



LIMINAL SPACES, AND IDENTITY TRANSFORMATIONS IN SOUTH ASIAN LITERATURES AND ARTS

Essays in Honour
of Professor Alexander Dubyanskiy

EDITED BY PAOLA M. ROSSI

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in South Asian Literatures and Arts

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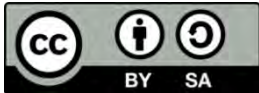
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Conquering the Sun: Sovereignty and Liminality in the Vedic *Mahāvrata* Rite

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the Vedic *mahāvrata* rite, or the rite of the so-called ‘Great observance’, as an important turning point in the definition of the late Vedic cosmic taxonomy related to the conception of cosmic sovereignty. According to the scholarly literature, the *mahāvrata* rite is an annual festival, marking the winter solstice, which takes place on the last but one day of the *gavāmayana* ritual, or ‘March of the Cows’. It belongs to the *sattra* typology, a ‘sacrificial session’, which may reflect a pre-*śrauta* ritual reality, and a sort of clan sodality, according to which all the participants play reciprocally equivalent roles. Moreover, the same rite would represent a means through which a new paradigm of sovereignty was represented: in actual fact a sort of “dynastic chiefdom” was established, that is a large confederation, namely the Kuru realm, whose power was more stable and centralised than previous clan-based societies, with increasing social stratification and specialisation. Furthermore, as a solstice rite, it is combined with a solar mythology, especially with the Vala-myth, which could be well applied to a new cosmic and transcendent ideology of sovereignty. Therefore, the *mahāvrata* day represents a perfect “liminal” experience: it marks the passage from darkness to light, from death to life. It is not only expression of a mere popular seasonal festival, guarantee of prosperity and wealth, but also contributes to defining a ‘power’ taxonomy, inasmuch as the liminal condition of the *vrātya* initiation is turned into a sort of paradoxical permanent liminality, by which cosmic sovereignty is established.

Keywords: *mahāvrata* rite, Kuru sovereignty, *vrātya* initiation, solar imagery.

1. Introduction: Conquering the Sun and Sovereignty

The motif of conquering the sun or sunlight (*svàr* / *súvar* [PIE *s(é)h₂w₁]¹) is widespread in the Old Vedic culture. It is frequently expressed by means of a phraseology based on syntagms such as *svàr* *√saní*, ‘to win the sun’, with its derivative *svar-ṣā* ‘sun-winning, the winner of the sun’, and *svàr* *√jī*, ‘to conquer the sun’, particularly used in its nominal equivalent, the compound *svar-jít* ‘the conqueror of the sun’². Such expressions refer to a common imagery concerning heavenly light, (e.g. Roesler 1997). Moreover, myths centred on the sun are essential in Rigvedic poetry, likely as heritage of Indo-European traditions (West 2007, 194ff.). In actual fact, as attested in the Rigvedic and Atharvavedic collections, brightness, especially sunlight, is conceived of in the Vedic culture as corresponding to well-being and cosmic prosperity. It guarantees long life and wealth, whereas darkness conveys paucity and death³. Therefore, such a correspondence between dichotomies such as sunlight vs. darkness, life vs. death, wealth vs. paucity frequently overlaps with the antagonistic warrior context⁴: coping with Otherness, overcoming enemies / demons and conquering wealth, especially cattle, means finding and conquering brightness, as in R̥V 2. 23. 3:

*ā vibādhyā parirāpas támāṃsi ca jyótiṣmantaṃ rátham ṛtásya tiṣṭhasi /
bṛhaspate bhīmám amitradámbhanaṃ rakṣoháṇaṃ gotrabhídamaṃ suvarvídamaṃ
// R̥V 2. 23. 3 //*

Having pressed away evasive chatter and darkness, you mount truth’s light-bearing chariot, which terrifies, which vanquishes enemies, o Bṛhaspati, and which smashes demons, splits cowpens, and finds the sun⁵. (Jamison–Brereton 2014, 433).

1. As for a detailed etymological analysis, see Pinault 2017.

2. Although *svar-ṣā* and *svar-jít* are both already attested in the Rigvedic collection (Scarlata 1999: 585; 161-162), the former is prevalent in the Rigvedic hymns, whereas the latter is mainly mentioned in the Atharvavedic collection.

3. Cf. e.g. R̥V 6. 47. 8ab: *urúṃ no lokám ánu neṣi vidván / súvarvaj jyótir ábhayaṃ suastí /* ‘[Indra], lead us along to a wide world, as the one who knows — to sun-filled light, to fearlessness, to well-being’. (Jamison-Brereton 2014, 836).

4. In particular, the appearance of the Dawns is conceived of in cosmogonic terms, as «the victory of Light over Darkness, of Life over Death», according to Kuiper (1983, 159ff., namely 161), just in relation to the Vala-myth.

5. The compound *suvarvíd*, ‘the finder of the sun’ is commonly mentioned in the Rigvedic collection (cf. Scarlata 1999, 585), in relation to manifold deities such as Agni, Indra, Bṛhaspati, Soma, etc. However, it fully complies with the Vala-myth in which the sun is found and “brought to light”.

The above lines refer in particular to the Vala-myth which is a sort of duplicate of the Vṛtra-myth, that is the release of the sun / Dawns, equivalent to the cows / waters, by disclosing the cave of the demon Vala and smashing it on behalf of Indra / Bṛhaspati⁶. In actual fact, the very phraseology meaning ‘conquering the sun / sunlight’ correlates Indra / Bṛhaspati to the Vala-myth itself (e.g. R̥V 2. 18. 1; 3. 34. 4 ~ AVŚ 20. 11. 4; R̥V 1. 100. 13; 10. 47. 5 ~ MS 4. 14. 8) or alludes to the stealing of the sun wheel on Indra’s behalf⁷. Finally, the motif of conquering the sun is highlighted by the explicit Rigvedic *bahuvrīhi* compound *svārmīlha*, literally meaning ‘one whose prize is the sun’, that is the definition of ‘contest’ as such, which is mostly correlated to Indra (R̥V 1. 56. 5; 1. 63. 6; 1. 130. 8; 4. 16. 15; 8. 68. 5), and his companions, the Maruts (R̥V 1. 169. 2), who are the winners of contests *par excellence*⁸. Thus, the following chain of equivalences is suggested: light → sun ~ cattle → conquering the sun ~ release of cattle → prosperity. The same motif is renovated in the ritual context: warrior deeds are already ritually re-evoked and re-founded through the somic liturgy in the Rigvedic somic book, for example, in R̥V 9. 97. 39:

*sá vardhitā vārdhanaḥ pūyāmānaḥ sómo mīdhvām*abhí no jyótiṣāvīt /
yénā naḥ pūrve pitāraḥ padajñāḥ suvarvído abhí gā ádrim uṣṇán //*
R̥V 9. 97. 39 //

The strengthening strengthener, being purified, Soma the rewarder, helped us with his light, with which our forefathers, knowing the track, finding the sun, burned the cows out of the rock. (Jamison–Brereton 2014, 1342).

