

## THE MYTHIC BACKGROUND OF THE MAHABHARATA

### I. Introductory Remarks

Even if we admit that the Mahābhārata (Mbh)<sup>1</sup> has some sort of historical background — historical peoples and place names as well as social, cultural and religious conditions are mentioned in the epic — it would be of little use to interpret the events we are told of as historical: the incidents leading to the conflict between Kurus and Pāṇḍavas, the great battle itself as well as its consequences are not described in terms of political history, but, as in all heroic poetry, in terms of personal fate and achievements. Since the question of the meaning of the Mbh battle for the history of India as well as that of its date thus can be answered only by vague conjectures, it is not surprising that in the last few decades alternative approaches, based on mythological concepts, have gained increasing weight<sup>2</sup>. The question seems only to be what kind of mythical models should be applied, and on this point there are widely differing views.

It was soon after World War II that S. Wikander presented his study «*Pāṇḍava-sagan och Mahābhāratas mytiska förutsättningar*»<sup>3</sup>, translated into French and published with additional remarks by G. Dumézil<sup>4</sup>. Wikander gave an analysis of the five Pāṇḍavas in the terms of Dumézil's trifunctional theory: Yudhiṣṭhira, the eldest, represented the first function of the priest king, Bhīma and Arjuna two aspects of the second, the warrior function, and the youngest Pāṇḍavas, the twins

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1. All references to the Critical Edition, Poona, 1927-66.

2. On the relation between myth and epic in general, see A. HILTEBEITEL, *The Ritual of Battle. Krishna in the Mahābhārata*, Ithaca, 1976, chapter 1.

3. «*Religion och Bibel*», 6 (1947), pp. 27-39.

4. *Jupiter Mars Quirinus*, 4, Paris, 1948, pp. 37-85.

Nakula and Sahadeva, the third function connected with agriculture, fertility, etc. Moreover, Wikander found a striking resemblance between the Pāṇḍavas and Vedic gods, thereby showing that the concept of the Mbh authors, who represented the Pāṇḍavas as sons and incarnations of the gods, was more than just a fanciful and late idea. According to Wikander, the transformation of gods into heroes must have taken place very early, as the character of Bhīma seems to resemble more the pre-Vedic, Indo-Iranian form of the wind god than the Vedic Vāyu.

The theory of a conscious transformation of Vedic gods into epic heroes was further developed by Dumézil in his voluminous study on the Mbh<sup>5</sup>. Interesting as the connections between epic heroes and Vedic gods may be, the book shows clearly that the trifunctional theory, the very core of Dumézil's approach, does not bear as far as its author originally may have believed; it may be suited to put into relief the character of some epic personages, but not to interpret the structure of the epic story. Moreover, and this was pointed out by F. B. J. Kuiper<sup>6</sup>, Dumézil's interpretation does not do justice to the fundamental dualism appearing in the opposition of the main parties, the five Pāṇḍavas and the hundred Kauravas with their respective followers. Kuiper, Sukthankar<sup>7</sup> and others were in my opinion right, when they saw in this opposition a reflection of the late Vedic Deva-Asura dualism. Mention may also be made in this connection of G. J. Held<sup>8</sup>, who by interpreting the Mbh in terms of a dualistic clan system contributed, as it were, an ethnological variant to the mythical interpretation of the epic.

A rather undogmatic Mbh interpretation on mythological lines, partly making use of Dumézil's categories, was presented some years ago by A. Hildebrandt<sup>9</sup>. Among its results may be mentioned a convincing comparison between the death of Abhimanyu, an episode of the Mbh battle, with the Scandinavian myth of the death of Baldr. I shall come back to this point later.

A climax in the mythological interpretation of the Mbh seems to have been reached with the recent studies of M. Biarreau<sup>10</sup>, whose approach, a sort of counter-model to Dumézil's past oriented interpretation, is based on the consistent use of concepts of classical Hinduism and entails a very detailed mythological interpretation of all major characters and events of the epic, including even etymological explanations of geographical and personal proper names. The central idea is

5. *Mythe et épopée*, I, Paris, 1968, pp. 31-257.

6. « Numen », 8 (1961), pp. 34-45.

7. *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata*, Bombay, 1957, p. 92 f.

8. G. J. HELD, *The Mahābhārata. An Ethnological Study*, London, 1935.

9. See note 2.

10. Particularly: *Études de mythologie hindoue*, I-V, in « Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient (BEFEO) », 54 (1968), pp. 19-45; 55 (1969), pp. 59-105; 58 (1971), pp. 17-89; 63 (1976), pp. 111-262; 65 (1978), pp. 87-238.



the concept of crisis between two *yugas*, the *pralaya*, a world destruction effected by the concerted action of the destroyer Śiva and of Viṣṇu, the god of *Bhakti* and *yoga*, who after the cosmic crisis that is accompanied by a collapse of *dharma*, restores a new order.

In spite of the strong suggestiveness of Biardeau's approach, the exclusive interpretation from the point of view of Hinduism raises serious problems concerning the history of the text. It is not by chance that Biardeau flatly denies the value of the critical Poona edition of the Mbh, because many of the additions banished by this edition into the critical apparatus or the appendix can be used by her as a confirmation of her conceptions. I must frankly say that I do not believe that the Mbh can be interpreted exclusively as a document of classical Hinduism. In my opinion, the findings of Wikander and the many additional connections established by Dumézil between epic heroes and Vedic gods, between epic events and various Indo-European, particularly Scandinavian, traditions, to which should be added, as I am going to show in this article, Greek parallels, suggest that the Mbh has a long history.

In order to make this hypothesis more plausible, I have to fall back upon an approach that to most scholars of today will seem to be out-dated, i.e. that of mythology of nature. I cannot give here a theoretical foundation for this approach, but shall only show that it yields results that perhaps are worth consideration. Only one or two remarks beforehand: the established fact that gods were identified with astral phenomena in several religions, e.g. the Babylonian, the old South-Arabian, and the Precolumbian religions of America, justifies in my opinion the question, whether the Indian, Greek and other Indo-European religions may not also have passed a stage, when sun, moon and stars were identified with gods. The facts that in the Brāhmaṇas Indra could be identified with the sun and Vṛtra with the moon, and that in classical Hinduism Brhaspati is regarded at the same time as a god and as the planet Jupiter, suggest the *a fortiori* conclusion that similar connection may have existed as well at a more archaic stage of religion as reflected in the R̥gveda, where several obvious powers of nature are present as gods, as e.g. Agni, Soma, Sūrya, Uṣas, Vāyu and Parjanya.

Even such a sober scholar as H. Oldenberg<sup>11</sup>, not to speak of A. Hillebrandt<sup>12</sup> and others, could not resist the temptation to connect Mitra with the sun and Varuṇa with the moon, and it was likewise Oldenberg<sup>13</sup> who interpreted the Adityas as planets connecting them with Zarathushtra's Amesha Spentas.

The reason why all these attempts seem to have failed is, as far as I can see, partly that they have not been carried through systematically enough, partly that neither the role of the planets nor that of the dif-

11. *Die Religion des Veda*, Stuttgart, 1917<sup>2</sup>, p. 188 ff.

12. *Vedische Mythologie*, III, Breslau, 1902, p. 57.

13. *Varuṇa und die Adityas*, in ZDMG, 50 (1896), pp. 43-68.

ferent aspects of sun and moon have been properly recognized. The very important aspect of the dark moon was, it is true, recognized by E. Siecke<sup>14</sup>, who, however, as an outsider and because of the extreme one-sidedness of his lunar mythology, was not taken seriously by most scholars.

Another reason why natural mythology has come into discredit seems to have been that it was understood, justly or unjustly, as an attempt to eliminate the richness and meaningfulness of the ancient religions and their mythology. Of course, the discovery of the connection between a given god and e.g. the moon could and can by a person stamped by the peculiar form of enlightenment typical of the 19th and 20th century easily be conceived as a sort of unmasking: « the god is in reality *nothing but* the moon (and the ancients must have been rather foolish, if they mistook a dead stone for a god) ». The possible meaning lying beyond the identification of celestial phenomena with gods cannot be discussed here at length; that the discovery of these connections, however, by no means implies a reduction of meaning will, as I hope, become clear in the course of this article.

I am fully aware of the fact that many of the topics I am going to mention only in passing deserve a full study of their own and that I do not do justice here to the huge mass of secondary literature already devoted to them. The aim of this article, however, is only to present in outline a complex hypothesis, whose further elaboration has to be deferred to a later date.

I am likewise conscious of the many pitfalls of finding out hidden meanings and of comparing mythology. It is difficult to weigh similarity; parallels that seem striking to one person may seem far-fetched to another, and the comparison between two sets of data, in the given case between a set of astral entities with a set of Mbh heroes and a set of Vedic gods, creates a logic of its own (Systemzwang) that may lead to identifications unjustified by the facts. I do not believe that there is any secure method to avoid these pitfalls; my only hope is that if I err, my error may be as stimulating for further research as e.g. the errors of the Mbh experts Holtzmann (junior) and Dahlmann turned out to be.

## II. *Natural Phenomena as Background of the Mbh*

To begin with, mention should be made of one of the early interpreters of the Mbh on a mythological basis: A. Ludwig, who in 1895

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14. Cf. E. SIECKE, *Drachenkämpfe. Untersuchungen zur indogermanischen Sagenkunde*, Leipzig, 1907, and other books by the same author, where the black moon is mentioned frequently.

published his essay « *Über die mythische Grundlage des Mahābhārata* »<sup>15</sup>, where he suggested that the conflict described in the Mbh reflects a year myth. Unfortunately, his identifications of the main heroes — he took e.g. the 5 Pāṇḍavas as representatives of the 5 seasons and Kṛṣṇa as the sun in spring — are rather fanciful and do not in any way contribute to a deeper understanding of the details of the Mbh structure. Nevertheless, I believe that his basic idea was correct and that the Mbh, at least as far as the great battle is concerned, indeed reflects a year myth.

The battle, i.e. Mbh VI-IX (or X, if we include the Sauptikaparvan), seems to be the very centre of the epic, since the first books (I-V) can be interpreted as building up the tension that finally leads to its eruption. Now, the battle is by the authors of the epic compared with a sacrifice<sup>16</sup>, and this reminds of the symbolical connection of year and sacrifice in the Brāhmaṇas<sup>17</sup>. Another hint into the same direction gives the number 18: the Mbh battle lasts 18 days, and it is the Brāhmaṇas<sup>18</sup> again where the year can be expressed by the number 18.

The year is determined by the course of the sun. In the Mbh, the sun is apparently represented by Karna, the eldest son of Kuntī engendered by Sūrya. But Karna does not participate in the whole battle; he is represented as the jealous rival of the old Bhīṣma, the grandfather, as he is called. Karna enters the stage only after Bhīṣma has fallen. This seems to suggest that Karna does not represent the total sun, but only one of its aspects: the sun of the Uttarāyaṇa or rather the summer sun, and that Bhīṣma means the complementary aspect, the sun of the Dakṣiṇāyaṇa or perhaps only the sun approaching the winter solstice. The first ten days of the battle, described in the sixth book (Bhīṣmaparvan), would then mean the last period of the old year governed by the old and wise hero Bhīṣma. In fact, the death of Bhīṣma is by the poets explicitly connected with the beginning of the Uttarāyaṇa<sup>19</sup>, and there is additional evidence that seems to confirm this interpretation: one of the epithets of Bhīṣma<sup>20</sup> is *mahāvrata*, a term that also designates the Vedic winter solstice ceremony<sup>21</sup>. When Bhīṣma falls, he does not touch the earth but lies on the arrows that are sticking in his body. This seems to point to the position of the sun in the time of winter solstice close to but not touching the earth.

