Recent Studies on the Ancient Indian Vṛātya

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Introduction
That the ancient Indian vṛātya continues to engage scholars, and rightly so, is demonstrated by two recent publications, both with Tiziana Pontillo (Cagliari University) as one of the editors. The first one is The Volatile World of Sovereignty: The Vṛātya Problem and Kingship in South Asia (2015), the result of a three-year research project financed by the Regione Autonoma della Sardegna and coordinated by Pontillo. This book contains nineteen articles relating to the vṛātya and Indian kingship.1 It approaches these subjects from a broad, interdisciplinary perspective, using a wide range of texts and some visual art. The second book, Vṛātya Culture in Vedic Sources (2016), contains nine scholarly papers presented at the 16th World Sanskrit Conference in Bangkok 2015. In this volume the authors try to “single out the specific features of the assumed vṛātya culture, i.e. those facets which are not included in the core of the orthodox Śrauta culture … or which seem to intentionally be shown in a bad light” (2016:6). We have comparatively little material dealing directly with the vṛātya; one of the aims of both volumes in question is to add to the list of sources Vedic passages not previously analysed from the vṛātya point of view (2015:3; 2016:1-2). It is my intention to review the two volumes in context of previous reseach and to discuss a handful of the contributions. I will also mention a number of vṛātya-related articles published elsewhere.

Previous research and theoretical framework of the present studies
The nature and origins of the vṛātya (“the vṛātya problem”) have been discussed for more than a century.3 It is not at all clear who the vṛātya is, as some passages describe him in a cryptic manner (e.g. “the vṛātya is not initiated but speaks like one initiated”, 2015:310) and are open to widely different interpretations. In his translation of the Atharvavedic Vṛātyakāṇḍa (AVŚ 15), “this unique and obscure Book” (1896:185)4, Ralph Griffith expresses perplexity at the combination of human and divine elements in the vṛātya, in what he calls a “hyperbolical glorification of the Vṛātya or Aryan Non-conformist”:

It is hard to understand and I do not attempt to explain the idealisation and grotesquely extravagant glorification of the Vṛātya or heretical nomad who appears at one time to be a supernatural Being endowed with the attributes of all-pervading Deity, and at another as a human wanderer in need of food and lodging. (Griffith 1896:199)

The Śrautasūtras tell us that a man who has led the life of a vṛātya should perform the vṛātyastoma ritual (see below) as purification. In later texts, such as the Manusmṛti (8.39, 10.20), vṛātyas are men of the Āryan varṇas (brāhmaṇas, kṣatriyas, vaiśyas) who have not undergone Vedic initiation at the proper time and who do not keep the Vedic ritual observances.5

The Vedic term vṛātya may come from vrāṭa ‘Schar, Truppe’ (Mayrhofer 1996:597)

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1 “The work aims at postulating a fresh proposal for an alternative explanation of the vṛātya-phenomenon correlated with the heterodox facets of Indian sovereignty.” (Pontillo et al. 2015:1)
2 Hauer (1927:1); Pontillo et al. (2015:1), etc.
3 Already in 1962 Heesterman wrote that the “problem of the vrātyas is certainly one of the most-beaten tracks of Vedic studies. Each generation of Indologists has, since more than hundred years, contributed to its study … and still there seems to be scope for generations to come.” (1962:1)
5 Remaining a vṛātya results in loss of caste (Manusmṛti 11.68).
and/or may be related to vratā ‘vow, religious observance’ (Falk 1986:17, cf. Mucciarelli 2015:66-67, Ferrara 2015:316ff.). The term appears to designate a person standing, more or less, outside the brahmanic socio-ritual community. The “outsiderhood” of the vrātyas has been interpreted in different ways (cf. Horsch 1966:401-402, with ref.; Köhler 2015:358-359): as a non-brahmanic, Indo-Āryan cultic community – in symbiosis or conflict with Vedic religion; as a band of young men obliged to follow certain vratās; or as evidence of an older, cyclical sacrificial system. Vrātyas appear as members of a troop performing a collective ritual (cf. below on vrātyastoma and sattra). The vrātya leader is endowed with vehicle, stick and bow; he wears black garment and skins, silver necklace, turban and long hair. The importance of Rudra – the Vedic “outsider god” – in vrātya texts was early on noticed by scholars; the vrātyas are also associated with Indra and the band of youthful, warlike Maruts. Jarl Charpentier (1911) detects in the vrātya the proto-Śaiva ascetic, and J. W. Hauer (Der Vṛtya, Untersuchungen über die nichtbrahmanische Religion Altindiens, 1927) the member of an Āryan, non-brahmanic group, whose cult is centered round Rudra. A different interpretation is provided by Jan Heesterman (“Vṛtya and Sacrificer”, 1962), who approaches the vrātya “from within the brahmanic orthopraxy”. He argues – resorting to ritual texts rather than AVŚ 15, which he considers to be relatively late – that the vrātya, rather than standing outside orthodox-brahmanic religion, represents a similar kind of liminal state, “betwixt and between”, as the initiate (dīkṣita) in a somic sacrifice. The initiate and sacrificer (yajamāna), according to Heesterman, originate in the vrātya, as an archaic, pre-śrauta (“pre-classical”) type of sacrificer.