However, it is in the later Rigvedic textual layer and in the Atharvavedic collection that the motif of conquering the sun/sunlight is explicitly associated with sovereignty: e.g. R̥V 10. 120. 8 ~ AVŚ 5. 2. 8 ~ AVP 6. 1. 8

6. In the earlier Rigvedic textual layer Bṛhaspati is an epithet of Indra: see Schmidt 1968, especially 237-240.

7. Thus in R̥V 1. 130. 9; 1. 175. 4; 4. 30. 4; 5. 29. 5, 9-10; 5. 31. 11; 1. 121. 13; here a chariot race between Indra and Sun / Dawn is hinted at, alluding to the stealing of the sun wheel on behalf of Indra.

8. The Rigvedic *mīlha* ~ Ved. *mīdhá* ‘booty, prize, reward’, OAv. *mīzda* ‘wage, reward’, Gk. μισθός ‘wage’ < PIE **misdʰh₁ó* ‘reward, providing remuneration’, is probably a derivative of PIE **ǵmey* ‘to exchange’ (Mayrhofer 1996, 357-358; 314-315); also, the derivative *mīdhvāṃs* ‘rewarder, generous’, is employed as epithet of Indra in R̥V 2. 24. 1, with reference to the same Vala-myth.

*imā brāhma bṛhāddivo vivakti indrāya sūśām agriyāḥ suarśāḥ /
mahó gotrāya kṣayati svarājo dūraś ca vísvā avṛṇod āpa svāḥ //*
RV 10. 120. 8 //

Bṛhaddiva speaks these sacred formulations fortissimo to Indra: “the first to win the sun, he has dominion over the great cowpen of the sovereign king, and he opened up all the doors that are his own”. (Jamison–Brereton 2014, 1592).

Bṛhaddiva, lit. ‘one whose heaven is lofty’ / ‘one who has lofty heaven’, is equivalent to Bṛhaspati as the priestly counterpart of Indra (Griffiths 2009, 15ff.), and the references to the cowpen (*gotrā*) and the opening of ‘doors’ (*dūraś ca vísvā √vr*) allude to the Vala-myth (Schmidt 1968, 208); henceforth, the term *svarāj* ‘sovereign king’ (lit. ‘self-ruler’) refers to Indra / Bṛhaddiva⁹. Moreover, in AVP 5. 2. 8 ≈ TS 2. 3. 14. 6¹⁰, Bṛhaspati acts upon the cosmos, along the cosmic vertical axis, from the bottom (*budhnād / budhnyāḍ*) to the top: he has conquered the sunlight (*súvar √ji*) in st. 4 (≈ AVŚ 4. 1. 4cd; 4. 1. 5ab; TS 2. 3. 14. 6; RVK 3. 22. 3) and he is designated as overlord (*samrāj*).

*budhnād yó ágram abhyárty ójasā bṛhaspátim ā vivāsanti devāḥ /
bhinád valám ví púro dardarīti kánikradat gāḥ súvar apó jigāya //*
AVP 5. 2. 4 //

The gods try to win Bṛhaspati, who powerfully rises from the bottom to the top; he broke Vala, he smashes the fortresses, roaring he has won the cows, the sunlight and the waters. (Lubotsky 2002, 17, slightly modified).

It is evident that conquering the sun ratifies the supremacy of the winner, so that it is the foremost token of overlordship. And the close relationship between kingship and cosmic solar attributes will be definitively formalised in the later dharmic literature, where the sovereign is compared to the sun (*e.g.* MDŚ 7.6)¹¹. However, the association of sunlight with the emergence of sovereignty is parallel to the development of the Brahmanical priestly function and the correlated

9. The interpretation of these verses is controversial: Geldner (1951, III. 347) claims that *svarāj* is an epithet of the demon Vala. Cf. also the translation and related discussion in Griffiths 2009, 15ff.: «Bṛhaddiva speaks these poems as a fortifying [laud] for Indra, the first to win the light. He (Bṛhaddiva) rules over the self-ruler [Indra]’s great cow-pen, and all his own doors he has opened».

10. Cf. Lubotsky 2002, 13-17. TS 2. 3. 14. 6 closes with the reading: *súvar apó jigāya* ‘he has won the sunlight, the waters’.

11. Cf. *e.g.* Gonda 1969, 25-26.

ritualism, since it becomes a means of legitimation of rulership. For example, the very ritual of the royal consecration (*rājasūya*)¹² was likely instituted by the Kuru hegemony (1200–900 BCE), that is, at the time when, according to Witzel (1995), a dynastic tribal confederation, led by the Kuru clan, emerged. By means of this rite the sovereign was recognised as such, insofar as he was provided with a solar body (Proferes 2007, 81ff.) and solar attributes (*vārcas* ‘splendor’). According to this correspondence between sovereignty and “solar-ship”, the king was equivalent to the rising sun. He was called Rohita (e.g. in AVŚ 13. 2 = AVP 18. 20), literally ‘the ruddy one’, but also ‘one who is caused to raise upwards’ (< *√ruh*) and rose up like the rising sun, ‘mounting the heavenly directions’ (*digvyāsthāpana*) and offering oblations to the heavenly quarters¹³, thus mapping space and measuring time. In this way a paradigm of supra-tribal or “transcendent” sovereignty was established, which had to overcome the clan divisions, thus representing a sort of a social “ecumenisation”¹⁴. In particular, the priestly function was reconfigured: whereas in pre-Kuru Vedic culture, priestly and royal functions were embodied by proto-Vedic chieftainship¹⁵, the Kuru hegemony separated them. In actual fact, while on the one hand, the institution of a separated priestly category, such as the *brāhmaṇa* one, contributed to the development of the ritual as a support for the new ideal of sovereignty, on the other, a new social organisation was introduced, which saw the sacerdotal class come to increase its prestige, thus precluding the hierarchically stratified caste system. Nonetheless, in claiming the cosmic primacy of the kingship (*rājanya*), the *rājasūya* rite itself is an example of a liminal condition¹⁶: firstly, shining up to the cosmic limits, thus removing darkness and fostering prosperous existence is a role played at the edge of non-being, on the threshold of the dangerous lightlessness that recalls the same warrior tension which in the proto-Vedic myth leads Indra to find and conquer the sun, fighting against the Vala demon. Secondly, this ascent to heaven, spreading through intermediate space like the rising sun, implies a transitional reality from which a new identity stems, that is the royal one. For example, in R̥V 10. 139. 2 Sūrya himself, defined as the eye of mankind, is pictured as a cosmic entity emerging in-between the spatio-temporal polarity (*pūrvam āparaṃ ca*):

12. Cf. Proferes 2007, 78-91; Tsuchiyama 2005; Heesterman 1957.

13. Cf. Heesterman 1957, 103ff.; 196ff.

14. As regards the definition of “ecumenisation”, also in relation to the development of the *śrauta* ritualism, inasmuch as it outdid the clan divisions, see Proferes 2007, 12.

15. Cf. Breteron 2004.

16. Cf. Turner 1969, namely as for the rite of status elevation, p. 170ff.

*nṛcákṣā eṣá divó mádhya āsta āpaprivān ródasī antárikṣam /
sá víśvácīr abhí caṣṭe ghr̥tácīr antarā pūrvam áparaṃ ca ketúm //*
RV 10. 139. 2 //

With his eye on men, he sits in the middle of heaven, having filled both world-halves and the space between. He watches over [his mares? the ladles?] facing toward ghee, facing in all directions (*visváñc*), between the earlier and the later beacon. (Jamison–Brereton 2014, 1625, slightly modified).