15. « Sitzungsber. d. Kgl. Böhm. Ges. d. Wiss. », 1895, nr. IX.

16. An extensive comparison between war and sacrifice is given in Mbh V.139.29-51.

17. E.g. ŚBr. XI.2.7.1 *saṃvatsaro yajñah*.

18. ŚBr. VIII.4.1.28 *aṣṭādaśo vai saṃvatsaro dvādaśa māsāḥ pañca 'rtavaḥ*. Cf. *ibid.*, 4.1.13.

19. Mbh VI.114.89, 97; XIII.152.10; 153.6.

20. S. SÖRENSEN, *An Index to the Names in the Mahabharata*, Delhi, 1963, p. 139.

21. Cf. P. ROLLAND, *Le mahāvrata*, in « Nachrichten d. Ak. d. Wiss. in Göttingen », 1973, nr. 3, p. 58 ff.

After Bhīṣma's fall Karna enters the stage, but it is not him but Droṇa who now becomes commander-in-chief of the Kaurava army. Droṇa whose significance I have to deal with later, keeps his central position for the next five days of the battle, covering the period from winter solstice to a point of the year some time after the summer solstice, if I am not mistaken. Only then Karna is installed as generalissimo. The structure of the battle thereby appears not to be symmetrical, as Karna's death apparently is not situated in the summer solstice opposite Bhīṣma's fall but in the end of summer or in autumn. The sinking sun seems to be indicated by the sinking of the wheel of Karna's chariot into the earth. The boastful and, at the same time, generous character of Karna corresponds, by the way, very well to the aspect of the sun in its fullest power.

The next question will be, who is the representative of the moon in the Mbh. Surprisingly enough, a moon hero was already detected by Dumézil<sup>22</sup>, who identified the young hero Abhimanyu, son of Arjuna, who is killed in the battle at the age of sixteen, with the moon. This is in my opinion a good example of the shortcomings of an unsystematic application of concepts of natural mythology. Abhimanyu as moon does not seem to be related to Karna, the sun. It is not Karna who kills him in battle but an otherwise quite insignificant son of Duṣṣāsana, and if, as Biarreau<sup>23</sup> thinks, he is the symbol of hope for the continuation of the lunar dynasty, it is difficult to understand why his death was placed in the Droṇaparvan and not as a climax toward the end of the battle. The answer to these questions is given by the Mbh itself: Abhimanyu is said to be the incarnation not of Soma, the moon, but of Suvarcas, son of the moon<sup>24</sup>. *Varcas* means «brilliance», «lustre», «light», and the death of Abhimanyu in the Droṇaparvan may, therefore, represent the gradual dwindling of the moon's lustre towards summer. Just the same event seems to be described in the Buddhist Udrāyaṇa Avadāna<sup>25</sup>, where Candraprabhā («Lustre of the moon»), queen of king Udrāyaṇa, i.e., according to my interpretation, of the Uttarāyaṇa, suddenly dies, shortly before the king transfers his power to his son Śikhaṇḍin, who may represent the destroying summer sun. Hildebeitel<sup>26</sup> has, on the other hand, pointed out the close resemblance of the circumstances of the death of Abhimanyu and the Scandinavian myth of the death of Baldr. It is, therefore, not unreasonable to suppose a similar natural background for the Scandinavian myth.

22. *Mythe et épopée*, I (see note 5), p. 245 f.

23. BEFEO, 65, p. 168.

24. Mbh I.61.86; cf. I.60.21, where Soma's son is called *Varcas*.

25. See my article *Die buddhistische Erzählung von Udrāyaṇa von Roruka und ihr mythologischer Hintergrund*, in this Journal, 10 (1982), pp. 199-214, here p. 201 f.

26. *Ritual of Battle* (see note 2), p. 336 ff.

From the fact that Abhimanyu is said to be an incarnation of Varcas, the son of the moon, it does, of course, not necessarily follow that Abhimanyu's father Arjuna represents the moon. Nevertheless, such an identification seems to me very tempting, because it would at once establish the missing harmony: Arjuna, the moon, would then — together with Śikhāṇḍin, whose significance I shall discuss later — kill Bhīṣma, the winter sun, whom he nevertheless is connected with by friendly relations, and the same Arjuna (=moon) would kill Karna, the summer sun, his bitter enemy. By this it is also explained why the death of Karna cannot take place at the time of the summer solstice, because this is the time when the full moon is weakest, but in the end of summer or beginning of autumn, when the moon regains its power.

If Arjuna, whose name means « the white one »<sup>27</sup>, represents the bright moon, it almost inevitably follows that his charioteer Kṛṣṇa, « the black one », represents the black or dark moon, i.e. the shadowy part of the moon that becomes visible in the crescent some days before and after the conjunction of sun and moon. But Kṛṣṇa may also include the invisible moon passing the sun. Of the two possibilities to represent the black moon mythologically, i.e. either as rival and enemy of the bright moon or as his friend, companion and guide, the authors of the epic have chosen the second.

But who are then the rest of the Pāṇḍavas? Bhīma, the second of the five brothers, offers no problem: he is represented as son of Vāyu, the wind, and all the features of his character tally with the brutal force of this phenomenon of nature. As to the eldest Pāṇḍava, Yudhiṣṭhira, already Biardeau<sup>28</sup> has pointed out that he as Dharmarāja has many points of contact with Yama, the god of death, whom I believe to represent the nightly sun in winter. This would, in fact, be the only aspect of the sun that could coexist without tension with the moon. It is Yudhiṣṭhira who after the battle becomes the main pupil of Bhīṣma, the probable representative, as we have seen, of the day sun in winter. The eldest Pāṇḍava is not a great warrior but rather a coward; he has, however, to fight out one great single combat, that against Śalya, whom he finally conquers. This happens toward the end of the battle, in autumn, as we have to assume, and as the poets of the Mbh very carefully select the opponents for their main heroes, it is possible to guess the significance of Śalya: as opponent of Yudhiṣṭhira, the nightly sun of winter, he should represent the nightly sun of summer, and we understand at the same time, why it is Śalya who has to act as charioteer of Karna, the day sun of summer, when this latter approaches his end.

As the summer nights are shorter and not as dark as winter nights, Śalya's sister Mādrī may represent Uṣas, dawn. She is mother of the

27. The dark complexion of Arjuna, that is alluded to several times in the Mbh (cf. HILTEBEITEL, *Ritual of Battle*, p. 61; BIARDEAU, BEFEO, 65, p. 116), seems to have its origin in the designation of Kṛṣṇa + Arjuna in the dual case: *Kṛṣṇau*.

28. BEFEO, 65, p. 95 ff.

two youngest Pāṇḍavas, the twins Nakula and Sahadeva<sup>29</sup>, whom I regard as the two aspects of the moon connected with morning and evening twilight, the crescents of the waxing and the waning moon. Nakula would then obviously represent the waxing moon, as he is distinguished by his beauty and has more the nature of a fighter, whereas his brother Sahadeva, who after the war administers the home affairs and is closely connected with Yudhiṣṭhira, an aspect of the sun, seems to represent the waning moon, i.e. the moon on his way home, the moon approaching the sun, the endurer (this may be the meaning of *saha*).

Pāṇḍu, « the pale one », the legal father of the five brothers, whose natural fathers are gods, is by a curse unable to beget children and dies when embracing his second wife Mādrī, who may represent dawn, as we have seen. If we look for an astral phenomenon that fades away in the dawn, it is reasonable to think of the planet Venus as morning star. This would fit to Pāṇḍu's antisexual character — he is cursed for having killed a mating couple of deer — and to his character as a hunter. In both respects he resembles, by the way, the Greek goddess Artemis, one of whose epithets: *phōsphoros*, « torch-bearer », also designates Venus as morning star<sup>30</sup>. Pāṇḍu's first wife, Kuntī, mother of moon (Arjuna), wind (Bhīma), and nightly sun (Yudhiṣṭhira), would then probably represent the night.

The identification of Pāṇḍu gives us the clue to understand Dhṛtarāṣṭra: if Pāṇḍu is Venus as morning star, his brother should be Venus as evening star. As father of a hundred sons he represents sexual strength in contrast to the impotent Pāṇḍu. His blindness may hint to the blinding force of desire, but also to the darkness of night that the evening star introduces. Together with his wife Gāndhārī, possibly a representative of evening twilight, he engenders a hundred sons, creatures of darkness and symbols of wickedness. As we shall see later, the poets apparently try to connect them with the Nāgas, and by this it becomes clear that in terms of mythology of nature they represent the clouds, since Nāgas and clouds are symbolically interchangeable. Thus, it becomes understandable that all the hundred sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra are killed by Bhīma, the son of Vāyu. The wind is the phenomenon of nature that appears to be stronger than the clouds and can, therefore, be considered as their arch-enemy.

The younger brother of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu is Vidura. Being the son of a Śūdrā-woman, he is of lower extraction than his brothers. Yet he is distinguished by his intelligence and righteousness. In the epic, he is busy as a messenger and, particularly, as an adviser. He is not a fighter and does not take part in the great battle. All these characteristics

29. Cf. S. WIKANDER, *Nakula et Sahadeva*, in « *Orientalia Suecana* », 6 (1957), pp. 66-96.

30. See H. G. LIDDELL and R. SCOTT, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford, 1940<sup>9</sup>, p. 1968.

qualify him to be the representative of the planet Mercury, the quick but rather weak mediator between day and night.

If we look out for the other planets, we easily recognize the planet Jupiter in Droṇa, the mighty brahmin archer and teacher of Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas in the art of war. He is said to be an incarnation of Br̥haspati<sup>31</sup>, whose name also designates the planet Jupiter. He becomes Bhīṣma's successor as commander-in-chief of the Kurus: the planet Jupiter was apparently considered as a kind of prolongation of the retiring old sun (Bhīṣma) into the Uttarāyaṇa.

Droṇa's son Aśvatthāman seems to represent the uncanny, all-killing fire of war. After the battle, in the course of his nightly raid on the camp of the Pāṇḍavas related in the Sauptikaparvan, he kills his main opponent, Dhṛṣṭadyumna, who represents Agni as the sacrificial fire. The combination of fire and war qualifies Aśvatthāman to be the representative of the planet Mars, who combines just these two qualities. Like Droṇa, he seems to have been considered as a prolongation of the sun of the preceding season, i.e., in his case, of the summer sun (Karna), and this equality of function may be the reason for Aśvatthāman being Droṇa's son.

One planet is still to be identified: Saturn, the black and slowly moving planet, who seems to reflect most truly the movement of the earth round the sun. He was therefore by the Babylonians regarded as the representative of the sun at the starry sky of the night<sup>32</sup>. In the Mbh, he is, in my opinion, represented by Śakuni, the antagonist of Yudhiṣṭhira — another representative of the night sun, as we have seen — in the gambling scene, the starting-point of the catastrophe for the Pāṇḍavas. The name of the deceitful dice-player, *śakuni*, means « large bird », especially « vulture », and the vulture is in fact in some representations iconographically connected with the planet Saturn<sup>33</sup>. Biardeau<sup>34</sup> too understands the name of the epic hero as pointing to him as a kind of inauspicious bird, and inauspiciousness is likewise one of the most prominent features of the planet Saturn.