Although the views of all the mentioned scholars are reflected in The Volatile World of Sovereignty and Vṛtya Culture in Vedic Sources, it is arguably Heesterman who has had the greatest theoretical impact. A cornerstone in the present volumes is the idea that the formation of the śrauta ritual system (i.e. the “solemn” form of Vedic ritual) is the result of a reform of a hypothetical, earlier organisation of ritual. This reform, “the outcome of a clash between different cultural matrices” (2015:2; similarly 2016:10), the editors of the 2015 volume suggest in the Introduction, could explain the significantly diverse attitudes toward the vrātya found in the śrauta texts, ranging from veneration (cf. Griffith above) to rejection. This view is mainly based on Heesterman’s brilliant – but also problematic and criticised – theory of a

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6 On differences between the vrātya leader and the vrātya group (the latter hedonistic and dressed in red, the former ascetic and dressed in black) see Falk (1986:23ff.; 2002:38-39).
7 Reviewed negatively by A. B. Keith (1913).
8 Vrātyas are members of a Männerbund, who live an independent life away from home, in order to get a starting capital “by threat and extraction from their neighbors.” (Jamison & Witzel 1992:46-47)
9 This transition to the śrauta system would match the shift from tribal society to a more hierarchical, stratified type of society under Kuru hegemony (2015:3; cf. Thapar 1990; Witzel 1995:11-12).
pre-śrauta, cyclical form of sacrifice (see Stephanie W. Jamison’s review of Heesterman’s *The Broken World of Sacrifice* from 1996 for criticism; cf. Falk 1986:190ff.). The reform theory is thought to explain the “otherwise incomprehensible axial breakthrough highlighted by Heesterman” (2015:2; cf. 2016:9; Heesterman 1985:5). Although this theory finds inspiration in Heesterman’s works, it differs from from the latter with regard to the nature of transition from pre-classical to śrauta: Heesterman identifies the soma initiate as the direct successor of the *vrātya* (“the genuine predecessors of the śrauta sacrificer and dīkṣita”, 1962:34) and imagines a development within Vedic society (although he thinks in terms of breaks and conflicting systems) from pre-classical sacrifice to the śrauta system, as well as from śrauta to interiorisation and renunciation of Vedic ritual, whereas the editors of the present volumes imagine a clash or break between two cultures, rather than a continuum (2015:2; cf. 2016:6; Pontillo 2016:208). In the 2016 volume the authors ask how the radical change (following Heesterman’s theory) from the ancient pattern of achieving a high status (becoming brahman, ruler, etc.) by merit (i.e. as victor in competition) to one of inherited privilege, could happen if not “determined by some decisive historical fact”. Therefore the authors assume that the cause of the breakthrough was “a clash between two distinct branches of Indo-Āryan speakers.” (2016:9) These two contrastive cultures are the Rgvedic and that of the *vrātya*, the latter thought to represent an early wave of Indo-Āryan immigration (Parpola 1983, cf. 2016). The *vrātya* culture the authors have in mind is the Heesterman type of agonistic, mobile and militant society, characterised by a dualistic system of cyclical exchange and age-group system.¹¹ Traces of this alternative, Indo-Āryan society is thought to be found in e.g. the *Atharvaveda*, the *Ṛgveda* Maṇdalas 1, 8 and 10 (Kānva and Āṅgiras hymns), gāthā verses and early Sanskrit epics, as well as in what Johannes Bronkhorst (2007) has termed the “Greater Magadha” cultural complex, from which Buddhism and Jainism grew (2015:2). The editors trace a *vrātya* “legacy” (2015:4) all the way from early Vedic texts up to medieval and later Indian culture.

The theory of “a clash between two distinct branches of Indo-Āryan speakers” stands in contrast to the theory of Heesterman, as well as that of Falk (1986). The latter follows Heesterman in seeing the development from the cult of the (vrātya) brotherhood/communitas to the śrauta ritual as a continuum, but, in contrast to Heesterman, Falk (1986:194) sees śrauta ritual as an adjustment to new socio-economical conditions, rather than men’s wish to break the cycle of conflict and violence. Falk (1986:50, 191-192) criticises Parpola’s theory on the existence of a pre-Rgvedic (“Atharvavedic”) culture of *vrātya*-Āryans and a younger, Rgvedic soma cult. Falk points out that this is contradicted e.g. by the fact that the Maruts and Indra, who appear as prototypical *vrātyas* in several texts, belong to the Rgvedic – and thus also to the somic – tradition (more on this below).

**Sovereignty and the apotheosis of the ekavrātya**

Let us now look closer at some of the new publications, mainly those centered round the Vedic *vrātya*. The article by Monero Dore, “The Ekavrātya, Indra and the Sun” in the 2015 volume, explores – mainly in Atharvavedic material – possible connections between the

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¹⁰ Jamison & Witzel (1992:42 / 2003:87) criticise Heesterman’s theories for being over-simple; he views the end of the old ritual as a sudden revolution, rather than as an observable ritual development. Heesterman sees non-competitive machinery in śrauta texts, “neglecting e.g. the social aspects of the increasingly difficult ‘ritual career’ a sacrificer undertakes by becoming a dīkṣita.” Heesterman does not look to Rgvedic and Avestan texts – the truly pre-classical ritual texts. Further, violence is found even in classical Vedic ritual, although the priests try to avoid the pollution that comes from killing and shedding of blood (1992:43).

¹¹ Cf. Vassilkov (2016:186-187): Vedic culture emerged against the *vrātya* background, and “existed for centuries as islands in a sea of *vrātya* communities.”

