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Proposal for a Multi-Perspective Approach to Śrauta Ritual¹

“Inside the Texts, Beyond the Texts”

The basis for research in Śrauta rituals² is the elaborate and chronologically complex corpus of Vedic literature. Especially the Yajurveda-Samhitās and Brāhmaṇas as well as the Śrauta-Sūtras are “the field of the Vedic fieldworker” (a term introduced by C.G. Kashikar). Therefore the first perspective must be philological: investigating the Śrauta rituals means working “inside the texts”. In this paper I will try to outline an approach to Śrauta-Ritual which goes “beyond the texts” (following Michael Witzel’s book title 1997), which can supplement the philological work, exemplified in the concrete case of the *vājapeya* ritual.³

History of Research

Vedistic literature concerned with Śrauta ritual is copious: out of this bulk the studies of single rituals are of special interest here. The earliest studies are from the pioneering phase of Vedistic research: to mention a few of them: Hillebrandt (1879) on the *Dārśapūrṇamāsa*; Schwab (1886) on the *Paśubandha*; Weber (1893) on the *Rājasūya*; Caland (1893) on the *Pinḍapitryajña*, the most recent studies are e.g. Krick (1982) on the *Agnyādheya*, Einoo (1988) on the *Cāturmāsya*, Kolhatkar (1998) on the *Sautrāmaṇī*. Most of the studies of single rituals

1 I am grateful to Ulrich Oberdiek for the many fruitful discussions on the “anthropological aspects” of this paper.

2 Even today Śrauta rituals are conducted occasionally. These performances are revivalistic, often the result of academic or politically fundamentalist motives. A special case is the uninterrupted tradition of performance of the Nambudiri Brahmins of the *agniṣṭoma* and the *atirātra-agnicayana* until ten years ago (see below chapter 2 about Frits Staal). Perhaps the last *agnicayana* took place in 1990 (see Staal 1992). A new performance is not being planned because there are no sponsors (personal communication with Dr. Radhakrishnan Nayar, who was one of the organizers of the 1990 Agnicayana).

3 For the texts in which the *vājapeya* is treated see appendix.

are largely descriptive presentations of the ritual activities according to the Brāhmaṇas and Śrautasūtras. They do not try to analyze or interpret *the rituals as rituals*⁴ in a broader context. Often not even the explanations and initial stages of interpretation given in the Brāhmaṇas are utilized and considered fully.⁵ All these studies have in common the feature that they hardly ever influenced the work of non-specialists.⁶ It is likely that this lack of influence is due to the ways in which the material is presented: the discourse on sacrifice and ritual prevalent in the social and religious sciences has had hardly any effect on Śrauta studies to the extent that not even the terminology current in present academic discourse has been introduced.⁷

Since the 19th century nearly all theorists of socio-religious studies and anthropology have been working on the fields of sacrifice or ritual more or less extensively.⁸ The pioneers of “modern” studies in sacrifice and ritual, however, were Henry Hubert and Marcel Mauss with their classical article *Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice* published in 1899. In a time dominated by evolutionist approaches Mauss and Hubert were the first social scientists who engaged in analyzing specific sacrificial rituals regarding their processual structure, their symbolism, and functions, also taking into account the intentions of the performers. According to Mauss and Hubert the ritual process is basically a transfer, a transition of the sacrificial matter from the profane to the sacral sphere. By this

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- 4 For the problem of applying anthropological theories or methods to exclusively textual evidence see Steiner, *forthc.*
 - 5 Exceptions are the works by Heesterman (1957) and Krick (1982). Special cases are presented by Bodewitz (1973, 1976 and 1990) and Houben (1991) who investigate individual rituals in the light of a specific ancient interpretation. The attitude of western scholars towards the genre of Brāhmaṇa even nowadays is characterised in many cases by a kind of—often unreflected—fascinated aversion, which results in an attitude that the texts cannot be taken seriously: Staal (1996: 118f.) for example expressly refutes the interpretations of the Vedic ritualists. Or the texts are exploited only with regard to very special mono-causal explanations.
 - 6 Even researchers concerned with later or contemporary ritual practice which is replete with Vedic elements often pay only lip-service to the so-called “Vedic sacrifice”, repeating often quoted clichés, without ever having read any description of a ritual.
 - 7 The state of affairs is similar regarding studies in (Ṛg-)Vedic religion. Cf. Oberlies 1998: xii.
 - 8 It is impossible to consider and discuss all the diverging approaches presented by numerous scholars and scientists, nor is it possible to give a summary of the discourse about ritual. A detailed and critical survey about so-called theories of sacrifice is given by Drexler (1993); for a short summary see e.g. Seiwert (1998); detailed on ritual theories: Bell (1992); short summaries see e.g. in Lang 1998, and Gladigow 1998; methodological criticism e.g. in Bell 1987, Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994: 64–87, and Staal 1996: 115–12 and *passim*.

