning” are made legitimate by their function: they are psychological stimulants; they speak to the emotions and to the imagination, and without them humans would not be ready to obey the injunctions. However, they add, one who places his faith (his *śraddhā*) in these narratives, and these descriptions, risks being taken for “one who is gaping with faith,” *śraddhā-vijṛmbhita*, which implies he lets himself be taken for “one who is gaping with ignorance,” *ajñāna-vijṛmbhita* (cf. Hacker 1954, 362 sqq.). Human faith must be concentrated on the rituals. It is not even a question of believing in the efficacy of the rites (because this would be belief in the promised results) but in the unprovable and indisputable necessity to execute them. The ritual is to itself its own transcendence. I am referring to the hardliners of the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā, the followers of the Pratbhākara school. According to them the phrase *svargalkāmo jyotiṣṭoma yajeta*, “desiring heaven one should perform the sacrifice called *jyotiṣṭoma*,” does not imply that the man who performs the sacrifice will obtain heaven or that such a thing as heaven exists.

Now it so happens that this doctrine, so austere, so contrary to what is generally called religion, so hostile to human religious needs, finds its support within the Veda itself. In fact, in the sacrificial treatises, at least, it is clear that the myths and the developments in relation to the raisons d’être, and the symbolism of the ritual, are secondary elements which come to accumulate, with strange overabundance, around the instruction on the rite itself which forms a central nucleus. Very casually, but also with a kind of feverishness, the sacred text multiplies, for one single ritual, etiologically different

myths, or variants of a same myth, that are incompatible with each other.

On the other hand, if one examines the content of the fundamental myths, and notably the cosmogonic myths, one finds that the creation of the world is already in the form of a primordial sacrifice (see Rg-Veda X.90). In other words it is the myth itself which teaches that the paradigm of the ritual is pre-existent, and gives to the account its own structure and its motifs. Moreover, even the Vedic pantheon, right from the most ancient texts, yields a large place to gods, which are nothing other than the personification of this or that element of the sacrificial mechanism. Among the most important Vedic gods, in fact, among those most frequently invoked, are Agni, that is the sacrificial fire into which the offerings are poured, and Soma, the liquor of immortality which the men solemnly offer to the gods (cf. Bergaigne 1878, 1:11-226). Further, the mythic stories abound with accounts of how the gods are somehow called to existence by the rite, or at least how they attain, by means of the ritual, their status as divine. This, for example, is the case of the god Savitar, the Inciter: "Thus wished Savitar: 'May the gods believe in me! May I become the god Savitar!' He made an offering to himself. The gods believed in him. He became the god Savitar. And humans believe in him..." (*Taittirīya-Brāhmaṇa* III.1.4.11). Let me note, by the way, that by making himself the recipient of his own oblation, the god Savitar contradicts the lesson we must draw from another Vedic text, *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa* V.1.1.1, which tells us how the demons failed because each of them poured his oblation into his own mouth, whereas the gods succeeded because each of them poured his oblation into the mouth of another god. Not surprisingly, this last story attracted the attention of Martin Buber who mentions it in his book *Ich und Du* (1923, 10 [1970, 100]).

Savitar became himself by appointing himself the receiver of his own oblation. Wishing to cause the others to believe in him, he begins by demonstrating his own belief in a variety of sacrifice which he just discovered. Let us note that in order to affirm himself as god, Savitar does not act on the mind of the other gods or humans by showing them that he holds supernatural power. No, he simply gives

them the model of believing. The logic of the Inciter is thus: “I am a god. There is reason to believe in me, because I am the recipient of an offering.” The reasoning of the philosophers of the “will to think” will go in the same direction. They will say: “The reality of the gods is the name they bear and which is invoked when one makes a ritual offering.” The injunctive sentence which dictates the ritual would be incomplete if the verb “to offer” were not given a complement of attribution, that is, the name of the divinity to whom the offering is destined.<sup>17</sup>

As we can see, it is the myth itself which exalts the power of ritual and which works to devalue the gods, that is, to eclipse itself.<sup>18</sup> Yet it would be still more precise to say that in the Vedic text one sees the sketch of a kind of confrontation between a religion founded on the ritual and a religion which gives way to myth. This confrontation is also a coupling, and it is the object of myths, but these myths are told explicitly in order to justify a stipulation of the rite.