¹² “In my opinion, the ‘vrātya rituals’ represent the ‘Atharvavedic’ tradition that existed in the Indus Valley [2000-1700 BC] before the arrival of the Rigvedic tradition [1500-1200 BC], and the ‘classical’ Vedic ritual came into being when these two traditions fused together.” (Parpola 2016)
vrātya (AVŚ 15, the ekavrātya “hymn”\(^{13}\)) and two other early Vedic, ascetic figures: the 
brahmacārīn (AVŚ 11.5) and the keśin/muni (RV 10.136). He also introduces into the 
discussion the enigmatic ekavṛtī in AVŚ 13.4. Dore tries to identify a common ideology behind 
the triptych of Ascetic—God—Sun in these texts. The vrātya and the brahmacārīn have 
previously been linked to each other by e.g. Hauer (1927:324f.), Heesterman (1962) and Falk 
(1986:67ff.), but Dore does this from a new perspective and in a more detailed manner. All 
three figures (vrātya, brahmacārīn, keśin) are identified with certain divinities (Indra, Rudra, 
Śūrya), described as sovereigns, possessors of esoteric knowledge and pursuing a mobile or 
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\(^{13}\)Dore refers to the Vṛātyakāṇḍa as a “hymn” (2015a:33ff.), with verse[s] (2015a:56), composed by “the poet” 
(2015a:35; cf. Hauer 1927:308; 1958:27), but it should be noted that the text is entirely in prose, similar to that 
of the Brāhmaṇa texts, which it also resembles in style and content. Occasional rhythmical word sequences are 
“mere casual lapses into meter” (Whitney 1905:772). Jan Gonda, following Whitney (1905:471), refers to the 
Vṛātyakāṇḍa as Atharvavedic “brāhmaṇa [type of] prose” (which is characterized by “typically brāhmaṇa 
constructions, an unmistakable monotony, and the use of some formal categories which are foreign to the 
Rgveda”) in the form of “paryāya (‘period’ [or ‘chapter’]) hymns” (Gonda 1975:305).
discussed by Dore (cf. Proferes 2007:85ff.). The closeness of the divinised ascetic and the divinised king in some Vedic passages may be illustrated by this Atharvavedic stanza composed for the royal consecration: [...] *chrīyaṃ vāsānaḥ carati svārociḥ / mahāt tād viśno āsurasya nāmā viśvarūpo amṛāṇi tattau // “Clothing himself in splendour [the king] goes about having his own brightness. Great is that virile name of the asura; having all forms he approached immortal things.” (AVŚ 4.8.3) The ruler ‘goes about’, like the ascetics discussed by Dore, and is said to be viśvarūpa, which can be interpreted either as ‘having all forms’, which would fit the idea of the king (like the ascetic/ekavrātya) as an aggregate of (all) deities.14

Another connection between the vrātya and sovereignty, not explored in the 2015 and 2016 volumes, is the symbolism of the āsanda, the seat or throne prepared for the vrātya by the gods in AVŚ 15.3. The seat, we read, is made out of the elements of liturgical speech and various parts of the cosmos: bhṛhat and rathantara are the two length-wise pieces, and so on. The vrātya ascends this seat. A similar throne is that of the king in the AB’s description of the great royal consecration of Indra, made out of bhṛhat, and other meters. This throne, supported by gods, the king mounts (AB 8.12; cf. 8.17). Another royal throne is that of the mahāvrata ritual in JB 2.25 (cf. Proferes 2007:88); again made of bhṛhat, rathantara, etc., and supported by the gods; the Sun is said to be consecrated on this throne and then visit the four quarters. The latter act forms another parallel between the vrātya in AVŚ 15 and the Vedic king: the wanderings or symbolic steps in the directions of space (the royal conquest of the quarters, digvijaya), which precedes their respective enthronements.15 These are just some of the connections between royal and ascetic figures in Vedic texts, a subject which could be explored in a future study.

A future study might also look in detail at possible “vrātya elements” in the Vedic pravargya ritual and the myths associated with it (cf. Hauer 1927:129-132; Falk 1986:26-27), such as the glorification of the mahāvrata figure/vessel. This is also for the contribution of Kyoko Amano in the 2016 volume, which looks at the ritual contexts of sattra myths in the Maitrāyanīsamhitā, whose background may be placed outside the central Yajurvedic communities. Amano discusses, among other things, the myth about how Agni, Makha, Vāyu and Indra performed a sattra (a collective Vedic ritual which for good reasons can be interpreted, in its “original form”, as a vrātya ritual, 2015:69) on the Kurukṣetra, to see who would first get success (prathamā rdhñvat) and share it with the others. Makha won and wished to keep the success for himself (against the vrātya/sattra principle of sharing the price). The other gods attacked him and Makha had to defend himself with his bow and three arrows. The story goes on to tell how Indra let some termites to cut through the bow-string, which led to Makha’s head being cut off. This myth has parallels (slightly different) in e.g. the Śatapathabrāhmaṇa, where it explains the origin of the pravargya. Amano notes that probable “non-orthodox” aspects in the myth include the bow with three arrows, which is a vrātya attribute (2016:47). Further, the secrecy of the pravargya suggests that it may have non-orthodox origins. The article by Frank Köhler in the same volume likewise touches upon the relations between pravargya and vrātas. As argued by Oberlies, the pravargya appears to

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14 Cf. the brahmacārin in RV 10.109.5, who “goes about, becoming a limb of the gods” (carati ... devānam bhavaty ēkām āṇgam). Henk Bodewitz (1985:16-19), however, argues in relation to other passages that viśvarūpa could be referring to glitter, lustre, which is compatible with the ancient Indian concept of royal splendour (af Edholm 2017:45).

15 Martin Wiltshire (1990:168-169) draws attention to the epithet “man of the four regions of space” for the solitary ascetic in the Pali Khaggavisāṇasutta in the Suttanipāta, which could also refer to a king: in the punarabhiseka (re-consecration ritual) the ruler wanders (sāmcarati) unoppressed through all the quarters, finding support in the world of Indra (AB 8.11).