transfer the religious condition of the sacrificer is changed. Mauss and Hubert are of special interest in the present context, because they were the first social scientists who utilized Śrauta rituals extensively⁹ for establishing a general theory of sacrificial rituals. But as one of their main sources is the Vedic animal sacrifice the theory focuses too much on the nature of the sacrificial matter being destroyed or killed.¹⁰ Above all Mauss' and Hubert's argumentation is based on the Durkheimian dichotomy of profane vs. sacral, the universal validity of which has been rejected repeatedly.¹¹

The first¹² indologist to introduce a sociological perspective into the investigation of a Śrauta ritual was Jan Heesterman in his book about the *Rājasūya: The ancient Indian royal consecration* (1957). Heesterman was inspired mainly by another classic work by Mauss, namely the *Essai sur le don* (1924). Starting from the study of the *Rājasūya* Heesterman developed¹³ a model in which he tried to explain the "classical" ritual system presented in the Śrauta texts as originating from "preclassical" structures. In spite of the many correct and astute observations on details the approach to Śrauta ritual, which can be deduced from Heesterman's writings, is not acceptable.¹⁴

Also, Frits Staal has to be mentioned. Starting with a "thick description" of an *agnicayana* performed by Nambudiri Brahmins in 1975 (published in two big volumes in 1983), he finally arrived at the point of radically rejecting all existing interpretative approaches to ritual because of the postulated "meaninglessness of ritual", formulated most effectively in "Rules without meaning" (1989). His famous *Agni* (alongside with the film by Robert Gardner) is probably the only description of a Śrauta ritual having been widely acknowledged by non-vedistic as well as vedistic scholars. The documentation and investigation of such

9 Their main sources were the *Paśubandha* according to Schwab (1886) and the *Dārśapūrnamāsa* according to Hillebrandt (1879). They also quote Sylvain Levi's classic *La doctrine du sacrifice dans les Brahmanas* (1898).

10 Drexler (1993: 27–41) discusses this theory in the context of its time—against the background both of the sciences and the humanities.

11 See e.g. Goody 1961: 155f. and Kippenberg 1987: 22f.

12 Keith (1925) is the first indologist who discussed the then current theories regarding the interpretation of sacrificial rituals, though he does not apply them to specific rituals.

13 In a series of articles and finally in a monograph (1993) [Review: Minkowski (1996)]. Heesterman in the first chapter of his monograph also discusses the theories of Meuli (1946), Jensen (1951), Girard (1972), Burkert (1972, 1987) and others who contributed to the discussion about "sacrifice".

14 Krick in her investigation of the *agnyādheya* ritual follows Heesterman's conception of classical/preclassical, but does not give up the connection with philological and historical facts, wherein lies the great value of Krick's work.

performances for their own sake is valuable and necessary—perhaps from a point of view different from Staal's. But as it has become obvious through Staal's documentation, such performances—in spite of their uninterrupted tradition—only contribute in a rather limited way to a better understanding of the ancient textual sources. The Śrauta rituals performed today are extremely anachronistic regarding the language of the *mantras* and the symbolism of the other elements. They have survived as pure activity detached from their socio-cultural context. This is the reason for Staal's perception of the ritual's meaninglessness and his postulate that ritual has nothing to do with religion and society (Staal 1996: 123 and *passim*). Staal utilized the results he found in the special case of the Nambudiri-*agnicayana* for establishing a new ritual theory which radically challenged all preexisting approaches. In this challenge lies Staal's merit. Especially Staal's insistence that ritual acts are meaningless has caused much discussion¹⁵ and was indeed seminal to the most important work on ritual theory published during the last years, namely that of Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994).¹⁶ Starting from Staal's meaninglessness Humphrey and Laidlaw settle their more sophisticated view of meaninglessness in the framework of the theory of action developed by Wittgenstein and others. I doubt, however, whether the characteristics of ritual action pointed out by Humphrey and Laidlaw are generally applicable to Śrauta ritual.

Possible Approaches

A new discussion of the Śrauta system must be based on the investigation or re-investigation of single rituals incorporating a balanced perspective from current studies in ritual, sociology, and anthropology. Now, which, out of the numerous theoretical approaches would be compatible with the Śrauta field¹⁷ or the *vājapeya*, if we do not follow Staal?

15 See e.g. Grapard 1991, Mack 1991, Strenski 1991, Scharfe 1990, Witzel 1992. See also Staal's debate with his critics (Staal 1991 and 1993).