Here is an example of this dramatic production. It begins with an injunction contained, I repeat, in the Vedic text. It features the behaviour of the man who undertakes, or rather prepares himself to undertake a great solemn sacrifice.<sup>19</sup> What I evoke here is the sacrificial scene, and I mean by scene both the physical place where a performance will unfold, in this case the clearly defined and carefully layed-out grounds where the sacrifice will take place, and also the event itself which is presented there. I remind you that I am talking about instructions and stories which evolve around the preliminaries and preparations for the act. Here, as an aside, I wish to point out that one of these questions, which I indicated earlier as having been discussed by the philosophers, which were imposed in some way on their reflection by the practice of the ritual, arises here, that is: What exactly is a beginning? How do we move from the preliminary phase, to the liminary phase, and then to the first step of the process? To prepare oneself for a ritual is to be simultaneously already within the world of the rite, because one submits oneself to the ritual observances specific to this phase, and because one is already in place on the consecrated ground, on the scene of the sacrifice. Yet one is not yet endowed with the qualities which will permit one to celebrate the

ritual as such, and, yet again, this phase, preparatory for the sacrificer, takes place while other executors of the sacrifice, the officiating priests, execute acts which are already fully moments of the sacrificial process itself. Furthermore, as if to complicate it all, the Vedic texts make it understood that this preliminary or first phase is also, in some way, the essential phase because, in submitting himself to the ascetic observances that are prescribed for him, the man who places himself progressively in the sacrificial state offers *himself*, and that this, in fact, is the true sacrifice. There is, in the Vedic texts, a somewhat anxious reflection on the beginning, on the opening: How to break-up the beginning? How to remove its violent aspect? How to already include what follows in the beginning itself? How to extend this beginning into everything that follows? (Cf. Malamoud 1990, 183–91).

The sacrificer thus begins with this introductory phase of the consecration or initiation (*diksā*) which may last several days.<sup>20</sup> The observations are concerned with the way to hold oneself: how to feed oneself, to sleep, to urinate, to defecate, and also how to speak. For the most part, these observances are very rigorous restrictions: sexual abstinence, reduced gestures, withheld speech, severe diet. Among others, one general idea is articulated which explains and unifies certain specific stipulations: the man, while he acquires this consecration or this initiation, is a fragile foetus.<sup>21</sup> He is in gestation within this womb that is the sacrificial ground. According to *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa* III.2.1.6, this foetus is also sheltered by the chandas, the various meters of the vedic poetry. There is a play here on the root *CHAND-*, “to shine,” from which *chandas* is supposed to derive, and the root *CHAD-*, “to protect.” When the consecration has been completed, the sacrificer will be born with a new body, a sacrificial body, which will permit him to enter into relationship with the gods and to proceed to the actual sacrifice itself. It is because he is a foetus that he must, as much as possible, keep his hands gripped with the thumbs inside. Yet he is also forbidden to laugh or to smile with his mouth open. An explanatory myth gives the reason (*Taittirīya Āranyaka* IV.2). Once the gods were celebrating a sacrifice together.<sup>22</sup> They had made this agreement: the first among them who would obtain their

common desire, splendour (*yaśas*), would share it with all of the others. Now there was in this group a god named Makha who was none other than the sacrifice personified (*yajñapurusa*). It is to him that the splendour came first of all. So he grabbed it, but he kept it for himself alone and went off with it. He was followed by the other gods and, while he was fleeing, a bow arose in his left hand and arrows in his right hand. Even though he was alone, using these armaments he easily held back the many gods who attacked him. So it was that, full of joy, he smiled wide (*asmayata*). Yet, because he had opened his mouth when he smiled, his radiant splendour, his *tejas*, escaped from him. The gods gathered it up, and coated the plants with it; this gave birth to wild millet which is called *śyamāka*, but whose true name, we learn, is *smayāka*, derived from the same verbal radical *smaya*, “to smile.” Conclusion: the sacrificer, during this period of consecration, identifies himself with this man-sacrifice of whom the myth speaks. He must take care not to lose, as did his model, his radiant splendour, his brilliant light, and thus he must avoid smiling with his mouth open.