If we try to interpret the remaining principal persons of the epic, we have to leave the sphere of astral bodies. Draupadī, the common wife of the five Pāṇḍavas, bearing the personal name Kṛṣṇā, « the black one », seems to represent the Earth<sup>35</sup>. She is born from the Vedī, the ground for the sacrificial altar and can thus be taken as a symbol of the

31. Mbh I.61.63.

32. See F. X. KUGLER, *Sternkunde und Sterndienst in Babel*, II, Münster, 1909-24, p. 105; cf. A. SCHERER, *Gestirnnamen bei den indogermanischen Völkern*, Heidelberg, 1953, p. 95.

33. See W. KIRFEL, *Symbolik des Hinduismus und des Jnismus*, Stuttgart, 1959, p. 63.

34. BEFEO, 63, p. 206.

35. Cf. BIARDEAU, BEFEO, 63, p. 205 (Draupadī = Earth + Śrī). See also A. HILTEBEITEL, *Draupadī's Garments*, in « Indo-Iranian Journal », 22 (1980), pp. 97-112.

Earth in its sacred, i.e. highest, aspect. Her brother Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna, brother-in-law and commander-in-chief of the Pāṇḍavas, is born from the sacrificial fire. He evidently represents the fire, Agni, in its sacred aspect. Draupadī's and Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna's brother Śikhaṇḍin seems to be another representative of fire, probably of the heavenly fire of the sun rising after the winter solstice from its earth-near position toward the sky.

The father of these three brothers and sisters, Drupada, may symbolize the sacrificial post, i.e. the tree in its sacred aspect. And just as earth, fire and tree as cosmic symbols could not possibly be absent in an overall scenery of the world, so we should expect a representative of the ocean. This seems to be given in the personage of Virāṭa, the king of the Matsyas (« fishes »), whom the Pāṇḍavas take refuge with in the 13th year of their exile, when they have to find a place where they can live without being recognized. At Virāṭa's court the Pāṇḍavas are submerged, as it were. Characteristically, Yudhiṣṭhira assumes here the name Kaṅka, « heron », i.e. the name of a fish-eating bird <sup>36</sup>.

We are now in a position to overlook the whole scenery of the battle. The forces of nature that are arrayed against each other seem to be moon, wind and fire on the one hand against sun and clouds, supported by the planets Mars, Jupiter and Saturn, on the other. Only one aspect of the sun, the nocturnal hibernal, together with the young sun at the winter solstice — if my identification of Śikhaṇḍin is correct — stands on the side of the moon group. Bhīṣma too, the representative of the declining, aged sun approaching the winter solstice, favours the Pāṇḍavas, though he has to fight against them.

There is a remarkable adequateness of the opponents: Arjuna (the bright moon) is opposed to Bhīṣma and Karṇa, both aspects of the sun at day time; Yudhiṣṭhira (night sun of winter) is opposed to Śalya (night sun of summer); Bhīma (wind) is opposed to the hundred sons of Dhr̥tarāṣṭra (clouds); and Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna (Agni) to Droṇa and Aśvatthāman (Jupiter and Mars, the two planets that are most closely connected with fire).

The course of the battle follows at large the course of the year: in the Bhīṣmaparvan, we watch the last fights of the old sun of the passing year, that finally refuses to fight against the young and woman-like sun of the coming year. In the Droṇaparvan, we witness the moon losing its brightness in spring, when the sun is gaining power. In the Karṇaparvan, we observe how the wheel of the summer sun begins to sink toward the earth. In the Śalyaparvan, the nightly sun of the darker part of the year (Yudhiṣṭhira) overcomes the representative of the summer night sun (Śalya), and the wind (Bhīma) smashes the last cloud of the monsoon season (Duryodhana); so that, finally, the Sautikaparvan with its nightly massacre must be situated in the latest part of the year, when days are shortest and nights longest.

36. Cf. BIAUDEAU, BEFEO, 65, p. 107.



If Abhimanyu's death marks the spring and beginning of summer, we should expect that between these two events the time of the summer solstice and summer monsoon would somehow or other be depicted in the battle. This seems in fact to be the case: the Ghaṭotkacaparvan, forming a part of the Droṇaparvan<sup>37</sup>, describes a fierce battle lasting the whole night between the 14th and the 15th day. The illumination of the armies at night<sup>38</sup> may point to an ancient popular custom of illuminating the night of the summer solstice with fires in the open air as it is custom in Scandinavia in the St. John's night. However this might be, there are clear indications as to the meaning of this nightly battle. The main opponents here are Karṇa on the side of the Kauravas and Ghaṭotkaca on the side of the Pāṇḍavas. Ghaṭotkaca is a son of Bhīma and the Rākṣasī Hidimbā. He himself is a Rākṣasa, and as his father Bhīma represents the wind, he may very well represent the fierce thunderstorm aspect of the wind. By a stratagem of Kṛṣṇa's, Ghaṭotkaca is sent against Karṇa, who in the growing distress of the Kaurava army finally is compelled to use his miraculous dart (*śakti*) against the Rākṣasa. This dart was given to him by Indra and was the only weapon which would have enabled him to conquer Arjuna.

Thus, the meaning of the episode is quite obvious: Karṇa (the summer sun) loses his *śakti*, i.e. power, in the monsoon battle, with the consequence that he is no longer able to overpower the moon in the following season. This is symbolically underlined by the scene after Ghaṭotkaca's death<sup>39</sup>: Toward the end of the night, when all the troops are tired out, Arjuna suggests a break of the battle, so that the warriors can take a rest. He is praised by all, and the armies fall asleep; but after a while, the moon rises and the battle is renewed. I think, this clearly hints to the reappearance of the moon after the monsoon battle, when the sun has lost its power.

### III. Heroes and gods

By now, we have reached a preliminary understanding of the meaning of the Mbh battle, but not of the epic as a whole. To take the latter only as a myth of nature in the form of an epic allegory would probably yield unsatisfactory results. The epic itself lays considerable stress on what can be called the religious background of the heroes. According to the Ādiparvan<sup>40</sup>, gods and Asuras get incarnated with parts of their substance in those human beings that act in the Mbh. A long list<sup>41</sup>,

37. Mbh VII.122-154.

38. Mbh VII.138.12 ff.

39. Mbh VII.159.22-50.

40. Mbh I.58.25-51.

41. Mbh I.61, quoted by me in the following as «Amśāvatarāṇa-List».

contained in the Sambhavaparvan, the 7th subparvan of the first book, notes in detail what the latest redactors of the epic thought to be the *aṁśāvataṛaṇas* of Devas and Dānavas. In addition, some of the main heroes, viz. the five Pāṇḍavas and Karna, are represented as sons of gods, the reason for this being Pāṇḍu's inability to beget offspring.

Now, already Wikander<sup>42</sup> has in a convincing way shown that these connections between gods and heroes are hardly of late origin. The heroes are apparently not superficially adapted to the gods, but share in their very nature. Thus, Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa correspond to the Vedic Indra and Viṣṇu, Nakula and Sahadeva to the Aśvins, while Bhīma according to Wikander represents a very early, even pre-Vedic form of the wind god. To the problem connected with Yudhiṣṭhira I shall come back later.

If we accept the fundamental identity of character of heroes and gods in the Mbh, the question inevitably arises, whether the relations which I just tried to establish between heroes and natural phenomena also apply to the gods. This would, of course, have considerable consequences for our understanding of the earliest development of Indian religion.

Let us start with Indra. In the actual religion of the Mbh, he is mainly a rain god; but if Arjuna really is his counterpart and if my identification of the hero with the moon is correct, then Indra must have been originally a moon god. Already Th. Benfey<sup>43</sup> identified very resolutely Indra with the moon, mainly because of the similarity of the god's name with *indu* (« drop », « soma », « the moon »). Later on, it was E. Siecke<sup>44</sup> who collected arguments for the identification of Indra with the moon. But as Siecke was one of the most radical and unrestrained moon mythologers, who recognized the moon almost in all major divinities of the ancient religions, he must be regarded as a rather suspect witness. Some more weight can be attached to W. Kopfers<sup>45</sup>, who from the view-point of comparing Indo-European ethnology also came to the conclusion that Indra originally was a moon god.

The testimony of the Ṛgveda reveals that the main features of Indra partly do not exclude his being a moon god, partly even suggest such an identification: Indra has obviously a visible, brightly shining appearance — this would apply, it is true, equally well to the sun, especially when his colour is said to be golden or yellow —, he changes his shape, he is born, he is always young, and he drinks *soma*, the juice that ultimately was identified with the moon, but which originally seems

42. *Loc. cit.* (see notes 3 and 4).

43. *Allg. Encyklopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste*, Hrsg. von J. S. Ersch u. J. G. Gruber, II.17, Leipzig, 1840, s.v. *Indien*, p. 169.

44. E. SIECKE, *Indras Drachenkampf*, Berlin, 1905.

45. *Pferdeopfer und Pferdekult der Indogermanen*, in « Wiener Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte und Linguistik », 4 (1936), pp. 337-340.

to have been only the liquid that circulated between Earth and Heaven. By drinking *soma* Indra grows rapidly. Indeed, his growth is very much stressed in the ṚV<sup>46</sup> and is apparently one of his major characteristics. He seems, therefore, to represent not only, as his epic counterpart Arjuna does, the bright moon, but first of all the waxing moon — in contradistinction to Viṣṇu, as we shall see. He is primarily a fighter, fighting against the powers of darkness and obstruction. His main enemy Vṛtra may, after all, be a cloud demon obstructing the waters, and Indra's *vajra* the thunderbolt. He makes the waters flow — this again seems to be a typical feature of the moon — and he fights for getting the sun light back; this latter idea is especially concentrated in the Vala myth, where « dawn » seems to be the main significance of the cows set free by the efforts of Indra and Bṛhaspati<sup>47</sup>. Hence Indra cannot himself represent the sun<sup>48</sup>; this becomes also clear from the fact that he at several occasions adopts a hostile attitude toward the latter.

Of course, not all Ṛgvedic statements about Indra can be interpreted on the line of lunar mythology. This is partly due to the rhetoric of the Vedic poets, who show a strong tendency to extoll their favourite god to heights far above moon and sun, partly to the beginning of a development that in fact resulted in a clear separation of Indra from the moon. In the Brāhmaṇa period, Soma is the moon, and Indra, the god who drinks the moon, is identified with the sun; and as Indra swallows as well Soma as Vṛtra, his old enemy Vṛtra could in the end even be identified with Soma, the moon. But these theological speculations had little effect on the popular belief. Here, i.e. in the Hinduism reflected by the Mbh, Indra has become a rain-god — apparently a prolongation of his connection with the waters and the thunderbolt in the ṚV.

Viṣṇu, one of Indra's companions in the ṚV, should represent the dark moon, if his connection with the epic Kṛṣṇa on the one hand, and my identification of the latter with the dark moon on the other, is to be taken seriously. It seems to me that this interpretation does not offer much difficulty.