16 For a review see e.g. Boyd & Williams 1996.

17 Of little value is Göhler 1990. He gives a survey of the state of research from the indological and philosophical-religious side including the Marxist perspective, as a result of which the work at least becomes an interesting document of late East-German (intellectual) history. However, his assessment of the Vedic textual sources is partially inappropriate and he does not establish a relation between the so-called "philosophisch-methodologischen Grundlagen" and concrete rituals.

Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner

A framework for understanding processual aspects of the *vājapeya*-ritual¹⁸ is Arnold van Gennep's well-known three-phase-model formulated in his *Rites de passage* (1909). It is quite obvious, that many, if not most, rituals of different cultures and societies—not only life cycle rites—are concerned with the central idea of transformation of a condition, human or natural, including a change of state of the person undergoing the ritual—be it only on the psychic level of mental condition. Therefore it is not surprising, that independent of the cultural context analogous patterns can be found which stress the aspect of transformation, of change. This was shown by van Gennep who analysed life cycle rites which are characterised by a threefold basic pattern. In its ideal-typical form the structure has the following parts: the phase of separation or segregation (1), which separates the ritual subject from his actual condition or state, is followed by the liminal phase of transition (2), during which the ritual subject is between two worlds. The rite is concluded by the phase of aggregation or integration (3), which integrates the subject into the new condition or state.

Victor Turner reformulated van Gennep's model with special emphasis on the liminal phase and liminality (first in Turner 1967; also e.g. Turner 2000: 95ff.). Many societies regard the ambiguity of the liminal phase as being dangerous, as Turner shows. Accordingly the liminal phase is often associated e.g. with death and/or with the prenatal existence in the womb. Both associations can be clearly demonstrated in the *vājapeya*, or in the *soma* ritual in general and agree with the explanations of the Brāhmaṇa-authors.

Turner interprets the immediate meaning and significance of rituals for the members of a given culture. In the case of the rituals of an African tribal society (the Ndembu) Turner demonstrates his methods of comparative symbolism research and processual analysis. He coined the notion of "ritual elements" (Turner 2000: 21) which are objects used in a ritual context, actions carried out, gestures, but units of space and time as well. These "ritual elements" are also called "symbols" by Turner. This means that most of the ritual elements—according to the conventions of the respective culture—stand for something else.¹⁹ Turner's assumption is congruent with the ancient Brāhmaṇa authors'

18 The evidence of the *vājapeya* and of *soma* ritual in general shows, that Staal's criticism (1996: 123f.) of the applicability of so-called "transition or liminal theories" to Śrauta ritual is not correct.

19 The fact that Turner occasionally may have tended to over-interpretation—Mack [1991: 221] criticized Turner's studies as "display of meaning-under-every-rock symbolic analysis"—does not minimize the principal efficiency of his method.

convention of making *bandhus* “links of identity”²⁰, although they have no term for Turner’s notion of “symbol”.

Semantic Approach vs. “Meaninglessness” of Ritual

I aim at a hermeneutic or semantic reading and analysis of the *vājapeya*-ritual in spite of Humphrey and Laidlaw. It is not a Western obsession with semantics and hermeneutics²¹ that leads me in this direction. It is in line with the ancient ritualists themselves, whose explanations, preserved by the texts, are a sort of “standardized hermeneutic” of the Śrauta system, not to say of Vedic culture.²² This does not mean of course, that I favour a “pure” Vedic “theological” explanation of the ritual and make myself what would be in Burghart’s (1996) wording a “European Brahmin”.

The *vājapeya*²³

My presentation of the *vājapeya* follows the sequence of actions as laid down in the *Baudhāyanaśrautasūtra* (11).²⁴ For interpretation I take some important points from the *Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa* (1.3.2–9),²⁵ both texts belonging to the Taittirīya school of the Black Yajurveda. The *vājapeya* is classified by the normative texts as one of the basic forms of *soma* sacrifice the paradigm of which is the *agniṣṭoma*. The central event of the *soma* ritual is the preparation, offering and consumption of *soma*, which takes place in three pressing sessions (*savana*).

20 The fact that ritual elements stand for something else other than themselves is expressed in the Brāhmaṇa texts by so-called “identifications” (about this see Wezler 1996; see also Minkowski 1989: 5) of the ritual elements with micro- and macrocosmic entities.

21 A criticism that is implicitly applied by Staal (1996) to the whole of ritualistic research preceding his own work, explicated in Mack 1991: 214.

22 The Brāhmaṇa explanations are not “arbitrary and ad hoc” (Staal 1996: 118) which is shown exemplarily by Minkowski (1989), although they can be piecemeal and sometimes not very illuminating. They do not give an interpretation in larger units, and explanations of the structure and interrelation of ritual elements are missing. Such interpretations are given only occasionally and up to a certain point. Often they are not intelligible without further commentaries.