In this story, it is all of the gods that are in competition with the sacrifice personified. In the myth which I am going to introduce now, and which shows us a characteristic of the sacrificial scene that evokes, it seems to me, what we call the primordial scene, there is one divine protagonist: the god Indra.<sup>23</sup> Of all the gods of the Vedic pantheon, it is this one who has the richest mythology and the strongest personality; it is he that most resembles, by his exploits and passions, the anthropomorphic gods of Greece. He is always champion of the gods, and it is he who leads the battle of the gods against the demons, and against chaos, even though he himself often has a chaotic manner because he is so impetuous. Here is how Indra intervenes in the ritual dictates relative to the consecration. Among the observances to which the consecrated one must submit is this: If he feels itchy, he cannot scratch himself with his nail or with a piece of wood, but only with the help of a horn from a black gazelle, which he carries attached to his belt, and which will have been given to him by one of the officiating priests at the very beginning of the procedure while reciting this formula addressed to the horn itself: “You are the

womb of Indra.” The sacrificer takes it while reciting this other formula: “Do me no harm” (*Āpastamba-Śrauta-Sūtra* X.9.17 sqq.). At the moment of scratching himself, the sacrificer must again pronounce formulas because, it is said, there must be differentiation between the sacrificial world and ordinary life. In ordinary life, one scratches oneself without saying anything, whereas during the consecration, one scratches his head saying, “I dig in you for ploughing, for good harvest; make it so that the plants have many shoots”; if he must scratch another part of his body he must say: “O horn of gazelle, undo this knot, if there is something tangled in the heart of this man (that I am), if his mind is muddled” (*Āpastamba-Śrauta-Sūtra* X.10.1 sqq.).

The *Mīmāṃsā* philosophers did not fail to reflect on these vedic instructions about the sacrificer’s itching and scratching (*kaṣṭūyana*). Here is the problem they discuss: what are the limits and what makes the unity of the act of scratching oneself? When one scratches one limb and then another without interruption, is it one action or two successive actions? Is it enough to recite the formula once, or does one have to repeat it? The answer is that once is enough because the person, the *ātman* who is to be relieved by the suppression of the sensation of itching, is one and remains the same. Yet if there is an interval of several minutes between two scratchings, one has to recite the formula again.<sup>24</sup>

Now what is the reason for these precautions; what does the act of scratching become a rite? Here is the explanatory myth in the version of the *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa* III.2.1.25: “The Sacrifice was overcome by desire for Speech, the goddess Vāk.”<sup>25</sup> He thought: “Ah, how much would I like to make love to her!” and then he united with her.

Indra said to himself: “Surely a prodigious being will be born from this union between Sacrifice and Speech, and this being will be more powerful than I am!” Indra transformed himself into an embryo and slid himself in the embrace of Sacrifice and Speech. After one year, he was born, and he then said to himself: “In truth most vigorous is this womb which contained me. I must take precautions in order that no prodigious being is born ever again from this womb and becomes more powerful than I! He tore Speech apart; he seized the

womb of Speech, gripped it tightly, pulled it out and placed it on the head of Sacrifice.”