The most striking feature of Viṣṇu in the ṚV is his striding out for Indra (or for Manu). Now, the waning moon disappears in the east and reappears three days later in the west, surrounding or covering, as it were, by three steps the whole earth. Viṣṇu's highest step seems to be the sun, which the moon has to pass before it reappears. Viṣṇu presses the *soma* for Indra or, as it is said at one place<sup>49</sup>, Indra drinks *soma* with Viṣṇu, i.e., according to my interpretation, during the time

46. See K. F. GELDNER, *Der Rig-Veda*, IV (Index), Cambridge/Mass., 1957, p. 55 f.

47. Cf. H.-P. SCHMIDT, *Bṛhaspati und Indra*, Wiesbaden, 1968, p. 240.

48. In spite of the arguments of HILLEBRANDT, *op. cit.* (see note 12), p. 195 ff., and of J.J. MEYER, *Trilogie altindischer Mächte und Feste der Vegetation*, III, Zürich, 1937, p. 134 ff.

49. ṚV VIII.12.16.

of his invisibility, or with Trita Āptya, who in my opinion is to be understood as the moon emerging from the watery element on the third day.

The new-moon time means the days when the birth of the bright moon is prepared. To this it fits very well that Viṣṇu is the one who protects the seed (retas) and grants a good birth. In RV X.184.1, 2 and AV XIV.2.15 he is for this purpose invoked together with the new-moon goddess Sinīvālī, who in AV VII.46.3 even is addressed as Viṣṇu's wife.

In the Brāhmaṇas, Viṣṇu is generally identified with the sacrifice. This characteristic, too, can easily be explained from his connection with the new-moon time: the moon passing the sun, Soma passing Agni, could be understood as the central idea of the sacrifice, as sacrifice itself. At the same time, Viṣṇu becomes the god of initiation, as he symbolizes and supervises death and resurrection of the moon.

Viṣṇu as the god of sacrifice and his relation to the sun and to Indra are very clearly depicted in a myth related in the Śatapathabrāhmaṇa<sup>50</sup>. Here Viṣṇu as god of sacrifice is decapitated by the ends of his own bow, whose string is gnawed through by ants. Viṣṇu's head becomes the sun, and the gods rush toward him in order to collect the vital sap that is flowing from his body: « Indra reached him first. He applied himself to him limb after limb, and encompassed him, and, in encompassing him, he became (possessed of) that glory of his »<sup>51</sup>. I think it is difficult not to recognize the moon myth behind this story: Viṣṇu's bow, on which he is resting his head, is here the last visible part of the moon; when the ants (=sun-rays?) gnaw through the bowstring, the bow beheads Viṣṇu, whose head, i.e. the dark, invisible moon, the moon at the end of his monthly course, becomes the sun. Then Indra appears and applies himself to Viṣṇu's body limb after limb: he is apparently the reappearing bright moon, who has to swallow gradually the dark moon in order to get back his brightness, here paraphrased as his *yaśas* (« glory »). Indra is the one who profits by Viṣṇu's sacrifice, his epithet *maghavat* is reinterpreted as *makhavat*, the companion of or the one who is possessed of *makha*, « the sacrifice », identical with Viṣṇu.

In later Hinduism, Viṣṇu is inseparably connected with the idea of his *avatāras*, his different descents on earth. It seems to me that this concept too is a natural result of his lunar qualities, and that it can be traced back to the Brāhmaṇas. The Śatapathabrāhmaṇa says at different occasions<sup>52</sup> that Soma, the moon, in the new-moon time, when he is not seen either in the east or in the west, i.e. in the *amāvāsyā* night, comes (down) to this world, where he enters waters and plants. Viṣṇu, likewise, hides himself in or creeps into the roots of the plants, in a myth contained in the same first book of the Śatapathabrāhmaṇa<sup>53</sup> that

50. ŚBr. XIV.1.1.

51. ŚBr. XIV.1.1.12, Eggeling's translation.

52. E.g. ŚBr. I.6.4.5.

53. ŚBr. I.2.5.8.

deals with full- and new-moon rites. Viṣṇu is here presented as dwarf (*vāmana*), i.e. in the same shape that he uses in the later Purāṇic version of the myth in order to win by his three steps the earth for Indra from Bali. In the Brāhmaṇa version too, the point at issue is the possession of the earth, which Devas and Asuras are contending for. The Asuras concede as much ground to the Devas as Viṣṇu lies upon. But as the gods make the place where Viṣṇu is lying the sacrificial ground (*vedi*) and as this symbolically means the whole earth, the gods win the whole earth for themselves. The meaning of both versions of the myth, the Vedic and the Hinduistic, is essentially the same, and both can be explained from the perspective of lunar mythology: Viṣṇu as dwarf, that means the moon becoming small and about to disappear in the east: in the Brāhmaṇa myth it is explicitly mentioned that the gods place the dwarf Viṣṇu eastwards (*prāñcam*)<sup>54</sup>, and here it is also said that Viṣṇu becomes tired (*glāna*)<sup>55</sup>, when he creeps into the plant roots. This reminds of the *yoga-nidrā* of the later Viṣṇu lying on the serpent Śeṣa: the moon seems to sleep, when he is invisible, and Śeṣa, the white serpent, also identified with Kṛṣṇa's brother Balarāma, can be interpreted as the last rest of the bright moon. By his sacrifice, Viṣṇu covers the whole earth just as the Trivikrama Viṣṇu penetrates by his three steps all the spaces. In both cases this can be explained as the moon that pervades within three days the whole space from east to west.

The idea of Viṣṇu's *avatāras* may thus have arisen from the concept of the moon coming down to the earth in the *amāvāsyā* night, and if Viṣṇu's *avatāras* take place in a period of crisis between two *yugas*, so can this be understood as an extension of the conception of the moon coming down to earth in the very critical time of his disappearance between two monthly cycles.

As the space for this article is limited, I cannot enter the question of the lunar aspect of the other *avatāras* of Viṣṇu, but shall now proceed to discuss the representations of the other epic heroes in the Vedic pantheon.

As far as the Pāṇḍavas Nakula and Sahadeva are concerned, the Mbh leaves no doubt about their being incarnations of the Aśvins. As I interpret these two sons of Pāṇḍu as the crescents of the waxing and the waning moon, the question will be, whether this interpretation holds good for the Vedic Aśvins too.

The Aśvins are in the RV generally connected with the early morning, with Sūryā and Uṣas, a statement that would apply only to the waning and not to the waxing moon, as this latter appears in the evening. On the other hand, it is said that they are born at different places, and it may well be that their appearance in the morning is to be explained by

54. SBr. I.2.5.6.

55. SBr. I.2.5.8.

ritual and functional reasons. Because, as divine helpers, protectors and physicians their main task seems to consist of helping the waning moon, that appears in the morning in the east, through his dangerous passage through water and heat at new-moon time.

The idea of the moon passing the water is probably expressed in the myth of Bhujyu, whom the Ásvins help to cross the sea by their winged horses. A clear hint to the three days of the invisibility of the moon is given in RV I.116.4, where the Ásvins bring Bhujyu to the other shore of the sea with their birds that cross (the sea) in three nights and three days. The next verse says that the Ásvins bring Bhujyu *home* on their ship possessing a hundred oars: we remember that the new-moon is the one that has returned home.

The second idea, the idea of the moon passing the heat of the sun, seems to be expressed in the myth of Atri whom the Ásvins rescue from a hot place called *ṛbīsa*. In RV V.78.4, the myth is used in a blessing for good birth. We have already seen the connection between the new-moon situation and birth, and it is, therefore, not surprising to find the Ásvins also invoked in another benediction for good birth, i.e. in the hymn X.184 (vs. 3) already quoted in connection with Viṣṇu and Sinīvālī. The fact that Soma, the moon, in the Mbh is called a son of Atri can be taken as an additional confirmation of the Vedic Atri myth being a new-moon myth.

I can not get rid of the suspicion that not only the Bhujyu and Atri myths, but all the Ṛgvedic myths that describe the Ásvins as healers and helpers are new-moon myths. The dangerous and critical period of the moon's disappearance could perhaps not be spoken of in clear terms, it may have been subject to a taboo and was therefore circumscribed by varying images the meaning of which was known to the initiated. Sometimes, however, the meaning appears almost undisguised, so e.g. when in RV I.117.24 it is said that the Ásvins « brought to life again Śyāva, who had burst into three parts ». It is difficult not to recognize here in Śyāva, « the dark one », the dark or dead moon who after three days comes to life again. The passage is interesting, because it shows how easily the moon change could be interpreted in terms of death and resurrection. This may have been one of the reasons for the later greatness of Viṣṇu, the god of the initiates who presides over the passage toward a new life.

The second Pāṇḍava, Bhīma, is presented by the poets of the Mbh as son and incarnation of Vāyu, the wind god. As the meaning of the Vedic Vāyu as wind is undisputed, it is not necessary to dwell on this point. The idea of Wikander that the character of the epic Bhīma rather corresponds to an older Indo-Iranian wind-god than to the Vedic Vāyu cannot be discussed here.

More problematic is Yudhiṣṭhira, the first of the five Pāṇḍavas, because in the Aṃśāvataraṇa-List<sup>56</sup> and throughout the epic he is repre-

56. Mbh I.61.84.

sented as the son of Dharma; but as there is no Vedic god of this name, we have to consider, whether there is any other god in the ṚV who might correspond to Yudhiṣṭhira.

The question has already been answered by me when I brought the eldest Pāṇḍava — in accordance with Biardeau's analysis — into relation with Yama and moreover, with the nocturnal sun in the south. The Vedic Yama has been recognized as nocturnal sun god already by J. Ehni<sup>57</sup> in a thorough study devoted to this god. It does not seem to be necessary, therefore, to resume the discussion here.

Yama is the son of Vivasvat, and so are the Aśvins<sup>58</sup>, who also are said to dwell with Vivasvat<sup>59</sup>. This becomes understandable if we take Vivasvat, whose name in the epic became one of the designations of the sun, as the sun at or just below the horizon, as this aspect of the sun could be declared to be the « father » of the night sun as well as of the crescents of the waxing and the waning moon appearing in the hour of twilight between day and night resp. night and day.

I am not yet in a position to determine with any degree of certainty the other aspects of the sun that I believe to have found represented in the Mbh in the ṚV too. The epic Karṇa is said to be the son of Sūrya. But the Ṛgvedic Sūrya seems only to be a general designation of the undifferentiated sun and not of the special aspect of the rising sun or the summer sun that Karṇa seems to represent in the epic. On the other hand, Karṇa seems to have some affinity with the epic and Purāṇic god Śiva<sup>60</sup>. It is Śiva who in his disguise as Ṛṣi Durvāsa gives Kuntī the mantra that enables her to summon the gods to procreate children with her<sup>61</sup>. The first god Kuntī calls is Sūrya, who thus may be the one who stands closest to Śiva, the giver of the mantra. Karṇa is with a second name called Vṛṣa, « bull », which again reminds of Śiva's animal. One of the most prominent of Śiva's tīrthas, mentioned several times in the Mbh, is Gokarṇa. The component parts of this name, go and karṇa, seem to hint at the hero's name Vṛṣa and Karṇa.

Śiva's main direction is the north, where he resides on the mountain Kailāsa. He is the prototype of an ascetic (*tapasvin*), and as *tapas* means asceticism as well as heat, many of the myths spun around the god may point to his solar character. Particularly the myth of Śiva and Pārvatī lends itself to such an interpretation: the god's continuous asceticism, until he finally yields to the wooing of the daughter of the northern mountain, may well mean the burning of the sun from about March onward until it reaches in the month of June its northernmost point,

57. *Die ursprüngliche Gottheit des vedischen Yama*, Leipzig, 1896.