The ritualisation of such liminal status by means of the *rājasūya* contributes to institutionalising the dominant and supra-tribal role of sovereign, that is to say that the state of liminality becomes permanent¹⁷: the royal consecration turns the proto-Vedic double chieftainship, based on the alternating phases of settlement (*kṣéma*) and mobilisation (*yóga*) and belonging to a semi-nomadic tribal society¹⁸ into royal uniqueness, which is definitively “outsiderhood”, that is over and beyond the fluctuant clan-lordship; in other words, it is a cosmic overlordship. Such a conception of sovereignty is mirrored in the Vedic textual *repertoire* which is directly associated to the Kuru hegemony, that is the first and the tenth Rigvedic books and the Atharvavedic collection whose compilation is indeed attributed to the Kuru period¹⁹. For example, in AVŚ 13. 2. 2-3 = AVP 18. 20. 6-7 the sun-Āditya / king, lit. ‘one who shines like a sun’ (*svaráyata*) is praised as a cosmic cowherd (*bhúvanasya gopā* ‘cowherd / protector of the living beings’), *éka* ‘unique’, who maps space and measures time:

*dísāṃ prajñānām [AVP prajñānam] svaráyantam arcīṣā supakṣám ásúṃ
patáyantam arṇavé /
stāvāma sūryaṃ bhúvanasya gopāṃ yó raśmíbhīr díśa ābhāti sárvāḥ // 2 //
yát prāñi pratyāñi svadháyā yāsi śībhaṃ nānārūpe áhanī kárṣi māyáyā /
tád āditya máhi tát te máhi śrávo yád éko víśvaṃ pári bhūma jāyase // 3 //*
AVŚ 13. 2. 2-3 //

[Him] shining with the brightness, the foreknowing of quarters, well-winged, flying swift in the ocean — we would praise the sun, the shepherd of existence, who with his rays shines unto all the quarters.

In that you go swiftly in front, behind, at will, [and] make by magic the two days of diverse form — that, o Āditya, [is] great, that [is] your great fame, that

17. Thomassen 2015, 54-55.

18. Schmidt 1992; cf. also fn. 31.

19. Witzel 1997, 262-264; 278.

you alone are born about the whole world. (Whitney 1905, II. 719-720, slightly modified).

Significantly, in st. 30 of the same hymn, the well-known motif of conquering the sun is mentioned by means of the compound *svarjít*, ‘conqueror of the sun’. In this case (AVŚ 13. 2. 30 ≈ AVP 18. 23. 7) the king / sun metamorphosis is fully realized, inasmuch as the very term *pátaṅga*, ‘the flying one’ occurs in R̥V 10. 177 as the embodiment of the sun:

*rócase diví rócase antárikṣe pátaṅga pṛthiviyāṃ rócase rócase apsv à Intáh /
ubhā samudráu rúcyā vy āpā itha devó devāsi mahiśáh svarjít //*
AVŚ 13. 2. 30 //

‘You shine in the sky, you shine in the atmosphere, O flying one; on the earth you shine, you shine within the waters; both oceans you have penetrated with your sheen; O god, you are the god, the sun-conquering buffalo’. (Whitney 1905, II. 724, slightly modified).

As regards these dynamics that concern the relationship between liminality, sovereignty and ritualism, it is worth recalling that in the *mahāvratā*, another peculiar Brahmanical rite, the mythical motif of conquering the sun is ritualised in the form of an agonistic scene, which sees two participants struggle to conquer an animal’s hide, explicitly defined as the mesocosmic counterpart of the macrocosmic sun.

The frozen state of liminality in which the new sovereignty is unfolded comes about right here, between the mythical deed as evoked in the Rigvedic and Atharvavedic stanzas and its ritualisation in the *mahāvratā* rite.

2. *Liminality and the Vedic Mahāvratā Rite*

The *mahāvratā* rite or ‘Great Observance’ is an annual festival that marks the winter solstice and takes place on the last but one day of the *gavāmayana* ritual, lit. ‘March of the Cows’. Given its ambiguous positions in Brahmanical ritualism, it appears to embody liminality as such. In actual fact, although it implies the classical sonic liturgy like the *agniṣṭoma* sacrifice, it belongs to the *sattra* typology²⁰, which means that all the officiants are simultaneously sacrificers, that

20. As for the classical *sattra* ritual or ‘sacrificial session’, cf. Falk 1985.

is to say that the traditional ritualistic roles are not observed: this is not completely in line with the Brahmanical orthopraxy²¹. Moreover, it is also characterised by non-standard ritual elements that confer a «bacchanal atmosphere» upon it²², such as musical instruments, dancing and singing women, explicit sexual references, with obscene dialogues and intercourse. The *mahāvratā* is a calendrical rite and as a ceremony that marks the passage from the old to the new year, it is definitely the critical liminal point, in which sunlight, life and prosperity must be renewed and re-founded by means of peculiar performances²³. In actual fact, these non-classical elements have been interpreted as remnants of a seasonal festival of prosperity, an expression of that popular culture that may have also had some non-Āryan components: mingled with the Āryan culture, they were subordinated to Brahmanical elitism²⁴. However, given the peculiar agonistic scenes (verbal and physical contests, chariot-races), which also include the struggle to conquer the animal's hide equated with the sun, it has also been hypothesised that the *mahāvratā* may preserve remnants of a form of pre-classical rite, prior to the development of the *śrauta* reform, especially in relation to the antagonistic warrior *milieu*. For example, according to Heesterman, the *mahāvratā* rite corroborates the thesis that primordial warrior violence was the archetype of sacrificial violence itself, which was gradually converted to a metaphorical level, by means of the mediation of the priestly category²⁵.

Furthermore, references to the so-called *vrātya* culture have been highlighted²⁶: the *mahāvratā* rite might have originated in the same warrior brotherhood / *Männerbund* of Indo-European matrix of which the *vrātya* culture is an expression²⁷. Nonetheless, the *vrātya* culture itself is considered on the edge of Brahmanical orthodoxy, that is a token of the liminal condition as such. This would also mean that the *mahāvratā*, as a result of the Brahmanical process of ritualisation, is paradoxically an example of permanent liminality, that is

21. As regards the relationship between *sattra* context and *śrauta* ritual, cf. Candotti-Pontillo 2015; Amano 2016.

22. As Jamison (1996, 96-98) states; as regards this rite, cf. Keith 1908; 1909; Rolland 1973; Witzel 2005; also, the remarkable overview by Selva 2019, 398-399.

23. Cf. Turner 1969, 168ff.; Kuiper 1960, 221-222. As for the relationship with Carnival Festivals, cf. also Selva 2019, 330-331.

24. For example: Keith 1908; Rolland 1973.

25. Cf. Heesterman 1985, 75ff.; in particular, in 1993, 55: «the actual sacrifice has been taken out of its context and remodelled according to the standard *śrauta* code».

26. Cf. Hauer 1927, 246-267; Horsch 1966, 325-327.

27. Falk 1986, 31; 44; Kershaw 1997, 338ff.

institutionalised liminality. Lastly, it is worth recalling that this rite is correlated to the Kuru hegemony: in the *Kuntāpa* section (AVŚ 20. 127-136 ≈ RṚKh 5. 8-22) which probably refers to the *mahāvratā* rite, the Kuru King Parikṣit and his kingdom are praised and celebrated²⁸.