As a matter of fact, Indra seems to be a specialist in this kind of trick. For instance, according to *Jaiminīya-Brāhmaṇa* III.19, Indra hits the demon Vṛtra with his thunderbolt, the thunderbolt *vajra*. Not being sure he has killed his enemy, full of fear, Indra runs and seeks shelter in the womb of the cows, of several cows, in fact. These cows want to give birth to the divine foetus which is growing within them. They can achieve this only after they have had the revelation or rather the vision of certain *sāman*, certain tunes of the Sāma Veda. We do not know how it worked, but the fact is that Indra, thanks to his *māyā*, manages to become the son of several biological mothers and to be born from several wombs at one time without splitting his own self.<sup>26</sup>

The text about the scratching continues with this explanation: the horn of the black gazelle which one uses in order to scratch oneself is the womb which Indra held tightly in his grip and which he tore from the body of Speech. Just as Indra, having become an embryo, was born from the union of Sacrifice and Speech, so also the sacrificer, during the consecration, is born from the union of Sacrifice, symbolized here by an antelope skin which he must always carry with him, and of Speech, symbolized here by the horn. Further along we are told: “He who is in a state of consecration is a foetus. If one scratched a foetus with his nail or with a piece of wood, one would cause his expulsion from the womb and his death. Yet a womb could not possibly harm the foetus which it contains. This horn is nothing other than the womb which shelters the sacrificer. He can scratch himself with this horn from a black gazelle....”

The Veda tells us other versions of this same myth (*Taittirīya-Saṃhitā* VI.1.3.1 sqq.; *Maitrāyaṇi-Saṃhitā* III.6.8; *Kāṭhaka-Saṃhitā* 23.4). They do not differ from that which we have just heard except on one point: the feminine partner of Sacrifice is not Speech, but the *dakṣinā*, that is to say Remuneration, the fee which the sacrificer is obliged to give to the officiating priests who help him to effect the sacrifice (cf. Malamoud 1976, 155–204). Such is the hold of the ritual, so strong is the tendency to populate the pantheon with

personalities which are in fact only constituent elements of the rite personified and rendered divine: Remuneration herself receives a life, a mythology, a body, and notably a womb. Yet one must clearly understand that the goddess Speech, even though she may be a fully mythologized divinity right from the hymns of the *Rg Veda*, is also, in her own way, a form of the rite: she is none other than the text of the *Veda* itself, which is made up of the totality of the poems and formulas to recite during the execution of the ritual, and which make it such that the ritual gestures are able to bring the gods into being.

Whether the feminine partner of Sacrifice be the Vedic Speech or Remuneration of the priests,<sup>27</sup> in any case, Sacrifice and his mate in this way hold the ritual closed on itself: autonomous, perfect, fertile. The gods are cast aside, and the myth, deemed bothersome and useless, is left behind or rather is only present inasmuch as it is that of which Speech speaks. In order to conserve the pre-eminence of the gods, or simply their *raison d'être*, Indra finds nothing better than to occupy the ground by a kind of break-and-enter, a particularly savage and subtle form of rape. The god does not remain god except when, by trickery and by force, he imposes himself as the son of the ritual couple which he caught in their love. Yet, it is true that in this horrible episode to which Indra was driven, he succeeded, and thanks to him the gods were given a future.

This story, which is offered as an explanatory myth for a ritual, is the dramatic portrayal of the rivalry between myth and ritual. One can read it in two ways, at least, and recognize in it, if I may venture on this ground, two concurrent versions of the theme of the omnipotence of thought. The rituals turn into gods; the mythological god is threatened with obliteration, and subsists only if he succeeds in being re-created by the ritual. One is given to see first in this story the lofty affirmation of the anteriority of ritual and its autonomy in relation to myth: the rites can do without the gods; the gods are nothing without the rituals. In the beginning was the ritual act, and this beginning may very well be perpetuated. Yet just as true, in the inevitably mythic form which this narrative takes, and in the turn which the story takes, one must recognize the proclamation of the irrepressible need to imagine.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to the periodization generally adopted, Indian antiquity concludes with the Muslim invasions (from Afghanistan and Iran) which became massive as of the year 1000. It is a convenient point of reference, but one must not exaggerate the importance of this division: the creation of Muslim states on Indian territory and the conversion to Islam of part of the Indian population did not cause the disappearance of or even alter the older civilization. Hinduism, the religion still dominant in India today, may be considered the historical product of Vedic religion, fruit of profound transformation, but operating without pronounced rupture. In the eyes of Hindu doctrinaries, in any case, there is real continuity between Hinduism and its Vedic origins.