16 See Falk (1986:30-31) on similarities between vrātyastoma and sattra. Falk suggests that both vrātyastoma and sattra originate in the brotherhood/Männerbund; vrātya and sattrin were one and the same person, at different ritual stages (1986:31, 44).
have a Rgvedic predecessor in the gharmá ritual (cf. Houben 2000), which originally
developed from an initiation ritual and, as such, has common origin with the orthodox
upanayana. The preparation for the initiation seems to have included learning poetry, which
may also be connected to the vrātya’s lifestyle (Falk 1986:35-36; Oberlies 2012:153, 283ff.;
Köhler 2016:172). But there is no Rgvedic connection between gharmá/pravargya and
sattra, Köhler writes (2016:173), and he questions Oberlies’ hypothesis. A future study will
have to balance these problems with the acknowledgement of elements in the Rgvedic
pravargya, as well as in the pravargya of later ritual texts, that can be related to the ascetic,
regal and solar symbolism that Dore (2015) connects with the Atharvavedic vrātya.

**Rgvedic culture versus vrātya culture?**

This leads us back to the question of the relationship between orthodox/Rgvedic religion and
“vrātya culture”. In his article in the 2016 vrātya volume, Dore explores the relationship
between the gods Indra and Brhaspati. As shown by Hanns-Peter Schmidt (1968) the name of
the Rgvedic Brhaspati was originally an epithet of Indra as lord of the brāhmaṇ (the sacred
power/word). The connection between brāhmaṇ and kṣatra (Indra) is traced by Dore in
passages from the AVŚ, such as 15.10 on the vrātya (2016a:191), and 11.5.7, where the
brahmacārīn is said to generate brāhmaṇ and be born as the demon-slayer Indra. According
to Dore Indra’s ambiguity and special relationship with Brhaspati reflects the vrātya as
consecrated warrior (2016a:180). The divinised ekavrātya is “the prototype of the priest-king
or consecrated-warrior” (2016a:192), i.e. Indra-Brhaspati, the pre-classical vrātya of
Heesterman (1993:142). A similar theme is explored by Neri & Pontillo (2016) in the same
volume; they ask what it means “to become brahmaṇ” in Vedic and Pali texts. Neri &
Pontillo argue that the brahmabhūta condition and the title brahmān (“sacred power-holder”)
originally denoted the status of one who occupies an outstanding position (śreṣṭha),
supremacy of both the military and the sapiential kind, by merit and not by birth, which would
place the origins of the brahmabhūta concept in the (Heesterman type of) agonistic “vrātya
culture” (2016:146-148).

With Falk’s critical remarks on Parpola’s theory (1986:192, above) in mind, I wonder
how one should view the existence of Rgvedic deities who apparently are connected with the
vrātya type of sodality/communitas: not just the ambivalent “outsider god” Rudra, but the
celebrated troop (vrātya/gana) of Maruts too — and their leader, the “arch-Rgvedic” Indra, who has vrātya-like qualities in the RV itself (Schmidt 1968; cf. e.g. Wikander 1938:71; Kershaw
2000:213ff.; Falk 2002:36, 39, 63-65). These vrātya-like deities appear not just in RV 1, 8,

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17 According to Oberlies (2012:153, 283ff.) the original/Rgvedic form of pravargya marks the end of the young
men’s initiation (the later upanayana) — the youths are identified with the divine ephebes, the Maruts — which
takes place just before the monsoon in order to strengthen the Sun.

18 At the same time, Köhler advises us not to take the etiological myth, which several texts specify as being the
reason for establishing the pravargya in a sattra, as reflecting the true origins of the ritual. The connection
between pravargya and the sattra may be a retrospective explanation given for the pravargya, the origin of
which was at that time forgotten (2016:172).

19 Heesterman refers here and in another publication of his (1985:78, 224) to Schmidt (1968), whose study is
based on the RV, but Heesterman himself very seldom use RV passages to support his theory, as mentioned
above. Heesterman differs from Schmidt in that he does not try to harmonise the shifting natures of Indra into a
single “Priesterkönig”, but instead emphasises “Indra’s ambiguity and alternation between the two roles [of

20 On closeness of Indra and Rudra see Das (2000).

21 As the ekavrātya moved to the east the troop of Maruts followed (AVŚ 15.14). The Maruts appear as
prototypical (vrātya) sattrins in post-Rgvedic texts (cf. PB 17.1.1). Thomas Oberlies (2012:339) writes that in
wartime the Rgvedic Āryans had a monophasic Herrschaftsstruktur, in which the leader was identified with
Indra; this organisation “erinnert sich nicht zufällig an die der Vrātyas, die ein Leben des yóga führten.” Cf. RV
10.34.12 (Gambler hymn): senānir gañāṣya ... rājā vrātya prathamō “the leader of your army, the foremost
10 – the Mandalas that may contain some vrātya influences, according to the authors – but in the Family Books as well. How well does this harmonise with the basic theory of Rgvedic and vrātya as “clashing cultures”?

This brings us to Köhler’s 2015 article, which questions the use of the term “orthodox” with reference to the RV. We know that ritual changes and innovations took place within Rgvedic culture, and change of meaning is detected by Köhler in terms for ‘poet’. The ritual offices of uṣīj and rebhā seem to have become neglected at a time when RV poetry was still composed, in contrast to the growing importance of the brahmān. To this one could add, from an Indo-Iranian perspective, the case of kavi, investigated by Köhler in 2011, which is used in the sense of ‘ruler’ in Avestan (kauui) but ‘poet’ in Vedic. Köhler concludes that we should not think in terms of “heterodoxy” and “orthodoxy” for the Rgvedic period, for there was never really a fixed corpus of norms to differ from. The absence of the term vrātya in the RV may be due to it existing parallel to the Rgvedic and was considered unimportant - or “was not perceived to be different at all”, Köhler suggests (2015:372), which contradicts the editors’ view that Rgvedic and vrātya cultures stand in opposition. Köhler also represents a critical voice in his 2016 article.22

Lycanthropic warriors

With the exception of Köhler’s 2015 article, reconstructed Indo-Iranian terminology and Avestan texts are not brought into the discussion in the reviewed publications. It might be of interest, however, to compare the Indian material and the theories of the reviewed volumes, with the ancient Iranian material. In the latter we find evidence of conflicts between rivalling cults: that of the “orthodox” worship of Mazdā, sprung from the religious “reform” of Zarānštra, and that of members of the vrātya-like, wolfish and violent Männerbund (Wikander 1938; Falk 1986:16).