23 Some of the following remarks are extracted from a detailed study of the *vājapeya* (Steiner 2002, habilitation thesis) to which I refer for all further details. In the thesis, however, the interpretations partially took a different course since the present paper has been written already in 2001.

24 The derivations in the sequence of activities of the other *sākhās* or in the other Sūtras of the Taittirīyakas can be neglected for the present purpose.

25 For technical reasons quotations are given without Vedic accents.

Around this event are grouped numerous ritual activities lasting several days. The features characterising the *vājapeya* against other forms of *somayajña* are embedded into this basic structure. The most spectacular of these characteristic features are:

- (1) besides the regular sacral drink of *soma* the alcoholic drink *surā* is being prepared and used
- (2) a chariot race of 17 chariots with the sacrificer as participant
- (3) the climbing of a short wooden post, which has a wheel of a chariot fixed to it
- (4) the climbing of a long post, the so-called sacrificial pole (*yūpa*) by the ritual patron and his wife.

The main purpose of the *vājapeya* is the attainment of a position or state called *svārājya*, usually translated as “universal sovereignty” by the ritual patron. In the form of the ritual preserved by the Brāhmaṇa- and Sūtra-texts *svārājya* implies a prestigious social position but not any socio-political function or office. So the *vājapeya* is a ritual of status elevation. It accompanies, or should I say effects, a change of state of the ritual subject, the *yajamāna*. The ritual subject is separated from his fixed position in the everyday social structure to be transformed, and to assume a better position in social life again after the liminal phase of transition. Inseparable from the status elevation of the *yajamāna* are two further ritual topics: on the one hand the attainment or reaching (*āpti*) of the creator god Prajāpati, which in this context means the union of sacrificer and Prajāpati; and on the other hand a “journey to heaven” (*svargo loka, asau loka*) of the sacrificer. I can elaborate here only on one aspect, namely the ascension to heaven / to the sky of the *yajamāna*.²⁶

Figure: Structure of the Ritual Plot

The plot of the *vājapeya* is characterized by two opposed processes, namely, ascension and the following descent, which the ritual subject undertakes or undergoes. During ascension the ritual subject is immersed deeper and deeper into the liminal state whereas the descent is characterized by gradually decreasing liminality. These processes develop while the structure of the plot unfolds. The

26 In this context different levels or layers of interpretation, pointing to historically different origins, can be recognized: There is every reason to believe that the concept of the “journey to heaven” is quite ancient and inseparably connected with the status elevation, which is legitimated through the ritual subject’s contact with “heaven”. The concept of the sacrificer’s union with Prajāpati is of later origin. But it would be beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this historically complex matter in detail.

structure consists in three interlocked sets of three phases each. The picture is somewhat simplified for the present purpose.

The basic structure of *soma* ritual resembles to a great extent the classical threefold model of van Gennep/Turner:

There are three phases, the introductory phase characterized by separation (1), which introduces the middle phase of liminality (2–3) with the three pressing sessions (*savana*) and (7–8), finally the concluding phase of integration (9).

The activities specific to the *vājapeya* (4–6) are an almost self-contained ritual within the ritual also characterised by three phases. They start during the midday pressing session (*mādhyaṇḍinasavana*), (3) being the centre of the middle phase of the *soma* ritual:

introductory: (4) drawing of 17 cups of *soma* and *surā* respectively,

middle: (5.1) a chariot race of 17 chariots with the sacrificer as participant,

(5.2) the climbing of the short wooden post by the Brahman priest, which has the wheel of a chariot fixed upon it,

(5.3) the climbing of the sacrificial pole (*yūpārohaṇa*) by the *yajamāna* and his wife,

concluding: (6) descending from the *yūpa*; ascending a stool (*āsandī*).

These sequences of actions (4–6) are intrinsically connected with the ritual topic of ascending to heaven (*ārohaṇa*) and descending again (*pratyavarohaṇa*).

The introductory phase (4) consists of the drawing of the 17 cups of *soma* and *surā* respectively which are sacred to the creator god Prajāpati. *Soma* and *surā* are to be considered polar, they are an antagonistic pair with qualities that can be arrayed in terms of binary oppositions: *etad vai devānāṃ paramam annam ya-tsomaḥ etan manuṣyāṇām yatsurā* “*soma* is the best food of the gods, *surā* of the human beings” [...] *pumān vai somaḥ strī surā* “*soma* is the man, the woman is *surā*” (*Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa* 1.3.3.16–21) or *satyaṃ śrīr jyotiḥ somo 'nṛtaṃ pāpmā tamaḥ surā* “*soma* is prosperity, truth, light, *surā* is misery, untruth, darkness” (*Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 5.1.2.10).