58. RV X.17.2.

59. RV I.46.13.

60. Cf. BIARDEAU, BEFEO, 65, p. 129, n. 1 (cf. p. 174): Karṇa as « l'héritier du Sūrya monstrueux et rudraïque qui domine le *pralaya* ».

61. Mbh I.104.4-7; 113.32-35.

when the collected power of the heat (*tapas*) seems to burst out in the monsoon rains. The flowing of rain and the flowing of seed can in the symbolical language of Indian mythology easily be substituted for each other<sup>62</sup>.

The result of Śiva's union with Pārvatī is Skanda, who is born under the Kṛttikās, the *nakṣatra* that is passed by the full-moon in the late autumn. We have seen that in the Mbh the summer-solstice seems to be marked by Karṇa's fight against Ghaṭotkaca. Karṇa loses here his *śakti*, « dart », or, symbolically, his « power », just as Śiva loses his strength collected by his *tapas*, when he unites with Pārvatī. It is therefore likely that Aśvatthāman, who presides the last phase of the war after the fall of Karṇa and Salya, corresponds to Skanda and that both are representations of the planet Mars<sup>63</sup>. Aśvatthāman, who according to what I just said should be an autumnal prolongation of the summer sun (=Rudra/Śiva), is in the Aṃśāvatarāṇa-List<sup>64</sup> of the Mbh declared to be an incarnation of Mahādeva (=Śiva) plus Antaka (=Death) plus Kāma (=Desire) plus Krodha (=Wrath). In this connection, mention should be made of a story told in the 72th chapter of the Matsyapurāṇa. Here, the planet Mars (Aṅgāraka) is identified with Virabhadra, a terrifying figure originating from a drop of perspiration on the forehead of Śiva, who, enraged, wants to destroy the sacrifice of Dakṣa. Now, Hiltebeitel<sup>65</sup> has shown that the authors of the Sautikaparvan apparently have paralleled their relation of Aśvatthāman's nocturnal raid on the camp of the Pāṇḍavas to the myth of the destruction of Dakṣa's sacrifice by Śiva. Aśvatthāman, the incarnation of Mahādeva-Antaka-Kāma-Krodha, would thus be the counterpart of Virabhadra, an emanation of the enraged Śiva and identical with the planet Mars. The destruction of Dakṣa's sacrifice would then mean the end of the Dakṣiṇāyana brought about by the agent of Śiva, who, as representative of the Uttarāyana, had been excluded from Dakṣa's sacrifice (=Dakṣiṇāyana). This interpretation enables us, at the same time, to understand the « mysterious words »<sup>66</sup> of Kṛṣṇa who, at the eve of Aśvatthāman's raid, proposes that he and the Pāṇḍavas « should *maṅgalārthāya* stay outside the camp »<sup>67</sup>. The term *maṅgalārthāya* contains, in my opinion, a deliberate ambiguity: superficially, it means « for the sake of acting auspiciously » (Hiltebeitel's translation), but the hidden meaning, which would very well suit the situation, may be « for the sake of the planet Mars (=Aśvatthāman) ».

62. Cf. RV V.83.1.4, where Parjanya is depicted as a bull fertilizing the earth by his seed (= rain).

63. Cf. P. THOMAS, *Epics, Myths and Legends of India*, 11th ed., Bombay, n.d., p. 121 (about the planet Mars): « Mangala. (...). He is identical with Kartikeya ».

64. Mbh I.61.66 f.

65. *Op. cit.* (see note 2), p. 312 ff.

66. Cf. HILTEBEITEL, *op. cit.*, p. 314 f.

67. Mbh IX.61.35; cf. 61.36 (*maṅgalārtham*).



The apparently close connection between Rudra as burning summer sun and Rudra as the killing planet Mars makes it, on the other hand, difficult to determine the character of Rudra in the Ṛgveda: the « ruddy boar of the sky »<sup>68</sup> may equally well represent the dangerous, disease causing aspect of the sun as the reddish planet Mars.

The other great sun hero of the Mbh, Bhīṣma, is by the authors of the Mbh considered as an incarnation of the Vasu Dyū/Div (Dyaus)<sup>69</sup>. As he is a father prototype — he is called *pitāmaha*, « grandfather », of Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas — it seems in the first instance to be reasonable to connect him with the Vedic Dyū, who as « Sky » often is mentioned in combination with Pṛthivī, « Earth ». But Bhīṣma is not only a « grandfather », but at the same time a great fighter, in fact, the greatest fighter in the whole army of the Kurus during the first ten days of the battle, and this points rather into the direction of his being a representative of the sun and not of the sky.

A look at Greek mythology may help to solve this problem, because there exists, as I believe, a rather fargoeing similarity between the Greek god Zeus and our epic hero Bhīṣma. Not only is the name Zeus etymologically the same as the name of the Vasu Dyū, whose representative on earth Bhīṣma is supposed to be, but their birth legends too show a striking similarity. Bhīṣma is the son of the river-goddess Gaṅgā (Ganges), Zeus is the son of Rhea, whose name is apparently derived from the verb *rheō*, « to flow ». Bhīṣma as well as Zeus are the youngest sons in a series of children, and the most striking trait in both legends is the circumstance that the whole series of children is right after their birth swallowed up by one of the parents: in the case of Bhīṣma it is the mother that drowns the seven Vasus born before Bhīṣma in the river Ganges, i.e. in herself, whereas in the case of Zeus it is the father Kronos who swallows the six elder sisters and brothers of Zeus<sup>70</sup>.

If we now look after the natural background of Zeus, it seems to be clear that he is not simply a god of the sky. Sky and Earth are represented in the Greek pantheon by Uranos and Gaia, and it is this divine couple that has its counterpart in the Vedic couple Dyū and Pṛthivī. The Greek Zeus thus does not correspond to the Vedic Dyū; he rather represents a similar, if not the same, aspect of the sun as the epic Bhīṣma does: both gather clouds around them; with Homer one of the most characteristic epithets of Zeus is *nephelēgerēta*, « the cloud-gatherer », and in the beginning of the Mbh battle the point is stressed that the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra (representing probably clouds) have to gather around Bhīṣma in order to protect him. Duryodhana charges his brother Duḥśāsana with this task in a speech<sup>71</sup> that can be regarded

68. *divó varāhām aruṣām...*, RV I.114.5.

69. Mbh I.93.

70. Hesiod, *Theogonia* 453 ff.

71. Mbh VI.16.11-20.

as the strategic program of the Kuru party for the first ten days of the battle.

This very short reference to the sun nature of Zeus must for the moment suffice. Neither is it possible to discuss here all possible correspondences to Bhīṣma's rival Karna on the Greek side. Let me only mention that I regard Apollon, whose fundamental similarity with Rudra/Śiva has already been elaborated by R. Goossens<sup>72</sup>, as the Greek representative of the rising sun, the summer sun and the sun as destroyer. It may thus be more than a mere coincidence, if Apollon's epithet Kárneios, derived from *kárnos* (probably meaning « ram ») reminds of the name of the Mbh hero Karna.

Our next question must be, whether the epic Bhīṣma has any correspondance among ancient Indian gods. I think, it is most natural to connect him with the Hindu god Brahman, who shares with Bhīṣma the epithet *pitāmaha*, « grandfather »<sup>73</sup>, and who represents the divine wisdom, particularly the traditional wisdom of the Brahmins. Now, Bhīṣma's function is precisely to impart the traditional lore of *dharma* to the Pāṇḍavas, the large books XII and XIII, Śānti- and Anuśāsana-parvan constituting in the main Bhīṣma's teaching. As advice- and protection-giving father figures, Bhīṣma and Brahman correspond to each other and to the Greek Zeus, their opposite being Karna, Rudra and Apollon respectively. This seems to fit quite well to the opposition between Brahman as creator and Śiva as destroyer in the Hindu trias Brahman-Viṣṇu-Śiva, where Viṣṇu holds the mediating position characteristic for him.

Leaving aside the rather complicated question, to what extent the different aspects of the sun are present in the Ṛgveda — one could e.g. think of Tvaṣṭṛ or of Dakṣa as predecessors of Brahman —, I proceed now to the problem of the divine representatives of the planet heroes of the epic. If we accept at all any connection between heroes, gods and planets, then there cannot be any doubt about the background of Droṇa, the great brahmin archer of the Mbh. He is said to be an incarnation of Brhaspati, and Brhaspati is, at the same time, the name of the planet Jupiter. The arguments of J. F. Fleet<sup>74</sup> in favour of an identification of the Ṛgvedic Brhaspati/ Brahmanaspati with the planet Jupiter were rejected by A. B. Keith<sup>75</sup> and others; but I think, the last word in this matter has not yet been said. If Indra is to be connected with the moon, it would in any case not be unnatural to recognize in the priestly helper of Indra in his nightly struggle for the recovery of sun and dawn Jupiter, the most prominent and auspicious among all the planets. Much, of course, depends on the system of the Vedic pantheon as a whole, in which an

72. La Nouvelle Clio, 1-2 (1949-50), pp. 17-21.

73. Cf. BIARDEAU, BEFEO, 65, p. 165.

74. JRAS, 1911, p. 514 ff.

75. JRAS, 1911, p. 794 ff.

isolated planet god would be highly improbable. We have to see, therefore, whether our planet heroes of the Mbh help us to detect other planet gods in the Veda.

The question after the divine counterpart of Dhṛtarāṣṭra has already been answered by G. Johnsen<sup>76</sup>. In opposition to Dumézil<sup>77</sup>, who identifies Dhṛtarāṣṭra with the Vedic god Bhaga, Johnsen has in my opinion convincingly shown that Dhṛtarāṣṭra is a replica of Varuṇa. His argument is based on Kuiper's dualistic interpretation of the Mahābhārata: the opposition Pāṇḍavas contra Kauravas reflects the opposition Devas contra Asuras; Varuṇa as Asura par excellence should be present on the side of the Kauravas, and the close connection between both Varuṇa and Dhṛtarāṣṭra and the serpents suggests their identity on the mythological plane.

If Dhṛtarāṣṭra corresponds to Varuṇa, it would be most natural to assume that his brother Pāṇḍu corresponds to Mitra, and as both seem to be representatives of the planet Venus as evening and morning star respectively, we have now to ask, whether already the Ṛgvedic gods Varuṇa and Mitra can be related to Venus.

It is known that both Hillebrandt<sup>78</sup> and Oldenberg<sup>79</sup> maintained that Mitra originally was a sun god and Varuṇa a moon god. The arguments brought forward by them apply, however, as well to the planet Venus: Mitra's relation to the morning and the day and Varuṇa's relation to the evening and the night can as well be interpreted in terms of sun and moon as of morning and evening star. In addition to that, however, there are features of Mitra and Varuṇa that quite definitely contradict their identity with sun and moon, but that agree very well with their being representatives of Venus. First of all their closeness to each other: they are very often mentioned together, and they have so many features in common, that one gets the impression of their being only two aspects of one and the same god. The other point contradicting the hypothesis of Hillebrandt and Oldenberg is the relation of Mitra and Varuṇa to the sun, which is called their eye. It is a logical development of this statement, if according to later mythology<sup>80</sup> Viṣṇu destroys one of Śukra's eyes (=the sun?) or if Dhṛtarāṣṭra is blind.

Most suggestive is a Ṛgveda verse where it is said that « the dexterous king Varuṇa made this golden swing in the sky so that it shines »<sup>81</sup>. The planet Venus seems indeed to swing from one side of the sun to the other, and apart from the planet Mercury, there is no other celestial

76. *Varuṇa and Dhṛtarāṣṭra*, in « Indo-Iranian Journal », 9 (1965-66), pp. 245-65.