<sup>2</sup> We limit ourselves here, in fact, to Vedic India. The language of the texts which make Vedic India known to us is an ancient form of Sanskrit. The most common terms for “ritual” in Sanskrit are, on the one hand, *kriyā* and *karman* both derived from the root KAR-, “to do, to make” (the first sense of these terms is thus “act” or “practice”), and, on the other hand, *kalpa*, “rule,” derived from the root KALP-, “to adjust, to adopt.” The texts which present the ritual rules are the *kalpa-sūtras*; a synonym of *kalpa* is *vidhi*, “disposition, injunction.” Another term for “ritual” is *yajña*, properly “sacrificial ritual.” The sacrifice, in its richness and complexity, is the model for rituals. We find in the Vedic texts countless passages which seek to demonstrate that the schema of the sacrifice may be found in the most simple of rituals.

<sup>3</sup> The injunction (*vidhi*) is characterized by the presence in the sentence of the verb in optative mode.

<sup>4</sup> The Veda is made such that the injunctions which are found there, and which one might believe carry a moral tone, are in fact of a ritual nature. When we read, for example, such sentences as “one must tell the truth; one must not lie” let us pay attention to the context. These obligations and these restrictions teach observances which must be respected by a man engaged in the preparation and celebration of a sacrifice. In this circumstance, “to tell the truth” means “to speak without altering the prescribed formulas,” and “do not lie” signifies “avoid superfluous works which do not relate to the ceremony.” It is, of course, implicit in these precepts that this speech, these formulas which must be so rigorously respected, express essential realities, and thus are truly Speech par excellence. On the origin of moral scruples in the concern for correct execution of the rite see Lévi 1898 [1966], 152–67. Nevertheless, may this obligation to tell the truth not be generalized to life in its entirety? This question is discussed by the philosophers of the “will to think” (*infra* note 12) thus by Śabara ad *Mīmāṃsā-sūtra* III.4.12. sq. The conclusion is that one must take

the injunction in its context and in its strictly ritual sense. It does not follow, far from it in fact, that the love of truth is not a recommended virtue. On the contrary, the man “who loves the truth” is glorified, and again the “truth,” the *satya* that is the object of this love, is the metaphysical “truth” rather than the antonym of “lie.” Truth, sincerity, and the other moral virtues are not, in and of themselves, the object of injunctions; there is nothing in the Veda which may be compared to the Decalogue. However, in the later Indian texts, Hindu as well as Buddhist, one finds abundant, and abundantly commented, lists of moral qualities and rules of conduct.

<sup>5</sup> The “solemn” rites are those which require the services of specialised priests and the installation of three fires on an ad hoc terrain; they are distinguished from the “domestic rites” in which the head of the house acts alone and uses only a single fire which is permanently maintained in the household.

<sup>6</sup> For detailed analysis of the form and content of the Vedic texts see Renou 1947, 1:270–380.

<sup>7</sup> We call *mantra* the fragment of the Vedic poem (verse or sequence of verses) which “makes sacred,” that is to say which renders the gesture one makes, or the object one manipulates when pronouncing it, ritually effective. With the passage of time the collections of hymns and prayers of the Veda have had a tendency to be considered only in their function as ritual instruments, that is to say, as collections of *mantras*. Cf. Renou 1960, 6:60 sqq.

<sup>8</sup> Liturgy, understood as the technique of the ritual, is one of the sciences auxiliary to the Veda, one of the “limbs” of this body. The other “limbs” are phonetics, grammar, metrics, etymology and astrology.