<i>soma</i>	<i>surā</i>
male	female
truth	untruth
light	darkness
divine	human

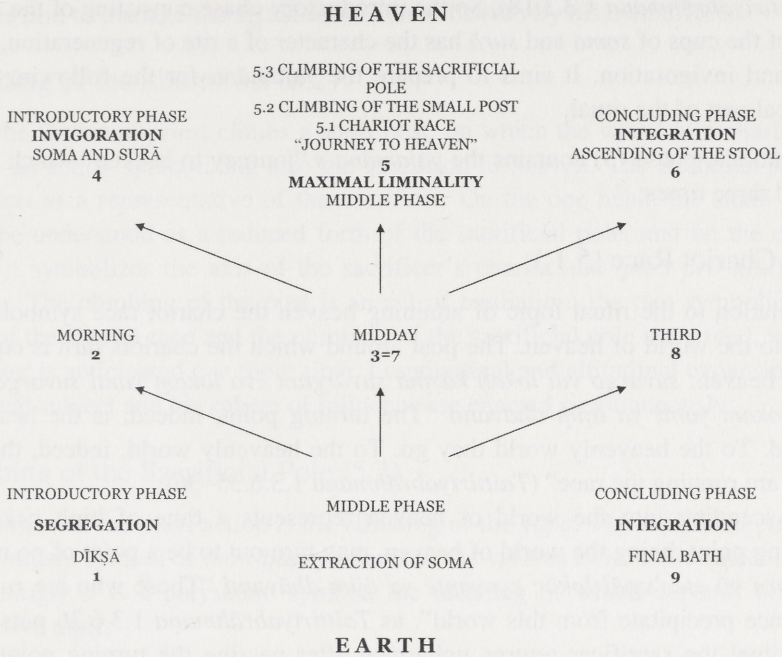


Figure 1

Soma and *surā* represent two contrasting principles. This view is supported by a myth related in the context of the *Sautrāmaṇī*, the only other ritual in which *surā* (but not *soma*) is used. In the context of this myth *surā* is the antidote to *soma* and in the context of the *vājapeya* the two contrasting principles have to be integrated. By this integration the sacrificer is healed and regenerated. This state of wholeness, integrity (*sarvatva*) is necessary for attaining heaven. The first interpretation, namely regeneration through reintegration of the two contrasting principles, is related to the sacrificer himself. A second, coexisting interpretation pertains to the sacrificer's wife who accompanies him in his ascension to heaven. It is evident, that *soma* has a strong relation to the sacrificer while *surā* is more related to his wife: *ātmanam eva somagrahais sprṇoti jāyāṃ surāgrahaiḥ tasmād vājapeyayājy amuṣmin loke striyaṃ sambhavati* "[The sacrificer] sets himself free by the cups of *soma*, his wife by the cups of *surā*. Therefore the

vājapeya sacrificer in yonder world has [sexual intercourse] with the woman²⁷ (*Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa* 1.3.3.18). So the introductory phase consisting of the drawing of the cups of *soma* and *surā* has the character of a rite of regeneration, healing and invigoration. It aims to prepare the *yajamāna* for the following most critical part of the ritual.

The middle phase (5) contains the *yajamāna*'s "journey to heaven" which is enacted three times:

The Chariot Race (5.1.)

In relation to the ritual topic of attaining heaven the chariot race symbolizes a ride to the world of heaven. The post around which the chariots turn is equated with heaven: *suvaro vai lokaḥ kāṣṭhā suvargam eva lokaṃ yanti suvargaṃ vā ete lokaṃ yanti ya ājīṃ dhāvanti* "The turning point, indeed, is the heavenly world. To the heavenly world they go. To the heavenly world, indeed, they go who are running the race" (*Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa* 1.3.6.35–36).

Ascending into the world of heaven represents a time of high risk. The turning point, being the world of heaven, may turn out to be a point of no return, for *pra vā ete 'smāl lokāc cyavante ya ājīṃ dhāvanti* "Those who are running the race precipitate from this world", as *Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa* 1.3.6.36 puts it. In the ritual the sacrificer returns unharmed after passing the turning point. The chariot race anticipates the actual ascension to heaven which is enacted by climbing the sacrificial pole and secures its safe end. It is an "altitudinal" action which is physically projected into the longitudinal plane and aims at expanding ritual space and the ritual subject.²⁸ By the chariot race the sacrificer wins an

27 For the syntax of *vājapeyayāy amuṣṣmin loka striyaṃ sambhavati* see Oertel 1942: 18f.: *sam-bhū* with Acc. of the person, usually with ellipsis of *mithunaṃ* "to have sexual intercourse with".