77. *Mythe et épopée*, I (see note 5), pp. 152, 157 ff.

78. See note 12.

79. See note 13.

80. Nārada-Purāṇa 11, acc. to G. C. TRIPATHI, *Der Ursprung und die Entwicklung der Vāmana-Legende in der indischen Literatur*, Wiesbaden, 1968, p. 208.

81. *gītso rājā vāruṇaś cakra etāṃ divi preṅkhāṃ hiraṇyāyaṃ śubhé kām*, RV VII.87.5.

body to which the image would apply better. The next verse also is a rather precise description of the evening star: «Varuṇa descends into the sea like the day, like a white drop, the powerful animal»<sup>82</sup>. This could well be the evening star dropping into the sea in the west or into the stream of nightly waters which are the abode of Varuṇa. The comparison with a white drop agrees with the white brilliancy of Venus. White is also elsewhere the colour of Varuṇa. In the Brāhmaṇa ritual, he is represented as śukla (cf. Śukra=Venus) and atigaura, «very white»<sup>83</sup>.

As far as the moral character of the R̥gvedic god Varuṇa is concerned, it may sound strange that the representative of the evening star, the star of sexual love, connected in Greek religion with the goddess Aphrodite, should be the protector of moral standards. But this moral dimension of Varuṇa seems to be derived from his relation to ṛta, which I would take — in opposition to H. Lüders<sup>84</sup>, but in agreement with other scholars — primarily as cosmic order, law of nature, especially the regulated course of sun, moon and the other celestial bodies. Varuṇa's overlordship over the laws of nature would explain his physical control of the human body: he punishes the man that indulges in all sorts of excesses by physical diseases. Epic mythology makes Surā, «brandy», his daughter and shows thereby his responsibility for the very kind of crime he punishes. His connection with sexuality appears in the Varuṇapraghāsa ritual, the Caturmāsya of the rainy season, where talking on sexual matters is part of the ritual<sup>85</sup>. In the Pāriplavam Ākhyānam, a cyclical recitation of different texts during the Aśvamedha, king Varuṇa is connected with the Atharvaveda and his subjects are the Gandharvas, who are represented by beautiful young men<sup>86</sup>. This shows clearly his connection with sexual attraction and beauty, as also in the epic the children of Varuṇa are distinguished by beauty<sup>87</sup>.

The fundamental unity of the Varuṇa of the R̥gveda, the Brāhmaṇas, and the epic becomes thus visible, if we take the planet Venus as evening star as their common background. Varuṇa and the planet are, moreover, closely connected in the epic. According to the northern tradition<sup>88</sup>, Śukra's father Bhṛgu was created by Brahman Svayambhu at a sacrifice of Varuṇa's (*varuṇasya kratau jātah*), so that all descendants of Bhṛgu can be called as well Bhārgavas (Bhārgava is one of the com-

82. *āva sindhuṃ vāruṇa dyaúr iva sthād drapsó ná śvetó mṛgás tūviṣmān*. I follow Geldner's translation.

83. Cf. HILLEBRANDT, *Vedische Mythologie*, II<sup>2</sup>, p. 27 f. and note.

84. *Varuṇa*, II, Göttingen, 1959.

85. Cf. J. GONDA, *Die Religionen Indiens*, I, Stuttgart, 1960, p. 80.

86. *yūvānaḥ sobhanāḥ*, ŚBr. XIII.4.3.7; cf. P. HORSCH, *Die vedische Gāthā- und Śloka-Literatur*, Bern, 1966, p. 21.

87. See E. W. HOPKINS, *Epic Mythology*, Strassburg, 1915, p. 121.

88. Mbh I.216\* (after I.5.6).

mon names of the planet Venus) as Vāruṇas<sup>89</sup>. According to the main tradition, Varuṇa is son-in-law of Śukra<sup>90</sup>.

The youngest brother of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu, Vidura, was proposed by me as a representative of the planet Mercury. As to his divine counterpart, I follow Dumézil<sup>91</sup>, who recognized in Vidura the Vedic god Aryaman. To identify Aryaman with the planet Mercury does not present, as far as I can see, any difficulty. Like Venus, this planet appears as evening and morning star; but as it is much weaker as Venus, it is not surprising that Aryaman is in the Ṛgveda only mentioned in a subordinate position, very often in connection with Mitra-Varuṇa. His main characteristics — hospitality and mediation in matrimonial affairs — could be understood as a result of his visibility in the evening and the morning, i.e. when guests arrive and depart, and of his abode in the dawn, where he mediates between night and day. Moreover, Uṣas, « dawn », or Sūryā is usually the divine maid who is paid court to; it was, therefore, quite natural to make Aryaman a wooer.

As to the planet Saturn, I am not sure, whether and, if so, by whom he is represented in the Ṛgveda. Some indications seem to point in the direction of Pūṣan: the inauspiciousness of the planet may be alluded to, when Pūṣan is described as *kapardin*, « wearing braided and knotted hair »<sup>92</sup>; his old age by his being a probably toothless goatseater (*karambhād*)<sup>93</sup>, the slowness of his movement by his having goats as draught animals<sup>94</sup>, and the remoteness of the planet Saturn is perhaps expressed, when it is said of Pūṣan that he is born in the remoteness (? *prāpathe*) of paths, ... of the sky, ... of the earth<sup>95</sup>. But all these statements also allow of other interpretations, and as there are other qualities of Pūṣan that do not seem to fit equally well, the question of the identity of the planet Saturn in the Ṛgveda must remain open.

#### IV. Further Greek Parallels

If we try to interpret Greek gods and heroes in terms of natural mythology, it appears that not only some traits of their often complicated characters, but also minor mythological details, that otherwise would seem rather bizarre, and, especially, their mutual relations become better understandable. I confine myself here to some of those features that point to a common origin with Indian mythology.

89. See HOPKINS, *Epic Mythology*, p. 120.

90. Mbh I.60.51.

91. *Mythe et épopée*, I, pp. 152, 157 ff.

92. RV VI.55.2.

93. RV VI.56.1.

94. RV VI.55.3, 4.

95. RV X.17.6. I follow Geldner's translation.

I already mentioned Apollon and Zeus as sun gods and their Indian parallels. As far as the moon is concerned, there can be little doubt that it is Athena and Hera that in almost all respects agree with what we should expect from the representations of bright and dark moon, particularly, if we compare them with their Indian counterparts. Athena's standing epithet *glaukōpis*, whose original meaning seems to have been « owl-eyed »<sup>96</sup>, was likewise applied to the moon. The owl, Athena's animal, is as night bird with shining yellow eyes a suitable symbol of the moon. On the Indian side, there may be compared Indra's name Kauśika, designating at the same time the owl. As Aigís-bearer, Athena seems to be a thunderstorm god like Indra. She is also — strangely enough for a woman — like the Indian god the favourite deity of the warriors and a great fighter herself.

Hera, on the other hand, is already by her most common epithets in the Ilias iconographically rather distinctly depicted as the representative of the dark moon. As *boōpis* she is qualified by the black eyes of the cow as Athena is by the yellow eyes of the owl; with *leukólenos*, « white-armed », the two crescents of the white moon confining the dark moon seem to be alluded to; and by *chrysóthronos*, « having a golden throne », her abode in the golden light of the sun is hinted at, just as Kṛṣṇa as *pītavāsas* is qualified by his yellow garments wrapping up his dark body. On coins from Argos, Hera is portrayed with the hair of her head shorn, apparently as bride<sup>97</sup>: the dark moon, bride of the sun-god, has her hair, i.e. her rays of light, shorn. To this may be compared the interpretation « bald-headed » for Viṣṇu's epithet *śipiviṣṭa*. Finally, the new-moon day is indeed the day sacred to Hera<sup>98</sup>, who like Viṣṇu also is a midwife deity (as *eileithyia*).

At the same time, Hera is the wife of Zeus: this reflects the marriage of the sun god with the moon in her dark phasis. Zeus and Hera are in the Ilias constantly on strained terms, and it is even told that once Zeus punished his consort by hanging her from the sky<sup>99</sup>. Hanging seems to be a characteristic feature of the dark moon<sup>100</sup>, which after the new-moon days appears as hanging in the western sky, where the thin crescent of the bright moon resembles a hook.

As to her character, Hera is the type of instigator, using all kinds of stratagems to reach her aims. In this point, she resembles very much

96. See P. CHANTRAINE, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*, Paris, 1968, p. 226.

97. See article *Hera* by EITREM, in: PAULY-WISSOWA, *Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, VIII (1912), col. 394.

98. *Loc. cit.* (see note 97), col. 387. Hera's connection with the moon was advocated especially by Roscher, see EITREM, *loc. cit.*

99. Ilias 15.18 ff.

100. In the Udrāyaṇa-Avadāna, the young boy Śyāmaka (= dark moon?) is hanging from the dress of Mahākātyāyana (= bright moon?) when journeying through the air; cf. my article (see note 25), p. 203.

the Kṛṣṇa of the Mbh, who instigates Arjuna to fight and who stands behind all foul tricks used by the Pāṇḍavas against their enemies in the great battle. And as Kṛṣṇa, the dark moon, acts as a charioteer for Arjuna, the bright moon and warrior, so does Hera act as a charioteer for Athena, the representative of the bright moon, in a very impressive scene of the Ilias<sup>101</sup>, where Hera and Athena descend from heaven to earth in order to participate in the battle on the side of the Greeks.

Though I am not in a position to interpret the whole Trojan war in terms of a year myth, I feel that the parallels between Mbh and Ilias both on the divine and on the human plane point to a myth of nature as common background.

Starting from the gods, it seems obvious that in the same way as in the Indian epic in the Ilias too one party (i.e. the Greeks) represents the lunar and the other (i.e. the Trojans) the main solar aspects. The moon goddesses Hera and Athena support the Greeks and the sun god Apollon the Trojans, while Zeus, another aspect of the sun, remains more or less neutral. The other gods cannot be discussed here.

As to the heroes, it is on the side of the Trojans obviously Priamos with his 50 sons who, at least superficially, resembles Dhṛtarāṣṭra with his 100 sons, and Hektor, the special protégé of Zeus, seems to be the parallel to the Indian sun hero Karṇa. His opponent on the side of the Greeks is Achilles, the ideal hero, who in many respects resembles Arjuna, the ideal hero of the Mbh<sup>102</sup>.

Let me mention only one episode among the legends around Achilles in order to show that there exists more than a merely superficial similarity between him and Arjuna. Post-Homeric Greek mythographers relate<sup>103</sup> that Odysseus when recruiting participants for the Trojan expedition found Achilleus at the court of king Lykomedes of Skyros, disguised in women clothes and hidden among the king's daughters. In order to detect Achilleus, Odysseus uses a stratagem: in the disguise of a merchant, he makes a display of jewellery and women's dresses smuggling in among these things some weapons. When a sudden alarm of war is given, Achilleus rushes forth to seize the weapons. Thus recognized, he can be recruited as participant of the Trojan expedition. It is hardly possible to overlook the parallel in the Mbh: here it is Arjuna who in the 13th year of exile lives together with his brothers at the court of king Virāṭa in the disguise of a transvestite (like Achilleus) and dance master of the king's daughters. At the end of the 13th year, the Kurus make a raid against Virāṭa in order to rob his cows. This is the occasion for Arjuna to give up his disguise and to fetch forth his weapons, that all the time were hidden in a śamī-tree<sup>104</sup>. The hidden hero has reappeared, and the way to the great battle is open.