In the 2015 volume, Yaroslav Vassilkov writes about animal symbolism of Indian warrior brotherhoods: in the Indo-Iranian and Vedic period warrior symbolism is concentrated in the wolf/dog, and in epic and later texts in the tiger/lion. Among other things, Vassilkov brings up the anthropomorphic Kernosovka memorial stone (2015:fig. 8.1-2) from 3rd millennium BC Ukraine, which depicts different kinds of weapons and what appears to be a werewolf (a man with tail, weapon in hand). The stone may have been raised in honour of a warrior belonging to an Indo-European, wolfish brotherhood. Recently, archaeologists David W. Anthony, Dorcas R. Brown and Anne Pike-Tay (2012, 2016) have sought to redress the criticism that we lack archaeological evidence that could support the scholarly reconstruction of Bronze Age Indo-European, lycanthropic brotherhoods. Basing themselves on recent findings of the Samara Valley Project (1995-2002), they argue that a wintery sacrifice of dogs and wolves took place 1900-1700 BC at Krasnosamarskoe, a Late Bronze Age settlement at Samara, Russia. The bones of at least 51 dogs and seven wolves were were fragmented, cut and split. At least one of the wolves was roasted. Standardised and non-functional chopping of dog-heads into 10-12 equal-sized pieces implies some kind of ritual butchery. They interpret this antinomian feast as a “transgressive act of liminality... In this case the passage was a transition to a status symbolized by becoming a dog/wolf through the consumption of its flesh.” The authors point to previous studies on Indo-European, lycanthropic-canine Männerbünde, including the vrātyas. Dogs and wolves in Indo-European traditions typically

king of the troop”. The Maruts appear in vrātas/ganās (RV 1.85.4, 3.26.6, etc.), Rudra being their father (RV 2.33.1, etc.).

22 Köhler criticises a forthcoming publication by Pontillo, which attempts to find traces of the assumed first Indo-Āryan (vrātya) culture in RV 10.181 (referring to the gharmā ritual). Köhler writes that one should not assume that a certain idea, in this case that of a path for men to the gods’ realm (devayāna), is alien to the RV and conclude that the few Rgvedic attestations of this idea must therefore be derived from outside, from vrātyas (2016:171).
signify death and war. Falk, Kershaw and others have identified the winter (the days around the winter solstice) as the time of (sacrificial) rituals among these Männerbünde, which fits well with the findings of wintery dog and wolf sacrifices at Samara (Anthony & Pike-Tay 2016).

The contribution of M. P. Candotti & Pontillo in the 2015 volume, entitled “Aims and Functions of the Vrātyastoma Performances”, is a detailed discussion of the vrātya as the outcome of reformed brahmanic tradition. They adhere to Heesterman’s theory of the original vrātyastoma as a ritual conducted by vrātyas in order to appoint a leader at the beginning of an expedition, and to redistribute the booty at the end of the same. The vrātya expeditions might originally have been a temporary institution of Indo-Āryan warriors and their clans, aiming for the prosperity for all members (2015:199) – expeditions usually directed against fellow-Āryans (2015:194f.; Witzel 1995:17-18). The warrior theme is continued in Marianna Ferrara’s article, which puts forth the idea that the hostility toward the vrātya, and the negative features attributed to him, in some brahmanic texts, can be understood as representing an opposition between the brahmanised kṣatriya – dependent on a priest or purohita – and the ritually independent vrātya warrior (2015:321). Ferrara also suggests that there might be a link between the older vrātya warriors and Upaniṣadic “philosopher kings” (such as Janaka) achieving enlightenment on their own, royal pratyekabuddhas in early Buddhist and Jaina texts, as well as the Vedic traditions about Keśin Dālábhya/Dārbhya (the subject of two articles in the book from 2016, by E. Harzer and N. Kulkarni) as a ritually autonomous king of superior wisdom (2015:322-323).

In relation to the warrior theme mention must also be made of Pontillo’s independent article “Droṇa and Bhīṣma as Borderline Cases in Brāhmaṇical Systematization: A Vrātya Pattern in the Mahābhārata” (2016) in the Proceedings of the Fifth Dubrovnik International Conference on the Sanskrit Epics and Purāṇas, in which the author brings together all occurrences of the term vrātya in the epic, as well as passages “which, although not including the term vrātya, may perhaps be evaluated as evidence of a veritable ancient vrātya-context” (2016:205). It is argued that several of the heroes in the epic show characteristics of the vrātya in “an age when kṣatriyas and brāhmaṇas do not yet represent definitively separate varṇas, but rather different roles played cyclically and ritually...” For example, The author discusses the episode in the first book of the Mahābhārata (MBḥ), when the warlike brāhmaṇa Droṇa directs the young Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas on an expedition against king Drupada, Droṇa’s former friend. Pontillo argues that Drupada and Droṇa can be interpreted as former vrātya companions, expected to share everything. Drupada, having inherited his father’s kingdom, refuses to acknowledge the poor Droṇa as his friend. Pontillo writes that the way the vrātya-type of heroes are presented in the MBḥ can be seen as the result of brahmanic propaganda for promoting the transition from the vrātya system to the “Brāhmaṇic Reform”. If Pontillo’s interpretation is correct it would help us better understand certain episodes in the epic, such as how Bhīṣma could know the identity of the mysterious stranger (Droṇa) arriving at Hastināpura, merely by the stranger’s looks and supernatural skills (related to Bhīṣma by Arjuna). She suggests that Droṇa and Bhīṣma already knew each other because they were fellow vrātyas educated by another unorthodox warrior-brāhmaṇa, Rāma Jāmadagnya. Pontillo’s study can shed new light on the epic figure of the kṣatriya who lives as an ascetic in the forest, wearing deer/antelope skin and matted hair, at the same time as he acts as a warrior warrior.


