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INTERPRETING VEDIC MYTH:
THE STORY OF INDRA AND KUTSA*

1. *Method and model of interpretation*

When interpreting Vedic myth, we are, as we all are aware, hampered by the limits of understanding that are due to the distance in time and cultural conditions separating us from ancient India. The myths of the *Rgveda*, often barely alluded to, normally have no unequivocal meaning, which means that, when interpreting them, we have to follow our preconceived ideas about what the Vedic seers are likely to talk about. We apply one or another model of interpretation, preferring either a ritualistic or a cosmogonical or a sociological or any other model. Or we assume – and this is perhaps the most sensible choice we can make – that the texts try to communicate different meanings on different levels at the same time. I think it is legitimate to apply any of the afore-mentioned models as long as we are aware of their limitations and as long as we do not claim that our interpretation contains the whole truth.

In this paper I am going to apply a model of interpretation that has been abandoned by the majority of scholars in the first part of this

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century, namely the specific kind of allegorical interpretation which assumes that Vedic myths in many cases refer to certain phenomena of nature. The reason why I still believe in the applicability of this model, is my experience with the *Mahābhārata*, where the main structure of the epic may – as far as I can see – easily be explained on the basis of a year myth and of the identification of the main heroes with aspects of the sun and the moon and other phenomena of nature¹. Of course, it would be preposterous to claim that this interpretation of the *Mahābhārata* is the final and only clue to the meaning of the epic – it has long been shown that there is far more than one single meaning in a text of this size and complexity and with such an extensive historical development². The only point one can argue for is the capability of an interpretation based on the model of mythology of nature to explain details of the structure that apparently cannot be explained otherwise.

2. Indra as a moon god

As far as the *Mahābhārata* is concerned, I believe that the two cousins Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, “the White one” and “the Black one”, originally represented the white and the black aspect of the moon³, and as Arjuna is said to be not only the son, but also a partial incarnation (*aṃśāvatarāṇa*) of Indra, it seems worthwhile to ask whether the Vedic god Indra, too, might have a lunar background⁴. Well, I am the last one to deny the difficulties connected with such a hypothesis. The

1. G.V. SIMSON, “The mythic background of the Mahābhārata”, in IT 12 (1984), pp.191-223; - ID., “Die zeitmythische Struktur des Mahābhārata”, in R. STERNEMANN (ed.), *Bopp-Symposium 1992 der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin*, Heidelberg, 1994, pp. 230-247.

2. Cf. V.S. SUKTHANKAR, *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata*, Bombay, 1957.

3. V. SIMSON, “The mythic background ...” (see note 1), p.197.

4. V. SIMSON, “The mythic background ...” (see note 1), 202 f.; as for the lunar character of Indra in the later Vedic period see id., “Remarks on the Suparṇa/Garuḍa myth (later Vedic period)”, in IT 15-16 (1989-90), pp.353-360, here pp. 354 f., and ID., “Gaṇeśa and Vṛitra”, in H.S. PRASAD (ed.), *Philosophy, Grammar and Indology. Essays in Honour of Professor Gustav Roth*, Delhi, 1992, pp. 339-350, here p. 342 f.

