

Saramā as a psychopomp dog in ancient India

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The paper investigates the origin of Saramā's legend by confronting its two oldest versions (ṚV 10.108 and JB 2.440-442) along with further Rigvedic fragments and mentions. Actually, nothing in the Rigvedic tale suggests that Saramā is a dog. The two main versions differ for a number of factors, not least the characters involved (only Saramā and the Paṇis are found in both sources) and the textual typology, but both come from the same oral archetype and consider Saramā a divine-sent heroine. From a historical point of view, some elements suggest that the context in which the myth arose was nomadic and war-like, and a strong competition for resources took place: cattle raiding, *brahmodya*-style back-and-forths and the taste for forcing adversaries to speak the truth, are all features that can be found in Vrātyas' lifestyle, thus linking the she-dog to wandering, sworn male brotherhoods in ancient India. Below the textual surface, Saramā's myth is a peculiar example of canine symbolism in Indo-Aryan tradition, and shows a privileged connection to death and the underworld: closeness to the yonder world is embodied by Saramā's progeny, since they are said to be Yama's two dogs, suggesting that dogs were believed to occupy an intermediate position between life and death. Traces of this belief emerge in contemporary traditions involving dogs, namely in the Khaṇḍobā cult in Maharashtra, which is considered to preserve legacies of Vrātya rites from Vedic times. Textual and archaeological evidence from the *aśvamedha* rite shows that in the great royal sacrifice a dog is killed along with a horse in order to ensure kingship. Reconstructing the first ideological stages of Saramā's story might help understand why in post-Brahmanical reform texts Saramā is no longer the protecting *devaśuni* of Rigvedic times, and becomes instead a demon who eats embryos in the womb, while dogs in general are seen as polluting and contaminating, probably also due to their relationship with death.

Keywords: Vedic and Sanskrit Sources, Saramā, psychopomp, dog and death, Vrātyas, cattle raiding.

1. Introduction¹

The present paper aims to trace a general framework about Saramā, the she-dog that, in Vedic times, works at Indra's service. The analysis is built on a careful analysis of texts: as early myths mirror both

¹ All translations, except otherwise indicated, are the author's.

the history, and the culture of the people who composed them, it is interesting to investigate the symbolic level hidden under the textual surface. The perspective adopted for examining the social and cultural background of the Saramā story mainly refers to the recent studies on male brotherhoods in ancient India, also known as Vrātyas, who are strictly connected with dog symbolism. A comparison of the several versions of the story of Saramā is proposed here, with the aim of better grasping its cultural background.²

The general plot, as it is traditionally interpreted, recounts that Indra's (or the gods') cows are stolen by the Paṇis, and later hidden by the demon Vala in the middle of the river Rasā. In order to recover the cattle, Indra sends Saramā on a raid at the river bank. The two oldest passages, one Vedic and one Late Vedic, are the richest, and most complete sources available to reconstruct the myth. As will be shown below, ṚV 10.108, reports a complex dialogue between our main character and her enemies, the Paṇis; and indeed neither Vala, nor the dog nature of the protagonist are mentioned. The more consistent JB 2.440-442 offers a wider prosastic version of the myth, narrating the backstory and the circumstances that led to the conversation recorded by the Rigvedic version of the story. Here, Saramā is clearly a dog, behaving as if she were a human, or even a divine character. Before her, an analogous mission had been ordered by the gods to the bird Aliklava Suparṇa, but the latter was bribed by the Paṇis, and damned for his failure. Instead, Saramā is rewarded for her success with the blessing of a rich offspring. However, this story must be quite old, since Saramā is already mentioned in the Family Books of the *Rgveda* (3.31, 4.16, 5.45).

The way Saramā's character has changed throughout the centuries stimulates a reflection on the common perception of dogs in ancient India. From the sources, it is evident that Saramā and her offspring, Yama's two dogs, occupy a liminal condition between orthodox rites and heterodox traditions—which historically corresponds to a marginalised social status for the people who live materially and symbolically close to dogs. In particular, Saramā's mythic sphere preserves the Indo-European feature of the dog as a psychopomp, while developing unique peculiarities inside the Indian ritual system, especially concerning the kingship issue and the royal *aśvamedha* sacrifice.

² Oertel (1898:103) already compared ṚV 10.108 with *Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa* (JB) 2.440-442, and concluded that the JB version is 'an attempt to fuse the two conflicting legends of the Rig-Veda and the Brhaddevatā' (8.24-36), 'keeping Saramā's character clean without sacrificing the motif of the betrayal of the god.'

2. The Rigvedic version of the story (ṚV 10.108)

The most ancient attestation of Saramā's myth can be found in *Ṛgveda* (ṚV) 10.108:³ the narration begins *in medias res*, when the Paṇis attempt in vain to bribe Saramā. At the beginning, the Paṇis seem quite circumspect, while asking about Indra and how Saramā managed to cross the Rasā river; later, they threaten her, receiving a fierce deny; eventually, they offer a compromise and try to flatter her with the prospect of sharing the booty.

1. [The Paṇis:] Looking for what, did Saramā come here? Indeed the path [is] in a distant place and leading far away. What message for us? What was [your] travelling? How did you cross over the waters of the Rasā?
2. [Saramā:] I move, sent out [as] messenger of Indra, o Paṇis, searching for your great treasures. With fear of going beyond, that animated us; in that manner I crossed over the waters of the Rasā.
3. [The Paṇis:] What is Indra like, o Saramā? What does he look like – he whose messenger have run here from afar? Also, [let him be] coming here: we shall establish a friendship, then he shall become our cattle herder.
4. [Saramā:] I do not consider him deceivable: he [himself] deceives [others] – he of whom as a messenger I have run here from afar. The deep flowing [rivers] do not conceal him; beaten by Indra, you, o Paṇis, lie down.
5. [The Paṇis:] These [are] the cows, o Saramā, that you went in search for, o blessed one, [having] come to the limits of the sky. Who could let them go away without fighting? Our weapons are also sharp.
6. [Saramā:] O Paṇis, your words [are] not striking. Let [your] evil bodies be impervious to arrows or let the path to you be impossible to follow—even in that case, Bṛhaspati will have no mercy! Let [your] evil bodies be impervious to arrows or let the path to you be impossible to follow—even in that case, Bṛhaspati will not have mercy!
7. [The Paṇis:] O Saramā, this treasure, rooted in a rock, [is] endowed with cows, with horses and goods. The Paṇis guard it, who [are] good herdsmen; you came to [this] deserted site in vain.
8. [Saramā:] Sharpened by the Soma, the Ṛsis, the Aṅgirasas, Ayāsyā, the Navagvas, shall come to this place. They will divide these cows into parts, then indeed the Paṇis will eject [their] word.

³ *kim icchantī saramā predam ānaḍ dūre hy adhvā jagurīḥ parācāiḥ | kāsmehitīḥ kā paritakmyāsīt katham rasāyā ataraḥ payāṃsi ||1|| indrasya dūtīr iṣitā carāmi maha icchantī paṇayo nidhīn vaḥ | atīṣkado bhiyasā tan na āvat tathā rasāyā ataram payāṃsi ||2|| kīḍrīn indraḥ sarame kā ḍṛśīkā yasyedaṃ dūtīr asaraḥ parākāt | ā ca gacchān mitram enā dadhāmāthā gavāṃ gopatir no bhavāti ||3|| nāham taṃ veda dabhyam dabhat sa yasyedaṃ dūtīr asaram parākāt | na taṃ gūhanti sravato gabhīrā hatā indreṇa paṇayaḥ śayadhve ||4|| imā gāvāḥ sarame yā acchaḥ pari divo antān subhage patanti | kas ta enā ava sṛjād ayudhvī utāsmākam āyudhā santi tigmā ||5|| asenyā vaḥ paṇayo vacāṃsy anīṣavyās tanvaḥ santu pāpīḥ | adhr̥ṣṭo va etavā astu panthā bṛhaspatir va ubhayā na mṛḍāt ||6|| ayaṃ nidhīḥ sarame adribudhno gobhir aśvebhīr vasubhir nyṛṣṭaḥ | rakṣanti tam paṇayo ye sugopā reku padam alakam ā jagantha ||7|| eha gamann ṛṣayaḥ somaśītā ayāsyo aṅgirasas navagvāḥ | ta etam ūrvaṃ vi bhajanta gonām athaitad vacaḥ paṇayo vamaṇ it ||8|| evā ca tvaṃ sarama ājagantha prabādhitā sahasā daivyena | svasāraṃ tvā kṛṇnavai mā punar gā apa te gavāṃ subhage bhajāma ||9|| nāham veda bhr̥ṣṭvaṃ no svasṛtvam indro vidur aṅgirasas ca ghorāḥ | gokāmā me acchadayan yad āyam apāta ita paṇayo varīyaḥ ||10|| dūram ita paṇayo varīya ud gāvo yantu minatīr ṛtena | bṛhaspatir yā avindan nigūdāḥ somo grāvāna ṛṣayaś ca viprāḥ ||11||*