<sup>9</sup> Such is, at least, the doctrine of the philosophical schools which present themselves as interpreting the Veda. In the Vedic text itself, (Vedic) Speech emanates from the cosmogonic god Prajāpati, and from this Speech emanates the world. On the various traditions regarding the origins or absence of origin of the Veda see Muir 1874 (1967).

<sup>10</sup> If in the beginning the gods and men had the “vision” of the Veda (it is, in fact, by the verb “to see” that this perception is designated) what reveals itself to them is paradoxically, none the less, a matter of word and sound; a traditional synonym for “Veda” is *śruti*, literally “that which is heard.”

<sup>11</sup> The term *mīmāṃsā* is a noun formed on the desiderative of the verbal root MAN-, “to think.” It thus expresses “the will to think.” On the philosophical school thus designated which presents itself as a reflection on that part of the Veda consecrated to the doctrine of the sacrifice (the *Brāhmaṇas*), see the bibli-

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ography in Verpoorten 1987. Particularly penetrating views on that which forms the specificity of the *Mīmāṃsā* are found in Biardeau 1964.

<sup>12</sup> It is not a question here of the authority or the persuasive force of the text, but of the strictly linguistic efficacy of the verbal form. See, for example, Edgerton 1929 (1986), 5; cf. Malamoud 1998, 199.

<sup>13</sup> Bibliographic elements in Malamoud 1998, 196 sqq.

<sup>14</sup> The components of a ritual are, in Vedic theory, as a minimum: the act of ceding or “abandoning” wealth; the performer of the act; the material object of this “abandon”; and a divinity, or at least a receiver which is not profane, to whom the abandon is made.

<sup>15</sup> The ritual creates an “unprecedented” (*apūrvā*) result, or at least is effective only because it incites an unprecedented force.

<sup>16</sup> On the need to avoid redundancy in the ritual and the assimilation of this bad repetition to incest, see Malamoud 1980, 45–47.

<sup>17</sup> On the status of the gods in the *Mīmāṃsā*, see Śabara *ad Mīmāṃsā-sūtra* IX.1.6–10. Good summary by Keith (1921 [1978], 61); cf. also Chattpadhyaya 1969, 202–53.

<sup>18</sup> It happens that the Vedic texts reveal a kind of scepticism regarding the myths they tell. At least the writers share, without excessive indignation, the questioning of those who doubt the existence of even such great gods as Indra. It is, in fact, to Indra that the most extraordinary exploits are attributed and thus the most mythic. He is able to accomplish these exploits as a result of a mysterious force, the *māyā*. The term *māyā*, however, is itself polysemantic, and its meanings changed between the most ancient Vedic texts (the hymns) and those of the later period (the *Brāhmaṇa*). It shifted from the sense of “power by which efficient structures are formed” to that of “art of projecting illusory and changing forms, acts of magic,” to end finally at “illusion.” Does Indra triumph over his demonic enemies by acts of magic which cloud the minds of his adversaries and paralyse them—or rather, are all these stories of Indra’s enemies (and of Indra himself) only fables, only fiction? One finds ambiguous scepticism: Indra is far too powerful to have ever had enemies to fight; or rather, Indra himself is invented. For example, a text like the verse Rg Veda X.54.2 may be taken in two different senses (Indra has conquered by means of his *māyā*; or rather, *māyā* that is everything) which imply two fundamentally different conceptions of the religion depending on whether one considers the verse in its first form and sense, or in the altered citation given by *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* XI.1.6.9 sq. Cf. the brilliant commentary of Minard

(1949 and 1956, 2:786 and 871 sq). On *māyā* cf. Renou, 1948, 290–98 (1978, 133–40).

<sup>19</sup> The typical form of the solemn sacrifice is the offering of *soma* in the ceremony called the *agniṣṭoma*. One will find an exhaustive analysis of all the stages of this sacrifice with citations (in French) of all related texts in Caland and Henry 1906 and 1907.