This would mean that, on the one hand, the Kuru sovereignty as “solar-ship” is a prerogative of the warrior heritage and, on the other, that such warrior heritage may coincide with the *vrātya* heritage, represented by the pre-Kuru young warrior brotherhood. In actual fact, the liminal character is emphasised especially in the agonistic scenes: the pre-determined limits are repeatedly challenged in the juxtaposition of figures playing antithetical roles and pronouncing antonymous expressions, and the borders between life and death become fluctuant. Reality here is unstable and uncertain, suspended between the binary oppositions, represented by the rivals, on the edge of chaos²⁹; boundaries must be recursively redefined and a new cosmos re-founded thanks to the victory of one of them, who is to be the supreme lord as such. Therefore, the dynamics of rivalry, power and kingship are linked to the liminal condition, or better, the acknowledgement of lordship progresses through liminal dynamics.

3. *Conquering the Sun as a Passage Rite*

As is well-known, the notion of liminality is especially correlated to the rites of passages, on which the famous work of Arnold van Gennep, *Rites de passage* (1909), was focused. Such rites mark the passage from one social role to another and represent the ongoing process of transition, that is the threshold condition between the separation from regular life within a community, and the reincorporation into the community itself, but with a new official publicly recognised role. These two crucial moments are tackled by means of specific rites equated to the contest with death and attainment of rebirth through initiation trials. Liminality is the spatio-temporal translation between these two antithetical points. In the Brahmanical society and henceforth in the dharmic orthodoxy, these characteristics belong to the *saṃskāra* rites, which mark the stages of life (*āśrama*), especially the *brahmacarya*, or ‘studentship’ which is introduced and closed by two specific passage rites (*upanayana* and *samāvartana*). However, in the proto-Vedic clan-based society the classical *āśramas* have yet to be outlined, and studentship in

28. Cf. Witzel 1995, 7-8.

29. Turner 1969, 38ff.

particular does not coincide with the scholarly learning of the Vedas, since the Brahmanical schools, committed to the preservation and the transmission of the texts did not exist yet: it is likely that in the earlier cultural phase, what becomes the later *brahmacarya* was equivalent to the stage of formation of future chieftains, those who held the double function of ‘warrior-lord’ and ‘priest-lord’³⁰. Moreover, the semi-nomadic tribal existence of the clan-based society was guaranteed by alternating phases of settlement (*kṣéma*) and mobilisation (*yóga*), which were managed by a double chieftainship, personified by mythical prototypes such as Varuṇa (*saṃrāj* ‘sovereign king’) and Indra (*svarāj* ‘independent king’)³¹: the former should represent the paradigm of lordship that preserves wealth, livestock and men in the settlements, while the latter should refer to the paradigm of lordship committed to collecting cattle and managing their seasonal movement and the correlated warrior operations. As far as a possible reconstruction of such a proto-Vedic cultural stage is concerned, it is assumable that the very *vrātya* culture as an example of Indo-European warrior brotherhood / *Männerbund* implied a form of initiation for the warrior-novices³², so that it might be an expression of ‘studentship’ or initiation practices aimed at training young male members of the clan for lordship, especially for the Indraic form of lordship³³. In particular, such an initiation period lasted a year: during the rainy season, starting with the summer solstice, ascetic life was practiced in the wilderness, under the guide of Rudra, whereas the war season, starting with the winter solstice and spent carrying out cattle raids, was led by Indra, who embodied warrior adulthood³⁴. And it is reasonable that each of these two different phases of initiation was opened and closed by peculiar rites. In this sense, noting that such a warrior training period proceeds in parallel to the course of the sun, the “solar-ship” must be one of the foremost characterising formative traits of such a form of studentship³⁵. In actual fact, the future Indraic chieftain must be able to orient himself and the livestock of his clan along accessible paths, following the rhythmical fluctuation of day and night, between sunlight and darkness; he must be expert at recognising animal

30. Cf. Schlerath 1995, 20-46, namely 33-34; and 1960. As for the Vedic *brahmacarya*, cf. Neri-Pontillo 2014 [2015], 160ff.

31. Cf. Schlerath 1960, 132-135; Schmidt 1992.

32. Cf. Kershaw 1997, 88ff.; 395ff.

33. Cf. Kershaw 1997, 342ff.; Selva 2019, 329ff.

34. Cf. Selva 2019, namely 405. As for Indra as «a seasonal god, connected with the ceremonies that accompanied the transition from the old to the new year», cf. Kuiper 1979, 137ff.

35. As for the relationship between sun-*rohita* and *vrātya*-leadership, cf. Dore 2015, 39ff., namely 57.

traces, finding lost cattle, collecting and yoking livestock, releasing and even conquering his herds. In such an initiation context, a competition correlated to the sun esoterically equated to the cattle might be expected: the scene of the *mahāvrata* rite must be interpreted as a remnant of that initiation challenge, since the *mahāvrata* day marks the winter solstice itself. In actual fact, on the one hand, it might close the first formative stage, as a sort of sapiential trial. It is worth recalling that one of the verbal contests performed during the *mahāvrata* day is also a dispute between a *brahmacārīn* and a woman defined as *pumścalī*, conventionally translated as ‘harlot’, but literally meaning ‘one who moves around the men’. On the other hand, as an auspicious and apotropaic rite it also opens the war season, ensuring a rich booty of cattle, wealth and prosperity. The final prize for this challenge is the sun itself, that is reincorporation into the clan community as the embodiment of Indraic lordship³⁶. At this point, it is worth noticing that the Kuru paradigm of sovereignty must indeed be rooted in such a *vrātya* context, or better that Indraic lordship, modelled on the *vrātya* initiation, is reproduced in the Kuru model of supra-tribal overlordship; in this case, the prize for the challenge is the sun itself, that is cosmic leadership. This transformation owes much to the renewed priestly role and the consequent Brahmanical revision: the development of the ritualisation permits the liminality of the proto-Vedic initiation practices to be turned into a means to legitimise the Kuru sovereignty. In this way, paradoxically, liminality becomes permanent, transposed into the dynastic sovereignty, and the passage rites of the young warrior are institutionalised in the rite of the winter solstice. In this sense, a new social order is an output of the *vrātya* liminal state, led by renovated overlordship; however, it is the same new paradigm of sovereignty associated with the new social order that is about to stigmatise the *vrātya* culture, that is, liminality as such: reality must be wholly under royal supra-tribal control and the new boundaries are the cosmic limits.

4. *Conquering the Sun and “Solar-ship” as the Kuru Paradigm of Sovereignty*

The Vedic textual *repertoire* concerning the *mahāvrata* rite encompasses passages of prose sections from the mantric collections such as KS (34. 5) and TS (7. 5. 9. 3), and *Brāhmaṇas* (PB 5. 5. 14-17; JB 2. 405; TB 1. 2. 6. 6-7). In these texts a ritual physical contest is pictured, combined with its etiological myth referring to the cosmic struggle between the forces of good and evil, the *devas* and the *asuras*, with

36. Cf. also Parpola’s interpretation (2000, 109-110).

the only exception being the TS prose, where the mythical counterpart is not referred to, and the ritual scene is only hinted at. Therefore, according to Witzel's reconstruction of the localisation of the Vedic schools (1987), PB, JB and TB are examples of Late Vedic products of the Brahmanical textual revision, belonging to the Kuru-Pañcāla realm; in particular, the Sāmavedic tradition, such as the Tāṇḍya recension (PB), is spread in the Kurukṣetra, whereas the Yajurvedic Taittirīya school (TS; TB) proliferates in the Gangā-Yamunā Doāb region, depending mainly on the Pañcāla realm, without any evident eastern interference. Lastly, the prose passage in KS is likely a late borrowing from the Sāmavedic tradition itself³⁷; the JB passage comes from the southern extension of the Sāmavedic *Brāhmaṇa* of the Jaiminīya, dependent on the Pañcāla influence³⁸, in which both innovative and conservative characters are presented, probably due to its marginal localisation. This would mean that none of these texts mirrors directly the Kuru culture and the *mahāvratā* rite ascribable to the Kuru period; on the contrary, all the texts are affected by Brahmanical orientation, that is primacy of the ritualised *Weltanschauung* and priestly prestige, even though it is likely that the Sāmavedic textual tradition might preserve a closer reference to a form of archetypical Kuru rite.