9. [The Paṇis:] O Saramā, verily you came here, driven by divine power. I shall make you our sister: do not go back, we shall divide away the cows with you, o blessed one.
10. [Saramā:] I know neither brotherhood nor sisterhood; Indra and the awful Aṅgirasas know [this]. Desiderous of cows, [they] concealed them to me, since I came; hence go away, o Paṇis, farther off.
11. [Saramā:] Go off, o Paṇis, farther off, may the cows which are out of place according to the ṛta come out,⁴ those which Bṛhaspati and the Soma, the pressing stones, and the inspired Ṛṣis found concealed.

At first glance, there is no indication that the cows belong to Indra, and Saramā might as well be stealing them on behalf of her patron (see Debroy 2008: 64); however, there are no clues in the text that she is a dog. Neither do the Paṇis look like the *asuras* they are said to be in later traditions; they introduce themselves as good herdsmen possessing sharp weapons. From the textual layout, nothing prevents us from considering all the characters as fully human, and not much information is given about the antagonist Paṇis, usually considered strangers. RV 6.51.14 states that the ‘devourer Paṇi’ is a wolf: ⁵ Jamison-Brereton (2014: 847) translates the term as ‘rapacious niggard,’ while on their commentary they point out that ‘the wolf is a cross-category in RVic classification, and this statement is a quasi-legal declaration that a particular human evil-doer is an outlaw.’⁶

The several interpretations of the symbolical level have mostly highlighted the cosmical value of the myth. Brereton 2002 interprets Indra’s attempt to regain his own cows as mirroring the poet’s aim to exercise the power of his enchanting word: ‘just as Indra Bṛhaspati and the Aṅgirasas found the cattle through their recitation of the truth, so the poet will likewise obtain cattle by means of the truth of this hymn’ (Brereton (2002: 224)): even if dangerous, the Paṇis do not possess the power of the magical ritual speech, which is necessary to subvert reality and shape a new cosmos. Witzel agrees that the cows represent the primordial dawn, treasures, riches of every kind, and poetry, arguing that Saramā and Indra bear a new cosmic order, which competes with (and wins) the Paṇis’ outdated one:

⁴ Jamison-Brereton (2014: 1590) attributes this line to a narrator and translates *minatīr ṛtena* with ‘exchanging places with the truth.’ By surveying all occurrences of the verbal base *mī-* with the help of the Sanskrit Digital Corpus, it appears that this lexeme has at least three main meanings: to transgress/violate, to confound, to diminish/belittle, and occasionally it is rendered with ‘to change/exchange/alter/compromise.’ Nevertheless, Geldner 1951’s hypothesis (vol. 3: 330, fn. 11b) that *minatīh* originated from *mimatīh* by dissimilation is tempting: in this case the coming out cows would be simply ‘bellowing’ (from *mā-*, 3rd present class verbal base). About the role of *ṛta*, Radicchi (1962: 108-110) investigates whether the instrumental *ṛténa* means ‘in conformity with the *ṛta*,’ or the *ṛta* is the force that breaks the *vala* open. Her position excludes the exact overlapping of the meanings of *ṛta* and order, and suggests that the cows simply come out of a rock according to the *ṛta*.

⁵ *grāvāṇaḥ soma no hi kaṃ sakhitvanāya vāvaśuḥ | jahī ny atrīṇam paṇim vṛko hi śaḥ ||* ‘O Soma, our pressing stones longed for companionship | slay indeed the devourer Paṇi, [for] he is a wolf.’

⁶ See <http://rigvedacommentary.alc.ucla.edu/> (accessed on May 2, 2024).

whoever conquers the cows will have a new dawn and inspired speech, thus ruling over the material world and controlling the prosperity of their sacrifices. The dialogue framework is interesting as well: if it is true that the *saṃvāda* structure can be found already in ṚV, on the other hand, considering the aggressive and competitive background in which it is composed and set, it is possible to connect this hymn with the *brahmodya*. In particular, Saramā's determined and impetuous attitude prospects her faction's victory and the splitting up of the booty among the winners, developed in a back and forth interaction. This allows us to suppose that both the layout and content were born in a reality where the competition for resources was also verbal and of wisdom.

Below the competitive coat, the last verse represents the scene as mirroring a sacrifice: just like in ritual, just one element out of place is enough to turn things upside down, and withholding the cows means to keep away the essentials to perform the ritual. As the sacrifice cannot begin in darkness, light is also being held, or dawn (*uṣas*): the perspective is a dark world, with different sacrificing rules, governed by the uncontrollable Paṇis.⁷ Remarkably, any mention of Vala is absent here: the Paṇis do not seem to have a protector. His presence might be implied for a listener, who was supposed to already know the plot of the story. Vala himself is similar to his brother Vṛtra: both withhold the source of life—water or milk; both are slain by Indra, who represents the legitimacy of Vedic warrior behaviour.

3. A later Sāmavedic version (JB 2.440-442)

Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa (JB) 2.440⁸

Then, indeed, the asuras called Paṇis were the gods' cowherds. They, indeed, went off with them (the cows). Vala, after surrounding them (the cows), concealed [them] at the Rasā. The gods said to Aliklava: 'Suparṇa, search for these our cows.' 'So be it' [he replied]. He indeed flew towards [them]. He indeed reached them, which were in the middle of the Rasā, hidden by Vala. They (the Paṇis) placed this before him, who came after [the cows], indeed: clarified butter, thickened milk, curd, sour milk. He was indeed satiated by it. They said to him: 'Suparṇa, right this food will be a tribute for you, do not deliver us.' He indeed flew back again. Indeed, they (the gods) said to him: 'Suparṇa,

⁷ Debroy (2008: 63) interprets the argument as 'a perpetual struggle between the forces of light and darkness.' i.e. night, who has stolen the rays of light as cows and Saramā as a messenger (*Uṣas*).

⁸ *atha ha vai paṇayo nāmāsura devānām gorakṣā asuḥ | tābhir ahāpātasthuḥ | tā ha rasāyām nirudhya valenāpidadhuḥ | te devā aliklavam ūcus suparṇemā no gā anviccheti | tatheti | sa ha anuprapapāti | tā hānvājagāma rasāyām antarvalena apihitāḥ | tasmai ha anvāgatāya sarpiḥ kṣīram āmikṣām dadhi iti etad upanidadhuḥ | tasya ha suhita āsa | taṃ hocus suparṇa iṣa eva te balir bhaviṣyatyetad annam mā naḥ pravoca iti | sa ha punar āpapāta | taṃ hocus suparṇa avido gā iti | kā kīrtiścid gavāmiti hovāca | eṣaiva kīrtiścid gavām iti tasya hendro galam utpīdyann uvāca goṣv eva ahaṃ kila tava uṣuṣo mukham iti | sa ha dadhidrapṣam va āmikṣām va udāsa | so'yaṃ babhūva yo'yaṃ vasantā bhūmikapaṭhur jāyate | taṃ ha tac chasāpa aślīlam jālma te jivanam bhūyād yo no gā anuvīdyā tā na prāvoca iti | tasya haitad grāmasya jaghanārdhe yat pāpiṣṭham tajjivanam |*

have you spotted the cows?’ Indeed, he replied: ‘What is this mention of the cows?’ ‘This is exactly the mention of the cows,’ Indra said indeed, squeezing his throat, ‘I am certain that this is your mouth, namely of one who lived right among the cows.’ He indeed threw out either a drop of curd or thickened milk. He became this that in spring is born as a mushroom of the earth. He indeed cursed him: ‘O vile, may your existence become contemptible, [of you who] having found our cows, did not deliver them.’ Indeed his life became the most wicked, in the hinder part of the village.