(Viśvāmitra, Rāma-Lakṣmanā, Karṇa, the Pāṇḍavas), as well as the brāhmaṇa acting as warrior (Rāma Jāmadagnya, Droṇa, Kṛṣṇa, Kalkin).25

Knowledge, dīkṣā and regeneration

In her contribution to the 2015 volume, “Lost Speech: The Poetry of Sattrins”, Elena Mucciarelli polarises the vrātya’s “bardic” or mystic-ecstatic knowledge (seen e.g. in his “stammering speech”) with the visionary, strictly metric Rgvedic poetry. She agrees with Falk (1986:36, 44ff) that poetry has a pivotal role in both vrātya texts and the RV, but attempts to show the differences in types of poetry (2015:72). Both types were appropriated by the developing brahmanic culture and included in the classical śrauta ritual, the result of a clash between two different “Weltanschauungen” (2015:93). Mucciarelli contrasts the sattra with the ordinary śrauta ritual, in that only the former allows for mishaps and mistakes (2015:83; cf. Falk 1986:35; Collins 2014:114-115). This view is also held by Heesterman, who stresses the supposedly “risk-free” nature of the śrauta ritual; it is not very convincing, however, since the fear of mistakes, the acknowledgement of inherent risks in rituals, and stories of interrupted or failed rituals, are found also in texts dealing with non-sattra śrauta sacrifices (cf. Jamison 1996; af Edholm 2016). Mucciarelli writes that in some sattras it is the secret knowledge (cf. Dore above) that allows the ritual to proceed, rather than visionary skills, similar to the capacity to know and to answer riddles in the vrātyastoma (2015:87). She finds support in Paul Horsch’s important work on Vedic gāthā and śloka literature, in which he links the gāthā verse/song to the vrātya, as well as to a special kind of knowledge (1966:215, cf. 130-131, 401-420). Mucciarelli gives several examples of this from the texts, one of them being PB 24.18 (cf. Candotti & Pontillo 2015:187-189), which deals with the over-night sattra lasting 61 days. This sattra, we read, was performed by the daiva vrātyas26, with Budha as their leader (sthapati). They consecrated themselves without having begged king Varuṇa for a place of worship. Varuṇa took away from them the sharing of the sacrifice and knowledge of the devayāna (path to the gods). At that time there was neither juice in herbs, nor butter in milk, nor fat on flesh, nor hair on skin, nor leaves on trees, until the daiva vrātyas performed the ritual. Then three (ancient) ślokas are quoted, stating that there was neither butter in the milk (vs. 5; cf. Hauer 1927:87), nor fat in the flesh, until Budha undertook (udayacchad, cf. Caland 1931:621; Falk 1986:58) the sattra, and “attained the whole/all” (sarvam āpon, vs. 6).27 The last verse goes: daridrā āśan paśavāh kṛṣāh santo vyasthakāḥ / saumānyasya dīkṣāyām samasṛṣyanta medaseti // “Poor was the cattle, being meagre, (and) boneless, (but) at the dīkṣā of the son of Soma it was provided with fat.” (PB 24.18.7, Caland 1931:621; cf. Horsch 1966:130)28 The brāhmaṇa chapter ends by saying that the vrātyas undertook this ritual and attained complete prosperity/success (sarvāṃ rddhim), and so does anyone who undertakes it.

According to Mucciarelli the quoted verse “evokes a powerful knowledge that can command fertility” (2015:88). She follows Horsch (1966:401, 405) in interpreting these three

25 Cf. further Dore & Pontillo (2013), who attempt to relate the death of heroes (like Bhūṣma) on the “bed of arrows” to long-stalked plants in Vedic texts, and to ascetic vrātya figures such as Keśin Dālbhya. The connection between the warrior brotherhood and the bed of reeds has also been noted by Mary C. Smith (1991), to which she adds the motif of “male parthenogenic birth”.

26 i.e. ‘vrātyas of the god [Rudra?]’, ‘divine/celestial vrātyas’, or ‘vrātyas aiming for heaven’.

27 6bc not metric; cf. Caland (1931:621); Falk (1986:58).

28 Cf. ŚŚM 11.4.2 on the secret dimension of the agnihotra: Śauvāyana, the adhvaryu of those who had Ayasthūṇa for their grhapati (in a sattra), said: “Surely this sattra is supplied with lean cattle (kṛṣa- paśū-) and scanty ghee; and yet this one thinks himself a grhapati!” (11.4.2.18, Eggeling 1900:62) The grhapati, however, responded well and instructed Śauvāyana on how to multiply one’s cattle and offspring, and take the sacrificer to heaven (11.4.2.20), which is also the typical goal in a sattra.