PB 5.5.14-17

*sūdrāryau carmaṇi vyāyacchete tayor āryaṃ varṇam ujjāpayanti // 14 // devās
ca vā asurās cāditye vyāyacchantas taṃ devā abhyaṣayaṃs tato devā abhavan /
parāsurā abhavann ātmanā parāsyā bhrātṛvyo bhavati ya evaṃ veda // 15 //
yadāryaṃ varṇam ujjāpayanty ātmānam eva tad ujjāpayanti // 16 //
parimaṇḍalaṃ carma bhavaty ādityasyaiva tad rūpaṃ kriyate // 17 //*³⁹.

An *ārya* and a *sūdra* contest a hide: of these two, they make the *ārya* rank the victorious one. The gods and the *asurās* [were] contesting the sun: the gods conquered it; henceforth the gods became [here], the *asurās* disappeared (*parā vbhū*): he, who knows thus, becomes [here] with his own [ranks], his rival disappears. When they make the *ārya* rank the victorious one, then they really make their own [ranks] victorious. The hide is circular shaped; indeed, that shape of the sun is made [here].

37. Cf. Heesterman 1962, 23, fn. 67.

38. Cf. Witzel 1997, 305, fn. 236.

39. Text after M. Kümmel, M. Kobayashi, A. Griffiths 2005; my translation.

JB 2.405

*āryaṃ ca varṇaṃ śaudraṃ coparyupari cātvālaṃ bastājine vyāyamayanty āṣabhe vā carmani. tayor antarvedy āryo varṇo bhavati bahirvedi śaudras. tayor āryeṇa varṇena śaudraṃ varṇaṃ jyāpayanti. devās ca vā asurās cāmuṣminn āditye 'spardhanta. taṃ devā asurāṇāṃ avṛñjata. tad yad āryeṇa varṇena śaudraṃ varṇaṃ jyāpayanty etam eva tad dviṣato bhrātrivyaṣya vṛñjate*⁴⁰.

They make a member of the *ārya* rank and a member of the *śūdra* rank contest a goat's hide or a bull's hide, atop the *cātvāla*. Of these two, the member of the *ārya* rank is inside the sacrificial area (*vedi*), the member of the *śūdra* rank is outside the sacrificial area (*vedi*). Of these two, they cause the member of the *śūdra* rank to be overpowered by the member of the *ārya* rank. The gods and the *asuras* contested that sun. The gods turned around it [averting it] from the *asuras*. Since they cause the member of the *śūdra* rank to be overpowered by the member of the *ārya* rank, then they turned around that [averting it] indeed from the hateful rival (*bhrātrivya*).

KS 34.5

[...] *sūdrāryau carman vyāyacchete // devās ca vā asurās cāditye vyāyacchanta / taṃ devā abhyajayan / āryaṃ varṇaṃ ujjāpayati / ātmānam evojjāpayati / antarvedy āryas syād bahirvedi sūdras / śvetam carma parimaṇḍalam' syāt / ādityasya rūpam* /⁴¹.

[...] An *ārya* and a *śūdra* contest a hide. The gods and the *asuras* contested the sun; the gods conquered it; it makes the *ārya* rank the victorious one, it really makes his own [rank] victorious; the *ārya* should be inside the sacrificial area (*vedi*), the *śūdra* [should be] outside the sacrificial area (*vedi*); the hide should be white and circular shaped; [it is] in the shape of the sun.

TS 7.5.9.3

ādré cārman vyāyachete indriyasyāvaruddhyai /⁴²

They two contest a wet skin, to obtain Indraic powers.

40. Text after Murakawa–Ehlers; my translation.

41. Text after L. von Schroeder (1900–1910), electronically prepared by M. Fushimi 2015; my translation.

42. Text after A. Weber (1871–1872), electronically prepared by M. Fushimi 2012; my translation.

TB 1.2.6.6-7

*devāsuraḥ sāmyattā āsan / tā ādityé vyāyacchanta / tám devāḥ sāmajayan // 6 //
brāhmaṇás ca sūdrás ca carmakarté vyāyacchete / dáivyo vái várṇo brāhmaṇáh
/ asuryāḥ sūdráh imè 'rātsur imé subhūtám akrann ity anyataró brūyāt / imá
udvāsikāriṇa imé durbhūtám akrann ity anyataráh / [...] brāhmaṇáh sāmjayati
/ amúm evādityāṁ bhrātr̥vyasya sām̐vindante // 7 //*⁴³.

The gods and the *asuras* came into conflict: they contested the sun; the gods conquered it. A *brāhmaṇa* and a *sūdra* contest a piece of hide; the *brāhmaṇa* [represents] the divine rank, the *sūdra* the *asura* rank; the former should proclaim: ‘These succeeded, these acted well [producing welfare]’; the latter should proclaim: ‘These performed the act of abandoning (*udvāsa*), these acted badly [bringing disadvantage]. [...] The *brāhmaṇa* wins: they find that indeed, the sun of the rival (*bhrātr̥vyasya*).

Firstly, these passages clearly show that some sort of dramatic play is referred to: the causative verbal form such as ‘they make s.one the victorious one; they make s.one contest s.thig’ (*ujjāpayanti, vyāyamayanti*) appears to uphold this hypothesis, so that the ritual performance coincides with the enactment of the contest as such. This is performed on the edge of the sacrificial area (*vedī*) in the north-eastern corner, near to the hole in the ground (*cātvāla*) from which soil is taken to construct the *mahāvedī*. Moreover, the rivals are placed on opposite fronts, partially inside and outside the borders of the sacrificial space which well represents the liminal condition of the agonistic relationship. The prize for the contest is a circular shaped hide, more often a bull’s hide, corresponding to the sun, which perfectly reflects the conquered sun / cattle of the mythical Indraic deed. The terminology clearly refers to the social taxonomy as outlined at least in R̥V 10. 90. 12⁴⁴, hierarchically ordered in compliance with the *puruṣa*’s sacrificial body; thus, it precludes the dharmic order of castes, especially in TB, where members of the *brāhmaṇa* category, the highest social category, are counterposed to the members of the lowest social category that is the *sūdra* one. It is worth noticing that the lexical variant *brāhmaṇa*, alternated with *ārya*, anticipates the lexicon of the ancillary literature, especially the dharmic one. For example, in the

43. Text after M. Fushimi 2012; my translation.

44. It belongs to the later R̥gvedic textual layer, that is the tenth book: R̥V 10.90.12: *brāhmaṇo 'sya mūkham āsīd bāhū rājanīyaḥ kṛtāḥ / ūrū tād asya yād vaiśyaḥ padbhyāṁ sūdró ajāyata // 12 //* ‘The brahmin was his mouth. The ruler was made his two arms. As to his thighs — that is what the freeman was. From his two feet the servant was born’. (Jamison–Brereton 2014: 1540).