JB 2.441⁹

They said to Saramā: ‘O Saramā, seek after our cows.’ [By replying] ‘So be it,’ she indeed moved along. She indeed went to the Rasā. This indeed [was] the Rasā that from hither [is] the sewer of the sea. She said indeed: ‘Verily, I will float on you, you will become fordable for me.’ ‘Swim across me,’ (the Rasā) said indeed, ‘I will not become fordable for you.’ She, the flowing one, indeed swam quickly, after turning downwards the two ears. She (the Rasā) indeed observed: ‘Now, how could the she-dog swim across me? Oh, I shall be fordable for her.’ She indeed said to her ‘Swim across me, I will become fordable for you.’ ‘So be it’ [Saramā replied]. Indeed, she (the Rasā) was fordable for her. She (Saramā) indeed passed through the ford. She indeed reached them, which were in the middle of the Rasā, hidden by Vala. Therefore, (the Paṇis) placed this before her, who came after [the cows], indeed: clarified butter, thickened milk, curd, sour milk. She said indeed: ‘I am not so much unfriendly to the gods. Having found the cows, I could eat of you. Indeed, having carried out the robbery of the gods, you are moving; verily, I am the path of these cows. You shall not prate to me, nor shall you take away Indra’s cows.’ She indeed stayed, without eating. She indeed found the cast-off skin of a serpent.¹⁰ She indeed ate it. One (of the Paṇis) went near her [saying] ‘Indeed, Saramā eats the placenta, as if [she is] killing him.’ Then this also [became] a common saying: ‘Indeed, Saramā eats the placenta, as if [she is] killing him.’ Indeed, she ate the placenta. She indeed ran back again. (The gods) indeed said to her: ‘Saramā, have you reached the cows?’

⁹ *te saramām abruvan sarama imā nastvaṃ gā anviccheti | tatheti sā ha anuprasāsāra | sā ha rasām ājagāma | eṣā ha vai sā rasā yaiṣārvāk samudrasya vāpāyatī | tām hovāca ploṣye vā tvā gādhā me bhaviṣyasi iti | plavasya ma iti hovāca na te gādhā bhaviṣyami iti | sā hāvācyā karṇau ploṣyamānā sasāra | sā ha ikṣāṃcakre katham nu mā śunī plaveta hantāsyai gādhāsāni iti | tām hovāca mā mā ploṣṭhā gādhā te bhaviṣyamīti | tatheti | tasyai ha gādhā āsa | sā ha gādhena atisāsāra | tā ha anvājagāma rasāyām antarvalena apihitāḥ | tasyai ha anvāgatāyai tathaiva sarpiḥ kṣīram āmikṣām dadhi iti etad eva upanindadhuh | sā hovāca na aham etāvadapriyā devānām | gā avidam yadvōśnīyām | ta u vai devānām steyam kṛtvā carathaitāsām vā aham gāvām udavīrasmi | na mā lāpayisyadhva nendrasya gā upaharisyadhva iti | sā hānāśīsyuvāsa | sā ha jarāyvapāstaṃ viveda | tadda cakhāda | tām haika upajagau | tyamiva vai ghnatī saramā jarāyu khādati iti | tadidamapyetarhi nivacanam | tyamiva vai ghnatī saramā jarāyu khādati iti | jarāyu ha sā taccakhāda | sā ha punarāsāsāra | tām ha ucussarame’vido gā iti |*

¹⁰ According to the lexicons, *jarāyu* (n) counts among its meanings ‘the cast-off skin of a serpent’ and ‘the outer skin of the embryo.’ The first could be referred to Vala (Vṛtra’s brother) as a serpent. In this sense, Saramā eating his skin could mean overpowering him. As for the second meaning, see *Atharvaveda Śaunakiya* (AVŚ) 1.11.4 where an easy childbirth is wished, when the placenta slips down to be eaten by a dog.

JB 2.442¹¹

‘I found’ she said indeed, ‘these ones, [which] had been concealed in the middle of the Rasā by Vala. They, as you imagined, were excited in this way.’ Indra indeed said to her: ‘O Saramā, I will make the progeny of you food-eater, who found our cows.’ They [who live] among the Vidarbhas, indeed the sons of Saramā (i.e. the dogs) also kill the tiger. The gods arranged this Abhiplava ceremony. By means of this [ceremony] they overflowed with this. Since they overflowed [by means of this], this is called Abhiplava. They consumed Vala right by means of Agni, [and] broke [him into pieces] by means of the Vajra. Whatever is the Jyotiṣṭoma (i.e. the light) that is in the first place, this is Agni; then, whatever is the bovine (i.e. devoted to the Gavāmayana sacrifice) Bahiṣpavamāna made of fifteen verses, this is the Vajra. They separated them (i.e. the cows of the Gavāmayana sacrifice) with the Āyus (i.e. by means of vigour). Since they separated them by means of vigour, this is called Āyus. They surrounded them (i.e. the cows of the Gavāmayana sacrifice) from both sides right with this Jyotiṣṭoma (i.e. with the light). They become these four Ukthyas (libations) in the middle. Verily, the sacrificial animals [are] the Uktha verses. A thousand of Stotra verses belong to them. Verily, Brahman [is] the bright Agniṣṭoma. After encompassing them on both sides right by means of this (Abhiplava ceremony) with a Brahman and a Jyotiṣṭoma, they set up. They, who being aware of this perform the Abhiplava, become elevated, indeed, as endowed with a thousand rewards. Then they said ‘When what is the four-day [ceremony] [is] intertwined in the middle, the Gavāmayana, the Āyus, the Gavāmayana and the Āyus. Then why do the two Jyotiṣṭomas have been placed separately?’ He indeed should reply: ‘In order to copulate, to obtain offspring.’ He who is aware of this, is born forth by means of the copulation.

The passage is evidently a more articulate and ritually oriented version of ṚV, which is probably only a fragment of the overall picture, but it is noticeable that both scenes are staged as a theatrical back-and-forth dialogue among the parts. In JB, the Paṇis are clearly called *asuras* (thus powerful agents) and the gods’ cowherds, which presuppose a pastoral, and perhaps nomadic background, in which hierarchies define social roles—and here the cattle really belong to the *devas*, in particular to Indra. New characters make their appearance, like Aliklava Suparṇa and Vala, whereas the Rasā acquires more consistency through a dialogue with Saramā, who is explicitly called *śunī*. Let us sketch their profiles.