101. Ilias 5.720 ff.

102. Cf. HILTEBEITEL (see note 2), pp. 158, 220 (referring to Dumézil).

103. Cf. K. KERÉNYI, *Die Heroen der Griechen*, Zürich, 1958, p. 352 f.

104. Mbh IV.38.

I already mentioned that the death of Abhimanyu in the Droṇa-parvan of the Mbh can be interpreted as the moon losing its lustre in spring. The parallel to this episode seems to be the death of Patroklos in the Ilias. Patroklos, it is true, is not the son of Achilles as Abhimanyu is the son of Arjuna, but he is the intimate friend of the Greek hero, and his death means as much to the latter as the death of Abhimanyu to Arjuna. When Patroklos sets out for his last fight, he wears the shining armour of Achilles, and this suggests that he in fact represents, like Abhimanyu, the lustre of the moon. This is also confirmed by the circumstance that at the end of his *aristeia* he is killed by the god Apollon himself<sup>105</sup>, the representative of the destroying summer sun.

The death of Patroklos is the result of Achilles' refusal to take part in the battle, his motive being his quarrel with Agamemnon. This very central motive of the Ilias has its parallel in the Mbh in the great quarrel between Arjuna and Yudhiṣṭhira related in the Karna-parvan<sup>106</sup>. The circumstances are rather similar: Agamemnon, who had offended Apollon, has to return his booty, the daughter of the Apollon priest, to the girl's father, whereas Yudhiṣṭhira is defeated in battle by Karṇa. Agamemnon reacts by taking away Achilles' war booty Briseis, and this is the immediate cause of Achilles' wrath and abstention from battle. In the Mbh, Yudhiṣṭhira offends Arjuna by blaming him for not having slain Karṇa. In both epics, the quarrel reaches a point, where the offended hero, Achilles resp. Arjuna, threaten to kill their king, Agamemnon resp. Yudhiṣṭhira. In terms of myth of nature the episodes mean that the night sun (Yudhiṣṭhira, Agamemnon) is humiliated by the progressing summer sun (Karṇa, Apollon), and that at the same time an alienation takes place between the bright moon (Arjuna, Achilles) and the night sun, because — this at least is the explicit reason given in the Mbh — the former is no longer able to protect the latter against the representative of the day sun (Karṇa).

In this connection it is interesting to watch the function of the dark moon, who in the Mbh is represented by Kṛṣṇa. It is Kṛṣṇa who finally settles the conflict by making mediating proposals. To act as mediator, particularly between sun and bright moon, seems in fact to be one of the most important functions of the dark moon. Now, in the Homeric epics all the evidence suggests that Odysseus is the representative of the dark moon. The crafty hero resembles in many respects Kṛṣṇa. Unfortunately, I cannot elaborate this subject here in detail; let me only point to the fact that in the conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon too it is Odysseus who acts as the leading mediator<sup>107</sup>, not as successfully, it is true, as Kṛṣṇa in the Mbh.

105. Ilias 16.787 ff.

106. Mbh VIII.48 f.

107. *hēgeito dē dios Odysseús*, Ilias 9.192.



The connections between Indian gods and epic heroes on the one side and the similarity of Indian and Greek mythology on the other thus seem to appear with greater distinctness, if myths of nature are supposed to be the common background. This points to an origin of the great epics of Indian and Greece from a milieu stamped by conceptions of astral religion, year mythology and other myths of nature. It lies, however, beyond the scope of this article to give a historical explanation of the Indo-Greek parallels presented in this study. The discussion of the question of Indo-European epico-religious tradition contra influences from the Near East must be deferred to a later date.

#### V. The Later Development:

##### *The Meaning of the Main Redaction of the Mbh*

Even if we thus come to the conclusion that myths of nature contributed largely to the formation of the basic structure of the Mbh, there can be little doubt that the authors of the main redaction of the epic were concerned with quite different matters. Although the general course of the battle seems to follow the course of the year, and although the activity of the main participants could be interpreted according to this line, it must be noticed that the division of the battle into the 4 *parvans* from Bhīṣma- to Śalyaparvan, to which the Sauptikaparvan can be added, does not seem to reflect directly neither the prominent points of the year solstices and equinoxes, nor the seasons.

The declining length of the battle-*parvans* counted in days rather suggests the succession of the 4 *yugas* to have been the model. This idea was, as far as I know, first pronounced by H. Gehrts<sup>108</sup> and seems to gain further support by the general trend of M. Biardeau's argumentation, that gives the concept of *yuga* a very prominent position within her symbolical interpretation of the epic. It does not seem quite unlikely that the more modern idea of the cycle of *yugas*, prevalent in the Purāṇas, was superimposed on the ancient structure of the year, which perhaps lost its actuality by the end of the Brāhmaṇa period.

Nevertheless, it seems to be doubtful to me, whether the connection between battle-*parvans* and *yugas* proposed by Gehrts is correct, although it seems at the first look to be natural to attribute, as Gehrts does, the 4 battle-books Bhīṣma-, Droṇa-, Karṇa-, and Śalyaparvan to the 4 ages Kṛta-, Tretā-, Dvāpara-, and Kaliyuga respectively. However, there are two statements about the *yugas* in the Mbh that suggest another solution. The first, contained in the Āraṇyakaparvan, says that

108. H. GEHRTS, *Mahābhārata. Das Geschehen und seine Bedeutung*, Bonn, 1975, p. 239 ff.

ritual activity starts only in the Tretāyuga<sup>109</sup>. As the great battle is in the epic itself symbolically regarded as a sacrifice, the conclusion would be that the beginning of the battle indicates the beginning of Tretāyuga and not of Kṛtayuga.

The other statement is contained in the Sāntiparvan<sup>110</sup> and attributes the following characteristics to the single *yugas*:

Kṛtayuga: *tapas* (asceticism),  
 Tretāyuga: *jñāna* (knowledge),  
 Dvāparayuga: *yajña* (sacrifice),  
 Kaliyuga: *dāna* (giving, generosity).

Now, I think there is a complete harmony between these characteristics of the *yugas* and the *parvans*, if we start not with the first battle-book, but with Udyogaparvan, the *parvan* immediately preceding the battle-books. The function of *tapas* is the accumulation of power, and collecting power is just the content of the Udyogaparvan, where both parties exert themselves in order to get strength, mainly by gaining allies, for the impending war. The dominating figure of the Udyogaparvan is Kṛṣṇa, the god who is the symbol for the concepts *bhakti* and *yoga* (*yoga* is closely connected with *tapas*), and who as the most venerable personage of the late epic would be a very suitable centre of a *parvan* meant to symbolize the Kṛtayuga. In this sense, the Bhagavad-gītā, Kṛṣṇa's teaching to Arjuna before the beginning of the battle, is properly to be considered as the climax of the Udyogaparvan, though the *parvan* division has attributed it now to the first battle book, the Bhīṣmaparvan.

If Bhīṣmaparvan corresponds to Tretāyuga, it should be characterised by *jñāna*, knowledge. Now, Bhīṣma is in fact the exponent of *jñāna* in the epic, so much so, that the huge mass of knowledge imparted by him to the Pāṇḍavas by poetical and technical reasons could not be included in the *parvan* that bears Bhīṣma's name, but had to be added as a kind of appendix to the battle in books XII and XIII, Sānti- and Anuśāsanaparvan.

The next book, Droṇaparvan, should correspond to Dvāparayuga and be characterized by the concept of *yajña*. In fact, the seventh book is almost overloaded by sacrificial symbols, as has been observed already by Gehrts<sup>111</sup>. Droṇa, whose name may signify « *soma-vessel* », is decapitated like a sacrificial animal by Dhṛṣṭadyumna, the representative of sacrificial fire, and, likewise, the death of Abhimanyu reminds in some respects of a sacrifice. Jayadratha, son-in-law of Dhṛtarāṣṭra and one of the main heroes of this book, bears as his sign a boar of silver, which

109. *tretām api nibodha tvaṃ yasmin satraṃ pravartate*, Mbh III.148.22.

110. Mbh XII.224.27.

111. *Op. cit.* (see note 108), p. 245 ff.

is compared by Biardeau <sup>112</sup> with the boar as symbol of sacrifice. He too is decapitated and his head is made to fly through the air by Arjuna's arrows. I believe that he is a representative of the planet Rāhu and as such a kind of caricature of Kṛṣṇa, both being concerned with moon change and eclipse. As this has nothing to do with the course of the year, the whole Jayadratha episode may have been included at a rather late period in order to underline the sacrifice character of Droṇaparvan.

The following book, Karṇaparvan, should then represent the Kaliyuga and be characterized by *dāna*. Well, Karṇa, the warrior who lost his *kṣatriya* rights because of his being born out of wedlock and being brought up by a *sūta*, and who, in spite of these antecedents, was installed by Duryodhana as king of Aṅga, a region outside the Vedic *dharma* — this Karṇa could very well represent those aspects of the Kaliyuga that are not represented by his friend Duryodhana, whom the Aṃśāvatarāṇa-List <sup>113</sup> identifies with Kali. When he constantly promises immeasurable treasures to anybody who might show him Arjuna on the battlefield, he shows unmistakably the virtue of *dāna*, so well suited to the incarnation of the sun. As Arjuna does not hide himself, this seems rather uncalled for and serves apparently the only purpose to illustrate Karṇa's liberal character.

The battle is not finished with Karṇaparvan, and the question arises, what the meaning of the following book, Śalyaparvan, may have been. In my opinion, Gehrts <sup>114</sup> is right, when he identifies the book following Śalyaparvan, i.e. Saṃvatsaraparvan, in which the night raid of Aśvatthāman on the camp of the Pāṇḍavas is related, with the cosmic night after the end of a *yuga* cycle. It seems to be logical, then, to interpret Śalyaparvan as the twilight (*saṃdhyā*) before such a night. Śalya, the brother of Mādrī (dawn) and opponent of Yudhiṣṭhira, the representative of the night sun in winter, could perhaps better than anyone else assume this significance of cosmic twilight.

If there is laid so much stress on the concept of *yuga* in those layers of the epic that probably have to be connected with its main redaction, we have to ask for the possible reason for the introduction of this motive. In this connection, mention should be made of an idea pronounced by A. Holtzmann jr. in the first part of his extensive Mbh study. Holtzmann was not only convinced that an original pro-Kaurava tendency of the Mbh was later on reversed into a pro-Pāṇḍava tendency; he had, moreover, the peculiar idea that the author of the pro-Kaurava version of the epic had been a Buddhist who wrote in the time of Aśoka and had before his eyes this very emperor, when he depicted Duryodhana <sup>115</sup>.

112. BEFEO, 65, p. 168, n. 3.

113. Mbh I.61.80.

114. *Op. cit.* (see note 108), p. 269.