śrautasūtras, such as BŚS 16. 22, the reading *brāhmaṇa* is combined with the term *vṛṣala* ‘low-born person’, which replaces *sūdra*:

athaitau brāhmaṇas ca sūdras cārdre carmakarte vyāyacchete ime ’rātsur ime subhūtam akran / iti brāhmaṇas / ima udvāsikāriṇa ime durbhūtam akran / iti vṛṣalas brāhmaṇaḥ samjayati naśyati vṛṣalaḥ /⁴⁵.

Then, those, the *brāhmaṇa* and the *sūdra*, contest a piece of wet hide; the *brāhmaṇa* [proclaims]: ‘These succeeded, these acted well [producing welfare]’; the low-born person [proclaims]: ‘These performed the act of abandoning (*udvāsa*), these acted badly [producing disadvantage]. The *brāhmaṇa* wins; the low-born person (*vṛṣala*) runs away.

Or in the Sāmavedic *śrautasūtras* (Lāṭyāyana [LŚS 4. 3. 5-8; 13-15] and Drāhyāyana [DŚS 11. 3. 4; 6-7; 11. 3. 12-14]), which describe the *mahāvṛata* rite, the term *ārya* is replaced by *arya* glossed as *vaiśya*:

LŚS 4. 3. 5-8; 13-15 ~ DŚS 11. 3. 4; 6-7; 11. 3. 12-14
dakṣiṇena mārjāliyam aryo ’ntarvedī dakṣiṇāmukhas tiṣṭhet bahirvedi sūdra udaṇimukhaḥ / 5 / aryābhāve yaḥ kaścāryo varṇaḥ / 6 / tau śvetam parimaṇḍalam carma vyāyacchetām / 7 / sūdraḥ pūrvaḥ / 8 / [...] sarveṣāṃ karmaṇi niṣṭhite tad [...] / 13 / avasṛjya sūdraḥ pradravet / 14 / tam tenaivāvakṣiṇuyāt / 15 /⁴⁶.

An *arya* (comm. *vaiśya*) should stand to the south of the *mārjāliya* [hut]⁴⁷, inside the sacrificial area, with his face to the south; a *sūdra* [should stand to the south of the *mārjāliya* hut] outside the sacrificial area, with his face to the north. Since there is no *arya*, anyone belonging to the category of *ārya* (comm. *brāhmaṇa* or *kṣatriya*) [may stand there]. They should both contest a hide, white and circular shaped. The *sūdra* is the first [to draw it away]. [...] Once the ritual action of all [the performers] has been completed, then, [...] the *sūdra*, having loosened [the hide], should run away. He (comm. *ārya*) should hit (comm. *hanyāt*) him (comm. *sūdra*) with that [hide] itself.

Such a development of the scholarly Brahmanical literature allows us to assume that the antithetical pair *ārya* and *sūdra* is the earlier reading than

45. Text after C. G. Kashikar 2003; my translation.

46. Text after H. G. Ranade 1998; my translation.

47. It is placed in the southern part of the sacrificial area: it is also on the edge between inside and outside the sacrificial area.

brāhmaṇa and *sūdra*. In actual fact, the agonistic scene of the mythical conquering of the sun is progressively dealt with in the same perspective as the dharmic system, dominated by the Brahmanical class. It seems that the proto-Vedic Indraic warrior deed and the supra-tribal overlordship of the Kuru hegemony eventually fade, persisting only as a backdrop. The liminal condition, fluctuant between life and death, order and chaos, challenging Otherness and Unknown, is definitively fixed as a simple ritualised scene performed within the marginalised space of the sacrificial area itself. It is normalised and institutionalised in order to legitimise the supremacy of the Brahmanical function. Furthermore, the mythical theme of the Indraic deed is transposed to the cosmological conflict between *devās* and *asuras*, which is traditionally employed as the aetiological motif for “logically” explaining ritual practices as founding acts of cosmic reality, and, conversely, for turning the cosmos into the authoritative principle of the ritual itself⁴⁸. It is the Brahmanical strategy of primacy insofar as Brahmins are specialists in ritual science: by making sacrificial oblation a rite founded on a cosmic myth, and, inversely, making the proto-Vedic Indraic deed establishing leadership a cosmic rite with sacrificial oblations meant becoming holder of cosmic leadership. Or better, the Kuru leadership, based on the acknowledgement of cosmic overlordship, is replaced by sacerdotal leadership, based on cosmic ritualism. Some traces of the previous royal primacy, even the remote warrior passage rite, may be identified through the linguistic phrases which echo them. For example, the term *bhrātr̥vya* conventionally translated as ‘rival’, is a kinship name: it must be an outcome of a secondary *u*-stem of *bhrātr̥* ‘brother’, combined with the genitival suffix **-ij̥o-*, so that it should designate ‘ascendant kinsman on the brother’s side’⁴⁹. It therefore conveys a conception of rivalry ascribable to a clan-based society, characterised by lineages, correlated with each other by means of hospitality links or even competitiveness. In this sense it is similar to the very well-known term *arī* ‘stranger’, with its double value of ‘rival’ and ‘guest / host’, according to Thieme’s analysis (1938). On the other hand, this terminology might also allude to the same warrior brotherhood to which the agonistic performance of conquering the sun also pertains: Indra himself is *bhrātr̥* in R̥V 3. 53. 5b; in other words, the competition for leadership can be fought only between peers, members of the

48. Cf. e.g. Patton 2005, 19-20.

49. As for such an etymological reconstruction, cf. Rau 2011 [2012], 14. In Old Iranian it means ‘brother’s son, nephew’, but in Vedic Sanskrit it means ‘cousin’, that is ‘father’s brother’s son’, because of a secondary semantic shift: cf. Benveniste, 1969, 259-266; *contra* Szemerényi 1977, 62-63.

same identity group. Moreover, partaking in *vr̥tya* sodality meant giving up, at least temporarily, the rules of the clan-community and adhering to a code of behaviour pertaining to an initiatic way of life other than the regular clan society. Therefore, despite his kinship, a *vr̥tya* represents Otherness, and conquering the sun means imitating the *vr̥tya* initiatic mechanism but turning it into a means of establishing cosmic rulership.