The gods try to recover Indra’s cows by seeking help from the bird Aliklava, called Suparṇa, ‘the well-feathered one.’ This first attempt fails, since the Paṇis bribe him with milk and dairy products. When Indra finds out, he condemns Aliklava to be damned, living a miserable life: it is a mythical

¹¹ *āvidam iti hovācemā rasāyām antarvalena apihitāḥ | tā yathā manyadhvam evam ājihīrṣateti | tām ha tad indra uvācānnādīm are te sarame prajāṃ karomi yā no gā anvāvida iti | te haite vidarbheṣu mālālās sārāmeyā api ha śārdūlam mārayanti | te devā etam abhiplavam samabharan | tenainā abhyaṣlavanta | yad abhyaṣlavanta tad abhiplavasyābhiplavatvam | te ’gninaiva valam abhyaṣan vajreṇābhindan | tā āyusaivāyuvata | yad āyusaivāyuvata tad āyusa āyusṭvam | tā etenaiva jyotiṣobhayataḥ paryauhan | sa ya eṣa purastāj jyotiṣ so’gnir atha yat pañcadaśam gor bahiṣpavamānaṃ sa vajraḥ | ta ete catvāro madhya ukthyā bhavanti | paśavo vā ukthāni | teṣāṃ sahasraṃ stotryāḥ | brahma vai jyotiragniṣṭomaḥ | tā etenaiva brahmaṇā jyotiṣobhayataḥ pariḡrhyodāharan | te ya evaṃ vidvāṃso’bhiplavam upayanti sahasrasanayo haivotthitā bhavanti | tadāhur yad eṣa caturaho madhye vyatiṣakto gaur āyur gaur āyur ity atha kasmāj jyotiṣ viparyūdhe iti | mithunatvāya prajānanāyeti ha bruyāt | pra mithunena jāyate ya evaṃ veda |*

explanation for the animal's actual nature, which is despised and left out for feeding on dead prey. Other sources say that *Suparṇa*, 'well-feathered,' denotes the eagle, whereas *alikhlava* is the popular name for a carrion bird, attested in two *Atharvaveda* hymns, in all cases belonging to a list of wild animals, mostly carrion-feeding.¹² *Aliklava* becomes then a mushroom (or another small whitish sprout born from a drop of dairy products), thus climbing down to a lower level of existence, but with the possibility of germinate again every spring. Whatever *Aliklava Suparṇa*'s backstory may be, in JB, Saramā's success in recovering the cows starts from the bird's failure.

Another interesting feature is the dialogue between Saramā and the Rasā: how is the first one supposed to cross the latter? Firstly refusing to become fordable for Saramā, after seeing her difficulties in swimming, the Rasā seems to change her mind, becoming a ford through which she might reach her target. Noticeably, the challenge is overcome thanks to the cooperation of the only two female characters of the story. Furthermore, the Rasā is not a common river, being commonly described as 'a mythical stream supposed to flow around the earth and the atmosphere,' while Ranade (2019: 1135) observes that it 'flows hitherwards away from the sea:' considering her nature, the mythic river resembles a yonder stream, which keeps the living on the outside of a non-place, far from an otherworldly refuge.

Having crossed the Rasā,¹³ Saramā finally faces Vala and the Paṇis. Remarkably, each of the 'speaking' characters—be it a she-dog, a bird, a river, a god or a demon—behaves exactly like a human being would do, a datum which makes it difficult to understand Vala's nature: is he a demon or a cave? We assume that his name, cited here, is only the personification of the cave in which the cattle is kept; for sure he surrounds (or restrains, *nirudh-*) cows, an action compatible with serpent-like appearance, which perhaps might imply an ideal similarity with *Vṛtra*.

Just like in *ṚV* 10.108, the Paṇis attempt to convince Saramā to betray her patron, but she refuses: instead, she eats a *jarāyu*: eating a part of another living being could mean to take possession of their essence, to overpower and cancel their presence and deeds. Whatever symbolical value this action means, Vala and his protected Paṇis lose their relevance and power in this debate, being somehow

¹² In *AVŚ* 11.2 the term is attested in verses 2.1 (*śune kroṣṭre mā śarīrāṇi kartam aliklavebhyo ḡdhrebhyo ye ca kṛṣṇā aviśyavaḥ* | 'Do not make the bodies for the dog, the jackal, the carrion birds, the vultures, those that [are] greedy carrion-eating animals') and 24.1 (*tubhyam āraṇyāḥ paśavo mṛgā vane hitā haṃsāḥ suparṇāḥ śakunā vayāṃsi* | 'To you the domestic and wild animals held in the forest, the gray geese, the well-feathered, the big birds, the winged ones') whereas in *AVŚ* 11.9.9 the *alikhlavas* are mentioned along with the *jāṣkamadas* (a not better identified 'kind of animal,' according to MW), the vultures and the hawks.

¹³ The verb *plu-* ('to float'/'to swim'), used for Saramā moving in the water, does not tell much about how Saramā's crossing over happens. Also, when Saramā finds the hidden cows, these are *rasāyām antarvalena apihitāḥ*: one cannot help but try to imagine how the setting is conceived, especially how a herd can be kept in the middle of a river.

defeated by this final action. At last Saramā reports the cows to the gods; as a reward, Indra makes her offspring *ānnād*- ‘food-eater,’¹⁴ dogs that in the Vidarbha land are able even to kill the tiger. If Aliklava is existentially declassified for his betrayal, and forced to only generate himself over and over again into a miserable being, in a specular way Saramā’s loyalty is rewarded with her progeny’s social upgrade.

4. Other Rigvedic fragments of the story

To account for the other occurrences of Saramā in the earliest *saṃhitā*, ṚV 1.62.3 focuses on Indra’s deeds in the Vala myth, and the role the Aṅgirasas play in recovering the cattle: ‘the Aṅgirasas, knowing the track (/word), chanting, found the cows.’¹⁵

At the order of Indra and the Aṅgirasas, Saramā found the nourishment for the offspring.
Bṛhaspati split the rock open [and] found the cows. The men bellowed together with the reddish [cows].¹⁶

In ṚV 1.72.8 her mention has a positive value, while a parallel is implicitly traced between the rescuing of the Fire and Saramā’s deeds, as she is the one who found “the cattle-pen, by which, even now, the clan stemming from Manu benefits” (Jamison-Brereton (2014: 197)).

ṚV 5.45.7-8¹⁷ probably refers to same myth as ṚV 10.108, mentioning the Navagvas and the Aṅgirasas along with Saramā, who is said to have recovered the cows by being the one who goes for the *ṛta*, and immediately after, in verse 8.2, the *ṛta*-path makes its appearance.

The (pressing) stone, guided by the hand, bellowed there, the stone along with which the Navagvas sang for ten months. Saramā, going after the truth, found the cows; the Aṅgirasas made all things real. When all the Aṅgirasas roared along with the cows at the brightening of this great (dawn), at the fountainhead of them [=cows], in the highest seat, Saramā found the cows along the path of truth.¹⁸

¹⁴ According to Amano (2013: 73), ‘food-eater’ is a Vedic expression used to indicate one who ‘has a stabilized economy.’

¹⁵ According to Jamison-Brereton (2014: 182) this hymn contemplates feminine characters in pairs, sometimes wives (*janī* and *patnī*), sometimes sisters (*svasṛ*, just as the Paṇis address Saramā in order to convince her to become one of them).

¹⁶ *indrasyāṅgirasāṃ ceṣṭau vidat saramā tanayāya dhāsim | bṛhaspatir bhinad adriṃ vidat gāḥ sam usriyābhir vāvaśanta naraḥ ||*

¹⁷ *anūnod atra hastayato adrir ārcan yena daśa māso navagvāḥ | ṛtam yatī saramā gā avindat viśvāni satyāṅgirās cakāra || viśve asyā vyuṣi māhināyāḥ saṃ yad gobhir aṅgirasō navanta | utsa āsām parame sadhasṭha ṛtasya pathā saramā vidat gāḥ ||*

¹⁸ Tr. Jamison-Brereton (2014: 719).

AVŚ 4.5.2 also refers to her as *sakhā*, a ‘friend’ of Indra, which allows White (1986: 239) to suggest that Saramā is a herd dog, whose job is usually to go after the cows.¹⁹

Later commentators give metaphoric explanations of this myth: in Mahīdhara’s commentary on *Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā* (VS), Saramā is considered as a heavenly dog and as Speech (Vāc), whereas in Sāyaṇa’s commentary on *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* (TĀ), she is the sacred altar (*vedi*) (Hariyappa (1953: 160-64)).

5. Dogs in old Indo-Aryan tradition

How was the dog considered in Vedic literature? Already Hopkins 1894 tried to investigate this matter, noticing that ‘dog’ (*śva-/śuna-*) is frequently a man’s name.²⁰ Indeed, dog features are pervasive in Indo-Aryan culture, perhaps because of the long time companionship of dog and human, especially in a tribal society, like the nomadic Aryans must have been. Dogs were (and still are) used for hunting, guarding and protecting settlements; they migrate along with their owners when domestic, help catching a prey in packs, control and guide herds as sheepdogs as Saramā in ṚV. No wonder such a close animal became a symbol and metaphor for anything halfway between animal wilderness and human communities.