Brāhmaṇas insist on identifying Indra with the sun (because the sun drinks the moon, and Indra drinks *soma*, and *soma* is by now the moon), and even among those scholars who recognized phenomena of nature in Vedic myths, there was a strong inclination to interpret Indra as an ancient sun-god⁵. Whichever naturalistic background we assume, we have to admit that a great god like Indra inevitably transcends this background and that it, therefore, always will be possible to quote passages that obviously do not fit into the pattern. Nevertheless, I feel that there is much more evidence for Indra's original lunar nature than for any other hypothesis. Characteristical for a moon-god seem to be the frequent references to his birth (whereas his periodical death could not be mentioned because of its inauspiciousness), his rapid growth and his changing appearance in general. Indra has a right side and a left side⁶, which would be much more typical for the moon than for the sun. Indra hits the demon Arbuda with ice or snow⁷, which could be considered as a peripheral feature if there would not exist the expression "Indra's fire" = "ice, snow" even in Prakrit: *īmdaggi*, cf. Sanskrit *indrāgni-dhūma*, "frost, snow"⁸. The moon is in Sanskrit called *śītāṃśu*, "he whose rays are cold", and so is Indra in later religion the god who is most opposed to *tapas* "heat, asceticism", one of the reasons why he could not ascend to the highest status in Hinduism. This opposition to *tapas*, which would be quite unexplainable for a sun-god, means more than the release of the waters by Indra and his later function as a god of the rainy period do, because both sun and moon can be imagined as weather-gods, and even if the sun is closely related to fire and the moon to water, the sun can be thought of as releasing the waters, e.g. in spring and early summer, when the melting waters come down from the mountains. But if Geldner is right with his interpretation of R̥V 2.15.6 "er liess durch

5. Cf., e.g., A. HILLEBRANDT, *Vedische Mythologie*, III. Breslau, 1902, pp. 195 ff.; J.J. MEYER, "Indra. Der altindische Gott der Frühlingssonne und der Fruchtbarkeit und sein Fest", in *Trilogie altindischer Mächte und Feste der Vegetation*, III, Zürich/Leipzig, 1937.

6. R̥V 8.4.8; cf. 8.33.5: his left hand and his right hand, which again reminds of Arjuna's epithet *savyasācin*, "ambidexterous".

7. R̥V 8.32.26.

8. Hārāvālī according to BÖHTLINGK/ROTH, Sanskrit-Wörterbuch.

seine Macht den Sindhu nordwärts fließen” (“by his power he made the Sindhu [= Indus?] flow northward”, *sódañcam sindhum ariṇān mahitvā*), then this passage could be understood as the description of the effect of the moon on the estuary of the Indus. Another lunar feature of Indra’s seems to be his special association with the night. It must be admitted though that ṚV-3.49.4, where Indra is called “the illuminator of the nights, the begetter of the sun” (*kṣapām vastā janitā sūryasya*) is ambiguous as the meaning could be either that he illuminates the nights directly (as moon) or indirectly by creating the sun (as the god of creation). But some Brāhmaṇa passages make it quite clear that the night belongs to Indra, when he alone has to fight the Asuras, the other gods being afraid of night and darkness⁹.

3. Indra and Kutsa in the Ṛgveda

But as far as I can see, it is particularly Indra’s relation with the sun in the *Ṛgveda* that supports the moon hypothesis. Indra here not only creates the sun – this could be interpreted as one of his functions as creator god – but he also appears in visible form by the side of the sun¹⁰ and, even more, sometimes comes into conflict with the sun or seems to be engaged in a kind of chariot race with the latter¹¹. In this connection Kutsa comes into the picture, a hero who participates in Indra’s fight against Śuṣṇa. This Śuṣṇa might be a demon of summer heat and drought, and the story would then be a calendar myth pointing to the summer solstice when the wheel of the sun comes to a standstill before it starts sinking. Kutsa acts as Indra’s charioteer¹² and can thus be compared with Arjuna’s charioteer Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata*. In the epic, too, there is a scene which can be connec-

9. Ait.Br. 4.5.1 f., in connection with the Atirātra rite; cf. H. FALK, “Soma I and II”, in BSOAS 52 (1989), pp.77-90, here p. 81 f.

10. RV 4.16.14.

11. RV 1.130.9; 1.174.5; 1.175.4; 4.16.12; 4.28.2; 4.30.4; 5.29.10; 5.31.11; 5.33.4; 6.31.3; 8.50.8; see E. SIEG, “Sonnenrennen im Ṛgveda”, in NGGW, Phil.-hist. Kl., 1928, pp. 195-213 (reprinted in K.S., ed. K.L. JANERT, Stuttgart, 1991, pp. 394-412).