As regards the reference to the mythical conflict between *devas* and *asuras*, it is worth noticing that in the Indraic myth itself the term *valá* also refers to the enemy as a sort of demon which blocks cattle and hides sunlight. In this sense, the representation of the mythical cosmic dichotomy between *devas* and *asuras* appears, on the one hand, to develop the same motif of the enemy equated to a demoniacal being while, on the other, it reflects the same relationship between the Rigvedic antagonistic pair *ārya* and *dāsa* / *dāsyu*, especially combined with the same term *vár̥ṇa*. It is also worth recalling that in the Rigvedic textual layer the term *vár̥ṇa* means ‘outer appearance’, even ‘colour’ and that it has yet to imply any hierarchically structured social system. Neither is a racial value so predictable⁵⁰, even though the colour of the white skin of the *ārya* is counterposed to the black one (*kr̥ṣṇa*) of the enemies *dāsyu* / *dāsa*: this is a reference to the visible appearance of the daylight, that is the sunlight (R̥V 4. 5. 13d: *sūro vár̥ṇa* ‘visible appearance of sunlight’), which represents wellness and long life, counterposed to the dangerous darkness, invisible as such, equated to death. Thus, Rigvedic expressions such as *ārya-vár̥ṇa*- (R̥V 3. 34. 9) or *dāsa-vár̥ṇa*- (R̥V 2. 12. 4) mean the visible and auspicious ‘colour’ belonging respectively to the *ārya* and *dāsa* groups⁵¹. Therefore, the ritual contest that takes place between *ārya* and *sūdra* is in compliance with the same conception of sunlight / prosperity mirrored by the Indraic myth of the conquering of the sun and by the correlated model of Indraic clan-lordship. The term *ārya* employed in the Brahmanical textual *repertoire* may be interpreted as the *vṛddhi* derivative of the same term *ari* ‘stranger’ on which the proto-Vedic clan-based relationship of hospitality is based: in this case *ārya* means ‘related to the hospitable one’ and refers to practices of hospitality and sodality, thus implying dynamics of group inclusion and exclusion, also consistent with the liminal dynamics of passage rites. However, the same later term *ārya* may be the output of a form of *vṛddhi* morphological derivation of *árya*, - e.g. *árya* - which might be confused with the Rigvedic *ārya*: the variant *árya* results from a change

50. Hock 1999 vs. Parpola 1988.

51. Rigvedic *ārya* and *dāsa* are frequently mentioned in relation to the conquering of light (*ivyótiś*) and / or sun (i.e. R̥V 1. 130. 8; 2. 11. 18; 3. 34. 9; 7. 5. 6; 10. 43. 4).

of accent applied to the homonym term *aryá*, actually related to the PIE root **h₁ár-* ‘to fit, to comply with’, and not to *aryá* as derivative of the *i*-stem *arí* ‘stranger’⁵². Therefore, *árya* denotes one who is ‘appropriate’, in compliance with a taxonomic system of rules and semantically differentiated from *aryá*, ‘related to strangers, hospitable’. Such an accentual shifting and the correlated semantic overlapping may be attributed to the historical Kuru phase, since it is attested from the Atharvavedic collection onwards. Thus, in R̥V 1. 130. 8a-e, which is part of the analogous textual stage, the term *ārya* evokes both clan-based hospitality and links to sodality and the member of a regulated and institutionalised “ecumene” that is the cosmos, inasmuch as it relies on the observance of commandments (*vrata*) and sacrificial practice, thus precluding the dharmic order: *ārya* is both *yájamāna* ‘sacrificer’ and warrior, or a warrior sacrificer⁵³:

*índraḥ samátsu yájamānam āriyam / právad víśveṣu śatámūtir ājīṣu /
súvarmīlheṣu ājīṣu / mánave śásad avratān /
tvácam kṛṣṇām arandhayat / [...] // R̥V 1. 130. 8a-e //*

Indra aided the *ārya* sacrificer in battles, affording a hundred forms of help in all contests - in contests whose prize is the sun. Chastising those who follow no commandment, he made the black skin subject to Manu [...]. (Jamison–Breterton 2014, 299-300, slightly modified).

In this later Rigvedic passage the scene of contesting the sun in the *mahāvra*ta rite, as textualized in the later Brahmanical *repertoire*, somehow appears in between the lines. Similarly, the double role of sacrificer and warrior conqueror of enemies’ wealth of those who recognise the authority of overlords is suggested in this stanza from the *Kuntāpa* section (AVŚ 20. 128. 5 ≈ R̥VKh 5. 12. 5 ≈ ŚŚS 12. 20. 5)⁵⁴. The role of the supra-tribal overlord is explicitly equated to the sun, who is generous (*maghávan*) like Indra, and equivalent to the pastoral hero of Indo-European matrix, since the root *ví√rap*ś is a secondary derivative of the compound PIE

52. Cf. Dunkel 2014, 2. 288-293; 25. As for the very complex reconstruction, cf. also Pinault 1999–2000 [2001].

53. This image of ‘warrior-sacrificer’ might refer to the *sattra* context, or better, the later figure of patron-*gr̥hapati* (*yájamāna*), who must refund the priest-officiant, might be anticipated by the *sattrín* figure who is officiant and sacrificer at the same time, especially in relation to the *vrātya* context. Cf. Candotti–Pontillo 2015, and Harzer’s contribution in this volume.

54. As for the texts and the proposed emendations, cf. Kim 2021, 1165-1166; cf. also Scheftelowitz 1906, 157-158.

**uih_xro-pek-ó* ‘men and cattle’, thus denoting the protector of men and livestock, the ‘cowherd’ as such⁵⁵.

*yé ca devā áyajantátho yé ca parādadhúh /
sūryo dívam iva gatvāya maghāvā no ví rapśate // AVŚ 20. 128. 5 //*

By going to the sky like the sun, the bountiful one brims [with men and cattle]
for us, [who are the] gods who made sacrifices and who hand over [much]⁵⁶.

According to AiB 6. 32. 19, this stanza is the last of a mantric sequence of five stanzas which are to be recited on occasion of the ‘arrangements of the (five) cardinal quarters’ (*diśām kl̥pti*), that is one stanza for each cardinal quarter; four quarters are traverse (*prāñc* ‘in front-east’; *adharāñc* ‘below-south’; *apāñc* ‘behind-west’; *udāñc* ‘above-north’), but one is upwards (*ūrdhvā diś* ‘zenith’), that is it proceeds from the earth to heaven along the vertical axis⁵⁷. The motif of the cardinal quarters is associable with the royal consecration by which overlordship is definitely a sort of “solar-ship”: royal authority fills up the whole cosmos and covers everyone who belongs to it. This clearly refers to the two functions of the proto-Vedic clan-lordship: the priestly role, correlated to the sacrifice, and the role of ‘handing over’ (*pārā v̄dā*) and sharing the booty, especially cattle, conquered from the enemies, that is the warrior role *par excellence*⁵⁸. However, the solar sovereignty holds a higher rank than these two functions: the Indraic model of lordship is turned into a cosmic leadership. Therefore, in R̥V 1.81.2b Indra is not only one who gives away wealth, but above all *bhūri parādadhí*, that is he is ‘the one who hands over much, so giving away further the limits’: he is the supreme distributor of wealth, that is ‘men and cattle’, interacting hyperbolically with Elsewhere. In actual fact, it is worth noticing that the sphere of *pārā* ‘far away, further, over to the other side’ is introduced here. Etymologically speaking this is a

55. Cf. Vassilkov 2011, 214-220, and the related bibliography.

56. My translation.

57. In AiB 6. 32. 19: *pañca vā imā diśās, catasras tiraścyā ekordhvā /*. As for the five directions in relation to kingship, also in AVŚ 3. 4. 2.