In the old Indo-European institution of brotherhoods, the dog and the wolf, its progenitor, were terms used for addressing the group members: the young, attacking, unsettled warriors were the wolves, while the dogs were the oldest ones, with the function of protecting their companions and their clan. The Indo-Aryan declination of these Männerbünde were the Vrātyas, sworn/consecrated warriors gathered around a *sthapati* (or *grhapati*), a *primus inter pares* who led the group during raids and was in charge of the sharing of the booty, but also performed sacrifices and ascetic practices on behalf of the group, and was depositary of esoteric knowledge. This might link Saramā with the Maruts (whose father is Rudra and whose leader is Indra); Vrātyas claim to be Rudra’s dogs (see Falk 1986: 18-

¹⁹ A brief mention is deserved by the latest source available, *Bṛhaddevatā* (BD) 8.24-36, which clearly follows the ṚV patterns, but twists the end of the story. In accordance with the tradition, Saramā is sent out by Indra, in order to seek the cows; the Paṇis ask her to stay as their sister, and propose to share the booty. She refuses, remarking that she does not desire neither sisterhood nor wealth; but – and at this point the plot begins to diverge – she would drink the hidden cows’ milk, ‘from having a natural taste and greed.’ After crossing back the one hundred league-long Rasā, under the effect of the milk, the she-dog does not report the cows to Indra, who, enraged, strikes her with his foot. This causes her to vomit the milk (which in some ways reminds of Aliklava Suparṇa) and go back to the Paṇis, full of fear. Finally, Indra recovers the cows on his own, having followed her up to the Paṇis’ refuge.

²⁰ See e.g. the three brothers Śunaḥpuccha, Śunaḥśepa and Śunolāṅgūla (lit. dog’s tail, penis, and hairy tail) in *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (AitB) 7.15.7.

19; White 1991:95-100), the Maruts are their divine double (Falk 1986: 64; White 1991: 98):²¹ the background these figures come from is the same.

As *dīkṣitas* and *brahmacārins*, Vrātyas were subjected to sexual restrictions, which might seem contrasting with the free mating of dogs, and yet if marriage is the norm, extremely licentious and extremely abstinent behaviour deviate from that norm. All unusual sexual habits are situated outside normal and normative orthodoxy, and even the aggressive war lexicon could hide a second layer, referred to the erotic and sexual sphere.²² Reminiscences of such sexually oriented dynamics can still be found nowadays, in cults and rites involving groups of devotees and the normalised presence of dogs. Sontheimer's (1984: 166) suggestion that 'The dog is often a metaphor for sexuality and sexual licentiousness' is thus relatable to Malla, Mani's brother and *rākṣasa*,²³ who inspired the legend on which the popular cult of Mallāri-Khaṇḍobā in Maharashtra (called Mailār in Karnataka and Mallanna in Andhra) is based. According to the popular tale (see Sontheimer 1984: 155-156), the demons Malla and Mani had become enemies of the gods by killing cows and Brāhmins, which led to their defeat by Khaṇḍobā, Śiva's *avatara* and the gods' messenger, in a battle which closely resembles a sacrifice. The cult is a perpetuation of the Rudra/Paśupati tradition, of which it preserves several elements, such as the bow iconography. *Malla-*, a common noun for 'wrestler,' is also the name of a tribe listed among others which, according to Manu, are be considered as descending from a Vrātya,²⁴ probably due to their unusual lifestyle and nomadic past. In JB 3.199, Kutsa Aurava, Indra's charioteer, is called *malla* for threatening the god's wife and sleeping with her. Indra makes him bald, but Kutsa again attempts to deceive her wearing an *uṣṇīṣa*, a turban commonly worn by the Mallas, by Rudra/Śiva and by the

²¹ The divinization of brotherhoods is not unusual in Indo-European mythology: see e.g. the Norse Einherjar, the Irish Fianna and the Iranic Mairya (Kershaw 1997: 338-457).

²² Some scholars attributed a sexual connotation to Saramā. Witzel (1997: 388) reads the whole *samvāda* as an 'exchange of words, full of *double entendre* (*śleṣa*).' Bodewitz (2009: 271) considers 'axle' and 'chariot' in the renowned dialogue between Yama and Yamī in ṚV 10.10 (whose structure is similar to ṚV 10.108) as sexual metaphors. Sexual promiscuity was also practiced by the Greek Cynicals, who—similarly to the Vrātyas—lived on the edge of social rules.

²³ The demon Malla also threatens Brahmins' wives (Sontheimer 1984: 157).

²⁴ In some Pāli passages quoted by Law (1973: 257-62; 294-332) and studied by Neri (2015: 402-409) Mallas figure as a prominent warrior tribe. According to the *Mānavadharmasāstra* 10.22: *jhallo mallas ca rājanyād vrātyāḥ licchivir eva ca | naṭas ca karaṇas caiva khaso draviḍa eva ca caiva khaso draviḍa eva ca* || 'From a warrior [deemed to be] vrātya are born the Jhalla, the Malla, the Licchivi, the Naṭa, the Karaṇa, the Khasa, and the Draviḍa.' The Mallas were an 'independent martial group,' perhaps living in the Chenab-Ravi Doāb, i.e. near to the desert of Rajasthan at the time of JB (3.200) and, named as Malloī by Arr, Ind 19.8; An. 6.5.4; 6.6.1, seem to be there in Alexander's time (see e.g. Witzel 1987: fn. 67). According to Choudhary (1964: 28f.), 'since the Mallas and the Licchavis had oligarchical constitution with a nomadic past, they were termed as Vrātyas by Manu.'

Vrātyas. Nevertheless, the assumed sexual freedom of Saramā is not mentioned in the surveyed texts. By contrast, she is connected with a rich offspring, which is a reward for her loyalty.

Sexual promiscuity seems to be lost in Khaṇḍobā rites, whose followers are nevertheless known as *vāghyās* (dogs) in Marathi and *vaggayyas* in Kannada (Dębicka-Borek (2015: 254), from *vyāghra*, ‘tiger.’ In Jejuri, the most important cult centre of Khaṇḍobā, where dogs are allowed in temples, and where copper statues of Malla and dogs are present, devotees use turmeric powder, stored in a bag made of tiger skin, to mark the dogs’ foreheads; furthermore, the *bhaktas* keep their vows by barking, carrying a spear and wearing clothes according to Vrātya descriptions. Their behaviour has been interpreted by Dębicka-Borek (2015: 255-256) as ‘the reminiscence of Rudra’s troop,’ i.e. the Maruts. The scholar provides a number of details about ‘rudraic’ features who relate Rudra, Narasiṃha and Khaṇḍobā (or Kaṇḍobā), behind the latter there are Śiva, Indra and Rudra. For instance, both Khaṇḍobā and Rudra are said to come from the mountain which ‘sounds almost as a description of such cults which are indeed dedicated to dangerous and furious deities worshipped on mountains, far away from civilization.’²⁵ Both are connected with dogs and tigers: in the ancient hymn devoted to god Rudra ‘dog-leaders’ and ‘lords of dogs’ are mentioned, and Rudra is seated on or clad in a tiger skin (*Śatarudrīya* 1.5; 4.5). In *Hiraṇyakeśi Gṛhyasūtra* 2.7.2, the Ekavrātya is addressed as a dog. In AitB 8.6, Rudra is the Lord of the forest (*araṇyānām paṭiḥ*) like the tiger. The Vāghobā (‘Father Tiger’) cult of Maharashtra seems to recall such an ancient stage of the cult of Śiva (preceding that of the Purāṇas; Sontheimer 1997: 96; Dębicka-Borek 2015: 261). Even today the devotees (*bhaktas*) behave like dogs within the relative festivals. Khaṇḍobā’s canonical image pictures him on a horse, surrounded by a pack of dogs, for hunting or for vanquishing demons—namely *daityas* Malla and Mani. Sontheimer (1984:166) observes that ‘The mixing of ‘tiger’ and ‘dog’ is chronic in myth, ritual and in art,’²⁶ while he notes that Bhairava’s *vāhanas* are ‘the dog and the tiger or two animals which are a mixture of both.’ *Puruṣavyāghra*,²⁷ ‘that tiger of a man,’ is an epithet for a warrior who has covered himself with glory; on the other hand, *puruṣavyāghras* were listed among the wild beings selected as victims of the sacrifices aimed at keeping fathers and sons divided in *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* (TB) 3.9.1.2-4 and *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (ŚB) 13.2.4.2-4,

²⁵ The *muraḷī*, a woman married to Khaṇḍobā, is the ancestress of the *pumścalī*, often considered as a harlot but with no textual evidence, which is cited in AVŚ 15.2 and is known for accompanying the Vrātyas in their expeditions. See Sontheimer (1997: 95); Eschmann (2005: 106); Dębicka-Borek (2015: 258).