12. ṚV 2.19.6; 6.20.5.

ted with the summer solstice or the period immediately following it: the final duel between Arjuna and Karṇa, the son and representative of the sun. Here the sinking of the wheel of the sun is indicated by the sinking into the earth of one of the wheels of Karṇa's chariot¹³.

Now, if we suppose that the conflict between Indra and his friend and charioteer Kutsa on the one hand and the sun and Śuṣṇa on the other is based on a conflict between sun and moon, we might be able to explain some peculiar features connected with Kutsa in his relation with Indra. Indra is best known as the god of the warriors, a fighting god, the prototype of the dragon-killers. In terms of lunar mythology, he then represents the waxing moon who sets out to fight the powers of darkness. But he has also another side, the one that symbolizes the waning moon. After having vanquished Vṛtra, Indra suddenly loses his courage, he withdraws and hides himself¹⁴. But there is also another aspect of the waning moon. As the *Sūryāsūkta* of the *Rgveda* (10.85) shows, sun and moon can be considered as a divine couple. In this case, the waning moon approaching the sun can be imagined as the male approaching the female, and the scene can get an erotic meaning. Such a situation is intimated when Indra is called on to go home and visit his wife, as in RV 3.53.4:

jāyéd āstam maghavan séd u yónis tād ít tvā hárayo vahantu "the wife is the home, you generous one, and she is the womb; let the yoked tawny horses carry you thither".

That is the place "where the large chariot is garaged and the prize-winning ass is unyoked" (*yátrā ráthasya bṛható nidhānaṃ vimócanaṃ vājíno rāsabhasya*), as the next verse says. The chariot of the moon is here drawn by an ass, in contrast to the horses that draw the chariot of the sun. All this explains why some of the passages of the *Rgveda* where Indra and Kutsa fight Śuṣṇa or are attacking the sun, are in the neighbourhood of a sexual imagery: Indra approaching the sun could easily evoke association with Indra, the god of sexua-

13. Mbh. 8.28.

14. v. SIMSON, "Gaṇeśa and Vṛtra", (see note 4), pp. 342 f.

lity. An example is RV 4.16. Indra's fight against Śuṣṇa is mentioned in vs.12, but the scene is introduced in vs.10 by a rather strange looking request to Indra:

*ā dasyughnā mānasā yāhy ástam bhúvat te kútsaḥ sakhyé níkāmaḥ |
své yónau ní-ṣadatanī-sárūpā ví-vāṃ cikitsad ṛtactíd-dha nārī ||*

“With your mind directed to the killing of the demon go home; let Kutsa desire your friendship. Sit down, both having the same appearance, on your own womb. She might be in doubt about you, the woman who certainly knows the right order”.

Thus Indra, when approaching his home and his wife, changes his appearance so that he looks exactly like Kutsa, or, in lunar terminology: the bright moon, when approaching the sun, changes his appearance and becomes like the black moon (which is conceived as a separate entity). These sexual associations explain why Indra in RV 10.38.5 is imagined as being bound by his testicles when he is together with Kutsa (see below).

4. *Kutsa in the Brāhmaṇas*

This short allusion is in some Brāhmaṇas extended to a little story¹⁵. The seer of this hymn (10.38), Luśa, is here depicted as vying with Kutsa about Indra's favour. Kutsa is the seer of several other hymns of the RV, but it seems that his personality more or less blends together with the mythical Kutsa, Indra's protégé and charioteer. The most extensive and interesting version of the story is found in the *Jaiminīya-Brāhmaṇa* (1.228). I quote Oertel's translation¹⁶:

Kutsa and Luśa called in rivalry upon Indra. He came to Kutsa's offering. He (K.) bound him (I.) with a hundred straps by the scrotum.