<sup>20</sup> For detailed study of the *dīkṣā*, “consecration,” then “initiation” in Vedism and Hinduism can be found in Gonda 1965, 315–459.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa* III.2.1.6 sqq. Later in this text there is mention of a cord made of hemp which the “consecrated” must wear as a belt; this cord is identified with ambiotic fluid and the piece of cloth with which he must envelop himself with the placenta. The symbolism constantly slips between the figure, the analogy and the metaphor.

<sup>22</sup> As a rule, the sacrifice is an individual affair, that of a sacrificer to whom the officiating priests offer their technical contest in exchange for remuneration. However, there are also, at least in theory, “sacrificial sessions” (*sattrā*) organised by several sacrificers each of whom acts as an official for the others: the distinction between “client” (or patron) and paid specialist is thus abolished. This is the case in the mythic sacrifice in question here.

<sup>23</sup> The god Indra is anthropomorphic, and even so human that he finds himself guilty of a great number of sins, or at least transgressions. The list of these sins is recalled on countless occasions, and it forms an important part of the mythology. Always concerned with assuring the supremacy of the gods, Indra uses violent means and may be driven to commit murders which demand reparation. He also has passions; he gorges himself on *soma*, *soma* which is not offered to him, but which he seizes by force and which makes him sick. This indigestion and the story of Indra's recovery frame a myth of origin for a ritual, the *Sauitrāmanī*, doublet and counterpart of the soma sacrifice. Indra is also a great connoisseur of women and constantly disguises and transforms himself in order to approach those he desires.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Śabara *ad Mimāṃsā-sūtra* XI.3,6,13 sq.; 4,16,51. Further, one will remark that the ritual formulas addressed do not relate exclusively to the gesture with which they are associated here. On the contrary, scratching the body is only one case among others of the use of these formulas. To pronounce them in this circumstance is a means of evoking scratching in general and notably that fertile scratching of the earth which is ploughing; it is also a means of classifying the itching among those discomforts which effect the body and, by extension, the mind.

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<sup>25</sup> Speech (Vāk) is a goddess at once the daughter and the feminine double (the second) of the cosmogonic god Prajāpati. However, she is also, and above all, the personification of the text of the Veda itself, or of the linguistic power of which the Veda is a concrete expression and receptacle. In this regard, Speech is an element of the sacrifice, feminine partner of other sacrificial elements which themselves are characterised as masculine: the act (in the sense of gesture); silence; mind. The entirety of the sacrifice is made of the sum total of these couplings in which it is always Speech who takes the feminine role (cf. Malamoud 1987b, 7–28). The particularity of the myth which we recount here is that Speech has as partner not a certain element of the sacrifice but the sacrifice as a whole.

<sup>26</sup> The text of *Jaiminīya-Brāhmaṇa* III.19 is, as often, highly elliptical. All the same, it does teach us the name of these melodic airs: these are the “songs of Tvaṣṭar.” Now Tvaṣṭar, in the Vedic pantheon, is the name of the father of Indra. We thus here have a reduced father, a father whose intervention is indispensable not in the moment of conception (since the embryo formed itself and acts of its own accord) but at the moment of birth. This reduced father comes to the rescue of the mothers who, although carrying a single embryo, are themselves plural: the cows.

<sup>27</sup> What is there in common between Speech and Remuneration that makes these two figures interchangeable in this story? It is first that the one and the other are designated by names in the feminine gender (*vāk*, *dakṣinā*). More specifically, the Remuneration par excellence in ritual practice is a cow (or herd of cows). The myths which explain the origin of the *soma* sacrifice teach that the cow, a year-old heifer, with which one pays the *soma* merchant, is none other than Speech herself, and that it is for this reason that a child begins to speak when one year old. Because it is Speech, the heifer would not be able to remain in the hands of the merchant. Just as well, as the sacrificer and the officiants, once they make a mime of purchasing the *soma*, chase the merchant, punching him, and take back the cow Speech, price of the *soma* (cf. *Taittirīya-Samhitā* VI 1.6.1 sqq.). This then is the affinity between Speech and Remuneration: the two both lend themselves to representation as a cow.

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