Beside this possible \textit{vrātya} theme of fertility/food in the quoted stanza (\textit{PB} 24.18.7), I suggest that it also contains a reference to the idea of “becoming thin” due to the ascetic regime (fasting or dietary restrictions) undertaken during the initiation (\textit{dikṣā}) in \textit{śrāuta} rituals. As Falk writes (1986:57), \textit{PB} 24.18 shows that “die Begriffe Vṛātya, Sattrin und Dikṣita untrennbar miteinander verbunden sind”.\textsuperscript{31} Dikṣā makes one thin (\textit{krśa}, the same term as in \textit{PB} 24.18.7), but also fit for sacrifice/pure (\textit{medhya}); \textit{yadā vai dikṣitah krśo bhavaty atha medhyo bhavati “When the dikṣita becomes thin he becomes [sacrificially] pure.”}\textsuperscript{32} (\textit{ĀpŚŚ} 10.14.9)\textsuperscript{33} This is also related to the idea of \textit{dikṣā} as death and rebirth, and buying oneself off with the victim (\textit{paśu}) on the fast day in the \textit{paśubandha} (\textit{Kauśītakābhṛtāma} 10.3)\textsuperscript{34}. The motif of the thin cattle becoming fat thus parallels the condition of the initiate. The idea of restoration through \textit{dikṣā} reappears in e.g. the early Āyurvedic compendium attributed to Suśruta\textsuperscript{35}, on the rejuvenation by soma, which apparently is based on the Vedic somic initiation, as noted by Dominic Wujastyk (2001:121).\textsuperscript{36} At the same time there is a connection between ritual Vedic asceticism and fertility, since asceticism/heat (\textit{pāna}) is often thought to

\textsuperscript{29} According to Horsch (1966:406) the stanzas belong to Indraic mythology. \textit{RV} 10.73.9 states that Indra placed milk in cows and plants, and 10.101, addressed to priests of the somic sacrifice, is attributed to Budha Saumya.

\textsuperscript{30} The \textit{mahāvrata} ritual, which is part of a \textit{sattra}, is identified with \textit{anna} (4.10.3-4). In \textit{PB} 4.10.1 Prajāpati poured out himself in creation; the gods decided to make Prajāpati ‘nourished’ (\textit{dhinavad, ‘DHAY ‘saugen, Muttermilch trinken’}, Mayrhofer 1992:776) by means of a great \textit{vrata}/vow. “Was während eines Jahres reift, das trugen sie ihm zusammen und reichen es ihm ihn – das nahm er als vrata zu sich, das sättigte ihn (\textit{tad enam adhino})” (Webber-Brosamer 1988:182) Speculations on the meaning of food (\textit{anna} as the “first born of \textit{rta}” and “immortality-granting agent”) is also important in Vedic texts not connected to \textit{vrātyas or sattras} (Lopez 1997).

\textsuperscript{31} The \textit{vrātyastoma-sihapati}, we read in \textit{BaudhāyanaŚŚ} 18.24, “lives according to the vows” (\textit{vratāni carati} of a \textit{dikṣita}: he lies down, abstains from work and should taste. Cf. \textit{JB} on the 21-day \textit{sattra}: the cold period of the year is bad, “mit mageren Kühen, mit mageren Männern [\textit{krśaguh krśapurūṣās]}.” (\textit{JB} 2.356, Tschida 1979:44, 101)

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{pīvā dikṣate krśo yajate yadasyāṅgānām mīyāte jhuteyeva taditi vijñāyate “Fett unternimmt er die Dikṣā, mager verrichtet er den Gottesdienst; was von seinen Gliedern sich mindert, das opfert er als Spende.”} (\textit{ĀpŚŚ} 10.14.10, 21.1.9, Caland 1928)

\textsuperscript{33} Cf. Heesterman 1993:31-33 with ref. The victim (\textit{paśu}) in the animal sacrifice is, in essence, the sacrificer (\textit{JB} 2.11; \textit{ŚBM} 3.3.4.21, etc.).

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Suśrutasamhitā} Cikitsāsthānam (4.29) (1998:502-505). \textit{Suśrutasamhitā} is the work of several hands, the oldest parts of which may date back before 250 BC.

\textsuperscript{35} This text claims that he who wishes to overcome age and death shall be reduced to mere skin and bones during sixteen days of fasting, while living in a kind of hut or room with three walls round it, the first day spent on a bed of sacred grass, covered with a blackbuck skin. After the period of fasting his condition will change in a miraculous way, and the emaciated person will regain all that he lost - and more: he will, thanks to the soma, be extremely beautiful, radiant and all-knowing (Wujastyk 2001:121, 174-79; cf. Müller 1954). On the connection between ancient Indian asceticism and medicinal traditions such as the \textit{Suśrutasamhitā} see Zysk (1998: both the physician and the itinerant ascetic wander about, are outside Vedic-brahmanic orthodoxy and receptive to new ideas. In the Vedic period the heterodox ‘roving physician’ (\textit{cārananvaiśādyā}) is considered impure by \textit{brāhmaṇas}, because of his journeys to non-Āryan lands and dealings with impure things (Zysk 1998:24). Only later do the \textit{brāhmaṇas} superimpose their own ideas and mythology on the heterodox material. This brahmanisation process reminds one of the scenario (re)constructed in the reviewed volumes, through which the \textit{vrātya} tradition is incorporated into (and reinterpreted by) the orthodox \textit{śrāuta} culture.
(accumulate the power to) generate rain and fertility (cf. Kaelber 1989:ch. 1). It is not explicitly said that the daiva vrātyas in PB attained devayāna, but in PB 17.1.10 success is combined with attaining divine status (cf. Candotti & Pontillo 2015:189). JB 2.221 similarly tells us that the divya vrātyas “ran the vrātya expedition” (vrātyāṃ adhāvayan) with Budha as sthapati, targeting the ekavrātya position. “The god” (Rudra?) wounded their sacrifice and they did not learn the way to heaven. But then Prajāpati arranged the vrātyastoma for them; they performed it and learned the way to heaven, and so does anyone who runs the vrātya expedition (2015:191-193). Just as the daiva vrātyas in the PB, the divya vrātyas in the JB are first unsuccessful due to damage in the procedure; thanks to correct performance they acquire the knowledge of the way to heaven. The completion of the ritual is the prerequisite for attaining the goal. All three ślokas in PB 24.18 stress the powerful action or ascetic regimen – the effect of Budha’s dīkṣā – rather than the “powerful knowledge” of the vrātya.37