²⁶ It has been noted how the Indian pair tiger-lion occasionally substituted the Indo-European wolf-dog one. Nevertheless, in the Mallāri-Khaṇḍobā cult, dog and tiger frequently occur together.

²⁷ As for the translation of this *karmadhāraya* compound rule according to *Aṣṭādhyāyī* 2.1.56, see Mocci-Pontillo (2019).

while one of them is mentioned as beneficiary of the sacrifice of a mad man in VS 30.8 (see Pontillo-Sudyka 2016: 276-287).

Considering all these pieces of information, it is tempting to assume that the context in which the Sārameyas kill the tiger is Vrātya-oriented, even though the specific action performed by them can hardly be decoded. Other details point to the same cultural direction: the Maruts' chariot is drawn by dogs (Hopkins (1894: 155)), and it is well known that the Maruts are the utmost warrior Männerbund found in Vedic times, which can be associated with other Indo-European analogous institutions.

It appears that contact with dogs implicates a liminal social position—either temporarily (like in *vāghya* rites) or permanently—halfway between anthropic world and animal sphere, life and underworld, in the middle of heterodoxy. This might have been one of the factors (along with the harshening of the mainstream behavioural rules, resulting in the Brahmanical reform) that led to considering dogs to be dirty and corrupting. This is the social context in which the Caṇḍālas, outcasts and members of the most despised tribes, are called *śvapacas*, 'dog-cookers,' or, *śvapākas*, 'the ones nourished by dogs.'²⁸ Caṇḍālas eat dogs, and what has been touched or licked by them; they are socially defined (and excluded) due to their connection with dogs. The breaking of sexual rules might be a part of this connection: just as the dog is impure by being sexually promiscuous, Caṇḍālas are born from a Śūdra father and a Brāhman mother,²⁹ therefore they do not belong to the *caturvarṇa* system. Furthermore, Caṇḍālas' job is to dispose of corpses, which makes them the closest human beings to death, whereas dogs are said to be carrion-feeders.

²⁸ White (1991: 72-73) cites *Amarakośa* 2.10.44-46. (2.10.20 in Sardesay-Padhye 1940) according to the scholar, all outcasts are defined by the term *śvapaca*: therefore if Brahmins are identified with pure cows that, among other things, give them dairy products for their diet, outcasts 'live by the flesh or milk of their impure dogs.' Śvapacas are described twice in the *Mānavadharmasāstra*, namely in 3.92, while accounting for Bali offerings, states that 'He should also gently place on the ground offerings for dogs, outcastes, dog-cookers, persons with evil diseases, crows and worms' (tr. Olivelle (2005: 113)), whereas 10.15 affirms that "Cāṇḍālas and Śvapacas, however, must live outside the village and they should be made Apapatras. Their property consists of dogs and donkeys, their garments are the clothes of the dead; they eat in broken vessels; their ornaments are of iron; and they constantly roam about" (tr. Olivelle (2005: 210)).

²⁹ White (1991: 87) takes this piece of information from MBh 13.48.10, 21.

6. Death and afterdeath

6.1 A change in perception: from psychopomp to demon

Saramā's closeness to the other world is reflected in her (supposed) family. For instance, in RV 10.14.10-11 Saramā's sons are two, four-eyed (*caturakṣau*), and strictly related to Yama, therefore to death and afterworld.

Run through a straight path beyond the two spotted four-eyed dogs, sons of Saramā,
then approach the propitious Pitṛs who exult [in] their drinking with Yama.
Your two dogs, which [are] your protectors, o Yama, [are] the four-eyed guardians of the road,
watching mankind. Grant this to him, o king, put above him both good health and fortune.³⁰

The two Sārameyas are the guardians of a path created by Yama for those who, dead since not long ago, move towards the yonder world: the *pitṛyana*, a bridge between the dead and the living ones.³¹ The Pitṛs are often associated with Yama and his entourage; sometimes, this includes dogs or dog elements as psychopomps, operating as bridges between deceased and living ones. The psychopomp feature is not surprising, when compared to other Indo-European hellhounds, just like Cerberus.

The *Mahābhārata* (MBh) depiction seems to be a joint between Vedic deification and gratitude towards Saramā's deeds, and the later demonisation of her and her offspring (probably coinciding with a stricter attitude towards dogs in general, considered impure). MBh 3.219.33-34 offers a clear picture of the change of perspective towards Saramā: if in older sources there was no suspicion or despise, here she is presented as an immoral being who threatens births.

The mother of the cows who now is called 'the charming one' by the wise ones, o king,
The bird (demon), then ascending with her, consumes children in this world;
Saramā is called she who is mother, she-dog and goddess, o Janādhipa,
Indeed she always [is] also taking away embryos of women.³²

The context is the same as AVŚ 1.11.4 (see fn.11), but turned upside down: the dog is not anymore auspicious for a delivery, instead it is dangerous, malevolent and greedy for pregnancy. 'Saramā

³⁰ *ati drava sārameyau śvānau caturakṣau śabalau sādhunā pathā | athā pitṛṇ suvidatrām upehi yamena ye sadhamādam madanti || yau te śvānau yama rakṣitārau caturakṣau pathirakṣi nṛcakṣasau | tābhyām enam pari dehi rājan svasti cāsmā anamīvaṃ ca dhehi ||*

³¹ Sandness (2007: 88) notes that this path of the ancestors is probably oriented southwards, as on the sacrificial field the offer for the manes is placed in its southern point, but she considers each of the dogs to have two eyes.

³² *gavām mātā tu yā prājñaiḥ kathyate surabhir nṛpa | śakunis tām athāruhya saha bhunkte śīsūn bhuvi || saramā nāma yā mātā śunām devī janādhipa | sāpi garbhān samādatte mānuṣiṇām sadaiva hi ||*

becomes a ghoulish who devours children who are still in their mothers' wombs' (White (1986: 243)): what was considered divine will be presented as a demon now onwards.

Dog-shaped will also be the demons who make attempts on children's life in the form of diseases: *Pāraskara Gṛhyasūtra* 1.16.24-25 reports a magic formula to be pronounced in order to make a disease leave the body of an ill child. In case the demon Kumāra attacks the boy in a *śvagraha* (or *svagraha*, literally 'dog attack,' which has been identified with epilepsy), his father should bring him in the middle of the *sabhā*, then recite the magic riddle:

If Kumāra, attacking suddenly, scattered with a net or with an upper garment, putting down the lap, whispers: 'O Kūrkura, Sukūrkura, Kūrkura, who binds children. | Be quiet, o young dog, let [him] loose! Be homage to you, o Sīsara, o Lapeta, o Apahvara. If it is true | that the gods gave [you] a boon, verily, you should cover this boy. | Be quiet, o young dog, let [him] loose! Be homage to you, o Sīsara, o Lapeta, o Apahvara. If it is true | that Saramā [is] your mother, Sīsara your father, Śyāma and Śabala your brothers. Be quiet, o young dog, let [him] loose! Be homage to you, o Sīsara, o Lapeta, o Apahvara.' |

He touches (the boy) [by saying] 'He does not weep, he is not anxious, he is not weary; then we speak, when we touch [him].'³³

This passage allows us to add pieces to the Saramā puzzle. Śyāma (the Black One) and Śabala (the Spotted One) are Saramā's sons—perhaps the Mācalas, certainly Yama's two dogs, whereas Sīsara is their father.³⁴ But there is a third brother, the demon itself, responsible for the disease that binds the child, and who must be convinced to let him loose with such a spell. Another chant, ṚV 7.55.1, addresses an *arjuna* Sārameya, 'presumably a watchdog barking in the night, [...] urged to go to sleep' (Jamison-Brereton 2014: 947). What originally was meant to protect the household from thieves and robbers, seems to become a dangerous intruder in later literature.