28 It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in detail the structure and symbolism of the sacrificial enclosure (*devayajana*), the ritual space, where the performance takes place. Hence, some remarks on the spatial symbolism related to the structure of the ritual plot and ritual topics, respectively, must suffice. The *vājapeya* or *soma* ritual in general deals with the transformation and expansion of the ritual subject or of his sphere of influence. This expansion is also enacted or performed by the various movements of the sacrificer and/or the sacrificial party in the ritual space. On the *devayajana* the expansion of length and breadth takes place. The *devayajana*, a liminal space, is the space where the earthly/human and heavenly/divine sphere meet. It represents the "world of living" in an everyday sense as well as in a cosmological-conceptual sense. The *yūpa* is erected on the eastern demarcation line of the sacrificial enclosure, to one half on this side of the line, to one half on that side. This fact underlines its being a liminal symbol. The sacrificial pole

expanded sphere of influence (*loka*) and generative power (*vāja*) as prize. This enables him to manage the actual ascension to heaven by his own efforts.

Climbing of the Short Post (5.2)

Now the Brahman-priest climbs a short post, on which the wheel of a chariot is fixed—an action symbolizing also the ascension to heaven. The Brahman priest here acts as a representative of the sacrificer. On the one hand, the small post must be understood as a reduced form of the sacrificial pole, and on the other hand, it symbolizes the axis of the sacrificer's chariot and (*pars pro toto*) the chariot. The climbing of the post is an act of mediation: the two symbolic actions of the chariot race and the climbing of the sacrificial pole are united, while the latter is anticipated one more time. Longitudinal and altitudinal expansion of the ritual subject and his sphere of influence are enacted simultaneously.

Climbing of the Sacrificial Pole (5.3)

The climax of the ritual action is the climbing of the *yūpa*. The sacrificial pole is the dominant symbol of the *vājapeya* because the various ritual topics meet here. Accordingly it is a polysemic symbol, the meaning of which depends on the respective topic:

- (1) The sacrificial pole represents the sacrificer or his *ātman* (“self” in the sense of “trunk” or “body”) respectively. More exactly speaking: it is the consecrated sacrificer (*dīkṣita*), since with the post and the sacrificer identical rites are performed: like the fitting out with a new garment and headgear as well as a girdle of grass, unction with water and ghee. The *yūpa* is a prolonged, “bigger” form of the *yajamāna*'s body being tall enough for him reach the sky.
- (2) The sacrificial pole is addressed as “first among leaders” (*agraḡā netrāṇām*) and is dedicated to the god Indra, the victorious leader par excellence. The sacrificer is identical with Indra. In this connection also the location of the post is of importance: it is erected on the eastern boundary of the sacrificial enclosure, which means it stands in the front line of the symbolic campaign of conquest enacted by the ritual as Indra, the human leader, would stand there. This symbolic meaning is related to the topic of attaining *svārājya*.
- (3) The sacrificial pole represents Prajāpati, the creator god. This is expressed by the height of the post of 17 cubits (*aratnī*), for the number 17 represents Prajā-

represents the triadic cosmological concept in a condensed form. At the same time it produces expansion of the ritual space into height. It is the concept of the world projected into a vertical line, whereas the *devayajana* represents a projection of the world into the horizontal plane.

pati. The sacrificer is also identical with this deity or becomes identical with Prajapati through the ritual performance.

(4) The sacrificial pole represents the well known triadic structure of the universe: earth (*prthivī*), intermediate space (*antarikṣa*) and sky (*div*). In the context of the topic of ascension, of climbing, however, the *yūpa* is the manifestation of the cosmic pillar (*skambha*) which according to Vedic cosmology gives firm hold to the earth and props up the sky. The cosmic pillar secures fertility, for through its location on earth it opens up the earth. At the same time it can split the clouds in the sky and cause rainfall which is the precondition of fertility. As long as fertility is guaranteed the claim of the sacrificer for the state of *svārājya* is secured. Last, but not least, the cosmic pillar represents the connecting path between this world and the world of heaven, the other world beyond. In Turner's wording it would be the liminal symbol par excellence.

By climbing the sacrificial pole the ascension to heaven and descent back to earth is enacted most directly. In the context of the *yūpārohaṇa* it may be asked whether the characteristics of ritual action as postulated by Humphrey and Laidlaw namely the disconnection of intention from the identity of the act (Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994: 2 et passim) applies.²⁹ Before the *yajamāna* starts to climb he declares his intention with the *mantra jāya ehi suvo rohāva*³⁰ "Come, wife, let us both ascend to the sunlight / to the bright sky" (*Taittirīya-brāhmaṇa* 1.3.7.41). After declaring that he intends to engage in the activity expressed by the root *ruh* he actually does *ruh*. There is no disconnection of intention and the identity of the act.³¹ The attainment of heaven by ascension is made sensorily perceptible and visible here by using a symbol and symbolic action. It is thereby made accessible to the purposive action of the sacrificer, and society. It is this act of making apparent abstract goals or concepts, in Turner's wording the "principle of revelation" (Turner 2000: 31), which is characteristic for the ritual act under discussion. It is the principle of revelation in which the power of the ritual performance manifests itself.