The regeneration of the emaciated animal/initiate by ritual means should be seen in the context of the above-mentioned warrior brotherhoods, their yearly cycle and rituals. Falk (1986:28; cf. White 1991:98) points out that the initiation of Budha in the PB takes place when the cattle are lean, which probably refers to winter conditions, since AB 4.26.3 mentions Śiśira (January and February) as a time when the cattle become like wild animals, thin and shaggy. The time of Budha’s initiation thus corresponds with that of canine/wolfish Männerbund rituals in other Indo-European cultures, as pointed out by Falk and Kershaw, and with the Samara Valley findings, mentioned above.

“Fictitious and bookish rituals”
The last contribution to be mentioned is that of G. U. Thite in the 2015 volume (cf. Thite 1996), which argues that the famous Vedic sacrifices aśvamedha, rājasyā, sarvamedha, puruṣamedha and vrātyastoma were never performed historically, at least not in the manner laid out in the Vedic ritual manuals. A major argument of his is that a performance of these grand sacrifices would give rise to numerous practical problems. The king may well have been sprinkled in the abhiṣeka, because this is realistic and practically possible, but not the whole series of rites in the rājasyā. Thite also points to the fact that there is little agreement on details regarding these ritual in Vedic and early epic texts respectively.38 Many scholars “take everything mentioned in the Veda very seriously”, but the world of authority and sovereignty of the Veda is “broken”, since some of the rituals described are “merely fictitious and bookish” (2015:152). The title of Thite’s article, “The Broken World of Sovereignty…”, appears to refer to Heesterman’s monograph The Broken World of Sacrifice (1993), in which the author considers the śrāuta sacrifice to be the result of the dissolution of the cyclic-agonistic sacrifice and the division between the “real” world and the artificial ritual arena of the solo sacrificer. Whereas Heesterman “does ritual the justice of treating its content seriously - but, unfortunately, only in the distant and unrecoverable past” (Jamison 1996:104), Thite questions the seriousness of the Vedic grand rituals altogether. Thite brings attention to important questions as to the execution of the great rituals in ancient India. However, the existence of different opinions on how certain rituals are to be performed does not mean that they were never performed at all; most rituals change in the course of time, as seen in the

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37 Vss. 5-7: “Great (mahī, Candotti & Pontillo 2015:188-189 ‘mighty’, but Falk 1986:57-58 thinks it refers to the Earth) was the dīkṣā of Budha”; “when Budha undertook the dīkṣā”, “at the dīkṣā of Soma’s son”. Cf. Hock (2016:110). According to Candotti & Pontillo the fact that reference in PB 24.18 is made to dīkṣā, and that the exclusion from devayāna is due to a ritual shortcoming, suggest “a typical Brāhmanic reorientation of a possible original Vṛtya context” (2015:189).

38 One striking example being the celibate Bhīṣma’s alleged performance of no less than “thirty horse sacrifices” (vājīmedhāh) in MBh 6.22.15 – an impossibility, if we are to follow the rules laid down in the Vedic manuals, since Bhīṣma was neither a king nor married (cf. discussion in Sharma 2009), whereas one needs to be a ruler with at least four spouses to be able to perform even a single aśvamedha.
Recent Studies on the Ancient Indian Vṛtya

Vedic and Purānic versions of rājasūya (Geslani 2012). Nor is a “bookish” sacrifice necessarily less interesting for scholars than a historically performed one, since even a purely theoretical ritual says much about the beliefs, ideals and aspirations of a particular culture (or at least the authors of the ritual texts). In that sense they are to be taken seriously. Also, the basic structure and function of the aśvamedha, for example, seems to be the same in epic and ritual texts; the same can be said of the rājasūya. It is striking how strong the presence of the agonistic element and the element of risk are in these rituals, both in the Vedic manuals and the epics, despite great differences pertaining to chronology and genre between these two types of texts (af Edholm 2016). This element, it seems, did not end with Heesterman’s pre-classical age.

Conclusion

Overall, the two volumes discussed above provide stimulating reading and are welcome contributions to a renewal of the study of the vṛtya problem, in addition to the classical works by Hauer, Heesterman, Falk, and others. The volume from 2015 contains a useful index locorum and a general index. Not only can the present studies, with their broad perspective and focus on both well and less studied texts, increase our understanding of the vṛtya and related ascetic/warrior figures, but also help us appreciate the complexity of Vedic culture and the in/validity of the concept of orthodoxy/heterodoxy at different times and places in ancient India. Although written for those who are familiar with Vedic and Indian culture, some of the questions raised by these volumes may be of interest also to the non-specialist, such as the topic of heterodoxy. Some basic theoretical assumptions in the books can, however, be questioned: the dualistic theory of a cultural clash between Ṛgvedic and vṛtya cultures, and a radical axial breakthrough, the śrauta reform. A complex subject such as that of the vṛtya allows for a plurality of interpretations.

Bibliography with Abbreviations


39 The letting loose of the horse for a year; the battle for the horse guarded by one or many princes; the sexual element involving the chief wife and the horse; and the symbolism of supreme rulership.
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