The role of dogs in relation to death is better understood when considering its importance in sacrifices, not only in royal *aśvamedhas*, but also in *sattras*. One of the places where the presence of dogs exerts its influence in the sacrificial arena is the Naimiṣa forest, where, according to the epics, the sage Gauramukha defied a whole Asura army in the blink of an eye;³⁵ hence it became a sacred place, a *tīrtha* for pilgrims and home to hermits. Young brahmans were instructed there, and initiated to probably

³³ *yadi kumāra upadravejjālena pacchādhyottariyeṇa vāpitā'ṅka ādhāya japati kūrkuraḥ sukūrkuraḥ kūrkuro bālabandhanaḥ | ceccec chunaka srja namaste astu sīsaro lapetāpahvara tatsatyam | yatte devā varamadaduḥ sa tvaṃ kumārameva vā vṛṇīthāḥ | ceccec chunaka srja namaste astu sīsaro lapetāpahvara tatsatyam | yat te saramā mātā sīsaraḥ pitā śyāmaśabalau bhrātarau ceccec chunaka srja namaste astu sīsaro lapetāpahvareti || abhimṛśayati na rudati na hṛṣyati na glāyati tatra vayaṃ vadāmo yatra cābhimṛśāmasīti |*

³⁴ Hariyappa (1953: 163) notes that in *Ekāgnikaṇḍa* 2.16 Lohita is said to be the father.

³⁵ MBh 1.38.

esoteric rites: the best known example is Śaunaka, who gathered pupils around him in order to teach them a 12-year-long sacrifice. Considering its running time, a celebration of this kind is probably comparable to a *sattra*.³⁶ In JB 1.363, Śitibāhu Aṣakṛta, *sattrin* who celebrates for *grhapati* Somaśuṣma, is called *naimiṣin*, which suggests that violent, unorthodox *sattras* took place in the forest.³⁷ In MBh 1.3 a *Sārameya*, led by curiosity, runs into a *sarpasattra* celebrated by Janamejaya in the Naimiṣa forest. Three of Janamejaya's brothers hit the divine pup, but Saramā proclaims its innocence since it had not looked upon the sacrifice and polluted it. The *sattra* is interrupted and never accomplished; misfortune will fall upon Janamejaya, cursed by Saramā to be filled with fear whenever he least expects it (White 1999: 97).

6.2 Dogs in the *sabhā*: a dice game for royal legitimacy

Unlike what happened after the so-called Brahmanical reform, dogs played an important role in Indo-Aryan culture. Their symbology was also crucial for the Vrātyas, who were fond of dice games, so much that it permeated the terminology for gambling, which was more a game of skill than of luck. White 1986 and 1989 has focused on the term *śvaghnin*, the name for a gambler, in the popular etymology of *śva-han*: '[the *śvaghnin*] is the 'killer' (-*ghnin*, from *han*, 'slay') of, or through the agency of, the dog (*śva*). But the hunter of dogs is, in this play of meanings, a hunter of goods (*śva*, like the Latin *sua*)—in this case the goods or possessions of his adversary in the dice game.'³⁸

³⁶ See the two recorded cases of 12-year sacrifices in *Padma Purāṇa* 6.219.1-12, 1 and MBh 1.1 ff.

³⁷ About the Naimiṣa *sattras*, White (1999: 97-98): 'the *sattras* held by the Vrātyas in the Naimiṣa forest in the dark dead of winter are portrayed as violent sacrifices in Brahmanic mythology. Thus the *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* [TS] states: 'the *dakṣinā* of the *sattra* is 'itself,' ātman... he who accepts a *dakṣinā* at a *sattra* eats a corpse: a human corpse, or the corpse of the horse. Food is the cow.'" TS 7.4.9 is being cited here: *ātmādakṣiṇaṃ vāi sattrām*. Pontillo (2023: 200) underlines that in this context the *ātman* is indeed the self, the *sattrin*'s body, cut deeper and deeper at each ritual stage; *dakṣinā* cannot mean 'priestly fee,' but it is rendered with 'magnificence,' which is necessary for the Vrātya group to be successful in its sacrifice. Summing up, the pre-BlackYajurvedasaṃhitā *sattra* establishes that the officiant's body be offered, for his magnificence will provide merits for the group and the *svarga loka* for himself (about the mechanism of merit transfer see Candotti-Neri-Pontillo 2020 and 2021). Also, Pandeya (1964: 406) writes that in MBh 8.32 the *ṛṣi* Angiras states that 'he who bathes in Naimiṣa, and offers oblations of water to the departed manes, controlling his senses all the while acquires the merit of a human sacrifice.' Given its context, one cannot help but think about Falk 1985 and 1986, and to his supposition that all *sattras* in the beginning were human sacrifices. See Amano 2024 on the cannibalism entailed by the *sattras*.

³⁸ White (1986: 290). Falk 1986's volume on Vrātyas includes an in-depth section on gambling, which has been the basis for Kershaw's and White's studies. Specifically on this matter, Kershaw (1997: 409) agrees with White, as she associates this kind of gambling with the Vrātyas with the dice games played by the Germans.

Besides, considering that Śyama and Śabala³⁹—or, taken together, the Sārameyau, the sons of the divine bitch Saramā—are each described as ‘having four eyes.’ White (1989: 287) suggests that *caturakṣa* should be intended as the ‘four-dice dog,’ at the same time as ‘four-eyed dog,’ since *akṣa* can mean both ‘die’ and ‘eye’—thus emphasising the three-folded relationship between dogs, death and the dice game played in the assembly hall, whose outcome was often crucial in the player’s life. The scholar points out that the *sabhā* can also be a gambling hall, while focusing on the value of the ‘four,’ winning number in such dice game, which was played with *vibhītaka* nuts (*Terminalia belerica*).⁴⁰

In practice, the connection between dog and death is evident in the *aśvamedha* sacrifice of the royal horse, run in order to legitimate the leader, and whose last ritualistic step was the dice throwing. According to White 1989’s reconstruction, one of the preparatory rites of the yearly (or two-year) ceremony was the killing of a black ‘four-eyed dog,’ a *catur-akṣa śvan*,⁴¹ in conformity to what ṚV 10.14 suggested. It is not clear how there might have been four eyes, but probably the chosen victim must have two spots or depressions above its eyes. The dog’s corpse was placed between the horse’s legs, chanting the formula *paro martah parah śva*⁴² “Away the man, away the dog!” The rite is concluded when ‘the dog’s corpse is made to float across the pool in a southerly direction, that is, in the direction of death.’ (White (1989: 300)). In doing so, it must be bound to the underbelly of the horse, thus connecting the sacrifice to Indra; finally, the royal horse is set free to wander within the king’s territory. Floating is exactly what Saramā did while crossing the Rasā, although it can be argued that celebrations involving water are the prototype of fertilising and renewing practices as well as the legitimisation rites

³⁹ The hellhound Śabala has been linguistically related to the western Cerberus (White 1989: 285), whereas Saramā herself has been traced back to the same archetype of Helen of Troy and Hermes; for instance, Müller (1864: 471) states that ‘The siege of Troy is but a repetition of the daily siege of the East by the solar powers that every evening are robbed of their brightest treasures in the West.’ The scholar also connected the root for Paris to the Paṇis.