15. See Sāyaṇa ad RV 10.38.5.

16. H. OERTEL, “Contributions from the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* to the history of the Brāhmaṇa literature. First series”, in JAOS 18 (1897), pp. 15-48, here p. 33 (reprinted in K.S., ed. H. HETTRICH and T. OBERLIES, Stuttgart 1994, pp. 28-61).

Luśa addressed him (I.): «I have heard of thee, o Indra, as one who himself catches, holding thine own, o bull, urging the miserly; free thyself from Kutsa; come hither; why should one like thyself remain bound by the scrotum? (RV X.38.5)». He, having torn them all, ran toward Luśa. Kutsa called after him: «O Indra, in the pressed somas (SV. I.381)». He (I.) turned back to him (K.). Luśa [addressed] him: «*Indrā hoyi have hoyi*». He (I.) stood between the two. He said to them both: «Take a part; of one of you I will drink with the self, of the other with greatness». «Yes». They both took a part; one obtained the self, the other the greatness. Kutsa obtained the self, Luśa the greatness. With the self he drank of one, with greatness of the other. With the self he drank of Kutsa, with greatness of Luśa. Verily these are his two selves, viz. the self and greatness. ...

The story reflects well, I think, Indra's lunar character. Like the moon vacillating between two poles, fullmoon and newmoon, so Indra vacillates here between Luśa and Kutsa, who are associated with *mahiman*, greatness, and *ātman*, the two selves of Indra. Luśa symbolizes his greatness. Maybe, his name is meant to give us a hint: it seems to be the same as "*ruśa*" and thus related to "*ruśat*", "white", pointing to the white moon. Kutsa, on the other hand, has as Indra's companion the patronym *Ārjuneya*, "the son of Arjuna (i. e. the white one)" and his name seems in one way or the other indicate the rather dubious nature of the black phase of the moon. If we follow W. Wüst's suggestion¹⁷, its first part could be regarded as a contamination of "*ku*" and "*kad*", so that the name may mean something like "what kind of fellow is this one?". And whereas Luśa's *mahiman*, "greatness", is a kind of second *ātman* of Indra (we remember Indra often to be called "*mahendra*" in the Brāhmaṇas), Kutsa's *ātman* seems to represent his real self. Returning home to his wife, approaching the sun, Indra loses his greatness, but finds his true *ātman*¹⁸,

17. See M. MAYRHOFER, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindoarischen*, I, Heidelberg, 1992, p. 365.

18. The localisation of his *ātman* in the sun may be one additional reason why Indra in the late Vedic period eventually was identified with the sun.

his true self in the shape of his own son. Because on the level of human relationship, this is the meaning of *ātman* here: the son is a kind of replica of the father, and when Kutsa in the first story chose Indra's *ātman*, the effect was that he became his son¹⁹. But it is obvious that the storyteller intends a play with different meanings of *ātman* here. If the father-son relationship had been the sole issue here, the use of the term *ātman* would not have been necessary at all. It would be futile though to speculate on any further meanings of *ātman* in this context as long as no other hint is given than the opposition between *ātman*, "self", and *māhiman*, "greatness".

The waning moon, the moon approaching the sun, was imagined as being driven by sexual desire. This is indirectly confirmed by a passage in the *Taittirīya-Brāhmaṇa* (3.1.1), where all the days and nights of the month are given individual names. Whereas the names of the last five **days** of the second half of the month (*aparapakṣa*), when the moon is approaching the sun, point to dawn, the sun, sun-rays and heat (Aruṇam, Bhānumat, Marīcimat, Abhitapat and Tapasvat), four of the five names of the corresponding **nights** refer to *kāma*, desire: Kāntā, Kāmāyā, Kāmajātā, (Āyusmatī) and Kāmadughā.