58. As for the use of this root *pārā v̄dā* combined to the warrior role of conquering wealth from enemies and distributing it to the community, see for example R̥V 1.81.6: *yó aryó martabhójanam / parādādāti dāsúṣe / índro asmábhyam śikṣatu / ví bhajā bhūri te vásu / bhakṣīyá táva rādhasaḥ // 6 //* ‘He who hands over to the pious man the sustenance for mortals that belongs to the stranger (*ari*) — let Indra do his best for us. Share out your many goods: might I have a share of your generosity’ (Jamison–Brereton 2014, 209); in the same hymn (1. 81. 2b), also the expression *bhūri parādadhí* occurs.

petrified instrumental form (< PIE **pérh₂-chi*)⁵⁹, *pārā* related to *pāra* ‘further’, ‘on the other side of’ which, in the Rigvedic collection basically refers to the moving ‘here and afar’ (*ā ca pārā ca*), ‘going away’ (*pārā vi / √yā*), thus hinting at the mobility phase of the clan-based society: in R̥V 3. 53. 5a the ‘brother’ Indra is evoked so that he can go hither and yon with his chariot (*pārā yāhi maghavann ā ca yāhi*), between the somic oblation and the conquering of booty, also alluding to the rhythmical solar movement⁶⁰. On the other hand, in the later Rigvedic and post-Rigvedic texts *pārā* refers to the sphere of Elsewhere⁶¹, clearly seen in the expression *pārā √bhū* ‘to disappear’ employed in the Brahmanical passages concerning the *mahāvratā* rite with a negative value where it means «dying, destruction and getting lost».

Finally, in TB 1. 2. 6. 7 the expression *amúm evādityāṃ bhrātṛvyasya sāṃvindante* ‘they find that indeed, the sun of the rival’ refers to the earlier well-attested Rigvedic and Atharvavedic syntagm *svār √vid* ‘to find sun’, especially as the compound *svarvid-* ‘the finder of the sun’⁶², basically recalling the Vala-myth and the Indraic deed of conquering the sun⁶³. However, here it is replaced by *ādityāṃ saṃ √vid* ‘to find, to obtain the sun’. The term *ādityā* is employed as an equivalent for the sun only from the later Rigvedic textual layers onwards and refers exclusively to it only from the Atharvavedic attestations onwards⁶⁴. It is not etymologically ascribable to solar imagery, but to *āditi-*, lit. ‘boundlessness’ and denotes the complex relationship between authority and observance of the commandments, so that *ādityā* is the epithet attributable to the lord of the commandments (*vratā*) within a community, but their observance is based on mutual obligations between the lord and the members of the community itself⁶⁵. Such a relationship is at the basis of a wealthy existence: the assumption of royal authority on the one hand, and obedience to the royal commandments on the

59. Cf. Dunkel 2014, 609.

60. Cf. Bodewitz, 2019 [2000], 163-164.

61. Cf. Bodewitz, 2019 [2000], 164; especially in the derivative *parāvāt* it denotes yonder world, with a negative value: «as a prefix to verbs *pārā* means “away, off”⁶⁰; see e.g. *parā-i* and *parā-bhū*. These compounded verbs express dying, destruction and getting lost».

62. Cf. Scarlata 1999, 585; *svarvid-* ‘das Sonnenlicht findend, gewinnend’ is attested 30x in the *R̥gveda* and is very common in the Atharvavedic collection as well. Cf. fn. 5 also.

63. E.g. in R̥V 3. 51. 2cd Indra is defined as follows: *vājasānim pūrbhīdam tūrṇim aptūram / dhāmasācam abhiśācam suvarvidam //* ‘winning spoils, splitting strongholds, swift at crossing the waters, attending to the ordinances, attending closely, finding the sun’. (Jamison–Brereton 2014: 534).

64. Cf. Brereton 1981, 314.

65. As for such a complex relationship, cf. Brereton 1981.

other guarantee prosperity for the community. In this sense, *ādityá* is not just the sun, as the cosmic light which rules the world, but represents a sort of identity principle, embodying a common ideal of right behaviour and a close connection between the authority of overlordship, clan-community and the natural world. *Ādityá* embodies the pact between the clan-lord, his clan companions and natural phenomena, and *ārya* becomes whosoever obeying the commandments behaves in compliance with them: *ādityá* and *ārya* represent the cosmos and are the core of the new paradigm of sovereignty⁶⁶. In actual fact, in the *mahāvrata* Brahmanical version one linguistic datum constantly appears, that is the *asurā*s are associated with the expression *pārā* *√bhū*, literally meaning that, once defeated, they are relegated to the sphere of *pārā*, in the distance, the sphere of Elsewhere. This means that the cosmic order is definitely established: the antagonist of the *ārya*, that is the *sūdra*, is definitely excluded from the ritual space which coincides with the royal cosmos as such; only the *ārya* can be the sacrificer and as such support sovereignty as “solar-ship”. In fact, the figure of the *sūdra* is definitely reduced to a subordinate and marginalised category.

5. Conclusions

The Vedic *mahāvrata* rite has been explored here in light of the notion of liminality as devised by A. van Gannep and his successor V. Turner, that is, with reference to the ritualisation of experiences which mark transitory situations, such as the rites of passage. As attested in the Brahmanical sources, the *mahāvrata* rite, with its non-standard elements and especially with the performance of a contest between an *ārya* and a *sūdra* to win a bull’s hide equated to the sun, may actually provide not only some traces of the Kuru paradigm of sovereignty, which was at the basis of the Kuru hegemony, but also those of a pre-Kuru passage rite, ascribable to the *vrātya milieu*. Despite the *śrauta* reform applied by the dominant priestly category during the Late Vedic period, the liminal condition as a characteristic trait of the earlier warrior initiation practices, on which the Kuru paradigm of sovereignty also depends, is trackable especially through linguistic hints. However, the Brahmanical process of ritualisation has turned the fluctuant transitional liminal condition of warriorship and kingship into a sort of frozen liminality, that is the social roles of warriors, ruler and priests are definitely fixed in the hierarchical

66. In actual fact *ādityá* is the epithet of Aryaman, Varuṇa and Mitra, the guardians of the right behaviour (Brereton 1981).

social system, precluding the dharmic caste system. And the *vr̥tya* liminality, with its initiation practices, is definitively excluded from the cosmos, marginalised like the *śūdra* condition.

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The present volume is a collection of 16 papers presented at the International Seminar 'Liminal Spaces, and Identity Transformations in Indian Cultural History' in Milan, in September 2019, when we were on the brink of a historical change unknowingly. And afterwards, during the pandemic experience, exploring liminality, as category of reality applied to Indian culture and especially to art and literature, appeared to be a means to cope with an emergency the likes of which had never been seen before. Obviously, this work does not aspire to be exhaustive, nonetheless, the heterogeneity of the contributions offers a multifaceted perspective: in actual fact, since liminality implies potentially myriads of interpretations, it appears to provide us with one of the main keys to addressing the entanglement of reality, especially the complexity of the Indian civilization, past and present. The focus is particularly on the literary and artistic aspects of such an extraordinary cultural heritage, from the Vedic period up to modernity; literature and arts are the lens through which variegated anthropological issues, crossing different historical phases, are investigated: firstly, the ritual question, in compliance with van Gennep and Turner's approach, but also religious experiences, sovereignty and violence, dialectics of identity, social dynamics, gender identity, etc. Literature and arts, but still by means of their own aesthetic devices, mirror critical points characterising such issues, as if poetry and artwork, zooming in on specific transition elements, were themselves on the threshold of manifold layers of reality, able to pass through their interstitial discontinuities. Finally, it is a great honour to dedicate such a volume to the memory of Professor Alexander Dubyanskiy (1941-2020), eminent scholar in Indian literature, especially in Tamil poetry, who experienced multiple aspects of liminality both of the South Asian culture and life.

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