⁴⁰ Or *vibhīdaka*, as in Falk 1986. Its nut tree is *keśin*, ‘the hairy one’ among all the trees, just as Rudra is *keśin* among the gods. This lead us to the name of Keśin Dārbhya, sometimes overlapped with Vaka Dālbhya, whose textual context has been studied as *vrātya*. See Amano 2013; Koskikallio 1999 and 2015; Dore-Pontillo 2013. This figure embodies the ascetic king: he stands like a *baka* (or *vaka*, heron) for an inactive meditation, is familiar with poisonous substances and is clearly acquainted both with social power and ritual knowledge.

⁴¹ *Āpastamba Śrautasūtra* 20.3.6-14, *Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra* 15.46, *Kātyāyana Śrautasūtra* 20.1-5, *Śāṅkhāyana Śrautasūtra* 16.1-9, ŚB 13.1.2.9, TB 3.8.4-5 are White’s (1989: 297-298) sources. Besides, Hariyappa (1953: 180, fn.64) notices that Bloomfield recognised the four-eyed bitch of AVŚ 5.20.7 with Saramā, while Śyama and Śabala are respectively interpreted as the Sun and the Moon.

⁴² TB 3.8.4.2. I suggest, given the context, to consider *marta* with its etymological ‘mortal’ meaning: in this sense, the rite’s aim is the removal of that deadly and perishable part of the human sphere, represented by the dog. Pushing away the dead dog would mean eliminating the *pāpmān* in it, and the staining pity on the sacrificers, and their *karman*. Also, the dog is called *bhrāṭṛvyā*, therefore the purpose was to cancel hostility and rivalry among the participants (or their families and tribes) which would bring a bad omen on the sacrifice.

of kings; however, floating, and especially floating southwards, might symbolise a journey to death. As a matter of fact, the *sabhā* too is located in the southern (*dakṣiṇa*) part of the village: through the centuries, the east-right has been regarded as bearing heterodoxy, evil spirits, dead (ancestors too) and death.

The long fortune of the ancient *aśvamedha* rite is testified by archaeological evidence in Vidarbha⁴³ (Maharashtra), which is, according to JB 2.442, the land where the Mācalas kill the tiger. The excavations were conducted next to a Gond village: the Gonds keep in their tradition both a sexually heterodox nuptial system.⁴⁴ and link with the royal prerogatives, since they can sacrifice and eat all animals except horses, and presumably dogs, which ‘explains the continued importance of the horse and the dog in cults, especially like that of Khaṇḍobā’ (Sontheimer (1984: 162). Parpola 2015 already took into consideration the burial of horse and dog skeletons discovered in Mahurjhari and Naikund by S.B. Deo (1970-72). Vaidya (2023: 166) explores the Nagardhan case, in which the archaeological finds, although late, add details to the *aśvamedha* picture: here a horse skeleton, intact and well preserved, was excavated along with a dog, found in the same position, just below the other one. A sacrificial altar, a spear, a sword, and a battle-axe were found next to the burial site, weapons indicating the power of kingship; Vaidya (2023: 169) suggests that the remains might refer to one of the eleven *aśvamedhas* performed by Madhavvarman I Viṣṇukundin, around 500 CE. Both skeletons do not show any sign of disarticulation, cutting or butchery, suggesting that the animals died of suffocation, as the text prescribe (see ŚB 8.1-5; TB 3.8-9). The tradition of horse burials has a long antiquity in Vidarbha, dating back to the Early Iron Age and Megalithic Culture. Moreover, excavations in Adam e Pauni have yielded clay or terracotta figurines (Pardhi 2023): only four out of 204 represent dogs, whereas 25 horses. Dog figurines date back from II BC to III century CE.

7. Conclusions

The figure of Saramā arose in a (semi) nomadic, competitive, warlike, and aggressive context, perhaps inspired by events of ordinary life—especially considering that the ṚV is often very practical, and that myths frequently originate from real events. The myth originated as a primarily concrete, probably

⁴³ The land is named after the *darbha* grass (*Poa Cynosuroides*), which is used for ritual purposes; it might be an etymology for Dālbhya/Dārbhya (see fn.43).

⁴⁴ According to Vassilkov (1989: 389), the *sabhā* rules have been recognised in the Gonds’ uncommon nuptial system, whose premarital habits involve a *gothul* (mixed dormitory): again, non-orthodox sexual customs are perceived by the Brahmanical mainstream as deviating, promiscuous and impure.

entirely human tale, which was later coated with a mythologic layer that complicated its symbology. Many factors suggest that it was a *vrātya*-oriented reality: a) stealing or winning cattle was the order of the day, necessary in the first place to sustain an entire clan; b) there is a taste for extorting the truth from opponents. Just like in *vrātya*-style *brahmodyas*; c) the protagonist is loyal to her patron in raids, whereas the leader (Indra in this case) is the administrator of booty. Furthermore, since in ṚV 10.108 there is no hint at Saramā being a dog, it cannot be excluded that she might have been originally imagined as a woman, a warrior equal to her male companions, which would not be accepted in later mainstream. Unlike the brotherhood members, who were subject to sexual restrictions, and, for instance, Malla and Mani, who are somehow sexually uncontrollable, no special sexual behaviour is mentioned about Saramā; thus, there is no evidence that Saramā is a *pum̐scalī*, and, even if she is, neither that a *pum̐scalī* is merely a prostitute. We have seen how Vrātya warriors address themselves (and each other) as wolves or dogs: the custom might have resulted in apotropaic names just like Śunaḥśepa, Śunaskarṇa, Śunaḥsakha, Śaunaka, and so on.

Only after the ṚV, the story became myth: perhaps because of the ‘dog epithet, Saramā was then conceived as an actual bitch, then interpreted as Light or Speech. Then the Paṇis (called *asuras*, thus powerful but at the Rigvedic chronological height not superhuman) from being a rival tribe or strangers, became demons, and the cows became a metaphor for light and dawn. While, from a more practical point of view, since it is precisely cows that are involved, to steal them is to take away what is necessary to arrange a sacrifice, thus limiting the religious activity, perhaps even the sapiential authority, of the robbed possessors.

Some interpretations of the tale layout as a renovation myth are nevertheless justified, especially the restoring of spring after a lightless winter, based on a Indo-European archetype, just as in the story of Persephone (after drinking the milk, Aliklava in JB and Saramā in BD are lost, like Persephone after eating the pomegranate). In this sense, Vala’s cave can be seen as a non-place, a sort-of Hades, while the Rasā has the function of separating the world of the living and the hereafter. Thus, Saramā’s character may be older than attested, although it seems to me to be a mostly Indo-Iranian invention or reworking, -since I did not come across any Indo-European analogues-, even if fitted into an Indo-European motif.

Post-Rigvedic reworkings give an account of otherwise lost connections, for instance Saramā’s connection with death, expressed through the family that at some point was assigned to her. In particular, her children, the two dogs belonging to Yama, reflect the Indo-European *topos* of canine psychopomps. Nevertheless, from *devaśunī* to demon we are always moving into the sphere of the otherworldly: in the re-evaluation process, staged as a cultural selection, the dog went from being a

neutral animal, perhaps even a friend, to being considered impure on all fronts (including the sexual one). Thus, mythical material is reshaped in order to get ghouls where the discredited past had created gods: texts like MBh, being a joint between the pre- and post-reform traditions, still keep track, but conceal it with a negative layer.

This change in perspective is part of a more selected and sifted-through canon, which also eliminated the *sattras*, unpredictable sacrifices and ritual transposition of a special liminality between life and death. Given that the boundaries between what became considered orthodox and what did not are very blurred, it makes sense to think that Brahmanical structure stigmatized symbols, and customs of parallel cultures, such as the ‘ideological’ descendants of the Vrātyas. What was not completely erased or rewritten was absorbed by the mainstream, resurfacing, for example, in the cults of Mallāri-Khaṇḍobā, which still today partially preserve what must have been Vrātya rites and lifestyle. Other ceremonies in which dogs are involved will be fortunate at least up until VI century CE, as the *aśvamedha* burial site testifies, for being strictly related to kingship and royal legitimacy.

Finally, the human sphere involved is, so to speak, secular; the Brahmanical mainstream preserving the myth could have cut and adjusted it, but all in all at the most ancient level there does not seem to be any reference to a Brahmanical culture and way of life in the strict sense.

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