115. A. HOLTZMANN, *Das Mahābhārata und seine Theile*, I, Kiel, 1892, p. 106.

There are certainly not many today who believe in Holtzmann's theories of tendency reversal and of Buddhist authorship for the Mbh. What remains, however, is the result of Holtzmann's search for traces of Buddhism with Duryodhana and his followers. Duryodhana is by the authors of the late Mbh considered as an incarnation of Kali, and it is well known that the Kaliyuga is often connected with the rise of Buddhism and other heterodox religions. There is indeed evidence for Duryodhana's connection with heterodoxy. Not only, that he declines to recognize Kṛṣṇa's divinity<sup>116</sup>, i.e., he may have been considered as an anti-Viṣṇuite by the authors of the main redaction; he has, moreover, a Rākṣasa friend, called Carvāka, appearing as a *parivrāj* (wandering mendicant) skilled in speech (*vāgviśārada*), by whom Duryodhana hopes to be revenged after his death<sup>117</sup>. The followers of Duryodhana, whom the Pāṇḍavas meet when they enter his tent after the war, are wearing reddish or yellowish and dirty clothes (*kāṣāya-malina-ambarāḥ*)<sup>118</sup>, which reminds of the colour of the Buddhist monk robe.

Holtzmann was of the opinion that his Buddhist author had Aśoka in mind when he depicted Duryodhana. If a speculation of that kind be permitted, I should find it much more tempting to connect Aśoka with Dhṛtarāṣṭra and the Buddhists with the hundred sons of the latter. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the blind ruler, who in spite of his wish to be impartial and to do justice to Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas alike, in his weakness gives way to the evil intrigues of his sons, whose influence he cannot escape, could well reflect the image that the orthodox brahmins had made themselves of the emperor Aśoka. The policy of this ruler, who openly supported the Buddhists and who propagated a general *dharma* of humanity instead of the brahminical *dharma* founded on Vedic tradition, must have meant a shock for the orthodox brahmin class. His rule may well have represented for them a climax of the Kali age, and *dāna*, the virtue of this age, holds indeed a very prominent position in the Aśoka inscriptions. It is this virtue the Buddhists lay special stress upon in their Aśoka legend conserved in the Aśoka Avadāna. This source<sup>119</sup> tells us that Aśoka as a *dānapati* organizes the so-called *pañcavarṣa* ceremony, a kind of contest of giving, where Aśoka's son Kuṇāla tries to surpass the liberality of his father. Aśoka gives finally away one hundred thousand ounces of gold, the territory of his empire, his wives, his ministers, his own body and his son Kuṇāla. This reminds strongly of the game of dice of the Mbh, that

116. Cf. Mbh VI.62.31 (Bhīṣma addressing Duryodhana):

*manye tvāṃ rākṣasaṃ krūraṃ tathā cāsi tamovṛtaḥ /  
yasmād dviṣasi Govindaṃ Pāṇḍavaṃ ca Dhanamjayam /  
Nara-Nārāyaṇau devau nānyo dviṣyād dhi mānavaḥ //*

117. Mbh IX.63.38.

118. Mbh IX.61.6.

119. See J. PRZYLUCKI, *La légende de l'empereur Aśoka*, Paris, 1923, p. 267 ff.

already by Held<sup>120</sup>, who followed a suggestion of M. Mauss, was interpreted as a potlatch ceremony, i.e. a giving contest common with the red Indians. In the Mbh where Dhṛtarāṣṭra is held responsible for the event, it is the Pāṇḍavas who lose all their possessions, while the Kauravas are the beneficiaries, just as the Buddhist *saṃgha* is the beneficiary of Aśoka's *pañcavarṣa* ceremony.

Already Holtzmann<sup>121</sup> pointed to the fact that the — in his opinion — later authors of the Mbh tried to connect Duryodhana with Śivaism too. This observation seems to be correct: the enemies of the Pāṇḍavas and especially those of Kṛṣṇa bear often Śivaite features, e.g. king Jarāsandha of Magadha, who is killed by Kṛṣṇa and the Pāṇḍavas in a concerted action<sup>122</sup>. The best friends of Duryodhana, Karṇa and Aśvatthāman, have also very close connections with Śiva. To the Viṣṇu-addicted authors of the Mbh, Buddhists and Śivaite may have appeared as their closely interrelated enemies<sup>123</sup>, and, in fact, interrelation and syncretism between Śivaism and Buddhism is a well known phenomenon in the history of religion of e.g. Kashmir, Nepal and Indonesia.

In this connection, mention may be made of a peculiar passage in the Kashmirian chronicle Rājatarāṅgiṇī, which seems to throw some light on our question of a possible relation between Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Aśoka. According to the Rājatarāṅgiṇī<sup>124</sup>, Aśoka had a son called Jalauka, who became an ardent worshipper of Śiva, but who also was compelled to build a Buddhist *viḥāra*. Now, of this Jalauka, whose name means « having his residence in water », it is also said that he « entered the lakes of the Nāgas by arresting the waters »<sup>125</sup>. If we compare with the Mbh, we find that it is just Dhṛtarāṣṭra who, like Aśoka, has a son, namely Duryodhana, who enters the waters by arresting them<sup>126</sup>. The purpose is different, it is true: Duryodhana enters the waters in order to hide himself from the Pāṇḍavas, Jalauka in order to have intercourse with the Nāga girls.

One should, of course, be cautious in drawing conclusions from this coincidence; I mention it only, because I am convinced that the connection between Kauravas and Nāgas is of crucial importance for the understanding of the message that the late Mbh conveys. If anything is obvious in the epic, it is the endeavour of its authors to establish a close relation between Kauravas and Nāgas. The Kaurava residence Hasti-

120. See note 8.

121. *Op. cit.* (see note 115), p. 118 ff.

122. Mbh II.18-22 (Jarāsaṃdhavadhaparvan).

123. This did not, of course, prevent them from integrating Śiva as — strongly apprehended — god into the main story of the epic.

124. Ed. Stein (Bombay, 1892), I.108 ff.

125. I.111, *saṃstabhyaṃbhaḥ praviṣṭena tena nāgasaro 'ntaram*; Stein's translation (Westminster, 1900).

126. Mbh IX.28.52: *prāviṣat taṃ hradaṃ nṛpaḥ / astambhayata toyam ca māyayā*.

nāpura is often paraphrased as « the city named after the Nāgas »<sup>127</sup>. *Nāga* means both elephant and serpent<sup>128</sup>, and this is no mere coincidence, as elephants, serpents, clouds and mountains are mythologically largely interchangeable concepts<sup>129</sup>. Dhṛtarāṣṭra is the name of a well-known serpent king and, as has been pointed out by G. Johnsen<sup>130</sup>, many of the names of the 100 Kauravas are also used as serpent names. A large part of the Ādiparvan is dedicated to serpent tales, and the great myth of Kadrū and Vinatā, Garuḍa and the snakes<sup>131</sup> has a striking structural resemblance with the main story of the whole epic.

If, however, a resemblance between Nāgas and Kauravas was intended, the question arises, what was the real meaning of the *sarpa-sattra* in the breaks of which the epic is said to have been recited for the first time. This so-called sacrifice is in reality a magic intending the destruction of serpents. By making this statement, we see at once the striking contrast to the Buddhist attitude towards the Nāgas. The image of the Buddha protected by the Nāga king Mucalinda must have appeared to Buddhists and non-Buddhists as the very symbol of this relation. In a story contained in the Pali Cullavagga of the Vinayapiṭaka and in the Aṅguttaranikāya of the Suttapiṭaka<sup>132</sup>, the Buddha teaches *metta citta* (« loving-kindness of mind », as I. B. Horner translates the term) as protection against snakebite and recommends a snake charm beginning with the words « *Virūpakkehi me mettaṃ* ».

The corresponding snake charm of Sanskrit-Buddhism, apparently a very popular text, contained in the Mahāmāyūrī Vidyārājñī of the Bower-Ms.<sup>133</sup>, in the Upasenāsūtra of the Sarvāstivādins<sup>134</sup>, but also transmitted in Central Asia as an independent text<sup>135</sup> — this Sanskrit version of the charm starts with the words « *māitrī me Dhṛtarāṣṭreṣu* » (or « *Dhṛtīrāṣṭreṣu* »), translated by Hoernle as « I hold friendship with Dhṛtarāṣṭra and his race ».

One thus gets the impression that against the motto of the Buddhists « friendship with the snakes, with Dhṛtarāṣṭra and his race », the authors of the Mbh put their motto « kill the snakes » by subordinating the whole epic to the snake destruction ceremony of the beginning, which

127. See SÖRENSEN, *Index* (see note 20), s.vv. Nāgāhvaya<sup>1</sup>, Nāgapura, Nāgasāhvaya.

128. On the frequent confusion of both meanings see BIARDEAU, BEFEO, 65, p. 131, n. 3.

129. Cf. Matsyapurāṇa (ed. Bombay, 1895) 125.18:

*gajānāṃ parvatānāṃ ca meghānāṃ bhogibhiḥ saha /  
kulam ekaṃ dvidhābhūtaṃ yonir ekā jalāṃ smṛtam //.*

130. *Loc. cit.* (see note 76), p. 257 ff.

131. Mbh I.14-30.

132. Vin. II.109 f.; AN II.72 f.

133. Ed. A. F. R. Hoernle, Calcutta, 1893-1912, p. 224.

134. Ed. E. WALDSCHMIDT, *Von Ceylon bis Turfan*, Göttingen, 1967, p. 339 ff., here p. 342.

135. E. WALDSCHMIDT, *op. cit.*, p. 368 ff.

seems to be a sort of program coming to its fulfilment in the great battle, where all the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra are killed. Approximating Nāgas and Kauravas, the poets made use of and contributed to the development of a symbolical meaning of Nāga: Duryodhana, the most prominent of the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, was considered as incarnation of Kali, and Kaliyuga included the coming up of heretical groups, that did not recognize the authority of the Veda and that appeared from the perspective of the Mbh authors to be in close connection with indigenous sun and serpent worship. Karna, incarnation of the sun, is made king of Aṅga in the east, and Duryodhana is quite often styled Gāndhārī<sup>136</sup>, « son of Gāndhārī »: the fact that his mother Gāndhārī has no proper name but is called after her country of origin, seems to be significant, if we remember that in the time of Aśoka, Gāndhāra was already a stronghold of Buddhism<sup>137</sup>.

To sum up: I believe that the main redaction of the Mbh is to be understood as a reaction of orthodox brahminical circles against the religious policy of the Mauryas. The addressees of the epic were the kings; therefore the brahmins made use of a very ancient *kṣatriya* tradition of heroic poetry, being originally a year myth in epic form. The structure of the year was superficially adapted to the structure of the four *yugas*, because it was intended to show at the instance of the friendly minded but weak king Dhṛtarāṣṭra the disastrous results of the neglect of *dharma*, leading into a dynastic crisis similar to the cosmic crisis that introduces a Kali age.

The whole event was represented as a historical occurrence of the hoary past by interpolating it into the existing dynastic history. But the disguise is indeed not very convincing, as the fathers of the main actors of the epic, Pāṇḍu and Dhṛtarāṣṭra, are presented as natural sons of Vyāsa, the alleged author of the poem; that is to say, it was intimated that they and their sons were products of his creative imagination.

The authors did not content themselves with the representation of the negative result, the catastrophe following the corruption of *dharma*; their positive contribution is the description of the true *dharma* to be followed by the ideal ruler. This is contained in the so-called didactic books, which certainly grew in the course of centuries, until they reached their present extent; but if we understand the Mbh as a document of counter-reformation against Buddhism, Jainism and other heretical sects, we must assume that the communication of the authentic *dharma* to the just king Yudhiṣṭhira already belonged to the concept of the main redaction.

136. See SÖRENSEN, *Index* (see note 20), p. 279.

137. Cf. E. LAMOTTE, *Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien*, Louvain, 1958, p. 365.