Reaching the top of the post is the point of maximal liminality of the ritual subject. The top of the post is the place where the transformation, the change of

29 There are further examples of the *vājapeya*, to which Humphrey and Laidlaw's criterion does not apply.

30 Cp. *Maitrāyaṇī-Saṃhitā* 1.11.8.

31 Of course it must have been obvious to the *yajamāna* and the other participants, that "in reality" he did not reach the sun/sky/heaven after climbing the post of 17 *aratnīs* height either. But we have no information about the inner attitude of the *yajamāna*, about his opinion towards that ritual act, about his state of consciousness and the psychic effect on him.

state of the ritual subject takes place. It is the most dangerous place, the most dangerous period of time during the ritual. The risk of precipitating or not coming back (*Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa* 1.3.7.44–45) is visible and tangible here. Climbing the post / ascending to heaven means consciously exposing oneself to the possibility of death, for being in heaven / in the beyond means being dead. The actual death of the ritual subject is suggested or even anticipated. Accordingly, the ascension is accompanied by a series of ritual acts, which should be interpreted as a kind of funeral rite. They aim at the well-being of the ritual subject in the beyond, or at transferring earthly conditions such as *annāḍya*, space, time and corporeality into the other world. The reintegration of the *yajamāna* can be brought about only gradually. The contact with earth and society must be restored step by step in a series of acts. Finally the *yajamāna* climbs a stool (*āsandī*) (6) and is carried away from the sacrificial pole by some of the officiants. Climbing the *āsandī* underlines the establishment of the sacrificer in his new elevated position, and being carried away by the officiants stresses the fact of integration, as well as acceptance by society.

This last action concludes the features specific to the *vājapeya*, the ritual within the ritual. The ritual process is then resumed following the paradigm of *soma* sacrifice with the midday pressing (7) and the third pressing (8), then there follows the concluding phase (9) with the final reintegration of the sacrificer culminating in the final bath of the main participants of the ritual.

Some Remarks Towards a Diachronic Approach

I have presented a strictly synchronic approach to the *vājapeya*, considering the time of the final codification of the ritual. I have tried to analyze the textual evidence “in its performance” as some anthropologists would say. But I cannot conclude this paper without a few remarks on a diachronic approach. It has long been recognized that the Śrauta ritualistic system as laid down in the texts represents a “frozen” form of the sacrificial rituals, which shows traits of secondary systematization. It is undoubtedly the case that the Śrauta system represents only the last stage of a development which the rituals certainly underwent during the long period of time while being practised, before they were finally codified.³² It

32 There seems to be a typical evolutionary process according to which rituals develop over a longer period of time, as e.g. Gladigow (1998: 558) points out: rituals become more differentiated, extensive and costly. The growing complexity of rituals seems to be a part of the general process of the professionalisation of religion. On the other hand ritual forms tend to be handed over unaltered for a long time although the socio-religious, political and economic context may change.

is also unquestionable that elements from various traditions were incorporated into the Śrauta system.³³ But in most cases—because of lack of evidence—it is extremely difficult to trace the earlier stages as well as the elements of various traditions.³⁴ Any attempt at historical reconstruction will necessarily remain tentative. One must also take into consideration the fact that what seems to be a discontinuity or an inconsistency in the ritual or an anomalous element to one or the other modern researcher may not necessarily have been one for the ancient ritualists. Also, the perception or non-perception of inconsistencies depends on the categories used by the researcher.

However, starting from a synchronic study in some cases diachronic conclusions about earlier stages of development, meanings and functions of the rituals or single elements within them are possible.³⁵ But a diachronic investigation must not utilize the categories “classical vs. preclassical” as suggested by Heeserman. Also, one or the other element will turn out to be secondarily incorporated. But the search for such elements must not fall into the trap of using the

33 These traditions result from the complex early history of India (the latest state of research is summed up in Witzel 2003: 10–33, whom I follow here). First, it is safe to assume that the immigration of the Vedic speaking Indo-Aryans to the Panjab, starting from Central Asia, took place with numerous stops, marriages into the respective indigenous populations, and the taking over of cultural elements. It is true that some elements of the Vedic ritual can be traced back into the Indo-Iranian past, there are even some Indo-European elements. But many elements taken over during the long period of migration have a genuine Vedic aspect—although they were acculturated (in this context Witzel especially stresses the influence of the Oxus culture). Further it is safe to assume that the Indo-Aryan tribes who arrived in the Panjab during the first wave of immigration underwent a large degree of acculturation absorbing many traits from the indigenous population. According to Witzel, in the late Ṛgveda at least three speech groups can be traced which are in close contact to each other, with an effect on culture and religion: the dominant Indo-Aryan, the early acculturated Para-Munda, and the Dravidian. Also, it cannot be taken for granted that the many rival Indo-Aryan tribes and clans, partially fighting each other—in spite of a kind of common identity—had a completely homogenous culture, religion, social structure and ritual system. Further we have to consider that there are different ritual traditions, or levels of ritual tradition, within one single society (see below the differentiation between liturgy- and performance-centred rituals).