It is no wonder, then, that Kutsa, who apparently belongs to that last period of the waning moon, was associated with sexual activity. The *Jaiminīya-Brāhmaṇa* (3.199-202) illustrates this in the story of Kutsa Aurava ("K., born of [Indra's] thigh")²⁰. This Kutsa, too, is appointed by Indra as his charioteer²¹. He manages to seduce Indra's wife, Śacī Paulomī, because – in the same way as in ṚV 4.16.10 (see above) – he has the same appearance as Indra, and Śacī is unable to distinguish the two men. Thereupon, to make him distinguishable, Indra makes Kutsa bald-headed (*khalati*). But Kutsa winds himself a turban (*uṣṇīṣa*) round his head and sleeps once again with Śacī. Now,

19. Cf. *Jaim. Br.* 3.199: *yādṛśa evendras tādrśa, yathātmano nirmīta syād evam*, "Just as Indra was, so was he, precisely as one would be who is made out of his own self". I quote the translation of W.D. O'FLAHERTY, *Tales of sex and violence. Folklore, sacrifice, and danger in the Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa*, Chicago, 1985, p.75.

20. Cf. O'FLAHERTY, *op. cit.*, pp. 75 f.

21. *saṅgrahīṭṭi*: this term may also have a lunar connotation as "he who draws together [the moon]".

the bald-headedness is precisely what we would expect from a representative of the black moon, the moon that has lost all its rays of light or, metaphorically, his hair. Indra's next step to make Kutsa distinguishable, is to cover him with dust (*pāṃsu*, pl.) between his shoulders. This feature, too, may be taken as a cue to the dark moon whose brightness is covered with dust as it were. Finally, Indra chases Kutsa away and makes him a Malla²². Now, *malla* means wrestler, boxer, i.e. a person who is specialized on close combat. Here too, we may detect an allusion to the black moon: whereas sun and bright moon send their rays of light over large distances and can, therefore, be compared with arrow-shooting archers, the dark-moon is rather seen as a wrestler who struggles with the sun in hand-to-hand fighting. Here again, Kutsa appears as a forerunner of Kṛṣṇa, the representative of the black moon in the *Mahābhārata*. Kṛṣṇa, too, is depicted as a *malla*, when he in his early years defeats and kills the two wrestlers at Kaṃsa's court, Cāṇura and Muṣṭika²³. For this reason, Kṛṣṇa is called *mallāri*, "enemy of the wrestlers", which, however, does not prevent the Mōḍha brahmins who are addicted to this sport, to worship Kṛṣṇa as their wrestler hero²⁴.

All this evidence must not, however, induce us to draw the conclusion that the Kutsa story was meant to teach people astronomy. According to O'Flaherty, the stories of the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* reflect man's (conscious or subconscious) fears in a similar way as our dreams do²⁵. The Kutsa story is placed by her under the heading "The Fear of the Father", and we are not surprised to find in her list of Tale Types and Motifs²⁶ a reference to the Oedipus motive. If we are looking for the deeper meaning behind the story, we will no doubt end up with concepts belonging to the sphere of ultimate human concern. But her interpretation, as legitimate as it might be, cannot account for

22. Cf. W.B. BOLLÉE, "The Indo-European Sodalities in Ancient India", in ZDMG 131 (1981), pp. 172-191, here p. 178; H. FALK, *Bruderschaft und Würfelspiel. Untersuchungen zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des vedischen Opfers*, Freiburg, 1986, pp. 20 and 30.

23. Harivaṃśa 2.30.

24. BOLLÉE, *op. cit.* (see note 22), p. 183.

25. O'FLAHERTY, *op. cit.* (see note 19), p. 18.

26. O'FLAHERTY, *op. cit.*, pp. 127 ff.

all the details as, to mention some of them, Kutsa's role as Indra's charioteer, his baldheadedness, and his transformation into a wrestler. These can be explained, as I hope to have demonstrated, by referring to the underlying new-moon myth. The celestial phenomena alluded to are not the message which the Vedic texts try to convey; they are rather to be considered as a sort of catalysts that stimulated the creative phantasy of the Vedic authors and provided them with both the details and the necessary structure of their stories.