34 Our most important evidence, the texts, do not tell us explicitly how they and the rituals were compiled and systematised. They represent an ahistorical perspective. Our oldest text, the Ṛgveda, is not concerned with “technical” questions about how and which rituals had to be performed but consists of liturgical material to be recited within the rituals. As the rituals were not performed in fixed locations or buildings and as the ritual implements were fabricated out of perishable materials we have no archaeological evidence.

35 In the Ṛgveda only two rituals are attested for: the *soma* ritual and the *pravargya* (see Houben 1991 about an early form of the *pravargya*).

categories “Brāhmanical vs. *kṣatriya*”, or “folk, popular vs. priestly”, which has been prominent since the pioneering days of Śrauta studies, for example in the works of Weber and Hillebrandt, and up to the present day as in a recent study of the *sautrāmaṇī* ritual (Kolhatkar 1998).

Along with text-historical³⁶ and socio-historical³⁷ aspects dealt with by Witzel and others the following criteria or approaches should be taken into consideration for the historical contextualization and assessment of the rituals and their elements:

(1) The differentiation between liturgy-centred and performance-centred rituals³⁸ introduced by Atkinson (1989: esp. 14f., 252, 298). Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994: 8–12) have stressed that societies invariably have both types of practices and that there may be an inverse relation between the two. The same members of society practise both types of ritual depending on the circumstances and requirements, or enlist the help of different types of ritual/religious specialists.³⁹ The Śrauta rituals are liturgy-centred. Reflexes of performance-centred ritual practices existing together with the various Śrauta schools can be found within the Śrauta system itself as well as in the Atharvanic tradition. Especially the *vājapeya* has elements that should be seen in the light of performance-centred rituals (among others the use and significance of the ritual drink *surā* pointing to healing rituals; the *yūpārohaṇa* pointing to “shamanic” practises).

(2) Catherine Bell’s (1988) insights into the ritualization of texts and textualization of rituals must be brought together with Witzel’s (1997) results on the formation of the Vedic canon and its socio-political background.

Both approaches will shed more light on the mechanisms of how liturgical and political authority was established and legitimated in Vedic society, or on the way in which the reformed Śrauta ritual system strengthened “the new Kuru dynasty” and “provided for some measure of upward social mobility” (Witzel 1997: 267).

36 Witzel 1997, where earlier studies are quoted.

37 Rau 1957 and 1997, Scharfe 1992, Witzel 1997 and others.

38 I cannot elaborate here on the interesting question if and how this differentiation can be related to the anthropological concept of Great and Little Tradition.

39 It would be inappropriate to apply the differentiation “popular vs. priestly” in this context.

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Appendix: The *vājapeya* Is Dealt With in the Following Texts
of the Vedic Canon

1. Saṃhitās:
- Black Yajurveda:*
Maitrāyaṇi 1.11.1–10
Kāthaka 13.14; 14.1–10
Taittirīya 1.7.7–12
- White Yajurveda:*
Vājasaneyī (Mādhyandina) 9
Vājasaneyī (Kāṇva) 10
2. Brāhmaṇas
- Sāmaveda:*
Pañcaviṃśa 18.6–7
- Black Yajurveda:*
Taittirīya 1.3.2–9
- White Yajurveda:*
Śatapatha (Mādhyandina) 5.1.1.–
5.2.2.
Śatapatha (Kāṇva) 6.1.1.–6.2.2.
3. Śrautasūtras
- Rgveda:*
Āśvalāyana 9.9.1–19
- Śāṅkhāyana 13.3.5–12; 15.1.1–38;
15.2.1–12; 15.3.2–4; 15.3.13–15;
15.4.1; 16.17.1–12
- Sāmaveda:*
Lāṭyāyana 8.11.1–25; 8.12.1–15;
5.12.8–23
- Drāhyāyana 15.4.1–19; 24.3.1–28;
24.4.1–17
- Black Yajurveda:*
Taittirīyaka:
Baudhāyana 11; 22.13
Vādhūla 9
Āpastamba 18.1–7
Sātyāśadha-Hiranyakeśin 13.1–2
Vaikhānasa 17.7–18
- Maitrāyaṇīya:*
Vārāha 3.1
Mānava 7.1
- White Yajurveda:*
Kātyāyana 14